

The Hunting and Trapping Community (and maybe fishing, too)

I've been through many winters now and I still live back in the woods on top of a mountain and I still enjoy the whole thing, including hunting the deer on my land.

I also get around and I'm seeing a 'sea change' in our fair land. I read voraciously (maybe even compulsively) and talk to people in all kinds of settings and am often still surprised by their negative comments about hunting, trapping, and even sometimes fishing!

Whatever our politics (in the hunting brotherhood), and that certainly can be quite diverse, from the time I first began going to hunting camps when I was 12 or so, I met people who were probably as morally sound as any group of folks around, and probably more so than most. I look back on those times and see fathers teaching sons and daughters much more than how to hunt. Really, when I think back, the focus was on relationships among those who hunted together, usually with the older ones setting up situations in which the youngest could learn something about themselves and maybe come to appreciate the land, and life, and maybe even some respect for death...the death of anything.

Now, looking back at my own two boys, both hunted from a young age and are out in the world doing very different things in very different places now, but still have respect for themselves and others as well as the land and life.

The oldest is what many, these days, would label an environmentalist. He works with fish, plants, and insects in a study of wetlands at a University and has the appropriate degree, but he also hunts, kills, and eats his own game and fish. No dichotomy there. He was raised that way.

The other just came back from Northern Iraq as a commander of a squadron of Kiowas. He spent the last year flying around the Syrian border looking for bad guys in a machine that can see through people's clothing at night (among other things). He is a forester by education as I am, but has spent his entire adult life so far flying in places like Kosovo and Iraq. He grew up hunting and living on the land as his brother did. His life is largely flying now. He does still love the outdoors and climbs mountains with ropes and good friends and chops wood and cruises timber with me on occasion when he's home. He has said that he wants his son to learn to use his hunting rifle, the gun that still resides here with me. He also refers to his years at home as his years in Egypt, and then laughs. Still again, no problem there. He was raised that way.

So, what is the point in me saying these things to those of you who are reading this sportsmen's paper? I'm preaching to the choir, right? Yep, that's right.

As I mentioned earlier, I'm a forester. I do timber sales and Stewardship plans for folks all over Pennsylvania. So I travel a lot in this fair State. A few years ago I was doing a timber sale for some folks in the Poconos and was presenting the results of the timber cruise (measurements) to the board of this group. They asked me why I didn't take more of the large oaks present throughout perhaps 1700 acres and about 400 weekend dwellings. I told them that there was no oak reproduction. None. If I cut all their oak (the larger of the tree species in the upper canopy), there would be no more of them coming along...ever. The deer were everywhere, eating everything, including their shrubbery

around the houses. Honestly, in several instances, I literally pushed deer out of a driveway with my truck in order to park. I had brought deer management information for them and suggested that they allow archery hunting of deer. No response. To lighten up the moment a bit at that board meeting, I said, "Where I come from, we eat deer". No one laughed. Most of these folks were from New York City and its suburbs. They did not think it was funny.

The important thing here to me is not the forest management issue (that's a lot more complicated than just deer). It is the many people who are completely divorced from what you and I grew up with and take for granted. They take something else for granted, and they like to live in the woods. Their idea of the woods, however, is different. After the sale was done, one of the board members said that he did not like seeing tree limbs on the ground across the street in the woods. He asked why all the limbs were not picked up after the timber sale. That was his world...Central Park. In short, a vast majority of the population in the United States does not understand the relationship between hunting, the land, and people that we take for granted. To put it bluntly, many see us as killers who see black choppers hovering in our favorite woods waiting for the UN to take over. You think I'm kidding?

On the other side, segments of the hunting community seem to be buying into this craziness in some ways by seeing conspiracies in much that happens around us. I see that on occasion, too.

I will give you a real-life example involving myself. As some of you probably know, I have a website for folks who have seen what they believe is a cougar...in the East (type in Pennsylvania Mountain Lion on Google). I get many sightings from all over the East and even the Midwest. This past May I got one from a fellow who was sure he had seen one and told me "that I know this lion is attacking deer I will shoot it..."

So, I simply replied that I would advise not shooting it unless there was an issue of safety. Well, the following is what I got in return and I will quote it in segments.

Segment one: "the Game Commission here is covering this whole thing up"

Segment two: "people including me saw the game commission trucks with cages in the beds driving the roads here to probably tranquilize the animal and make this thing go away."

Segment three: "maybe you animal lovers would feel different about one of your own being in danger, don't tell me what's legal and what's not."

Segment four: "they rely on animal lovers like you to smooth things over."

Segment five: "you are just another animal activist who is sleeping with politicians. In closing, as you said about the food chain and all that crap, well I'll tell you, Mr. animal lover, his food chain is over!!!!"

Segment six: His last comment was, "thanks for answering anyway."

At first I laughed because I thought, this is a great joke. This guy has one hell of a sense of humor. When I reread it, I realized he was not being funny. Like most of you, I've heard this kind of stuff before, but never had it directed at me...a guy who hunts, fishes, traps, and has practiced karate for 30 some odd years. I did write him back and kind of ignored the paranoia and tried to talk to him. He never responded and I got no dead cougar in the mail (he had promised that, too).

So where am I going with this...again? We all know that those folks are out there at both extremes of the poles, and there are lots of them, especially on the first mentioned end. What do we do about it? Well, there are lots of natural alliances that are possible.

Really, the hunting, trapping, and fishing community was the first conservation movement in this country and is still a very powerful group in that regard, but it has become fragmented as our society has and as a greater percentage of the population has become divorced from the land.

How many of you can go back to your boyhood (or girlhood) places where you hunted, trapped, or fished, and still find those areas there with good habitat still present for game? I grew up on the edge of the farmland north of Pittsburgh. I could walk into the woods with a gun, traps, or fishing rod if I went north and get on a streetcar and head into the city if I chose south. Now it is hard to even find the hills where I roamed. Some of them are literally gone. In those days I could carry a 22 rifle on the trap line and hitchhike with the gun and a bunch of dead muskrat in my game pouch and actually get picked up! Today, I'm afraid, that would not happen in most places.

Many of the groups that we label as 'Environmentalists' or 'Forest Industry' or 'tree huggers' or whatever, really have many common goals with us and many of us are part of other groups as well. I know I am. We need to find common cause. If we do not, it will only get worse.

We are attempting to do that here in Tioga County by putting together a tracking course for folks who are interested in knowing what kind of predators (top of the food chain inhabitants because that tells you something about the rest of the food chain) inhabit their land. Really, the course is about habitat. We started this when I was the Tioga County Planner, as we looked for ways to get landowners to take care of their land and do it privately since most of the folks I get to know up here do have an interest in that. I know a large hunting club that just turned down a lucrative deal with a corporation because they believed it would alter their land and values too much. They looked far beyond the money.

We have found that the interest from landowners has been beyond the hunting community and also includes birders, farmers, college professors, and all kinds of other folks...the whole gauntlet of people with something in common: Land, and how it helps those who stay close to it and treat it with respect.

This is just a local response, but it is probably the best kind, mostly devoid of large, outside groups and involving the folks who actually live and work on the land. I'm sure many of you feel the same way. Look for positive alliances with people who care and learn what they are about. In turn, they will begin to understand your community. I've seen that happen here.

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