

The "Spirituality" of Hunting: A Schizoid State of Mind?

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For many people the feelings of wholeness, belonging and oneness are best realized by experiencing some aspect of nature such as being in the woods or beside a river. It may seem ironic to them that other people who go into the woods or by the water are going out to kill animals, and yet they claim to have similar feelings, finding something spiritual in hunting, trapping and fishing. It is a curious ethical inconsistency to enjoy communion with the wholeness of nature and then to derive something purportedly spiritual from killing an animal. Little wonder, therefore, that those who go out to kill animals for recreation and other non-subsistence purposes so often fail to make a coherent ethical argument to justify their actions.

The incongruity between experiencing something spiritual in nature and killing another living being for food or fur is reconciled by traditional subsistence hunters by a deep sense of gratitude and often remorse toward those lives they take in order to sustain their own. Certain species may be totemic "allies" of particular individual hunters and cannot be killed or consumed. Other species that are a major food source, like the caribou to the Inuits and the salmon to the Lummi, are regarded with great reverence and are



incorporated into art, myth and legend since they are integral to the survival and future of the culture. Young hunters are taught to kill their prey humanely and swiftly otherwise they will feed the creatures' fear to their families.

In the absence of a deep cultural affinity with animals, hunting becomes a cult, a romanticized, if not atavistic regression to an earlier more natural time in human history. The modern trophy and sports or recreational hunter may share a feeling of alienation from contemporary industrial-consumer society along with environmentalists, nature lovers and animal rightists. But the motivation to take life in the name of sport, enjoyment or other non-essential (i.e. non-subsistence) purpose seems misplaced; an anachronism. Rationalizations like "killing helps regulate wildlife populations" are rarely valid since populations and natural predators are often manipulated for hunting, trapping and fishing in the name of "sustainable harvest management."

That hunters, trappers and fishers are concerned about wildlife habitat protection does little to resolve the ethical inconsistencies of their recreation. The prevailing attitude toward wild animals as "renewable living resources," and the acceptance of killing animals for recreational purposes (and terrifying fish in what is seen as the "fair sport" of catch and release fishing) turn animals into objects of mere utility and personal



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gratification. They have no subjective or transcendental value as totems or manifestations of divine creation. They are objectified and conceptually separated from the sense of the sacred in the wholeness and oneness of nature. This separation mirrors the separation of the human from the spiritual landscape of the ecosystem wherein the animals are an integral and inseparable part. The hunt and the act of killing are culturally accepted ways of overcoming this sense of separation. Yet there are less harmful ways of overcoming this sense of separation that every non-hunting naturalist and yes, every "Bambi loving tree hugger" also, can offer. We don't have to kill to connect. But a more sensitive and mature culture would surely regard such behavior as killing for sport and pleasure a pathological aberration, and would regard the recreational hunter's proclaimed sense of the sacred in nature and wildness as schizoid until all the killing, maiming and suffering end.



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