

HUNTING AND NATURE CONSERVANCY

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Abstract

For some time now, hunting has grown to be a highly controversial topic. Generally, scientific papers on this matter only deal with well determined scientific-ecological aspects. However, many controversies cannot thoroughly be understood in ignorance of the specific viewpoints of the parties involved in the discussion. The present study gives an analysis of this "non-scientific" side of the problem.

First, some particular ethical-philosophical aspects are taken in consideration, further the translation of the distinct viewpoints into practice is being examined.

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I. PRESENTING THE PROBLEM

1. INTRODUCTION

For some time now, hunting has grown to be a highly controversial topic. In prehistoric times, as well as during centuries of our own history, it used to be part and parcel of human activity. Later on, it became a privilege of the nobility. As many other things, hunting too was 'democratized' in recent times. It is approached now by various interest groups. Generally speaking, these can be divided into supporters and antagonists. Conflicting views and reproaches are of daily occurrence.

In this context, the state of things in Flanders is sometimes very similar to what we find in most West European countries, because the fundamental points at issue are the same, in ignorance of land-frontiers. Giving concrete form to this controversy need not be very exhaustive, it will be sufficient to interpret a few typical matters in dispute. The problem will be mainly presented from a Flemish angle in this contribution. It will largely be based on a previous, exhaustive study (Van Den Berge, 1987).

The controversial issues are generally found on two levels : one relates to viewpoints and ethical-philosophical aspects, the other to scientific- ecological aspects.

It is evident that the first set of points at issue is a source of many obvious controversies. Scientific papers on hunting problematics will generally be narrowed down to the second set. The acute shortage of unambiguous viewpoints is thus perpetuated by the reserve with respect to the 'non-scientific' side of the problem. Yet, in many cases, the chosen angle proves to be decisive in the interpretation of certain facts. In this context it is remarkable that actual argumentation during discussions is frequently contradictory, although both parties pride themselves on scientific grounds. It is therefore necessary for a general approach and analysis of the problem that a number of relevant viewpoints be interpreted and investigated thoroughly.

2. THE HUNTERS' POINT OF VIEW IN GENERAL

First of all, it must be made clear that the presentation of the viewpoint in defence or in justification of hunting is concerned with the ideal situation, and not necessarily with a reflection of day to day practice. In nearly every speculative paper, hunters themselves make a clear distinction between 'good' and 'bad' hunters. Existing misuse in hunting is sufficiently known and strongly criticized in hunting

circles. These existing misuses will therefore not be the subject of the present discussion, as there is no contradiction between supporters and antagonists concerning this point.

The modern (good) hunter always emphasizes his not influencing animal population, or nature in general, in a negative way. In this context, modern hunting adheres following principles (Swartenbroekx et al., 1984) :

- just like forestry and agriculture, hunting aims at a permanent and optimal use of the earth's produce
- the biological processes which govern animal and plant life, must be taken into account
- the hunter enjoys himself during his stay in nature, he can relax by pursuing his hobby
- in our ever changing society, he often becomes the 'manager' of wildlife on his hunting ground
- certain rules of conduct must be followed in hunting
- it is essential to possess thorough knowledge on wildlife, means of hunting and game-laws.

3. THE OPPONENTS' POINT OF VIEW

Several tendencies exist among the opponents of hunting, although they may not always be clearly distinguishable from one another.

First there is the general public's point of view, which has always been latently hostile to hunting. Though this attitude may find its origins in the former aristocratic nature of hunting and shooting, nowadays it has grown strongly because of the conscious propaganda made by people concerned with the protection of nature. This point of view is not very relevant when we discuss the relation existing between hunting and nature conservancy. It is hardly to the point, and often based on superficial emotions. But it is important to acknowledge its existence in the background of the discussion, especially as we try to situate hunting in contemporary society.

Secondly there are the viewpoints of those directly concerned with nature protection and nature conservancy. We can distinguish two tendencies, namely one which is radically opposed on principle, and one which takes a more moderate and pragmatic line.

The radical viewpoint opposes any form of hunting (and what goes with it) as a purpose in itself. This becomes concrete in their not accepting hunting as a form of recreation, as it is often justified by supporters. This viewpoint is based on ethical principles. Yet it is

not considered out of the question to shoot down animals for economical or ecological reasons and for certain positive effects in nature conservancy.

The third and last vision is more moderate and pragmatic, as mentioned above. Hunting is not opposed on principal grounds, but because it may influence nature conservancy in a negative way.

According to the ethics behind this viewpoint, man is 'obliged' on moral grounds to guarantee that living beings can live harmoniously now and in the future'. A certain form of shooting, e.g. as a form of recreation, is accepted, as long as the principles of nature conservancy are not threatened in practice.

Although ethics are the basis of this tendency, they are not used as a working basis in concrete discussion, as there is no disagreement on this principle with the 'good hunters'. Discussions can be narrowed down to facts which can be controlled, in other words to the question whether there is any negative influence.

4. THE NATURE OF THE CRITICISM

Confrontation of the above-mentioned viewpoints reveals many distinctions on different levels. Leaving alone the public's hostility, which is based on emotional or historical grounds, the line of opposition taken by protectors of nature is fundamentally moral. With the present game-law, it is hardly conceivable that hunting should cause ecological catastrophes. The 'nature conservancy is self-preservation' thesis cannot be applied here ; moreover it is increasingly considered as a form of opportunism from nature protectionists. Thus the protection of separate species can be mainly traced back to ethical and philosophical starting-points.

As shown above, the supporters of hunting do not raise objections against a moral starting point in itself. But there is no agreement on the tenor of the ethics which are used, nor on its translation into practice. This last issue can be divided into standpoints and (interpretation of) facts.

The ethical aspects and standpoints will be discussed here, the scientific aspects will follow in a later contribution.

II. DISCUSSION

1. ETHICAL-PHILOSOPHICAL ASPECTS

1.1. Presentation

The description of the antagonists' viewpoints has made clear that the differences of opinion with the hunters centre mainly around the radical opposition, because this group criticizes the rudiments of the hunters' standpoint, namely the attitude man has chosen towards surrounding nature.

Starting point is the thesis that man-made negative effects on nature are no necessary condition for protest. Recent improvements on the game-act (e.g. a compulsory exam to be taken) are considered inadequate, as they nearly always consist of technical interventions. Yet, the rudiments of the game-act have not even been touched. That is why the remaining discussions on hunting are carried on on the level of principles and values concerning these rudiments. This is the basis of much displeasure.

As mentioned in the general introduction, this aspect was not often dealt with sufficiently in the past. It is consciously neglected by the moderate trend. This particular ethical starting point is of course continuously brought up by the radical trend, but it is never discussed exhaustively. Up till now, this aspect did not get sufficient attention from official organizations and parallel authorities. In a number of contributions the subject was thus closed immediately with the much heard thesis that 'hunting is as old as mankind' and therefore self-evident. But nowadays there is more openness towards this subject within official organizations, in accordance with their mandate of negotiation and compromising in our ever changing society.

It has been said by the supporters of hunting that the radical opponents are really nothing but a small group of people, in spite of their being the most noisy and active. Yet, in this context, it is necessary to draw the attention to the fact that the starting point of 'the moderate', i.e. the moral obligation to help guarantee the harmonious survival of living beings, can be interpreted in different ways. Conflicts arising here can usually be traced back to resistance out of ethical motives. It is therefore often difficult to distinguish between radical and moderate opponents. That is why a discussion on moral principles cannot be narrowed down to the ideas of a small group of fanatics, but must also include the ideas and motives of the larger part of the movement for nature protection.

The differences in opinion concerning the rudiments of the hunters' standpoint can be made concrete in three interconnecting points of disagreement, which are the moral attitude towards killing, the aspect of utility and the recreational aspect.

As far as the ethics of killing are concerned, the most important question to be answered or choice to be made is whether non-human life can be credited with an own ethical intrinsic value, or merely with instrumental value. If we choose the first answer, it follows that a number of problems will arise concerning consistent behaviour.

This consistent behaviour does not only relate to the different animal species in their relation to one another (e.g. deer versus fly), but also to the distinction between animal and vegetable life. It is therefore clear that even the most extreme vegetarianism cannot but partly escape the discussion of this problem. This problem of consistent behaviour is one which relates to killing in general, but the aspects of utility and recreation are more specifically related to the rudiments of hunting. As concerns the utility aspect, hunters like to range themselves on one level with forestry and agriculture, to make their behaviour acceptable: it is only another form of land-use. They make a point of utmost importance of the thesis that they do not waste natural resources but only use them. They do not 'rob' nature, they only take away that which will be replaced by nature in a spontaneous way. It is obvious though that our present-day society is not really in need of products gained by hunting, such as venison or to a lesser extent, furs and trophies. In the same way, reflections relating to the world food problem are irrelevant, because all materials and infrastructure used in and around hunting, use much more energy than hunting itself yields back. Only the specific gastronomical qualities of venison can be considered as a real aspect of the utility aspect.

As concerns the aspect of recreation, we must distinguish clearly between 'hunting for pleasure' and 'hunting for controlling', which is a form of hunting out of necessity or desirability (e.g. to prevent damage by game, or because the natural enemies of certain species are extinct). 'Pleasure hunting' though is purely recreational, there is no necessity for hunting whatsoever, but it can be allowed on scientific grounds, if certain restrictions are respected.

The main question concerning consistent behaviour is whether material utility (venison, furs) or spiritual utility (recreation, enjoyment) for man is worth to give a concrete example to make this general and theoretical matter more directly comprehensible.

The examples which apply best to the cited problem are some objections written down by hunters, referring to the vexed prohibition on hunting the woodcock in Flanders from 1979 to 1983. For convenience' sake some basic principles must be accepted in studying this subject. Thus we can say that hunting the woodcock is acceptable from a population dynamical viewpoint (while other influences on the environment are negligible). On the other hand there is no necessity to hunt the woodcock (the birds do not cause any damage). The hunter then asks what is the moral difference between hunting the woodcock (the tastiest game) and for instance fishing mussels or shrimps or trout. The same standard can be used in these cases: there is no real necessity for the fishing and it is done for pleasure (also gastronomical pleasure).

It is useful to consider the place of and the possibility for ethics in face of such a problem, before handling the problem more concretely, because it is not only the hunting question which causes discontent over standards and values related to nature and environment. Conacher puts it this way (in Miller, 1985) : "most environmental problems are primary psychosocial, nearly always involving conflicts over priorities. While data may provide rationalisations for individual choices, ultimately decisions boil down to a question of value, of who wants what".

In the first instance, we are inclined to look for the solution to environmental problems within those specific disciplines related to these problems, without a basic discussion about values, about 'who wants what'. We are usually convinced that 'real answers' must have a technical or scientific nature, certainly not an ethical or social one. As suggested by Zweers (1984), this often has unsatisfactory results, because the natural sciences are thus touching the limits of their working-sphere, while the problem reaches far beyond this particular discipline. Environmental problems then prove to possess a partly philosophical nature.

It is indispensable for a clear discussion that this subjective mediation is discerned clearly by the parties concerned. Undeservedly, the significance of this mediation is often misjudged as 'ethical helplessness' with regard to environment and nature protection. According to Zweers (1984) the pursuit of philosophical deepening must not be considered as an escape from reality or from everyday practice and its difficult choices. As these choices concerning environmental problems mainly boil down to a choice between man and nature, philosophical deepening is indispensable to bring into equilibrium profits and losses for nature as well as for man. Protectors of the environment can only keep ignoring this fact to their own cost.

Philosophical deepening alone will not suffice, if unrelated to politics or economics. Making sure that environmental philosophy can be an efficient instrument in (political) reality is an important task. The way in which this is handled is of great importance.

Philosophy usually claims the ability to say intelligent things about the purpose of life. In environmental philosophy, great importance is attached to the use of standards. But proposing a system of standards runs the risk of being arrogant, or priggish. It is not desirable to create new ethical values out of nothing, these must have the chance to grow, as ethics can be seen as a result of a particular culture or historical period (Zweers, 1984).

The same conclusion is reached by De Blust et al. (1980), who believe that ethical reflections concerning nature conservancy in general, must necessarily be based on the historical development of the man-nature relationship, while examining what is to be judged positively or negatively. Only when we realize that our own particular situation is part of a larger historically grown reality, do we have a chance of proposing the standards in question successfully. The further development of the man-nature relationship is then a subject of a public and social discussion, a question of cultural policy.

1.2. Discussion

1.2.1. Introduction

It must be clear that it is impossible to give unassailable answers to the above-mentioned questions and it is not appropriate either, given the place of an ethical-philosophical working method. A 'social discussion' has hardly started. Yet both (militant) supporters and opponents of hunting do not hesitate to bring forward explicit standards. The hunters know themselves to be backed by their own history, together with a general historical man-nature philosophy. On the other hand, the opposition's philosophy finds its roots in a recent trend in society. When we examine this more accurately, we find it is practically impossible to give a clear definition of this philosophy, let alone to use it as a good instrument. A philosophy like e.g. "nature protection out of respect for life" has been proved, not to be uncorrect, but unfit for use (De Blust et al., 1980). The woodcock versus shrimp and mussle theory is a useful and concrete example.

1.2.2. The hunters' standpoint

The ethics and philosophy used by the hunters has grown historically out of a typically anthropocentric attitude. It was believed that nature had been given to man in order that he could exploit and enjoy it, free from care and as he saw fit. Animals were divided into 'useful species' and 'pests' all in conformity with this anthropocentric attitude. Where hunting was concerned, many species were considered to be unrightful rivals, because they claimed what man considered as his own property.

From the second world-war on, hunters' magazines published more and more articles on the choice between protection and destruction. Old 'certainties' were now distrusted, but there was not much change in day-to-day hunting practice.

The seventies saw a more serious turn of the tide, as the general public became sensitive to the idea of protecting nature and the environment. The hunters saw the danger of a too vehement protest against their practice and started an enthusiastical preaching of the 'Weidgerechtigkeit' (an internal code of behaviour based on 'respect for game and nature') in order to remain legitimate.

The notion was dug up from old German hunting traditions, where it used to be characteristic of a certain level of civilization and therefore also socially characteristic of the hunting elite, who felt obliged to restrain too violent impulses (Dahles, 1987).

As a result of this trend, hunting had to be carried on within strictly regulated bounds. The extremely anthropocentric attitude from the past made room for a more subtle one. The modern hunter says explicitly that he does not want to have any negative influence

on populations or ecological systems, on the contrary. But the position chosen with regard to the man-nature relationship remains basically anthropocentric. Ecologically speaking, this is a choice for the 'ethics of dominating'. This form of environmental ethics, as an alternative for the so-called 'ecological ethics' (see further), boils down to ethics of nature management and environmental management for man and by man (Achterberg, 1984 ; Kruithof, 1985). Environment and nature have no moral significance of their own.

It is clear how this is put into hunting practice. Thus many hunting practices do not content themselves to jump at conditions which make hunting necessary or possible, but they will try to create those conditions themselves. Thus the management provides for its own continuity. In this very anthropocentric attitude, hunters will look for their own ethics in and attribute a moral significance to the function animals have for man. A typical quote illustrates this : "Yes, I admit I enjoy having a beautiful shot at a sparkling cock-pheasant in the low light of a quiet autumn day. And maybe this is the highest honour we can give to a wild animal".

This point of view bears a strong resemblance to a sacred act, a cult or a rite, where the (wild) animal is used as an object for the satisfaction of a human phantasm.

The essence of the hunters' starting point is the principle that they simply have the right to harvest and to enjoy a good hunt, as a compensation for their efforts (feeding the game etc.). In this sense, every criticism from outsiders will be considered as a basically unrightful assault on this freedom, on this right to manage.

1.2.3. The antagonists' standpoint

Resistance against the rudiments of the hunters' point of view is worded explicitly by the more radical trend, as mentioned above. Yet the general idea behind this can be found in the opinions of a larger social trend, that of nature conservancy. The aim of this rather new trend is to conserve and protect natural values and natural areas. If human intervention does not serve this objective, it will be considered as a negative influence. This applies to the most important form of hunting, the so-called hunting for pleasure.

It is important in this discussion to emphasize the ideological character of nature conservancy. Attention is not necessarily devoted to 'the natural' (thus the wild shoots of birches are cut down regularly on the moors) nor to diversity in itself (a zoo is not an example of nature conservancy) ; the only aspect which really counts is a diversity which has once grown out of a spontaneous ordering (Schoevers, 1985).

By this artificial marking out of nature conservancy's working grounds, a lot of essential difficulties related to hunting and nature protection are evaded. Thus the distinction made by the opponents of hunting, between the admissibility of hunting birds of passage on the one hand, and on the other hand hunting animals which can be looked after by the

hunters all year round, can partly be traced back to this. (This last form of hunting could thus be considered as a form of cattle breeding in nature). In the same way the admissibility of meat-eating often goes back to the fact whether the slaughtered animals have been bred by man or have been living in natural conditions. In this context the above-mentioned concrete example of the shrimp versus the woodcock, has made clear that this basic principle lacks consistency and utility when examined more thoroughly.

A more plausible explanation for this distinction can be found in the combination with the emotional appeal certain species possess for us humans. It is known that certain animal species evoke more sympathy and favouritism, simply by the way they look, and are therefore protected more stubbornly. This is of course a purely subjective and emotional starting point and it explains the difference, much resented by the hunters, between the criticism of their activities and those of e.g., the anglers.

It is therefore obvious that the antagonists' standpoint is in need of deepening. Up till now, this matter has hardly been taken up by the actual movement for nature conservancy. Therefore detailed versions are not yet available.

Because the general environmental question has now become one of the topics of the day, it has also become a subject-matter within several disciplines such as ethical philosophy. It must be repeated in this context that one cannot put oneself in an absolute or authoritarian position. A desirable direction can only be indicated ; its eventual realization depends upon (cultural) policy, on social discussion on a large scale.

A possible answer to the problem defined here, or a possible direction, can be found in the above-mentioned 'ecological ethics', the alternative for the ethics of dominating as a form of environmental ethics. It must be made clear that the word 'ecological' does not refer to ecology as a science ; it only refers to the common object.

The pursuit of ecological ethics was born out of a moral alarm about what is done to non-human nature by human activities. Starting point is the principle, that however important the inter-human aspects of environmental problems are, it is morally unacceptable to deny non-human living beings that care and respect they are entitled to morally. In this way, non-human interests get a fair chance to carry moral weight in conflict with human interests. Animals, plants, natural habitats, ecosystems or the biosphere can only be a legitimate object of our moral care if they fulfil certain criteria of moral relevance. Determination and justification of these criteria are an important task for ecological ethics, as is the drafting and justification of fit moral standards.

Starting point is the universal moral principle that we cannot damage or harm the interests or welfare of other beings gratuitously. Because of the explicit wish for impartiality and universality in moral thinking (drafting of rational ethics) there is no reason whatsoever for confining this principle to humans, as far as other beings fulfil the criteria of moral relevance.

This relevance applies to all living creatures ; all enjoy a kind of

welfare and/or possess interests which may be damaged. The fact that non-human living beings have a right to moral consideration, does not mean that their claims to respect their interests or welfare all carry the same weight ; it is a case of distinction between moral relevance and moral significance or weight. Thus we can discriminate if priority conflicts occur, e.g. in proportion to the degree of consciousness or pain perception.

This discrimination is based on the principle of justice : similar cases will be treated similarly, different ones differently. And there is the 'duty of non-maleficence' which is considered a prima facie duty. Prima facie duties are duties which do not apply in absolute way : in case they are in conflict with moral duties carrying more weight, we must abandon their fulfilment, though they remain binding in themselves (after Achterberg, 1984).

The crediting non-human beings with moral relevance means they possess an inherent or intrinsic value. And this means it is not right to treat them only as a means to satisfy man's needs. The ethics in question suggest that human beings, as only moral subjects, also have direct duties towards non-human living beings (animals, plants, habitats, and indirectly ecosystems). According to Achterberg (o.c.), these ethical starting points are best illustrated by this image of nature emphasizing the natural ordering in and by nature.

All this is merely a presentation of a moral starting point and the corresponding basic moral attitude ; concrete ecological ethics do not exist as yet. The drafting and deduction of rules to make a choice in priority conflicts has started only recently.

Kruithof (1985) has devoted a book to a.o. the clarification of basic principles and - far-going - principles of non-anthropocentric philosophical axiology. It is not necessary to go deeper into this matter under the present circumstances. The movement for nature conservancy must find a way by itself. If the protectors of nature persist in neglecting philosophical deepening, it will only be to their own cost.

1. 3. Conclusions

At first sight the discussion concerning the rudiments of hunting can appear to be of secondary importance in the actual activities of nature protection. We think it is admissible to confine ourselves to avoiding negative influence where this is possible. It has been proved again and again in discussions on principles, that ideas on nature protection actually have their roots in deeperlying ideas on nature, man and society. Viewpoints on concrete points of controversy in the hunting problem (as for instance whether the woodcock can be hunted or not) can serve as a model in this context. Of course these controversial issues are not a case of problems as large as life ; but they are an integral part of a general effort towards nature conservancy.

As a social trend, nature conservancy would do well not to hide its ideological nature under a cover of science. Nature and environmental problems have been dealt with in a purely scientific and technical way before, and this has often had unsatisfactory results. Philosophical deepening often appears to be necessary for the realization of man's spiritual and material welfare in his environment. The discussion on the rudiments of hunting, that is to say hunting for hunting's sake, does not stand alone in this context ; it is rather symptomatic for man's basic attitude towards nature surrounding him. This problem certainly exceeds the possibly short-lived culmination of cultural attention for nature. Alienation from nature need not be looked for in the tendency opposed to hunting, but in the viewpoint that nature is a thing to be managed or dominated by man.

Hunters must consider this seriously, and must not always avoid the problem by ridiculing the ethics of nature conservancy as something which is non-consistent and therefore untenable.

Their strategy consists in searching for points of comparison as there are the killing of animals or even plants bred by man, agriculture and forestry, the fishing of shrimps etc... but this will never be a satisfactory argumentation.

Although concrete 'ecological ethics' do not yet exist, we must realize that the starting points used at present by radical opponents of hunting, need not be untenable, but could very well fit in with a rational deduction from the standard concerned.

In this way man is not put in an isolated position within the ecosystem : but integration takes place out of a non-anthropocentric attitude, which emphasizes the spontaneous ordering in nature as much as possible.

As concerns the killing of living beings, we must examine whether it really adds to mankind's welfare, instead of being a privilege of a very limited group (as hunting for pleasure is for the hunters).

2. TRANSLATION INTO PRACTICE

2.1. Presentation

In addition to the above-treated theoretical aspects, there are other standpoints which are very important in the discussion concerning hunting and nature protection ; these are the concrete practical aspects and their consequences. There is no disagreement between protectors of nature and hunters with a sense of responsibility on the principle that hunting must not have any negative influence on nature and environment. Still hunters like to emphasize the idea that hunting has several merits and positive influences, which must certainly be taken into account.

Therefore we must examine whether or not there are negative effects, and what is the real significance of those aspects presented as merits in the present-day situation. In this context we will discuss the following subjects : 'Weidgerechtigkeit', hunting as a strategy for nature conservancy, nature management and the position of hunting in society (more specifically the economical significance and the social position).

Of course those practical standpoints will bear the mark of the corresponding viewpoint on the rudiments of hunting. This interweaving is sometimes rather narrow, or partly overlapping. But we shall try to discuss the above-mentioned subjects on their own merits. Interrelations will be mentioned explicitly.

2.2. Discussion

2.2.1. 'Weidgerechtigkeit'

This concept has been defined above as the hunter's 'green conscience', an internal code of behaviour, based on respect for game and nature. It must be obvious, that it is impossible to give a more exact definition. That is one of the reasons why it is hardly possible to say what is the exact proportion of hunters adhering to this code, to those who do not. According to the hunters themselves, there is a large majority sticking to this code, the opponents on the other hand think it is only a minority. However important this proportion may be, the code itself must be the subject matter of this discussion, as the supporters and opponents of hunting do not disagree about those who do not apply the code.

It is remarkable that whenever hunters define the concept 'Weidgerechtigkeit' in general, they always mention two separate aspects in one breath, as if they are inseparable. These two aspects are the avoidance of negative effects caused by hunting on the one hand, and the positive effects on the other hand. This is an unfair presentation of reality. The number of concretely worded rules of conduct confirms this thesis. When we do not consider some practices belonging more or less to folklore and tradition (e.g. blowing the hunting horn), the larger number of these rules boil down directly to the avoidance of negative effects, as for instance hunting when the stock of game has grown scarce. And then, a number of these rules do not do more than observing existing legal regulations.

The hunter deserves no real praise for this. What is more, several of the said recommendations do nothing but guarantee that the hunter will be able to continue hunting ; they protect the hunter against himself.

Another category consists of merely internal rules of the game. In this way one does not shoot a sitting hare, running partridges or swimming ducks : a 'fair' hunter gives a 'fair chance' to his quarry and waits until the hare is running or until the partridges and ducks are flying.

It must be clear that these rules are of no great use to nature conservancy, or to the game. These rules of the game are rather out of place as a form of ethics towards the animal : the hunter only increases his own satisfaction in hunting by believing it was a 'fair struggle'. These 'fair' starting points can even prevent the necessary efficiency where there is a real need for management. So the use of 'unfair' bait for big game can be very opportune to facilitate selective shooting.

A last and smaller category consists in measures taken in favour of the stock of game, e.g. feeding in winter or general management of the habitats.

These so-called positive measures must be valued at their true worth with regard to nature conservancy. When they are interfering in a population, hunters only want to harvest the surplus. The hunters' positive measures are often reduced to helping create this surplus. A lack of surplus would postpone justifiable hunting ; but in general nature conservancy does not worry much about this kind of situations. Many of the usually shot species are very common. Management of habitats favouring the stock of game, can indirectly enrich all of nature. Generalizations are, also in respect to this matter, out of place, as will become evident further down. This kind of management concentrates on some favourite species, favouring in the first place continuing hunting possibilities and not necessarily preventing negative influences on nature conservancy in general.

2.2.2. Strategy for nature conservancy

Hunters often try to turn the tide of criticism on their actions by introducing hunting as an effective strategy for nature conservancy. Two partly interfering starting points are on the one hand hunting as a guarantee for game conservation, and on the other hand hunting as a guarantee for habitat conservation.

We must consider two aspects when evaluating hunting as a guarantee for the preservation of game. For the first one we can refer to what has been said when interpreting the concept of 'Weidgerechtigkeit'. A far-seeing hunter will take good care to 'harvest only the interest and not to touch the capital itself' ; what is more, he will try to increase the productivity of this capital as much as possible. An essential distinction must be made between resident species on the one hand and migratory species on the other hand : only the first category is within the direct sphere of influence of local hunting management. Nature conservancy can only exceptionally profit by this, but this is not so where the second aspect is concerned. It is therefore often advanced by the hunters.

This second aspect concerns the repression of poaching, as this does not often shrink from touching the capital. And poaching is a strongly disturbing factor, especially there where a judicious management is necessary (e.g. with roes), on the one hand because of its specific and undesirable interferences, and on the other hand because there is no possibility of indicating directions.

Excessive shooting of rarer species (as the woodcock) is generally prevented by guarding, as the poacher would have to risk too much to capture these species.

As concerns hunting as a guarantee for the preservation of natural habitats, we must distinguish clearly between the past and the present. A lot of open space has indeed been preserved in the past through hunting. As hunters were a directly interested party in their capacity as 'ground-users', they could easily secure these interests because of their powerful position at the time.

The present-day situation though, is completely different. The position of authority of the hunting part of the population and its interests has not only grown less important, but the idea of nature conservancy is now supported by a broad social tendency. Hunters have ceased to be the only organized part of the population, which is concerned over the destiny of nature.

And it must be evident by now that a nature conservancy policy which takes itself seriously, cannot be based on countless and split-up green patches of temporary and private interest. That is why the efficiency of the hunters' strategy for nature conservancy can only be looked upon as a form of pressure on government policy. But in this context, the position of hunting does not carry much weight anymore, as has been mentioned before. In this way, we must reduce to its true proportions the value hunters attach to their being allowed to hunt certain species (such as the woodcock and the snipe). What is more, their interest in nature conservancy cannot be taken seriously, because they connect their concern for the preservation of valuable natural habitats to their being allowed to hunt these particular species.

2.2.3. Nature management

In this context, the concept 'nature management' indicates all of the techniques which allow us to attain a preconceived end, based on ecological and ideological insights. This end can generally be described as preservation of growth of the 'natural value' of a certain area. Hunters often suggest that hunting is necessary as a form of nature conservancy, even that hunting is nature conservancy. It must be clear though, that the hunter does not aim at a higher natural value of the hunting ground in the first place : what is emphasized is the obtaining of the best stock of game, 'to be able to use the natural resources in the best way'.

The fight against or the prevention of damage by game in agriculture, horticulture and forestry can only be a side issue in this context, because the hunter is hold legally responsible in this question. With regard to actual nature management, we must only judge the hunter's free practice of game management.

On this topic, disagreement between supporters and antagonists of hunting can be found on two levels, on the one hand the level concerning the efficiency of a measure as regards a certain end, on the other hand the level concerning the measures on themselves, as regards their desirability. Important aspects concerning both levels will be discussed

in a later contribution : namely those relating to the corresponding ecological insights ; the only aspects which will be judged here as to their possible merits or negative effects with regard to nature conservancy will be those originating from a particular ideology.

The ideological aspects in the discussion on the relation between hunting and nature management as a technique of nature conservancy are interrelated closely with the general ethics and philosophy of both parties.

It is essential to distinguish between the preconceived objectives. Human interference is inherent to the objective of hunting ; in nature conservancy this interference is prevented, unless it is necessary for the realization of the preconceived objective. The conclusion can be drawn here that all interference by or for the benefit of hunting, which does not fulfil a necessity, nor a concrete objective of nature conservancy, can be judged to be undesired. There are many such interferences in hunting, which can serve as an example. In this way, the reaping of a 'natural population surplus' within a certain species, cannot be legitimated within the context of strict nature conservancy standards, even though the stock of the species in question may not be influenced throughout the years. Other examples are the reduction of predatory animals, the stocking with game, the specific care of the different species of game and the general improvement of natural habitats for the benefit of the stock of game. Even if the hunter's harvesting can be a neutral interference in itself, the other examples often entail fundamental changes.

In case of the restriction of predatory animals, it is essential that the hunter ranges himself within the ecosystem on the same trophic level with the natural predatory animals, so that they become rivals. The hunter hopes to harvest more for himself by continually fighting these predatory animals.

The stocking with game is an appropriate technique within hunting. The main purpose is to allow a uniform continuation of hunting. Threatened species are not involved here, with the exception of some recent publicity stunts (concerning three-frog for instance).

Specific care of certain species, such as additional feeding or providing added nesting opportunities, is also an appropriate technique in hunting. Here too, the main purpose is to make the surplus to be harvested as high as possible. Combined with the reduction of predatory animals, this boils down to favouring certain species for the benefit of one kind of interest, namely the objective of harvesting.

At first sight, the improvement of natural habitats seems to agree best with real nature conservancy. Hunters tend to emphasize this aspect very strongly in discussions on hunting and nature conservancy, although the measures taken by hunters and gamekeepers mainly serve specific species of game. They say these measures influence all of the ecosystem in a positive way.

This is indeed a good opportunity for hunting to make itself creditable with regard to nature conservancy. Alas, it is often proved in practice, that the measures which are taken have a negative effect because of the partiality of hunting interests.

There are not raised any objections to the planting of foreign plants for instance, as long as they increase the hiding opportunities for the game (cf. SWARTENBROECKX, 1982). All kinds of 'rest grounds' are claimed

in the interest of hunting, to use them as a field or grazing-land for game, while often rare or vulnerable biotic communities are destroyed, for the benefit of some favoured game species. That is why the hunter's improvement of natural habitats cannot always be considered a service to nature.

2.2.4. Social position

Of course hunting and nature conservancy do not stand by themselves in society. The unavoidable integration in the social system provides us with some relevant aspects with regard to the present discussion. It is not our aim to examine these aspects exhaustively in themselves ; it is more useful to locate them exactly with respect to the problem at issue and pointing at possible merits or negative effects. In this context we shall first focus attention on the economical significance of hunting. Two aspects are to be distinguished : one is a direct result of hunting in itself, the other relates to a strategic point of view, such as the prevention of damage to other users of the land, and the prevention of poaching.

Concerning the first aspect, it is so that hunting has resulted directly in a certain economical industry (hunting licences, arms trade, venison, ...). On a national level, its significance is small, but not totally unimportant. Hunters use it in defence of hunting.

With regard to the production of venison and in particular of the venison resulting from pleasure hunting, it is important to state that the share of those species which cannot be bred, is negligible ; and it is this aspect which is most in conflict with nature conservancy. It must be repeated in this context that, although the produce of hunting favours a certain circulation of money, the profits are negative when compared to the necessary investments in energy. It must also be evident, that in our present-day society, the production of venison in general cannot be an objective in itself, only a result. Thus the economical significance of possible higher returns in venison cannot be a driving force.

As for the economical significance of hunting as a form of industry, we must only consider the alterations occurring when hunting will know further restrictions. All parties do agree that a form of hunting will remain justified or necessary in our cultural landscape in the future. Nevertheless it is evident, that when hunting will be reduced to the necessary or strictly desirable, this will have a radical influence on the general economical significance of hunting. Anyhow, it will never be anything but a small share in something of rather limited interest, while other activities of a greater economical significance (as e.g. forest recreation), could come into prominence.

For that matter, the basic thesis applies, that the economical significance of present-day hunting cannot be decisive for its regulation.

Prevention of excessive game damage and of poaching is the second aspect of the total economical impact of hunting.

Private prevention of poaching saves the community a lot of expenses. This prevention is strongly desired by nature conservancy too (cf. above). The hunter's harvest objective often guarantees its actual efficiency.

Concerning game damage, we must draw the attention to the possibility that thanks to the hunters, the community need not pay for measures outside the strict interests of hunting. What is more : hunters prefer to pay for it themselves. Alternatives are less opportune in this context, except for specific cases and circumstances. If we would leave the general reduction of the stock to the ground-user's arbitrariness, we would open the door for criminality.

Nor can this whole task be entrusted to government officials, because their way of acting lacks subtlety and is too expensive to be useful for the community. This last possibility is often suggested by those in favour of nature conservancy, because they think misuse can be prevented by the elimination of self-interest (the harvest objective). Yet it is clear that the same guarantees can be obtained by specific regulations and mechanisms of control within hunting itself. Government investment can be reduced to official supervision, which will always be necessary anyway.

Speaking in theory and from an economical point of view, hunting is favourably placed as a form of private game management, but it must be emphasized that it is often completely different in practice. As it is, hunting is often placed in an ambiguous position, as it prevents game damage, while at the same time causing it. Especially in the case of big game, as deer and roe, they often maintain a size of population far above the capacity of the natural habitat. By excessive feeding, giving medication against a.o. infections with parasites, and maintenance of an unnaturally high number of female animals, the hunter strives for the highest possible amount of quarry. In fact it is remarkable that hunters who ought to prevent excessive damage, are often in conflict with the interests of a.o. foresters, because of the high demands they make upon the game population and its management. For many years now, this conflict of interests has been a source of many and often repeated controversies.

A second aspect concerning the social position of hunting compares the hunter, being a person wanting recreation, with other people who also claim nature and open space for their recreation.

A first group consists of the nature lovers whose passionate preference for certain species of animals (in practice for individual representatives) can be contrasted with passionate hunting.

Where recreational hunting is concerned, a 'democratic' solution could be found in dividing the scientifically admissible period for hunting proportionate to the number of opponents and antagonists.

But the social aspect of hunting as recreation must not only be judged with regard to 'passionate' nature lovers, but also with regard to all those people who are looking for some rest and relaxation in nature. It must be observed here, that the number of the last mentioned is a multiple of the number of hunters. We must also take into account that an unintentional confrontation with the killing of animals and the noise of gunshots, can be a heavy burden for those seeking recreation, on a physical as well as a psychic level ; nor can we guarantee those people's safety in this way. In this context the hunter suggests that the city dwellers should adapt themselves to outdoor life (not the other way round) but this standpoint is not tenable, for purely democratic reasons. It is inherent in hunting as a form of recreation that it takes a lot of space. An acute conflict of interests has arisen now that the general public has got such a large interest in nature. The hunter has often paid a lot for his possibilities of recreation and he is

therefore inclined to close this hunting grounds to the public to prevent them from disturbing his quarry. These two opponents often form a three-cornered affair with the movement for nature conservancy, as this movement also fears mass recreation might have negative influences, but does not like being excluded from areas of great natural interest.

We must realize that although the 'city dweller' has a right to rest and relaxation in nature, this can have unadmissible negative influences ; that is why a compromise must be found in a form of guided and organized recreation. This solution can easily be realized in practice, as the largest part of those seeking recreation are very guidable. It is also essential to inform these people on the necessity of following certain rules of conduct : only then may there be a chance of finding them ready to adapt their behaviour and actions when this is necessary.

In this context though, we must draw the attention to the fact that hunting in itself has a strongly anti-educational influence : to treat animals as a target shows a complete lack of respect for nature. This image is evoked and intensified by the limited contact between hunting and the general public. Information on this subject is desirable as a form of hunting will always be necessary. But information on necessary interferences must not be confused with information on those interferences which are unnecessary, though they may be admissible. In this context we must ask ourselves whether it is desirable to justify recreational hunting towards the public, this kind of hunting being a typical example of the related view on the general relationship man-nature, as discussed above.

On the other hand, when hunting is reduced to what is necessary or desirable, it can be justified in its entirety, and thus acquires real educational value.

But the central problem can be found in the fact that hunters, unlike the other people seeking recreation in nature, pay a lot of money for their hobby, and furthermore take it for granted that they ought to be rewarded according to their 'deserts', through being entitled to harvest. It has become evident though that the current net profits made by pleasure hunting, are small or strategically questionable. The right to harvest which is believed to be so evident, thus loses much of its soundness. The problem concerning the financial conditions for hunting recreation can be traced to the corresponding government policy. High financial sacrifices are asked in order to realize a necessary reduction of the number of hunters. The alternative lies in a stricter selection at hunting examinations, and this is rejected because it does not answer the principle that each level of the population must have equal chances ; besides hunting would thus cease to be a kind of sport. The fundamental choice to legitimate hunting as a source of recreation turns out to be a direct and indirect cause of conflicts with the other groups seeking recreation in nature. It is obvious that these conflicts, both direct and indirect, can be avoided for the greater part by a reversed strategy, which reduces the number of hunters radically to the level of hunting as a means of control. The hunters' financial sacrifices can be reduced and this would be justified by the fact hunting for control and guarding can be regarded as a service to the community.

It remains to be observed that the choice for private game management must be linked to the condition that this kind of management must be possible. Hunting on Sundays and public holidays for instance can cause conflicts with other people looking for recreation and these conflicts must be solved in this light (by means of temporary and/or local regulations). But the number of situations giving rise to conflicts will automatically be limited. A similar remark can be made with respect to too strict standards for responsible hunting (e.g. related to certain types of weather).

2.3. Conclusions

The recreational aspect is decisive in present-day hunting. Hunters themselves do not assign such an important part to this aspect in their activities : they are inclined to legitimize their actions by emphasizing the positive aspects. They do not hesitate suggesting that without them, nature would be dead in a very short time. This thesis is completely untenable.

The merits of the 'Weidgerechtigheit' (often used by hunters) are very limited with regard to nature conservancy. On the contrary, many of the self-imposed rules of conduct are absolutely necessary if hunting is to be endured.

Many of the so-called positive side effects of hunting occur very seldom and are strategically dubious, as far as the part taken by pleasure hunting is concerned. Nowadays hunters have ceased to be the only ones who care for nature. Legitimation of hunting for pleasure in its various aspects must be regarded as particularly anti-educational : it confirms the old-fashioned image of man versus nature. What is more, its undemocratic position in this context can prevent those other people seeking recreation in nature, from discovering nature and learning to appreciate it.

A radical reduction of hunting practice to the level of hunting for control can combine the economical advantages of private hunting - mutatis mutandis - with the getting rid of negative effects as much as possible. When hunting fulfils a real necessity or general desirability in a direct and strict way, there is no reason to replace it by another structure, but there is an important economical reason to maintain it. It is essential that 'democracy' should not be aimed at in hunting practice itself, as opposed to the current policy. Hunting must be made into a concern for an élite (not in a financial sense, but as regards expertness in ecological matters) and not into a popular sport : the object of this kind of sport does not allow this anymore.

III. FINAL CONCLUSION AND SUMMING UP

In the matter of ethical-philosophical aspects it appears that the controversies between supporters and opponents of hunting boil down to a difference of basic orientation or attitude towards man in his environment. In this context, present-day hunting for pleasure is not a serious problem in itself, but it certainly is a symbol or intermediary for a general view, which ought to guarantee the preservation of the entire ecosystem.

Concrete interference by means of hunting can be neutral or necessary on certain conditions. It must be emphasized though, that this is exceptional, especially in a cut-up and densely populated area as Flanders.

It is therefore very improper that hunters persist in claiming that their management is correct, and that only their zoological management is correct, or even that 'hunting' and 'nature management' are identical.

Biologists and ecologists are often reproached with being the most emotional scientists existing. But personal involvement or 'partiality' in hunting matters can be reduced to a difference in starting point, namely either 'hunting, unless ...' or 'no hunting, unless ...'. We need not make reservations concerning the concretization of the conditions, in the field of science, unless one is in doubt about it. The (rational) principle of reverse proof cannot legitimize an interference (like hunting) on a scientific base, when the precise effect is unknown or cannot be known. This applies to several ecological problems in connection with hunting, because of their inherent complexity. Therefore partiality must be sought in hunting circles in the first place.

But we must also draw the attention to the fact that the protectors of nature often use standards, which are too radical or dogmatic, because they are as passionately bent on nature as the hunter is on hunting. In trying to gain the general public's sympathy or because of more personal grudges, they unjustly use improper generalizations and situations which have been rendered out of date by recent events (e.g. extinction of certain species through hunting). Infringements of the game law are often too soon ascribed to hunters. Existing abuse within hunting is known in hunting circles and is strongly criticized by those in favour of responsible hunting. Too much attention to certain excesses can only confuse the necessary dialogue between hunters and (other) protectors of nature, and divert the discussion from the real problems.

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