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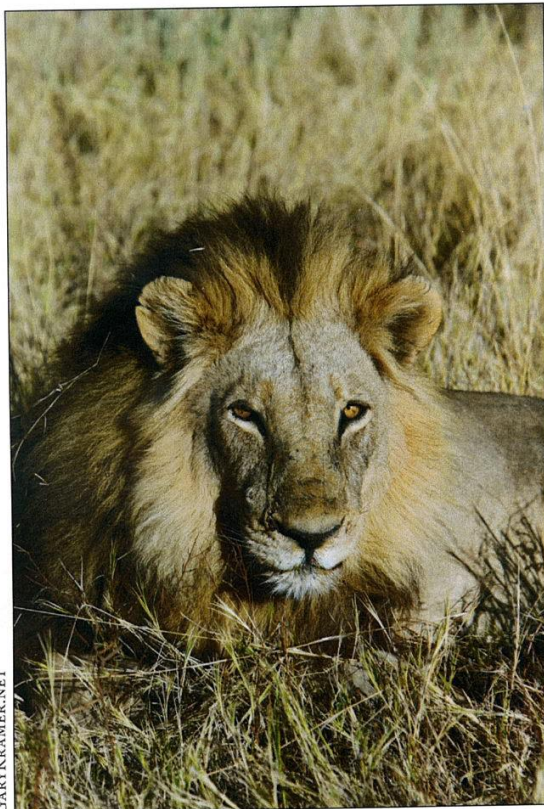


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FORMING A CONNECTION

In the "us-vs.-them" arguments with anti-hunters, let's not forget that we all have a common empathy for wild animals.



GARY KRAMER, NET

Hunters feel a strong empathy for wildlife, just as non-hunters do. This should be a source of common ground rather than of antagonism.

As hunters, we often feel we are permanently playing defense, having to explain our actions and justify our motivations in the face of intense, and frequently ill-informed, criticism. We feel too often painted as the villains, despite our conservation efforts, and this has inevitably led to deep-seated frustrations within our community. This frustration, in turn, naturally seeks a quick fix, a silver bullet argument that will convince society of hunting's relevance. In some cases, we have developed the necessary long-term vision to deal effectively with public perception. Our frustration has also, however, led to varying degrees of defensive posturing and reactionary thinking that simply will not address what I perceive as the greatest challenge to hunting worldwide, and to international (think African) hunting, in particular. While we concentrate on the anti-hunting messages of certain organized groups, we are in danger of missing the one thing that is driving institutions, governments and publics to question why hunting should continue. Anti-hunting sentiment finds resonance in the wider public for a reason, and that reason is human empathy for animals.

We all know how the story goes, of course. We congratulate each other on our conservation successes in one breath and, in the next, we complain to one another about those ignorant and

naïve "animal rights people," who are clearly determined to destroy the things we love. Opponents of hunting acclaim their concern for animals, while denouncing ours as false and deceitful. We accuse them of being impractical, misguided, and inactive, promoting their philosophical agendas when they should be taking action and doing (or at least paying for) actual boots-on-the-ground work to benefit wildlife. They call us bloodthirsty killers. We call them liars and nutcases. They condemn our ethics and we mock their concern for individual animals while they wear leather belts, eat lobsters that have been boiled alive, and order fish and fowl at their favorite restaurants. It can certainly feel like an us-against-them sort of world.

But how real is this black and white world we have constructed? Is ending all hunting really the goal of every individual we define as an anti-hunter? Are all those people we conjure up as iconic enemies and nutbars, the urban pinstripers, the social media geeks, the activists against use of animals, really so unified in their views on all hunting? Or are many of them simply against some kinds of hunting, for some species, under some circumstances? Can we truly just put all these people in one box and dismiss them as being all the same? Indeed, isn't the hunting community itself made up of some pretty diverse opinions on how and why we should hunt?

Let's be realistic. Just as most hunters are ethical and humane, not all anti-hunters are uninformed and unrealistic nutcases. In fact, many anti-hunters are well informed and honestly care deeply about wildlife and the environment. And dare I say, some care just as deeply as you or I. They often feel differently than hunters do, of course. However, the emotion they express towards wildlife and their desire



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to protect the lives of individual animals is not abnormal or misplaced; rather it is as valid as our passion to hunt, fish, and conserve. It certainly can lead to very different issues and outcomes for wildlife and people, however, and that is where our disagreements should be defined.

It seems to me that the real problem with this us-against-them philosophy is that it doesn't help us, it may help our opponents, and, most importantly, it does not help wildlife which both sides claim is their primary concern. Furthermore, it fails to grapple with the fact that many people, including hunters themselves, hold very nuanced views on hunting, supporting some aspects while denouncing others.

Most importantly, this us-against-them mentality does not engage the root issue that is causing such turmoil over hunting today. The great middle ground of public opinion is moving toward a position that can and will, if not corrected, damage hunting's future in ways anti-hunting advocates never could. While we are skirmishing on the sidelines, putting our faith in lawsuits and political parties, the modern public floats a river whose destination is not controlled by any of those things. So, what does control this? Well, empathy does, and in our urbanized, nature deficient, and invisible-animal-death world, this emotional freight train can only gather steam.

Empathy is defined as the capacity to understand or feel what another being is experiencing. It indicates an ability to relate, creating connections and influencing values and perceptions on many levels. It is often said that empathy is what makes us human, assisting our development as a social species and dominant life form. But how does human empathy relate to animals and to our relationship with them and how do these issues affect hunting? While a very complex question, can there be any doubt that human empathy for wildlife and animals generally is increasing globally, that our modern representations of these natural others in our media and advertising is blurring

established lines of reference between humans and animals? At the same time, it is increasingly evident that more and more people are becoming uncomfortable with human-caused animal death in various circumstances, hunting included. Understanding these relationships will be critical to defining hunting's future and in developing any strategic effort to explain its relevance and value in a very different and increasingly urban world.

Humans have been killing animals since the dawn of our existence, so it's no wonder that many people perceive the desire to hunt as natural. Just as natural, though, is a tendency to feel respect for, and an emotional connection to the animal that has been hunted and/or killed. This emotional tension played such a key role in our hunting predecessors' relationships with animals that they were inspired to immortalize them in early sculptures, amulets and, most dramatically, in the magnificent cave paintings of Europe and other regions. Indeed, blurring the lines of distinction between animals and humans seemed to come naturally to our ancestors, as they created images of creatures that were quite clearly part human and part beast. So, empathizing with animals is not a novelty introduced by anti-hunters, and blurring the lines between animals and humans is not a creation of social media or modern advertising.

So, why did early hunters express such emotional connections to the wild animals they hunted and consumed? Well, part of the answer lies in the fact that the first hunters had to learn to relate emotionally to the animals they pursued. They had to understand their behaviors and their responses to stimuli to achieve a successful pursuit. This required the hunter to empathize, or truly think like his or her prey, in order to predict the animal's next move. From an anthropological standpoint, hunting is widely considered central to the evolution of modern human abilities to strategize and predict events. As I have often stated, hunting has not only influenced our physical development but our emotional and cognitive

capacities as well. We think as we hunt... for wild others or wild ideas. Thus, empathy for our prey is not contradictory to hunting; it arose with it.

Empathy toward animals, then, from an evolutionary standpoint, is not at all unnatural. In fact, it seems reasonable to conclude that empathetic hunters make more efficient predators, since they better understand the focus of their pursuit. Furthermore, virtually every hunter I know frequently expresses empathy for animals, whether wild or domestic, and thus this is something we and anti-hunters share, rather than being something that separates us. Empathy for animals resides in all of us, and, in my view, is becoming an ever more powerful force in our debates over animal use. There can be no doubt it is hunting's greatest challenge and it is time to find common ground.

Perhaps, in a strange way, our shared empathy for wildlife, rather than being something that separates us, can be the very best way for the hunting community to build common ground with those who question hunting's relevance. One thing is for certain, animal empathy is here to stay and hunters need to find a way to engage in the debates it engenders, not as antagonists, but as full and willing participants.



Shane Mahoney

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.