Hunting the Hunters

The persistent quacks of adorable marbled and glossy ducks permeate the grounds of Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina at Tomlinson Park—affectionately known as the Duck Pond—daily, diffusing their angelic warmth throughout the chilled mountain air. Students flock to the Pond either to doze off with the ducks by their side or to feed the ducks pieces of bread they saved from their lunch. Undeniably, there exists an endearing aura the ducks of Appalachian emanate that make them so loved by all; this is why it is so unbelievable that these affable ducks are brutally pierced with bullets year-round by camouflaged killers solely to fulfill a carnal desire of man. This practice, known commonly as “recreational hunting” or “sport hunting”, continues to be a matter of moral and rational debate all over the world (Luke 3). The Harvest Information Program, affiliated with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, records that in 2012, hunters killed approximately sixteen million ducks—a number that is too high about which to be complacent. Keep in mind that the exorbitant aforementioned aggregate excludes other animals that are the targets of hunters: geese, doves, deer, and elk, among others (Raftovich). Combined, the amount of animals humans kill each year for sport is at an unacceptable level. Recreational hunting is an inadmissible form of animal cruelty in society and should be prohibited on the basis of animal rights, the fallacious logic upholding the practice, and the understanding and connection humans have to the animals hunted.

*Oxford English Dictionary* defines an “animal” as “any living organism characterised by voluntary movement, the possession of rapid response to stimuli, and the ingestion of complex
organic substances”. The definition continues, however, to state “any mammal . . . except man” (qtd. in Hurn 13-14). Oxford’s interpretation of what constitutes an “animal” nevertheless stands eerily similar to that which constitutes a “human”, yet Oxford blatantly and hypocritically asserts that an “animal” and a “human” exist as two separate entities. This provokes a serious question—what does it mean to be an “animal”? Because of the striking similarities in Oxford’s definition of “animal” with that which is considered “human” and its disinclination to include humankind in its discernment, it may be more necessary to study the corollary to the previous question—what does it mean to be “human”?

Reputable scientists and laypeople alike argue that humans exist in a stratum far above that in which animals abide. Those who maintain this belief—or rather misbelief—claim that, while humans and animals are biologically continuous, they are set apart on the basis that humans have “culture”, whereas animals do not. Social anthropologist Samantha Hurn, Programme Director for Anthrozoology at the University of Exeter in the United Kingdom, deems this reasoning erroneous and foolhardy, contending that “many of the defining characteristics of ‘being human’ (such as the possession of ‘culture’, language, conscious thought and so on) are also found, in varying degrees, outside the human species” (4). Utilizing Hurn’s knowledge, it is therefore reasonable to assume that both humans and animals have been cut from the same cloth.

The first step towards the realization of animals’ rights is to acknowledge that animals are sentient beings capable of conscious thought, akin to humans. Consider the whelp a dog gives when spanked by its caretaker, the panic a deer endures when it spots movement in its surroundings, or ducklings’ eagerness to be in close proximity to their mother. To put it further into perspective, envision a human infant; now imagine that infant being beaten by his or her
father simply for crying. It could be argued that the beating is justified because the infant is naturally subject to the father’s interests due to his or her comparatively lower levels of mental capacity, verbal communication skills, and responsibilities (Linzey 30-31). However, any moral person would immediately object to this practice. Now, replace the infant with an animal. Nothing has changed in this scenario other than the recipient of the beating. Humans argue that an animal, exactly like an infant or even a mentally incapacitated human, has little mental capacity, communication skills, and responsibilities. As stated earlier, no moral person would sit idly back and let a father abuse his helpless infant. Likewise, then, no moral person should remain unperturbed by the abuse recreational hunting inflicts upon animals.

Now that it has been established that animals are sentient beings, it is imperative to address the rights to which animals are entitled as such. While there exist many intrinsic rights for animals, the fundamental right all animals deserve is simply the right to life. Every human values life, as is evident in society’s strict laws prohibiting murder. However, when it comes to the lives of animals, we have relatively less rigorous laws. This indicates that society values human life over that of animals, but there is neither vindication nor justice in this ideology. In the “land of the free”, rights have been guaranteed to all humans, but animals are worthy of the same security under the law.

The right to life should be extended to the animals that share the world with humankind. Philosopher and animal advocate Ros Godlovitch argues, “Suffering is accepted as a concomitant of living and, as such (except for extremely severe and prolonged suffering) is considered worth tolerating. But it is considered worth tolerating because a value is placed on living” (qtd. in Linzey 158-159). If a value is placed on living, then society should not make an effort to cut short the lives of animals by hunting recreationally.
An explanation as to why humans may not value the life of an animal as much as their human counterparts may rest in the fact that, “whether we are hunting ducks or forcing a poodle to wear a sweater, we are unable to accept that non-human creatures are anything other than objects we may own” (Manseau 53). This notion, which Manseau terms “moral schizophrenia”, refers to the perception that animals are inherently lesser than humans; it follows that humans also disregard the life of an animal as equally relevant as that of a human. However, as determined earlier, humans and animals are analogous in many ways, and as such can be considered as being the same species. As Robert Louis Stevenson, acclaimed Scottish novelist and essayist, states, “Nothing more strongly arouses our disgust than cannibalism, yet we make the same impression on Buddhists and vegetarians, for we feed on babies, though not our own” (qtd. in Hurn 84).

Certainly, society has made commendable strides towards the valuing of animals’ lives. Seventeenth-century French philosopher René Descartes adopted the view that animals were not “‘persons’ but things”. He maintained that animals were not conscious beings, but rather machines that possessed no soul. Descartes stated, “A crying dog is no different from a whining gear that needs oil” (qtd. in Manseau 53). A recent study conducted by Stephen Kellert, Professor of Social Ecology at Yale University, found that in the modern age, “Americans on average are more oriented toward expressing affection for animals and avoiding causing them harm [35%]” (Luke 35). However, Kellert’s study displays a percentage of Americans that possess a humanistic and moralistic attitude towards animals that is far too low. Kellert’s findings suggest that there still exists a large gap between parity for animals and rejecting them as inferior that must be bridged.
Having concluded that a major problem in the animal rights arena is the idea that humans value the lives of other humans more than they do the lives of animals, it is crucial that this concept is analyzed from a metaphorical point of view so as to put to rest any doubts that the lives of both humans and animals are equivalent in value. As Brian Luke, former Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of Dayton, provides:

Consider . . . if cheetahs ruled the earth. Imagine that the vast preponderance of the earth’s resources were designated for creating space for cheetahs to occupy and for making their lives safe, secure, and fulfilling . . . Every species of plant and animal is evaluated and treated according to its usefulness in making cheetahs happier, healthier, and more numerous.

Now imagine that some person growing up in this cheetah-centric world asks the obvious question: “Why are my needs and the needs of every other creature on this planet subordinated to the desires of cheetahs?” Her parents give the standard answer: “Because cheetahs are the fastest land animal on earth. They are unique and special, possessing the greatest intrinsic worth because of their tremendous foot speed. No one can run as they do.” (6-7)

The obvious response to this analogy is one of frustration—simply because cheetahs are the fastest land animal, that should not make them the rulers of the earth. To humans, an individual’s running speed does not constitute one’s worth. But, from the perspective of animals, possessing human traits may not justify the superiority that humans claim. Human traits, like the running speed of a cheetah, may be “morally irrelevant”—“they . . . make us different from other species but do not give us greater inherent worth” (Luke 7).
In summary, the logic upholding society’s belief that humans are superior to animals is not only ignorant, but is also invalid. As concluded earlier, the similarities that humans and animals share are so numerous that it would be more of a challenge to claim that the two exist as two distinct creatures. To many animal activists, the “human superiority” excuse in justifying recreational hunting is nothing more than a flawed cop-out. Luke explains, “We do not exploit animals because we are superior to them, we claim superiority in order to excuse the exploitation” (8).

Another irrational excuse recreational hunters sputter to defend their unsettling hunting tactics is that their hunting helps to maintain the balance of the ecosystem by preventing certain species from becoming too populous. This sophistic belief assumes that nature, which has been self-sustainable for millennia more than humans have even existed, is incapable of taking care of itself. Ecosystems and the food chains and webs they contain have balanced themselves for ages; humans, however, feel that they know how to manage nature better than “Mother Nature” herself. This is why humans take it upon themselves to balance the population of certain species for the sake of the “unbalanced” ecosystems they exploit. However, if recreational hunters stowed their weapons and let nature take its course, they might be shocked at the results.

Humans may remark that, unlike the human population, the animal population cannot regulate its numbers without being preyed upon. However, this claim is shaky. It is highly improbable that “species that are not preyed upon . . . universally multiply unchecked until their food supply is exhausted and they die of mass starvation. This would risk extinction” (Luke 63). Luke continues by observing that “the zebra’s population must be checked by the lion, but the lion’s population must be checked by some species that preys on it; this lion eater would also need a predator to keep it in check, and so on indefinitely”. This infinite pattern is not witnessed
anywhere in nature, and so it stands that species that are not preyed upon develop some other means for regulating their population levels (63). This further maintains that hunting is not a necessary occurrence to check a population’s numbers.

Another issue with curbing the numbers of a species by hunting recreationally is that by eliminating a certain number of species at the top of the chain—because they are too numerous—hunters negatively affect the food chain on all the lower strata. Luke makes an example out of a study conducted by Mark Hebblewhite, an Associate Professor of Ungulate Habitat Ecology at the University of Montana, in the Bow Valley of the Banff National Park in Alberta, Canada. Through this study, Hebblewhite wished to consider the effects of removing the wolf population from a section of the park on its prey, its prey’s prey, so on and so forth. In the section without the wolves, the elk population increased. However, as the elk population increased, willow trees, willow warblers, and beaver dams were not as common—the elk feed on willows, which in turn leaves less for the beavers and the warblers (63-64). Hebblewhite’s study disproves modern recreational hunters’ theory that checking a species’ population will, in the end, help to balance an ecosystem. This study substantiated just the opposite; interfering with a species will cause trouble at other parts of a food chain. In other words, an ecosystem is best left untouched by humans.

There exists in the sector of recreational hunting a gender divide. As is expected, more men than women hunt recreationally—approximately ninety-percent of hunters are men, whereas the animal rights movement is overwhelmingly female (Luke 1). As these statements evidence, hunting appears to be a masculine undertaking that appeals only to the manliest of men, and women almost always actively assail the men’s activities. As Luke ponders, “The question is not so much why women oppose animal exploitation as why men support it” (1).
Our society, like all its precursors, assigns both men and women roles, with which they are expected to comply. A “role” defined is “the way a person in a particular position within a social organization is expected to act” (Zusman 8). These gender roles spell out specific norms that each gender must heed in order to be viewed as “normal”. “Feminine gender roles typically include an expectation of responsiveness to the needs of others, while masculine gender roles often include an expectation of a willingness to override or disregard our sympathies for others” (Luke 15). As a result of these prescribed roles, hunting for sport is not only expected to be enjoyable for all men, but is necessary to prove one’s manhood to society. Luke goes on to state, “The construction of a manhood based on domination proceeds from an historically contingent presumption, namely, that male identity must develop in opposition to female identity” (23). Because responding to the suffering of animals is a “natural” part of womanhood, men feel obligated to remain in their separate sphere where animal suffering in activities like recreational hunting is desirable.

In a patriarchal culture, males are discouraged from associating themselves with “womanly emotion”, and thus are applauded when they exhibit a lack of sentimentality and a surplus of ruggedness (Luke 211-213). From whatever perspective one views the issue, however, gender is not a sufficient defense for either maintaining or opposing recreational hunting. Men and women both have been witnessed hunting animals, whether for sport or for subsistence. In *The Hunger Games*, the first of three books in the critically acclaimed trilogy authored by Suzanne Collins, protagonist Katniss Everdeen is depicted hunting fearlessly along with her male partner Gale Hawthorne. This example of hunting performed by a woman in popular culture demonstrates that hunting is not only just an issue for males, but also for females. Thus, the issue of recreational hunting should be viewed from a position that excludes gender. To associate the
support for recreational hunting with men and “to associate the animal rights cause with ‘womanish’ sentiment is to trivialize it” (Luke 211).

However, men and women alike have no need to feel pressured into “hating” animals and lusting for their blood. In the present day, our connection to the animals we hunt has changed dramatically. From the Paleolithic Era to the age of Colonial America, slaying animals was a necessary practice. Killing a woolly mammoth when it attacked was justified not only because of the danger it presented to the people of the Paleolithic Era, but because it was an invaluable source of sustenance for humans. In the modern day, however, humans “do not hunt out of necessity; they typically do not hunt to protect people or animals, nor to keep themselves or their families from going hungry. Rather, they pursue hunting for its own sake, as a sport” (Luke 88). In a world where grocery stores are built on every corner and where there are four McDonald’s locations per square mile, it is safe to say that recreational hunting is no longer required for survival (Super Size Me).

That is not to say, however, that hunting in its entirety should be banned henceforth. Many people living in destitute areas without access to a stored food supply still rely on hunting as a means of subsistence. This form of hunting is the only hunting that should be allowed to exist, with strict regulation by the government to ensure no person abuses the system. In The Hunger Games, Katniss Everdeen and her comrade Gale Hawthorne live in an impoverished community where food is scarce and fat on the bones is a sign of wealth. Katniss reflects on this unfortunate situation, stating, “You see an elderly person, you want to congratulate them on their longevity, ask the secret of their survival. A plump person is envied because they aren’t scraping by like the majority of us” (Collins 124-125). To survive, the hunting duo must venture unseen into the woods to hunt animals and forage for foliage; if they did not hunt on a regular basis, both
they and their families would starve due to the penniless nature of their community. It is this type of hunting—subsistence hunting—exhibited in Collins’ novel *The Hunger Games* that is acceptable in any of today’s societies. Even so, subsistence hunting is rare because of the modern and developed nature of societies worldwide.

Other than subsistence hunting, hunting no longer has a respectable function in society. “Functionalism”, a sociological lens that “views society and other social contexts . . . in terms of the function it serves”, exposes modern recreational hunting as superfluous (Zusman 6). Because hunting in most cases is not necessary for survival in the present day, it can be said that hunting no longer serves a function for society, and should be eradicated based on its lack of value and worth. In summation, “At a stage of civilization when people do not need to hunt to survive . . . killing animals is not imperative, and in evolutionary terms, it is backward and barbarous” (Bronner 10). Should the “manly” man be discontent with this notion, it would behoove him to be aware that, just as hunting contributed to society in a meaningful way in the Paleolithic Era, there are other ways in which he can contribute to the modern society that do not involve killing animals. For instance, “activities such as planting, gathering, teaching, building, cooking, cleaning, and so on are essential to human life and obvious potential sources of esteem” (Luke 23). In other words, men should breach the parameters of manhood constructed by society and fill their time with meaningful work that will produce an egalitarian existence for both sexes.

Recreational hunting is nothing more than humans’ thirst for gore. However, hunters attempt to excuse their sordid practice by justifying their superiority to animals, their concern for the welfare of ecosystems, and their inherent manliness. These petty apologies are inadequate and simply aim to evade the reality that they are executioners rather than hunters. However, the longevity of recreational hunting is not granted solely by the hunters themselves—“Modern sport
hunting . . . continues through the direct effort and tacit compliance of many who themselves never hunt” (Luke 108). It is therefore imperative that every citizen is informed of the brutality of recreational hunting. Hunters in the historical sense killed animals out of necessity; today, humans kill animals not out of fundamentality, but for sport. This equates not hunting, but murder. Murder is committed with malice aforethought; no hunter can deny that going into the woods with a loaded weapon intending to kill an animal is not parallel with the nature of murder. Animals are entitled to rights under the law that protect them from such licentious behavior on behalf of humans, seeing as they are sentient beings. Humans are so bent on asserting their superior status, but recreational hunting itself mimics the natural predation of the animal kingdom. As novelist R.J. Braidwood states, “A man who spends his whole life following animals just to kill them to eat, or moving from one berry patch to another, is really living just like an animal himself” (qtd. in Hurn 55). In our “advanced” society, hunting recreationally evokes a sense of crudeness and rudimentariness. Being “superior” need not imply dominance, but can be understood as recognizing how to utilize one’s “superiority” to benefit all. That is what a superior and moral human should strive for—balance, not sovereignty, of the natural world.
Works Cited


