

## The Land and the Hunters Many of Us Are

I was standing before a group of owners of some timberland. They had asked me to do a timber sale for them and I had. What I had seen while I was walking and driving through their vast holdings amazed me. Deer...many times five to ten at a time, with little fear of humans, stood in driveways of the homes there, eating the flowers and shrubs. Were these whitetails? They looked like miniatures from an exotic game farm. The forests were mainly mature oak...nice red oak. The forest floor was completely open. There was no reproduction at all. I had heard that they did not allow any hunting on this 1700 acres...not even controlled bow hunting.

Someone on their board asked me why I had only marked about three to four trees per acre for harvesting when there were more mature, harvestable trees. I told them that there would be no reproduction of their oak forest. It would all be eaten by the deer. Once these oak trees were cut, there would be no more oak trees. And then I thought, what the hell, I'll lighten the mood here. I said, "You know, where I come from, we eat deer." **No one laughed.** Most of these folks were from large East Coast cities or their close environs.

I spoke to the forester of the mill that had been the high bidder on the timber. He really did not want to be there. One of the men on the board of this property told me that he did not like what the loggers had done across from his house. They had left limbs on the ground. He did not want anything on the ground. He wanted a park. It was a lesson for me. I thought these folks had read the information I had given them. I assumed they had read the contract...and since their second homes were in a large wooded area, I assumed they had some knowledge...

We seem to have a larger and larger segment of the population that is completely out of touch with fields and forests. I

came out of a meeting with some folks about pig barns in our area some time ago and asked a farmer who had also been in that meeting what he had thought of the whole affair. He said, "Their feet go from carpet to cement to carpet." I had never heard it said that way before.

Years ago I ran outdoor programs for delinquent kids from Pittsburgh. We were roping our way across a stream and one of the kids pointed at the big boulders and yelled, "Look at those big bricks!" I'll never forget that. Another asked me if they turned the water off at night. The kicker came when I was kidding around with them as is my nature, and pointed to a metal arrowhead stuck in a tree, and said, "Indians!" Immediately three or four of the kids started to run down the trail. These were older teenagers. That was over forty years ago. It was happening then. Those kids are at least middle-aged adults now. Chances are that their kids are even more removed.

Where we live here is North Central PA., we have had events to get folks living in the towns (and especially their children) on to the farms to touch, feel, and taste. Maybe we need to really broaden that education to our fields and forests?

So what's the point of what I've said so far?

If we wish to preserve our life style, we must help encourage visitors as well as our own local population to appreciate the fields and forests we live close to. One simple way to do this is to help landowners to learn about the species of plants and animals that actually inhabit their lands. In doing this, they would learn about those fields and forests. It would bring most folks closer to their land by making them more aware of what good deer cover, grouse habitat, song bird cover, high quality stream areas, or a place that has a blue heron rookery looks like.

In my other job (some years ago) as the Tioga County Planner, just about every development that happened in the County came across my desk. I saw lots of older farmers selling off their lands, especially those lands that perked (as in sewage perc). Sometimes that was okay because the acreage was large and

someone was buying it for a cabin someday, but wanted it mainly for hunting and perhaps many other forms of outdoor recreation.

In more and more instances I found that was not the case. I found instead that it was being bought as something that would be subdivided into small lots and/or get posters put all over it because the owner was completely against hunting or trapping. I think most of you probably have heard that story before.

The amount of development in the wrong places was sometimes disheartening, even here in a very rural portion of the State.

So why the title “The Land?” I have met many people at different times of my life. I’ve lived with stone-age man in the jungles of Malaysia and in the Western Ranch culture and helped American Indians harvest timber on their land. I’ve traveled through South Vietnam, staying on U.S.Army bases and talking to G.I.s. I more recently found my lost family in a former Communist State and helped family members find their origins in yet another place.

The short of all this is that I’ve seen a variety of places and lifestyles, and what we have right here is pretty special. To that point here in Tioga County, PA, I know people who are traditional hunters. I am close to folks who do not hunt or even eat any meat. I call some friends who are for complete preservation as well as some who are pro-development. Those are the extremes, I know. Most of my friends are as I am...somewhere in the vast middle.

Most of the people who I know, or who I’ve met through the years, do care about the land whether they were born and raised here or are refugees such as I am. The land is the common denominator. Many of the ones who stayed here, stayed because of the land...and the quality of life that goes with that. Almost all of the refugees came because of that. It is a great common denominator. I believe that now, more than at any other time in our recent history, our society of hunters needs to find the common bonds. I’ve seen it work among those that I know.

Besides, it would be fun to see hard-core hunters and trappers tagging along with little old ladies in tennis shoes who don't eat meat and wouldn't kill a flea. Or maybe with a kid who has never been around someone who actually kills and eats game, but thinks nothing of pigging out on hamburgers at Mickey D's. One thing I do know, it will produce bonds. That can only help.

.

---