# 6

# **HUNTING DELUSIONS**

Lisa Kemmerer

When faced with the truths of buying flesh in the grocery store, some people argue that hunting must be preferable—that hunting is the environmentally friendly way to put "meat" on the table. This chapter explores this assertion.

# Wildlife Services—Ecosystem Manipulation on Behalf of Hunters/Ranchers

In 1913 the U.S. government passed the "Animal Damage Control Act," authorizing the U.S. Secretary of Agriculture to suppress, eradicate, and control any nonhuman animal deemed injurious to human interests, namely the interests of ranchers and hunters (Fox 2009). U.S. Animal Damage Control has since been given a less descriptive title—U.S. Department of Agriculture's Wildlife Services Program. Despite the new name, Wildlife Services continues with the original agenda—killing native wildlife on behalf of ranching and hunting interests.

Wildlife Services kills with/by "poisons, steel-jaw leghold traps, strangulation neck snares, denning (the killing of coyote pups in their dens), hounding, shooting, and aerial gunning," taking out coyotes, foxes, bobcats, otters, wolves, black bears, and mountain lions (Fox 2011). Wildlife Services kills "more than 2.4 million animals each year, including more than 120,000 native carnivores at an annual cost to taxpayers of over \$115 million" (Fox 2009, 2011). Such "ecologically short-sighted conduct" has inevitably altered ecosystems, and extirpated species (Robertson 2012).

Because the birthrates of many species vary *directly* in response to external pressures, "culling" is ineffective, guaranteeing greater resurgence:

[W]hen populations are low with respect to the maximum number of individuals an environment can support. ... birth rates (the number of live births per

female per year) have a tendency to be high. When a population is at or near the maximum number the environment can support, birth rates are low and death rates (the number of animals in the population dying per year) are high.

(Yarrow 2009)

Killing deer or coyotes ultimately causes each of these species to bear more young than would otherwise be the case. In contrast, immunocontraceptive techniques reduce a variety of populations by 72-86 percent (AWI Quarterly 2012).

It is important to remember that wildlife conservation began because of and for hunters. Many hunters and U.S. federal and state wildlife agency employees therefore assert that conservation exists—and wildlife remains—thanks to hunters. While there was some truth to this when wildlife management first began, it is no less true that wildlife management was initially necessary because of hunters. Without hunters, the U.S. would not have needed conservation in Roosevelt's day. Conservation was initiated to protect hunted animals from hunters-to conserve wildlife for the pleasures of future hunts. In the absence of hunting, conservation would not have been necessary in the early twentieth century, though preservation (preserving wilderness for its own sake, as compared with conservation for human use) would eventually have been necessary due to human population growth and expansion. Preservation under these conditions would have been much more likely to be designed to preserve ecosystems and habitat.

# **Funding: Taxpayer Burdens, Hunter Benefits**

A brief history of the Pittman-Robertson Act debunks the notion that hunters and hunting organizations fund contemporary government conservation. Legal intervention was deemed essential in 1937 to save hunter target species; Congress passed the "Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act," commonly called the "Pittman-Robertson Act" (P-R), adding an 11 percent excise tax on rifle, shotgun, and ammunition sales, earmarked for use by state wildlife agencies to manipulate wildlife to increase hunter target species. States were required to match "grant funds with at least one dollar for every three federal dollars received" ('Pittman-Robertson' 2013, p. 3). Consequently, states that sold more guns received more Pittman-Robertson monies, and had more P-R funds available for wildlife manipulation. This legislation effectively tied the interests of state government wildlife agencies to the interests of state firearms industries.

As hunting became more and more of a pastime (as opposed to a source of necessary sustenance), hunter revenues declined. In 1970, the Pittman-Robertson Act was amended, adding "provisions for the deposit of the 10 percent tax on pistols and revolvers" ('Digest' n.d.). This amendment further tied government wildlife agencies to the firearms industry, and also radically altered who pays the P-R tax.

Today less than 5 percent of U.S. citizens hunt, but there are approximately 90 guns for every 100 citizens (Moss 2004; 'Hunters' n.d.). The most common reason for keeping a gun in the U.S. is now personal protection—usually a

pistol or revolver. The second most common reason for owning a gun is target practice (Carroll 2005). Millions of women in New York, Boston, Los Angeles, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco, and Philadelphia—who have never hunted and never will hunt—purchased handguns and paid the P-R tax. Some of these gun owners (like my sister) vehemently detest hunting, but nonetheless supported the P-R tax with their handgun purchase. Given that less than 5 percent of U.S. citizens hunt, and given that FWS P-R tax now draws largely from those who carry handguns for personal protection, government wildlife agencies misappropriate P-R funds by using these monies to manipulate wildlife and ecosystems on behalf of hunters.

Luckily, an alternative source of funding is available. Although hunters and hunting declined steadily over the last fifty years, wildlife watchers grew by one million each year between 1996 and 2001 (Robertson 2012). "The ratio of nonhunting outdoor enthusiasts to hunters grew more than 26 percent in the last ten years" so that there are now six times as many non-hunting wildlife enthusiasts as there are hunters (Robertson 2012). U.S. wildlife watchers currently contribute \$46 billion to local, regional, and national economies. Non-hunters buy everything from "bird food to binoculars, from special footwear to camera equipment," spending large sums "to enjoy wildlife" ('Federal' n.d.). But if an excise tax on tents, cameras, hiking boots, climbing gear, sleeping bags, binoculars, backpacks, life preservers, skis, and canoes (and perhaps photography sales) were implemented to fund wildlife protection, federal and state wildlife agencies would need to shift focus from conservation on behalf of hunters and hunting to genuine preservation of wildlife and wild lands. Contemporary outdoor enthusiasts prefer to visit intact ecosystems, to watch wildlife on the hoof—they want to see deer and ducks alive on public lands, not dead in the back of a hunter's truck.

Given the decisive shift in public interest over the last thirty to fifty years, it is no longer just or sensible (if, indeed, it ever was) for wildlife agencies to cater specifically to hunters. FWS's ongoing alignment with hunting interests and firearms industries constitutes a flagrant breach of public trust and a gross misappropriation of public funds.

#### "Public" Lands

Despite the requirement that public lands be "held in trust for the American people by the federal government," hunter interests hold sway. It is a breach of trust for federal agencies to exploit, manipulate, or damage public lands, or ecosystems and wildlife on public lands, on behalf of a tiny special interest group. Perhaps federal and state government wildlife agency oversight personnel are unaware that, with the drastic decline in hunters, hunter-friendly policies can no longer be considered management "in trust for the American people" ('Public' n.d.).

Government "management" policies for public lands are locked into the mindset of Americans who lived a century ago, when the majority of citizens hunted and public lands were perhaps rightly preserved for hunter interests—assuming hunter interests formed the majority. Today, U.S. citizens overwhelmingly choose to view rather than kill wildlife, and U.S. public lands ought to be managed accordingly—"in trust for the American people" ('Public' n.d.). Instead, public lands visitors are expected to acquire and wear fluorescent orange when entering public lands during long hunting seasons. At such times, hikers, bird watchers, backpackers, mountain bikers, and climbers—all other users—enter public lands knowing that they take their lives into their own hands—that they might be inadvertently shot by hunters.

There are several ways to justly manage public lands on behalf of the American people. For example, hunting can be restricted to a percentage of public lands reflecting the percentage of hunters—which is to say, public lands where hunting is allowed should be restricted to less than 5 percent of total public lands. This would leave 95 percent of public lands open for general use year-round for the 95 percent of the population that does not hunt. Alternatively, hunting could be restricted to a proportional percentage of time-5 percent, allowing the vast majority (the 95 percent) to feel safe on public lands 95 percent of the time. Based on the likelihood of yet further dwindling interests in hunting, perhaps hunters could be allowed on just 5 percent of public lands for just 5 percent of the time. Such changes in U.S. policies would hold U.S. public lands "in trust for the American people," rather than in trust for a mere 5 percent of the U.S. population.

# Wildlife "Refuges"

By definition, a refuge:

- offers "shelter or protection from danger or distress,"
- is "a place that provides shelter or protection,"
- offers "recourse in difficulty" ('Refuge' n.d.).

Given this, we would expect a "wildlife refuge" to be a place where wild animals are sheltered and protected, but there are currently 556 National Wildlife Refuges in the United States, and they are decidedly dangerous places for wildlife.

U.S. wildlife refuges were established to "create well-stocked hunting grounds," as "a breeding ground for producing an outflow of game for sport hunting" (Kheel 2008). The home page of U.S. NWRS website announces, "Your Guide to Hunting on National Wildlife Refuges," and includes a search engine to helps users "Find the Perfect Hunt" ('Your' n.d.). The U.S. NWRS website also lists the agencies "Guiding Principles," including "wildlife management," defined as "active manipulation of habitats and populations, [as] necessary to achieve Refuge System and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service missions" ('Guiding' n.d.). Hunting is listed first among the agencies "wildlife-dependent uses," followed by fishing ('Guiding' n.d.).

#### Hunting as "Mercy Killing"

Contemporary hunters often assert that shooting wildlife is beneficial—even essential—for wilderness, ecosystems, and wildlife populations—no one wants Bambi to die a slow and painful death from starvation. But if deer are dangerously overpopulated, why is hunting limited to certain seasons? Why are hunting policies designed to inflate deer numbers? If deer (and other hunter target species) are overpopulated, wouldn't FWS stop eliminating (and start protecting) natural predators?

Those who claim that hunters prevent slow death by starvation also overlook the fact that hunters do not target thin, vulnerable, or sickly deer. Hunters tend to seek big bodies and big racks—the bigger the better. Why else would they attempt to attract target animals using bottled urine from does in heat (Heffernan 2012)? Rather than eliminate sickly deer, hunters strip "big game" populations of their strongest members, and their strongest genes. "This sort of discriminatory culling-of-the-fittest runs counter to natural selection and is effectively triggering a reversal of evolution by giving the unfit and defective a better shot at passing on their genes" (Robertson 2012).

Those who argue that hunting provides essential population control never seem to notice the hypocrisy—the absurdity—of human beings gunning down other species because we think they are overpopulated. We are the most dangerously overpopulated species: Do we really want to advocate shooting to kill as a reasonable and appropriate solution to overpopulation problems?

# Hunting as Procuring "Compassionate Meat"

With heightened awareness of the horrors of factory farming, some argue that hunting elk or rabbits or quail is preferable to buying beef or pork or turkey—that hunting is more compassionate than any factory farmed animal products: "Many hunters point out that death in the slaughterhouse is by no means more humane" than a bullet in the wild (Luke 1997).

Hunters cannot and do not shoot perfectly each time they pull the trigger, and hunters leave wounded animals to die slowly in the elements, or to be harassed and killed by other predators. Hunters wound animals who are not retrieved, animals who hemorrhage or die of infection—especially birds. Of the 200 million animals killed by hunters every year, 50 million are doves, 25 million are quails, and 20 million are pheasants (Gudorf and Huchingson 2010). Just three species of birds constitute nearly half of the 200 million animals killed annually, and fowl are still gunned down in the same way that my grandfather killed birds-with shotguns that scatter pellets, hoping to knock birds out of the sky, hopefully to be found and brought in by a "bird dog." Given this, it is not surprising that wounding when hunting is estimated to be as high as 30 percent (Gudorf and Huchingson 2010; 'Reducing' n.d.). Many wounded animals are left to die-those retrieved rarely die a painless death (Hatfield n.d.). Hunters very seldom kill quickly and cleanly with one shot. The average hunter is in the field only five to seven days each

year—hardly an ample experience to determine a clear shot. Many novices, bent on achieving their legal limit, often "shoot from the hip" and injure rather than kill their target (Gudorf and Huchingson 2010).

Some hunters turn to bow hunting in the hopes of finding a measure of challenge. Bow hunting has a wounding rate of greater than 50 percent; bow hunters expend an average of 14 arrows per kill, and "[w]ounding and crippling losses are inevitable" (Hatfield n.d.). Each of 24 studies on the subject "concluded that for every deer legally killed by bowhunters, at least one or more is struck by a broadhead arrow, wounded, and not recovered. Studies of bowhunting reveal an average wounding rate of 54%" (Hatfield n.d.).

To determine whether or not hunting is cruel, we must know the definition of "cruel":

- · "disposed to inflict pain or suffering";
- an act "causing or conducive to injury, grief, or pain" ('Cruel' n.d.). Hunting is cruel by definition.

To be fair, we must also figure in the physical and psychological pain and premature deaths of the many animals killed by Wildlife Services on behalf of hunters—those gassed, trapped, snared, and gunned down on behalf of hunters. Snaring and trapping are known to cause extensive, prolonged suffering not just for those who are killed, but for the larger community in which these animals live.

There is no nutritional need to consume flesh in twenty-first-century America—venison or beef or chicken. People who are genuinely committed to minimizing suffering must ask a broader question, do I need to eat animal products? Those who sincerely wish to reduce suffering (and protect ecosystems)—will hunt for potatoes and pickles in the garden, market, and pantry, rather than doves and ducks in the forest. For those who seek a compassionate diet, the answer is vegan, not venison.

#### **Hunting for Economy**

Many hunters justify their sport as a means of low-cost sustenance, but when a prospective hunter queried online what it might cost to get into the game, replies noted the expense of a rifle/bow, ammunition, boots and clothes, license and permit—\$500-\$1500 just to get started ('How' n.d.). This assumes that one already owns a chest freezer and a truck, or some other way of transporting a large, bloody carcass. Ongoing expenses include ammunition, annual hunting licenses, the cost of transport, and gear upgrades and replacements. At \$0.50-\$1.50 for a single shot, ammunition is expensive (Gudorf and Huchingson 2010; Robertson 2012). (How many hunters are unwilling to burn up their money honing skills at a target range before they head for the woods?) Seasonal U.S. hunting licenses range from \$20-\$50 (depending on the state), with an additional

license (in the range of \$10-\$30) required to shoot hunter target species, such as a deer, as well as for the privilege of killing a less common species (elk, antelope, moose). Hunting out-of-state generally costs at least four times as much ... and hunting out-of-state is increasingly necessary as urban sprawl claims wild lands ('How' n.d.). Indeed, many hunters now drive long distances to reach areas open to hunters, and travel is therefore an increasingly significant portion of hunting expenses (along with owning, insuring, and maintaining an appropriate vehicle for rough terrain and for hauling a corpse home). Finally, one who hunts for food will need a chest freezer, and some will need to add the cost of professional butchering. This does not equate to a bargain buck (or even a discount duck).

Compare this with the cost of gardening, a wonderful family enterprise and bonding experience. Seeds and starters (\$5-\$15, depending on amount and variety) are the primary annual cost. Watering a garden entails no additional expense for those who already water a yard. For those who do not have a yard, community gardens are available in many locations (often free, sometimes \$15-\$50 for a season, depending on the community) ('Frequently' n.d.). A gardener can preserve produce by canning, or freezing, but gardeners can also choose to plant crops that keep well without refrigeration, such as winter squash and potatoes. Gardening for veggies is much cheaper than hunting for flesh, especially if one adds environmental costs and the cost to one's long-term health.

Another option, also much more economical than hunting, is to buy bulk staples. For example, it is pretty easy to find twenty pounds of rice for \$10, and twenty-four pounds of navy or kidney beans for even less. Much of the world's population has depended on these, or similar grains and legume-based staples, for centuries—beans and rice, rice and lentils, potatoes and beans. With bulk grains and legumes and plants, it is easy to prepare delicious meals for one person on a budget of \$20–\$30 per week—including spices—now that is a markdown meal! See Ellen Jaffe Jones's Eat Vegan on \$4 a Day for practical suggestions about this (Jones 2011).

Hunting is a comparatively expensive way to put food on the table.

In reality, hunting is typically not a source of provision but actually drains family resources. Deer hunters, for example, spend on average over forty dollars per pound of venison acquired, once all the costs of equipment, licenses, transportation, unsuccessful hunts, and so forth, are calculated.

(Luke 2007)

A hunter in *World Bowhunters Magazine* writes: "Nobody hunts just to put meat on the table because it's too expensive, time consuming, and extremely inconsistent"; hunters kill wildlife "because it's fun!" (Luke 2007). Honesty provides a breath of fresh air.

North Americans who hunt almost always hunt for pleasure, not for sustenance. Perhaps the best proof of this is that hunters kill some twenty-five million mourning doves, sixteen million squirrels, two million woodchucks, half a million prairie dogs, six hundred thousand crows, and sixty one thousand

skunks every year ('Learn' n.d.). Have you ever been invited over for woodchuck soup or skunk stew?

#### The "Eco-Hunter"

An environmentalist is

- "a person who is concerned with the maintenance of ecological balance and the conservation of the environment";
- "a person concerned with issues that affect the environment, such as pollution";
- "an expert on environmental problems";
- "a person who advocates or works" to protect "air, water, animals, plants," and other aspects of the natural environment ('Environmentalist' n.d.).

Hunters want bloated numbers of hunter target species and a dearth of carnivores competing to secure prey. Hunters enlist powerful government wildlife agencies to manipulate predators and ecosystems on their behalf—to bolster prey. Hunters have demonstrated over the course of more than a century that they are not interested in advocating for "the preservation, restoration, or improvement of the *natural* environment" ('Environmentalist' n.d.; emphasis added). Environmentalists are those interested in allowing predator/prey relationships to create and recreate their own natural balance, as they have for millions of years. Those who manipulate wildlife, altering natural ecosystems, do not qualify as environmentalists.

#### Conclusion

On what legitimate grounds would an informed, sincere environmentalist align with hunter interests when hunter interests damage ecosystems? How can any informed, sincere environmentalist *fail* to take a stand *against* policies that destroy the integrity of ecosystems, which are generally supported by the gun lobby, hunters, and government conservation programs?

According to Aldo Leopold, a "thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (Leopold 1968). Wildlife agencies damage the integrity and stability of ecosystems while manipulating biotic communities on behalf of hunters. Contemporary environmentalists in the U.S. who align with or support hunters and hunting do so at the expense of their mission—and therefore at the expense of their own integrity.

#### **Discussion Questions**

1 Why do you suppose so many myths surround hunting? What social and cultural forces maintain hunting myths presented in this chapter?

- 2 Is it morally justifiable for an environmentalist to purchase a gun given that such a purchase pays for wildlife manipulation?
- 3 Should hunting be legal on public lands? Why or why not?
- What are the advantages and disadvantages of holding hunters to 5 percent of public lands?
- As long as we continue to allow hunting in wildlife refuges, should they be renamed? As a class, create a letter with suggested name changes to be submitted to Wildlife Services Department.
- 6 How do we, as one species among many, justly assess which species is most overpopulated?
- 7 Is it morally acceptable, when human population growth is creating the most significant and dangerous environmental problems, to control the populations of other animals (bears, elephants, or deer) and not our own?

#### **Essay Questions**

- 1 Is hunting immoral? Is it natural? Is hunting outdated? Why?
- Under what specific conditions might a hunter be an informed environmentalist and yet maintain integrity, if any? Put another way, are there any circumstances under which hunting might be morally justified for an environmentalist?
- 3 In what ways is wildlife manipulation beneficial for wildlife, environment, or hunters respectively?
- 4 Can you think of any population control methods that we might legitimately use both on ourselves and on other species? If you feel they cannot be used on humans, what does this indicate about such methods? When might freedoms and rights be breached, if ever, on behalf of the environment—on behalf of the life and safety of all that dwell herein?

### Suggested Further Reading

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#### Note

For more on this subject see Eating Earth, Lisa Kemmerer, Oxford University Press, 2014.

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