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GameTrails

VOL. XXIII, NO. 4

CONVENTION 2017



JOURNAL OF DALLAS SAFARI CLUB



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Hunters: THE ORIGINAL

HUNTERS KNOW IT, BUT NOW THE REST OF SOCIETY IS STARTING TO UNDERSTAND THAT EATING MEAT FROM WILD ANIMALS IS A HEALTHY, SAFE, AND ENVIRONMENTALLY FRIENDLY CHOICE.





LOCAVORES

BY SHANE MAHONEY

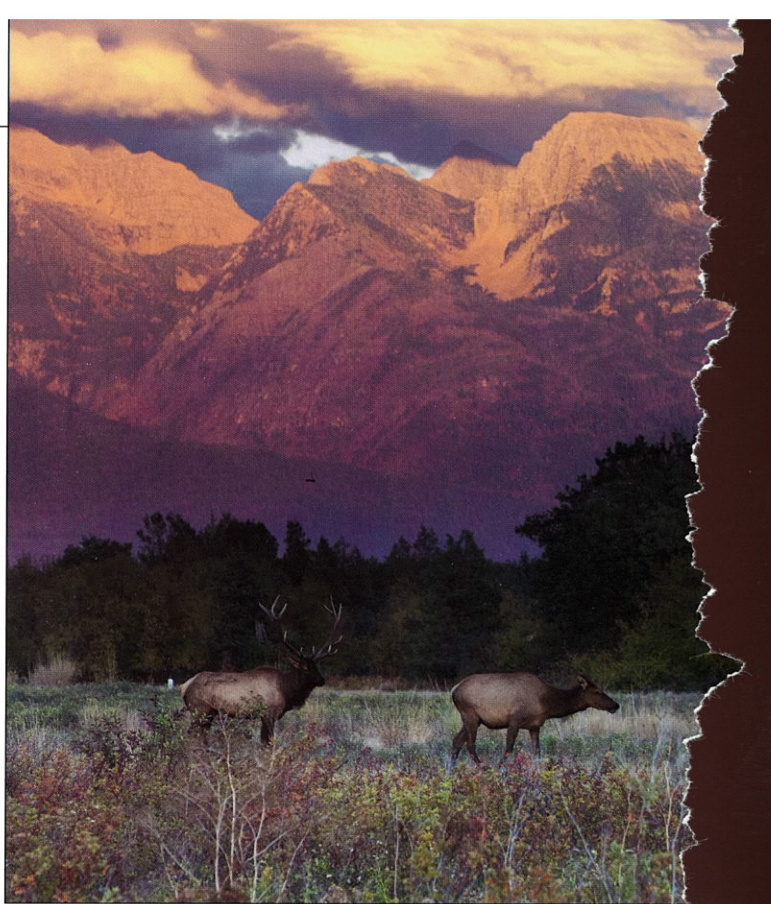


HUNTERS: THE ORIGINAL LOCAVORES

Scientific evidence shows that within our species' lineage, hunting long pre-dates the appearance of modern humans some 50,000 years ago. Indeed, nearly three million years ago, our primate ancestors began to use sharp stones as tools to cut meat, making it more efficient to transport and digest. This meat likely entered the diet of our ancestors as scavenged food, stolen from other animals or acquired in the aftermath of fires, drownings, or other natural disasters. Our earliest real hunting efforts would have been highly opportunistic, taking advantage of young, injured, very old or sick animals, and would gradually have developed from there along a long road of experimentation and improvement. This was a pivotal shift in human evolution and also in our relationships with the wild animals on this planet. No longer did we watch them simply as other foragers of vegetation or as predators to be feared. Suddenly, they became our primary food.

Meat is highly nutritious and easy to digest. It is dense in calories and rich in protein and fat, as compared to plants, and acquiring it in increasing abundance led to many changes in our biology. Most significantly, the increase in available nutrition allowed more energy to be allocated to brain development and maintenance, as less energy was required for digestion. However, to keep this train running, we needed better means of acquiring animal flesh. Our growing brains required an ongoing supply of this super food which in turn necessitated more, and more efficient, hunting. Our increased brain capacity and related intelligence made this possible. This cycle of eating meat, cultivating brain matter, and gaining intelligence fed upon itself, so to speak, for millions of years. Along the way, we developed more complex tools, more intricate social relationships, and better strategies for hunting. It is highly likely that the pursuit of meat necessitated and led to increased cooperation, communication, and sharing among individuals, qualities that are still highly valued in modern society. Qualities, in fact, that are still strongly associated with modern hunting and hunters.

Hunting was fundamental to human nature, and to our pathway to competitive success within the natural world. It is ironic then that the big brains and powerful intelligence which evolved because of regular access to hunted meat would eventually allow us to stop hunting and gathering as a primary means of subsistence, to shift to agricultural production, and eventually afford us the luxury of deciding whether to eat meat at all.



Human brains are adept at problem-solving and conceptual thinking, giving us a unique ability to consciously predict the consequences of our actions quite far into the future. At some point in our history, we began to learn how to predict food availability and then to modify the environment to encourage greater abundance of preferred foods. Techniques such as pruning, weeding, burning, and flooding were used by early human communities to boost seasonal harvests within their local territories. About 10,000 years ago, some groups went a step farther and began creating permanent settlements and cultivating the land to produce the bulk of their food. Plants were domesticated and bred for productivity and reliability. Animals too were domesticated for food, labor, and, eventually, companionship. These changes in our relationships with wild nature would eventually encourage vastly different human perceptions about animals and our responsibilities toward them.

These incremental increases in food predictability and abundance allowed our human ancestors to grow swiftly in numbers and to spread across the globe. In more recent history, advances in agricultural technology meant more food could be produced by fewer people and thus most people did not need to worry about finding or growing food at all, aside from the minor effort of trading for it. The development of preservation and storage technology and, even more recently, rapid long-distance transportation and economic globalization, have freed affluent humans from even considering the seasonality of food availability or how it is produced.

In the U.S. and Canada, about 80 percent of the population lives in urban areas. Globally, the total population living in urban areas increased dramatically from 34 to 54 percent between 1960 and 2014, a trend expected to continue into the foreseeable future. As a result, humans, by and large, live in towns and cities served by ports, roads, and railways. We have access to butchers, bakers, and



fish-mongers. We have supermarkets selling fresh produce year-round, packaging meat in such a way that we need not even be aware of the fact that blood ever fed the muscle that has become our roast dinner. We can get what we want, anytime we want. Our urban lives roll on and our food miraculously appears. Entire populations – billions of people around the world – feed their families without ever planting a seed or seeing an animal up close.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

Regardless of the source of food and the dietary choices we make, however, all human life, current or ancient, has a prerequisite of death. Being animals ourselves, we identify with and value the life of animals and, as a consequence, the deliberate death of an animal, even for the purpose of sustaining a human life, is a serious matter. As hunters, we understand this profoundly. As grocery shoppers, we risk being indifferent to it.

We have always shared a complex relationship with the animals around us, but it is only in the wake of industrial-scale agriculture and global urbanization that we can willfully ignore the fact of animals as food. We are detached from the growing, raising, harvesting, and slaughtering of animals, and from the butchering, preserving, processing, and, to some extent, even the cooking of our own food. Typically, we are no longer personally invested in the production and acquisition of our own food. This is especially true for meat.

Consequently, our relationship to animals has also changed; arguably for the better, arguably for the worse. Historically, we depended on animals for food, labor, transport, protection, and companionship. We revered them and we feared them. We shared our homes and our workplaces with them. We shared life and death. It is from animals that we learned that flesh eats flesh, that existence is temporary and fragile and conditional, that one can be both predator and prey, and that, ultimately, death sustains life – an ecological fact without exception. This intimate connection to animals persists in contemporary culture, but it has fundamentally changed in many ways.

The freedom of being disconnected from food animals and the replacement of so many working animals with machines has, in a sense, freed humans to extend greater empathy to animals. Many have come to advocate for the end of the exploitation of animals for human gain or use. Indeed, some choose not to consume meat at all, or to be highly selective in the meat they do eat: no red meat, no organ meat, no skin, or no fat. Still others eschew even animal byproducts such as milk, eggs, and honey. Our contemporary choice to consume or forego meat is a luxury, neither right nor wrong, but certainly one that was not afforded to our ancestors. They could not afford to be indifferent to animals; nor could they revere them to the point of refusing to harvest them as food.

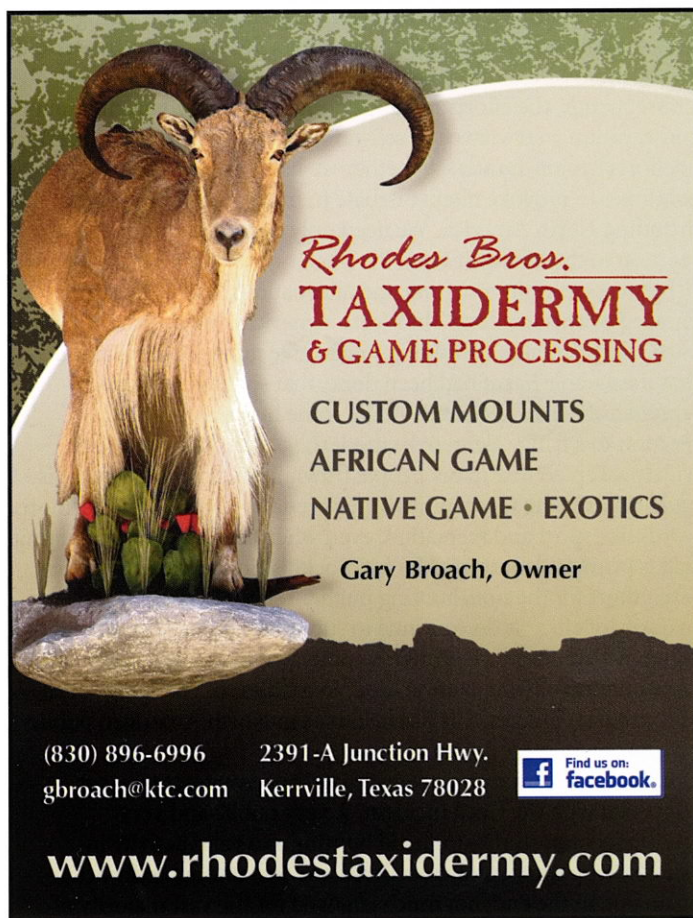
The remarkable feat of releasing most humans from the basic need to constantly seek food could have made hunting obsolete in North America, but it has not. Particularly for indigenous cultures that rely on wild meat, fish, and plants for subsistence, cultural and spiritual needs; and for populations in remote areas with extreme climates, such as the far north where agriculture is not economically viable, harvesting from the wild is still critical to survival. These situations, however, hardly describe most North Americans.

Today, for most of our citizens, hunting and fishing are simply no longer necessary; we do not require the harvest of wild game

or fish, or to eat meat at all, in order to live what most would describe as adequately healthy lives. We have become so successful at producing a diverse abundance of easily obtained, calorie-rich foods that, from a nutrient and energy perspective, meat no longer offers the substantial advantage over plant-based foods it once did. Yet, hunting and angling remain deeply embedded cultural practices and significant food procurement traditions for significant numbers of our citizens. Hunting is not frivolous or accidental; it is persistent, purposeful, and highly relevant to millions of people in Canada and the United States today. Why is this, and how do we work to maintain it?

FOOD CHOICES

Humans, with our big, meat-produced brains, are frequently occupied by questions of ethics, contemplating how we ought to behave. When applied to the issue of eating meat or not eating meat, there are both practical and ethical reasons for individual choices. The arguments against meat tend to be based either in animal rights or welfare, environmental sustainability, or human health risks. To greatly simplify some very complex principles, animal rights and welfare advocates often emphasize practices that limit animals' freedom or expose the animal to harm or suffering or object to the fact that animals raised or used for food are exploited. The argument against meat from the perspective of environmental sustainability points to the loss of wilderness and wildlife habitat, and the large amount of space required for livestock production versus the caloric efficiency of raising food crops in the same

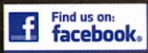


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HUNTERS: THE ORIGINAL LOCAVORES



amount of space. The argument regarding human health risks relates to the prevailing economic model of large scale centralized raising, slaughtering, and processing facilities with the consequent increased risk of contamination and the potential reach of broadly distributed, contaminated products and the use of antibiotics, herbicides, and pesticides that are linked to large-scale production of domestic livestock.

For many years, individuals concerned with humane, sustainable, and/or healthy eating generally selected some degree of vegetarianism in order to satisfy their personal ethics. Meat, in any form, was avoided. In this context, hunters were often portrayed as barbaric and willfully indulgent and their killing of wild animals as frivolous. From the critic's point of view, how could this be otherwise if the hunter's wild bounty was unnecessary? Consequently, the efforts made by hunters toward environmental conservation were viewed as self-serving and, thus morally inferior to efforts by non-hunters. Whether we like it or not, hunting continues to provoke intense debate in many parts of the world, including North America. We need only recall the worldwide reaction to the killing of Cecil the lion.

For reasons right or wrong, the international public became enraged by this incident. The North American outcry was particularly intense, conveying a collective public voice insisting that irreparable harm had been done, that something morally reprehensible had occurred. While some hunters ascribe this reaction to a fringe element in modern society, it has become widely accepted that many people frown upon hunting when it is qualified as being for trophies or for predator control. Furthermore, words like sport and recreation, even when associated with hunting that is primarily motivated by food-acquisition, can cause serious discomfort for the non-hunting public. Yet, we know that the majority of citizens do continue to support regulated hunting and fishing where these are primarily motivated by and encourage the consumption of wild, natural food. Regardless of changing social and cultural climates, this has held true in North American public opinion surveys for decades.

It is important not to underestimate, nor overreact to, what happened with the Cecil incident. A very public and very emotional opportunity to derail hunting as a valid activity in our contemporary culture occurred and will undoubtedly occur again but, in the end, not much changed for the vast majority of

hunters in North America. Hunting was examined, ridiculed, defended, demonized, and advocated for under an attentive public microscope, and although trophy hunting clearly continues to invoke a measure of disdain, the validity of food hunting was likely reinforced. Cecil provided the hunting movement with a rare opportunity for self-assessment and course adjustment. It had best take it.

Social support is not unconditional, nor should it be, but for hunting it certainly does continue and it certainly needs to be encouraged. We need to rethink our public persona and language to convey more precisely what hunting entails and what it contributes to modern society, not to us as hunters or to the events of ancient history. We know that even in light of vocal anti-hunting advocates, the majority of people who do not hunt or fish will generally support the rights of others to eat wild meat. Since food is central to our participation in wild harvest, and critical to maintaining social support for this, it ought to also be central to our discussion of hunting. The logic is clear; and the need clearer still.

Thus for those of us who aim to protect the traditions of hunting and fishing, it is a valuable exercise to examine why public support continues as it does. The answer partly lies in our inability to escape our evolutionary history—that strong human connection to hunting as a way of existence, even as a human identity. It also lies in our remembrances of relatives and loved ones whose earlier lives as farmers, ranchers, and hunters brought them in intimate contact with the deaths of animals. I believe, however, that public support increasingly derives from a cultural shift in our relationship to food. This modern shift is part of a complex readjustment of social values that takes many forms, one of which relates to how and what we eat. In recent years, North American food ethics have become more nuanced and the conversation about where food comes from has become significantly more complicated. In this context, a quiet but powerful transformation is happening with regard to the way that people think about the natural world and how they interact with the natural systems that ultimately provide their food and other life requirements.

You may have noticed more and more people lately relating anecdotes about their vegetarian brother-in-law or their vegan aunt who recently took up hunting. On the surface, these stories are amusing because we still conceptualize hunters and vegetarians as opposites. This may be true of some hunters and some vegetarians, but, increasingly, both exist on a spectrum of sustainable and respectful eating, and the distance between those choices is smaller than it appears.

THE LOCAVORE MOVEMENT

Increasingly, North Americans value and desire food that is considered healthy, ecologically and environmentally friendly, and ethically obtained. There is a growing desire to know where our food comes from, whether it is organic, whether it was raised and killed humanely, how it was handled, treated, and processed after harvest, and who benefitted from the sale.

Between 1997 and 2014, consumer spending on organic foods increased tenfold. Today, depending on the region, 68 to 90 percent of U.S. households purchase at least some organic foods. The Certified Humane program, created to give consumers peace of mind about the treatment of livestock, grew from 143,000 animals in 2003 to more than 96 million animals certified in 2014

in Canada and the U.S. Participation in home or community food gardening in the U.S. increased 17 percent between 2009 and 2014. These are clear trends of increased interest in responsible food procurement.

As a society, we have begun to view food in the context of the whole food system, a kind of social ecosystem thinking, and are making social and ecological choices to minimize harm and maximize benefits. The locavore movement perhaps best exemplifies this tendency as a natural culmination of society's pursuit of sustainable and respectful eating. It is also where the gap begins to close between vegetarians and hunters. After all, hunters are the original locavores.

The locavore movement is perhaps best known through the popularity of the 100 Mile Diet. Practitioners eat only locally grown produce and, to the extent possible, rely on meat, eggs, and other foods from sources within 100 miles of their consumption. The intent is to benefit the environment through the reduction of carbon emissions created by transporting food over long distances, but eating locally also keeps resources closer to home, creating economic benefits for local communities, businesses, farmers, ranchers, and service providers. The 100 Mile Diet, however, is something of an extreme or purist practice.

While the locavore movement has been simplified by less prescriptive "buy local" slogans, it is essentially an expression of

a food ethic where individuals take personal responsibility for their food choices and resist globalization and the impersonal industrialization of food and its consumption. Locavores value a food supply chain that is ecologically sound, decentralized, provides knowledge about production and processing, has high-quality products, succeeds at social justice, and fosters community. Not all products sourced within 100 miles of a household will meet these needs, and not all households can meet basic requirements by restricting their food acquisition to 100 miles.

Nevertheless, how strictly a locavore defines local distance from the source of production is not irrelevant. The closer a person's physical proximity to the source of their food, the better their knowledge of production and handling is likely to be, which increases their ability to make informed decisions about purchasing. The fewer steps between the producer and the consumer, the fewer opportunities there are for contamination and exposure to disease. Reduced producer-to-consumer physical distance can also lessen environmental damage, partly through decreased transportation (although bulk transportation over long distances can be as efficient as small-batch transportation over short distances), partly through energy and other environmental mitigations during production, and partly through purchasing items which are not highly processed.

Consider the fact that the average head of lettuce travels more than 1,800 miles to reach a consumer. Or that it takes about 20 calories of fossil fuel energy to produce two calories of food energy – a very inefficient process. Just 100 years ago, only one calorie of energy was required to produce two calories of food. It does not take a genius to figure out something is not working here. Not surprisingly therefore, locavores' emphasis on revitalizing old technologies to produce, process, and prepare food is gaining ground across many cultural groups and economic classes. And people are moving this awareness to action. There has been a surge in the popularity of home-preserving techniques such as curing, canning, drying, and fermenting. Backyard gardens and backyard chickens are more common. And the vegetarian-turned-hunters we like to gossip about? Well, hunting just happens to be a clear and obvious part of this new/old tool box for ethical consumers.

THE HUNTER AS ETHICAL CONSUMER

There is no one-size-fits-all model for the locavore, of course, but the underlying ethical framework is that one should participate directly in one's local foodshed. Hunting absolutely fits this



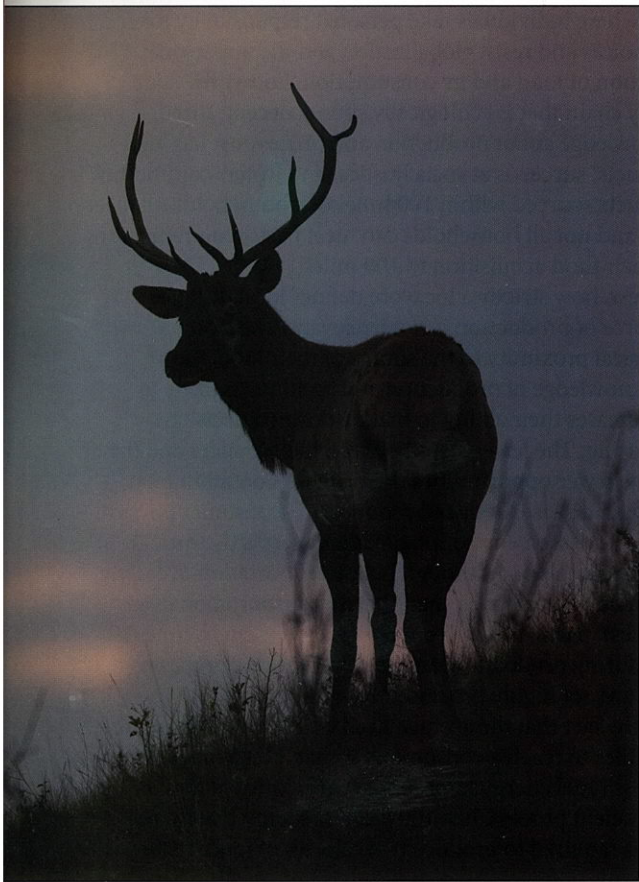
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framework. It is perhaps the ultimate means by which one can take personal responsibility for their food.

Wild-harvested meat and fish are produced without any land development. Game and wild fish are, undisputedly, organic foods. Wild-harvested protein has not been treated with hormones or antibiotics, colored with artificial dyes, or preserved with unknowable chemicals. The overwhelming majority of hunters are committed to fair chase and make every effort to ensure a quick kill with minimal suffering. Up until the moment of their deaths, the animals have lived without fences, pens, or cages, without human handling of any kind. They have lived fully in the environment to which they are adapted and in which they and their progeny can naturally thrive. They have experienced a natural life, expressing species-appropriate behavior; death follows a life lived wholly wild, no matter how long or short.

There is no centralized processing of wild-caught or wild-shot foods. Butchering may be done personally by the hunter, or by a capable friend, but is likely contracted to a trusted local professional. The meat that ends up on the table is fully and intimately known to the harvester. It is also higher in protein, higher in the good omega-3 fatty acids, and lower in cholesterol and the bad omega-6 fatty acids than conventionally raised commercial counterparts. Respect for this wild harvest is personal and demonstrated through the hunter's use and consumption of as much of the

animal as possible. This includes the meat, of course; but also, often the hides, horns, and skulls. Making maximum use of the animal is part of an ethical framework of food consumption.

So is sharing the wild harvest. Hunting has a long history as a means of cultivating and fostering social relationships within a community. Most of us do not hunt alone, nor do many of us consume all the meat and fish we harvest. Sharing is one of the elemental characteristics of hunting, a behavior that is observed throughout the world and across evolutionary time. We share food and experience with the members of our hunting parties. That food is also shared with family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. We serve wild game when people visit us, and we bring it to potlucks and similar community meals. The people we share with likewise share their portions. We also donate our wild harvest where programs are available. Nearly 16,000 pounds of venison are donated annually to charities in North America, providing more than 10 million meals to individuals in need. As in our evolutionary and historic past, not everyone hunts; but everyone can participate in the food that hunting provides.

FOOD SECURITY

North America has the highest food security globally, meaning that compared to other regions, we have the most consistent and dependable access to enough nutritious and culturally appropriate food for active and healthy living. Despite this, 12 to 14 percent of households experience some degree of food insecurity every year; 3 to 6 percent of households experience severe food insecurity. The strongest predictor of inadequate access to food is poverty.

Hunting and fishing could, for some affected households, be part of the solution to food insecurity. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is designed for democratic access to the sustainable and appropriate use of wildlife. Poverty, however, is one of the greatest barriers to participation in hunting, though less so for fishing. We are thus challenged to find policy solutions that will improve accessibility to those most vulnerable to food insecurity.

Food insecurity is an issue of increasing concern globally, particularly in light of human population growth. Estimates suggest that current food production would need to increase by 70 percent by 2050 in order to meet expected needs. This is a concern for conservation, too. We have a tendency to sacrifice wild and feral landscapes in favor of agricultural and other industrial developments. Clearly, large-scale agriculture is necessary, but I am not convinced that means it has priority over wild spaces. We need, as a society, to begin to explicitly consider the food value associated with undeveloped landscapes as one of the many critical ecosystem services they provide. Space on this earth is finite and we need to learn as quickly as possible how to increase agricultural efficiency while decreasing further encroachment on important wilderness resources.

To date, little effort has been made to assess the actual amount of food that is harvested in North America through recreational hunting and angling, a critical metric for estimating the value of this wild food. What we do know is that every year nearly 14 million Americans and 2 million Canadians participate directly in hunting. Twenty-five million Americans and nearly 3 million Canadians annually participate in recreational fishing. Furthermore, an unknown number of indigenous hunters and fishers harvest wild game and fish for subsistence as part of longstanding cultural practices. Given these numbers, we can begin to appreciate the vast biomass of wild protein harvested from the lands and waters of Canada and the U.S. every year. When we consider the sharing of that meat and fish, we realize the far-reaching impact this harvest must have and that, for millions of people, this wild protein is likely a highly relevant part of the continental food system.

To better define and evaluate our assumptions about the importance of wild protein, we need better information. We should be able to describe the biomass of our recreational harvest, its economic value, how many people share in its consumption and also answer the question of how we would replace this wild

food if hunting and angling were to disappear. Right now, we do not have this information, but there is an ambitious multi-year research and communication effort underway that will provide it.

The Wild Harvest Initiative was launched with early support from DSC, the Wild Sheep Foundation, and the Guide-Outfitter Association of British Columbia, and now has a host of partners including more than a dozen non-governmental organizations, state agencies, businesses, and private citizens. Led by Conservation Visions Inc. and combining academic research with an emphasis on communications and outreach, this program will bring the food relevance of recreational hunting and angling to the North American public and beyond.

Whether we recognize it or not, the locavore movement is helping redefine society's relationship to food by creating a public discussion about where food comes from. The seed-to-table, embryo-to-plate, forest-to-pantry slogans of the locavore community are encouraging more citizens to make deliberate choices around food and to take greater ethical and environmental responsibility for it. I believe this discussion is helping shed a positive light on recreational hunting and will, over time and with encouragement, assist in repositioning the activity within mainstream discussions of sustainability, health, fitness, and food security. This can only be helpful in presenting hunting and angling as

reasonable choices for new generations of food- and health-conscious American and Canadian citizens.

Of course, it is still up to hunters to be the champions of our natural world and the myriad benefits and advantages that it provides for all of us. As hunters we need to have better informed conversations with non-hunters and other members of the general public about the full range of values that our activities provide. We need to be emphatic without being dismissive of opposing views. Our wild protein harvest is certainly one of the most tangible benefits of hunting and fishing, but not everybody needs to hunt or fish, or eat meat, for that matter. As humans, we are the quintessential dietary generalist and, due to both our broad palate and long history of adapting our environment to suit our needs, no other species on earth has access to the diversity of foods we consume. And no other species has the awareness or arrogance to evaluate and judge others solely based upon dietary choices.

To keep hunting and fishing positively positioned in the public discussion, to present these activities as valid means of obtaining food, to reinforce the position of wild-harvested food as healthy, safe, humane, and environmentally friendly, and to underscore hunting and fishing as ethical food procurement decisions, we must continue to tell our stories. And we must tell personal stories, not just scientific ones. We must tell stories that convey our personal connections to the land and our personal sense of responsibility for the wild. We must join with all those who harvest from nature – the berry pickers, the fruit gatherers, and the firewood and mushroom collectors – to help explain to modern society why hunting still matters, and why hunting and the wild harvest are still relevant. **GT**



For more information about the Wild Harvest Initiative, visit www.conservationvisions.com/wild-harvest-initiative

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