

The American Hunting Myth

The American Hunting Myth, Ron Baker, New York: Vintage Press, 1986. Hardcover, \$10.95, Index, 287 pages.

by Douglas H. Chadwick

In a journalist who writes about wildlife, I love my job, except that every time I mention some article that an animal was shot or a population declined due to heavy hunting, I get sportsmen's letters—the kind hunting organizations encourage members to send—demanding explanations. Don't I understand, they ask, that hunters are America's foremost conservationists? That no species hunted since game laws were established has become endangered or extinct? That without hunting, animals become overpopulated and die of starvation and disease, often ruining their range in the process?

Sure, I know the party line. I was trained in it. Before turning to journalism, I was a wildlife biologist working with big game. I realize that it's been years now since hunters have killed any critters. They harvest surplus crops. The really up-to-date ones exert necessary consumptive recreational pressure upon underutilized resources. They alleviate potential suffering while stimulating productivity. They reduce dangerous overabundance at the same time they ensure abundance in other words. They correct nature's erratic swings and help balance ecosystems.

In all, everything works out so splendidly, you can be sure the deal is rigged. I didn't say wrong — just rigged. It's a set-up. And we need to recognize how and why it is set up, lest we further confuse science with self-justification and mistake the way we work nature for the way nature works.

Having just finished a recent book entitled *The American Hunting Myth* by Ron Baker, I decided I'm going to answer my next sportsmen's letters by suggesting that they have a look at it. They won't like the book,

it's a blatant anti-hunting tract. Yet it defines the grounds for debate more clearly than most. And hunters will be surprised to find that it does so through considered argument rather than emotional trades such as they might expect from the chapter headings — "Root of an Evil," "Avarice Strikes Again," "Nightmare in Orange," and so forth.

Baker has some trouble getting underway. He introduces his subject through a rambling discourse that is so weak he has to keep promising, (in parentheses) that the truth of what he is saying will become obvious later on. Eventually, though, he does hit a stride, presenting summaries of hunters' standard claims and attempting to refute them point by point.

If game regulations actually ensure that hunted species will prosper, for instance, Baker wants to know why Massachusetts has refused to place a limit on the number of bear hunting licenses it issues despite the fact that there are fewer than 100 bears in the state. If hunters are leaders in conservation, why in the world have they fought so hard to avoid switching from lead shot—a poisoner of some two million waterfowl annually, along with falcons, eagles, and the aquatic environment—to steel?

Baker identifies the principles of game management as pseudobiology and analyzes the preconceived notions upon which they are based. The fundamental one, of course, is that sentient life forms are proper subjects for recreational killing: that jackrabbits, swans, and grizzlies alike may be treated as a source of pleasure for "sports" as well as a source of meat. That's the game part. The management part means accepting "widespread manipulation of wildlife and its environment," Baker points out. Yet this "is a false cure for ecosystems that have been adversely affected by man's activities. It deals "with effects rather than causes, the ultimate causes being human overpopulation, habitat development...." And to

accommodate the 30 million sports afield these days, ever more intense levels of such manipulation are required. A third key assumption is that human hunting on that massive a scale is still preferable to tolerating more predators and scavengers in wildland communities.

As the author goes on to note, the guiding philosophy of game management is semiarbitrary — an approach termed maximum sustained yield. It is often at odds with the holistic concept of maximum sustained diversity in ecosystems. Available funds and manpower are devoted to favored game species while the conservation of other creatures with different habitat needs assumes a low priority. Moreover, to sustain a high yield means sustaining an artificial age and sex structure in prey populations. This reduces social diversity and competition and therefore has long-term consequences for the animals' behavioral and physical traits. They are evolving under a new set of conditions.

Unlike predation, hunting seasons amount to sudden, wholesale invasions that can remove 30 percent of a targeted group within a couple of weeks, taking the fit right along with the unfit. Here, too, Baker says, we may be changing the very nature of beasts. Hunter selection for large, healthy — trophy-size — individuals runs exactly counter to natural selection. The naturalist Edwin Way, Feale defined it as evolution in reverse. How concerned about these issues are our wildlife agencies? Not very, the author warns. His central thesis is that although the game management establishment churns out propaganda aimed at schoolchildren, wildlife students, and citizens, trying to convince them that nature could scarcely get by without its expert assistance, it is less interested in biology than in political and economic expediency. It is, in fact, destroying the integrity of our wildlife heritage.

There, I've done the best I can by *The*

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American Hunting Myth. Now I have to say that while I'll recommend it to sportsmen for the sake of a good healthy discussion, I'm afraid I cannot recommend it as a particularly well-written, well-researched, or convincing work in itself.

Baker's strength is simply that he has worked hard to reason out the shortcomings of current game management practices. His weakness is that once he has put forth his opinions, he can't seem to get much further. In short, he continues to deal in generalities. A rational breed of moral outrage is commendable but no substitute for facts.

For instance, in explaining why game commissions tend to be composed of hunter-oriented political appointees instead of ecologists, he tells us: "This is the result of individual preferences, traditional legislative practices, the pro-hunting orientation of the government wildlife bureaucracy, the apathy of most nonhunters, the power of the hunter lobby and the arms industry, and the political view that the business economy is of far greater importance than the welfare of the earth and the life that it supports." Which sort of tells us everything and nothing. I would have found it more instructive to hear the voices of some of those people, perhaps during a typical commission meeting.

Baker badly needs detailed examples to buttress his assertions. But once outside upstate New York and its deer herds — the sole subject he appears familiar with from first-hand experience — his examples are too brief and random to illuminate very much. And some are just plain wrong, as when he states that wolf packs reintroduced to portions of the Rockies have helped bring about a decline in winter-killed deer and elk by keeping herds on the move between ranges. Nice idea, but there are no such reintroduced wolf packs in the West.

In a section dealing with habitat altera-

tion, the author laments, "Even worse, lightning-set fires on interior tracts of federally owned forests in the Western states are now sometimes allowed to run their course." Yet western forests — and sage-lands as well — are adapted to frequent fire. It is a vital component of nutrient cycling and renewal of successional habitats such as meadows and brushfields. For decades, we suppressed wildfire to the detriment of wildlife abundance and diversity. Apparently, the revolution in our appreciation of the natural role of fire ecology passed Baker by.

Lacking a solid grasp of background material, Baker is inclined to make his case against different aspects of hunting by rearranging the general arguments he has used already. Where he could provide insights regarding the complexities of biopolitics in a world of shrinking wildlands, he is content to prove that politics play a large part in influencing decisions, and repeatedly to hand down the sweeping judgment that game officialdom is driven by greed — a desire to sell more licenses. By the same token, we end up learning precious little about the behavior and ecology of hunted species, though there is a great deal of new and provocative data that he could have drawn from and presented in depth.

So Baker and the system he criticizes have something in common after all. You can follow the logic of their arguments if you're willing to start off by accepting a lot on faith. Well, so far I've managed to avoid taking a position for or against hunting. That's because I don't have one. Mind you, I'm not trying to avoid opinions altogether in that arena. I've got plenty.

I think there are clearly too damn many hunters in the woods each fall, and too damn many of them are people who can't shoot straight or track an animal once they've lucked out and actually hit one. Which are prime reasons why the percentage of prey

wounded and never recovered is estimated at between 25 and 50 percent for most species — needlessly, stupidly high. I think hunting is growing rapidly more competitive, mechanized, and superficial, creating the very sort of environment people go into the woods to get away from. And I think many hunters — and game managers — agree with these opinions.

Interestingly, a survey of general wildlife knowledge among those interested in the outdoors, turned up two equally low-scoring groups: avid trophy hunters and avid antihunters.

I live in a part of rural Montana where most people hunt to put meat in the freezer. In the fall, they don't say hello, they say "Got your elk in yet?" I know some pretty good hunters, too.

I don't mean the guys all dressed up to play terrorist with their camouflage shoes, bandoliers of ammo, and knives big enough to carve bromosaur steaks. Hey, I'm Diane. And I'm here to alleviate potential suffering. I sure don't mean any of the caricatures cruising the logging roads either, in their overpowered pickups with the radio on, chucking beer cans out one window and pointing a gun muzzle out the other. Howdy, folks call me Ace. As one of America's foremost conservationists, I'm looking to make sure no species get endangered. And of course I don't count Alice, who doesn't like camping but always buys herself hunting tags so her husband can shoot two of everything.

Nope. I mean the person with the scratched rifle, the sharp pocket knife, and a worn pair of boots who likes to get back in so far he or she can hear the treethrums in the silence. I mean the person who knows how to smell the wind. Perhaps the greatest reward nature offers besides unalloyed beauty is communion with the rhythms that nurture our own species. Though Ron Baker may never believe it — or approve of



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it, anyway — hunting can be one way to achieve that state.

(On the other hand, I find myself as leery of the game management establishment as Baker is in many respects. Not so much because it continues to promote excessive hunting as because it corrupts good scientific research and clear understanding with all its jargon, suppression of criticism, and pretenses of having discovered ways to fix nature and improve upon its design. Over the past two decades, this hunting-nature-critics-own-good school has convinced society to permit shooting and trapping in national wilderness areas and many wildlife refuges, along with state parks, and some national parks may soon be added to the list. If the trend continues, there will be no place left free to evolve on its own, without being stamped to suit our formulas.

All of this only reinforces our claim to domination over nature. The more we try to justify that claim, the more we see ourselves as separate — beyond nature — and the more distant the possibility of communion becomes.

Ironically, Baker again has something in common with the game system here. When he decides "The human race is unique in its failure to live in harmony with other species when all of its physical needs have been satisfied," he, too, reinforces a sense of separateness. When, toward the book's close, he demands to know "By what divine judgment has the human race been given the right to abuse other forms of sentient life for its selfish ends?" he unintentionally does the same by placing us in a context of moral failure — badness, sin, and all the rest of it. Are no animals selfish? Ace genes self-

ish? Are we alone banished from the garden because we are supposed to know better? Are we better? Or worse? The farther we travel into the realm of guilt, the harder it gets to find a way back home in the mark.

This need not be. The goal could be instead to break down those psychic barriers of both domination and guilt that we have constructed between ourselves and the live sphere that sustains us. The future of wildlife depends upon how truly we are able to see nature. Our own future depends upon it as well.

Douglas Chadwick is a journalist and wildlife biologist whose major research has been on the mountain goat. His articles on wildlife and conservation have appeared in many national magazines.

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