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Growing Up with Hunters: An Insider's Perspective

By Sudie Hoffman

Many of us who care about animals go about our lives while immersed in a world that is either not aligned with, or is even openly hostile to, our respect for animals. Sudie Hofmann is one of many people who grew up in a family that didn't share her respect and compassion for animals. She shares her experience of what it's like to grow up in a family of hunters.

I grew up in a family in which the men would list hunting as their favorite recreational hobby. In the mid-1960s, my grandfather bought 720 acres of property adjacent to Gooseberry State Park north of Duluth, Minnesota, where Lake Superior can be seen from its highest point, for the purpose of deer hunting. Roughly 20 men (and occasionally one woman) would venture to this land every fall to pursue what they loved to do: kill animals. Hunting culture has been a constant part of my life in Central Minnesota, woven into childhood traditions and enduring persistently. From seeing deer strapped to the roofs of cars on the freeway heading south to the Twin Cities, to closing my blinds so I don't have to see blood stained bright orange clothing hanging from clothes lines in neighbors' yards, hunting culture was everywhere. Holiday cards sometimes followed the hunting season each year with entire families posing with dead animals.

Enculturation

Sons and grandsons are sent off to their first gun safety class as soon as they turn 11 in my family. They engage in a rite of passage upon the killing of their first deer. The ritual involves cutting the deer open and gutting them, whereupon an older male relative smears blood on the face of the young boy. These are the values that are instilled in the boys, and to a lesser extent, girls, and that are imparted from one generation to another. They learn these lessons at an early age from people they love and trust. They are taught to have power over an animal while ignoring issues of empathy and ethics and thus become hardened to the suffering of the animal.

Interestingly, in ancient Sparta, young males were sent away at the age of seven to learn to kill through cruel and vicious means in order to become skilled warriors. Athens, by contrast, required that boys remain with their parents and extended families to learn culture, art, and language. The Athenian boys became deep, critical thinkers and thus became the leaders and visionaries of the community. As I read this history not long ago, I thought about the "curriculum" being implemented in my family.

The young boys in my family are taught that their first instinct when seeing an animal is not a tactile one of wanting to touch the fur or wonder at the beauty of the animal, but one of immediate need and pleasure in shooting them, causing them pain and killing them. While walking with my family on the property near Duluth as a child, we came upon a small sparrow sitting on a branch 15 feet ahead of us. My father raised his gun and shot the bird. She fell with a thud to the leaves below. I was so shocked I started crying and could hardly find the words to ask my mother why he did something so unspeakable. She was calm and said that is just what hunters do. One of my nephews recently told me many hunters say, "If it is brown, it is down."

Every Christmas gathering at my grandparents' home involved the children being sequestered in the sewing room waiting for Santa's thumping at the locked dining room door, while the men sat in my grandfather's den smoking cigarettes and pipes, discussing the great deer hunt that they just concluded. I would sit on the floor of the room and play board games with my cousins. The room had windows that opened into the den and I would hear the men talk about the thrill of killing "their" deer

that year, what part of the property it was on, how it fell and got back up, where they shot it again, how the deer almost got away, and if a buck, how many points the antlers had. They then discussed where the head would be displayed in their homes or businesses like a trophy and how much it would cost to be prepared.

The lessons I would hope that children learn are about the interdependence of nature and animals. Children should be taught about the intelligence and sensitivity of these majestic animals and the pain they feel when they are shot and injured. Over fifty percent of deer shot by bow hunters are crippled or wounded. Hunting is a cowardly act, not one of courage. In addition to the pain inflicted on the animals, the impact on the animal's family and the role each animal plays in the web of life should be considered.

Trophies and Ethics

Many serious hunters have a mental checklist of sorts on which they tick off each type of animal they have killed, or desire to kill. They hope they can "bag" or "take" a black tailed deer, sometimes referred to as the phantom trophy. The ultimate conquest is the polar bear, whose tag license is around \$750 excluding an export fee, and also carries the trip and outfitter's cost that exceeds \$22,000 according to one website. It is always about the next conquest – bigger and better. The heads of the animals are proudly being held by hunters in photographs or displayed on their walls to show their manhood and hunter prowess. Hunters who will not pay for braces for their children's teeth, or offer to pay for college tuition, will spend thousands of dollars on trips to Canada or Alaska in order to kill a certain type of bear, moose, caribou or elk. One guidebook discusses the joys of being an elk-aholic. For hunters on a budget, the conquest is the deer with the largest antlers or the 12 point buck.

Sporting goods and farm supply stores offer an abundance of products to lure deer to hunting areas and deer stands. A local store in my city has 22 aisles of hunting products with three specific aisles of baiting videos including *Heart Stopping Hunts*, baiting products such as *Active Scrape*, *Magnum Scrape Dripper*, male urine sprays, and *Super Charged Scent Killer Soap*. Some hunters illegally place corn or mineral blocks embedded with food to attract deer. Department of Natural Resources conservation officers attempt to find the blocks, but it is usually another hunter who reports the practice because of the unfair advantage it gives neighboring hunters who place them. Another common practice of hunters is creating shooting lanes in front of their deer stands to give them a clear shot at deer passing through the area. Deer hunters claim that a deer's favorite four letter word is edge, so they explore ways of maximizing edge or vegetation components on their hunting property. There are also numerous websites that provide tips on how to navigate deer sanctuaries, or thorny areas where deer tend to hide each season. This often involves entering the area on hands and knees. Hunters also place cameras in hunting areas year round so they can monitor which deer frequent their property. When hunting season arrives, they have their sights set on the prized deer "trophy."

Claims of Environmentalism

Hunters often justify their "sport" by claiming that they are helping the environment by controlling or "harvesting" the "surplus" deer population. There are several problems with this claim. First, how can this argument be posited when exorbitant fees are paid by some hunters to acquire permits to kill animal species that do not need to be controlled but are still available for killing on a limited or lottery basis?

Second, it would be unlikely that hunters are truly ecologists or environmentalists. In my experience, these hunters do not belong to environmental groups, contribute to them or support candidates that

are pro-environment. Actually the opposite is true. They often disparagingly call environmentalists, “tree huggers” and actively oppose candidates who address land and resource usage that would reduce deer herds. The Minnesota Deer Hunters Association’s website states that the purpose of the group is to confront “constant challenges that impair hunting.” The association employs a full time lobbyist and spends \$50,000 a year in direct legislative action. Only 6% of the population are hunters but they have an inordinate influence over public policy, land, and animals. The *hook and bait* voters are courted in every campaign. Even during President Obama’s first campaign, he promised to protect hunters’ gun rights. The *blaze orange brigades* are well-funded and focused on one thing – protecting their “sport.”

Third, hunters will log forests in order to sell the timber to pay property taxes on the land. In addition to the economic reasons for logging, hunters get the bonus of attracting deer to the young vegetation or edge habitat that grows in the logged areas.

Fourth, it would be a stretch to claim that hunters care about the environment when they commonly drive gas guzzling large SUVs or trucks in order to pull trailers a few times a year and use motorized boats and jet skis in the summer that leak gasoline into lakes and rivers.

Finally, there is increasing evidence that contamination from lead bullets is decimating several types of bird species, and this contamination and lead residue have human health consequences as well.

Game for Food

Another common claim is that people hunt in order to get venison. While I am sure this is true within certain racial and economic groups in the Midwest, my experience is that, in general, this is far from the truth. A neighbor had the local utility company evaluate his home for energy efficiency. He was told to unplug the small freezer in the basement as a cost saving measure. The company technician said, “People are wasting a lot of electricity with these freezers. They usually just have a lot of freezer burned venison in these things.” Typically people can’t give venison away. My brother attempted to entice the guests at a 4th of July celebration to sample his venison burgers. As I cleaned up the paper plates off the picnic tables at the end of the meal, the hard purplish meat was hidden under the red, white and blue napkins on almost every plate.

Male Bonding

A common claim is that men just want to be together with a grandfather or uncle in the woods and explore nature. They like the anticipation of packing and planning the meals, or the building of a new porch on the cabin. Unfortunately male bonding goes beyond these simplistic enjoyments. From my experience, the culture in hunting cabins too often involves telling sexist wife jokes, complaining about wives, talking about women’s bodies, drinking, and calling each other derogatory homophobic names. Dads and uncles implicitly teach sons and nephews that part of being a man is ignoring hygiene issues while in the cabin, making disparaging comments about women and getting fairly intoxicated. Pro-hunting sexist bumper stickers are plentiful such as, “We Interrupt this Marriage for Hunting Season,” to “Show Me Your Rack,” to “I Hunt Whitetail All Year Long” featuring a naked woman bent over. And hunters laugh about the uncle who always gets “polluted” and falls down in the cabin at night. Adding insult to injury, if these hunters were asked if they would just be content with this form of male bonding and not have to shoot animals as part of it, their response would be that they need both. It is all part of the experience.

Recently I was at a home improvement store purchasing a few ceiling tiles. The sales associate asked me to stand at the bottom of his ladder as he handed me the correct size. Another associate approached the area where I was standing and said to the associate on the ladder, “Trevor, you can’t believe what happened to me last night. I shot a deer near my house. I was aiming for its

shoulder and then I got it right square in the back of the head. God, it was beautiful.” They bonded as fellow hunters and I am sure there was even more bonding after the horrified female customer fled the scene with her ceiling tiles.

Safety

Issues of safety are also central to the debate about the practice of hunting. Even though gun safety courses are required, each year over 100 hunters and non-hunters are killed by hunters. People in rural areas are afraid to venture out to their mailboxes for fear of being shot and are forced to keep their nervous dogs inside during the season. Thus, this recreational activity poses a safety issue for the entire community. Putting a gun in someone’s hand, especially a child, is a risk that families just simply do not have to take. I have personal experience with this. My 14 year old brother was shot across the top of his head by his friend in a duck slough, sustaining a closed head injury. Both boys were young and careless and not being mindful of where the other person was crouching in the tall grasses at the time they fired their guns. My brother now lives every day of his life with a physical and mental disability.

In addition to the issues of the use of firearms, approximately 2,500 deer-vehicle collisions are reported every year in Minnesota. A spokesperson for State Farm estimates that based on claims, only 10% of these types of crashes are actually reported to law enforcement. Fatalities and serious injuries are substantial with the highest number of deaths being motorcyclists. Deer are entering roadways for two reasons during the hunting season. One is that they are mating and more active during dawn and dusk. The other is that they are under constant stress with sounds of gunshots and are thus forced into unfamiliar territory. In addition to the human casualties, many deer are injured in these crashes and suffer significant pain with broken limbs.

Controlling Overpopulation and Destruction of Gardens

“What about controlling the deer population?” “What about all the deer near the highways?” “What can we do about our flower and vegetable gardens?” People living in deer habitats bemoan the animals for eating farmers’ crops, endangering road-users, or damaging gardens and other plantings. Disagreements frequently occur between residents about how to address the issue. Hunters say, “Let us shoot them,” and are more than happy to do it. Conservationist groups and scientists call for better ways to live alongside deer that will result in long-term solutions and take into consideration issues of: land management, forest maintenance, controlling “browse” vegetation, limiting access to human habitations, providing winter feeding grounds, dissuading people in residential areas from feeding deer, and reintroducing and supporting natural predators such as wolves. The central argument is that the mismanagement of deer populations by state governments has often led to large herds, and that those same state governments have exacerbated the problem by implementing short term, simplistic remedies such as hunting.

Deer numbers can vary wildly in different parts of a state. In areas with low deer populations, the DNR will actually commence deer feeding programs to increase the herds and thus increase the coffers of the DNR with hunting permit fees. Minnesota, for example, began such a program in 2014. The executive director of the Minnesota Deer Hunters Association stated in a Minneapolis Star Tribune article that he was, “Pleasantly surprised and mildly shocked,” to learn about the new program. The DNR commissioner bemoaned the fact that he had not seen a deer in four years and was thrilled that his agency would move forward to increase the “depressed” herds. Another hunter is quoted as saying, “Generally hunters are pretty disappointed in (the declining deer herd). They liked the fact that they could hunt multiple seasons and kill multiple deer (in the past.)” It would be difficult to argue that hunters are engaging in this sport to merely help the environment and control

the deer population when they advocate for increasing it. The hunting industry in Minnesota annually is a half billion dollar business with 500,000 hunters looking for reasons to shoot animals.

Hope for a Cultural Shift

In my experience, I have also found that hunters are kind, sweet, gentle people. Believe me, I know. They even drive 75 miles to help you after your daughter has pumped 10 gallons of diesel fuel by mistake into your new Honda Accord and it is now chugging its way across the parking lot of a mall in Minneapolis. I like to think that hunting is an aberration in their character. It has been taught to them psychologically, as part of *group think*. I am also hoping that the culture is changing. As I look around my neighborhood, and within my family, fewer males are engaging in this recreational hobby with each new generation. I think they just don't have the stomach for it and they define their lives and their manhood in better ways.

While visiting my sister in northern Washington, I watched several black tail deer walk through the yard in the idyllic misty morning air. Two juvenile twin deer began a game of tag while their protective mother looked on. My 16 year old nephew, Milo, was eating cereal and staring out the window. I said, "Milo, could you ever shoot one of those animals?" He looked perplexed and asked, "Why would I want to do that?" He shook his head and kept eating. He was raised differently than the young men in my extended family who have remained in Central Minnesota. He helps his parents make dog beds for the local Humane Society so shelter dogs don't have to sleep on the floor and get kennel cough, and he helps with the Society's fundraisers. He has been taught important lessons about values and ethics all his life. In a recent newsletter at that shelter, the executive director wrote about the youth programs it sponsors and that children renew "her faith in future generations and their ability to show kindness and compassion to animals."

I dedicate this article to my precious local grandnephews, Jack and Luke, with the hope that they will be part of the new generation that embraces the critical life lessons of empathy and non-violence.