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# Hipsters Who Hunt

More liberals are shooting their own supper.

By Emma Marris | Posted Wednesday, Dec. 5, 2012, at 11:23 AM ET



Hipster hunting is good for you, and for the planet  
Photo by Charlie Croskery.

I think the evolution of the new lefty urban hunter goes something like this:

- 2006: Reads Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma*, about the ickyness of the industrial food complex. Starts shopping at a farmer's market.
- 2008: Puts in own vegetable garden. Tries to go vegetarian but falls off the wagon.
- 2009: Decides to only eat "happy meat" that has been treated humanely.
- 2010: Gets a chicken coop and a flock of chickens.
- 2011: Dabbles in [backyard butchery of chickens](#). Reads that Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg decided to [only eat meat he killed himself](#) for a year.
- 2012: Gets a hunting permit, thinking "how hard can it be? I already totally dominate *Big Buck Hunter* at the bar."

Hunting is undeniably in vogue among the bearded, bicycle-riding, locavore set. The new trend might even be partly behind a recent 9 percent increase from 2006 to 2011 in the number of hunters in the United States after years of decline. Many of these new hunters are taking up the activity for ethical and environmental reasons.

"It feels [more responsible and ecologically sound](#) to eat an animal that was raised wild and natural in my local habitat than to eat a cow that was fattened up on grain or even hay, which is inevitably harvested with fuel-hungry machines," writes [Christie Aschwanden](#), a self-described "tree-hugging former vegetarian."

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A recent spate of books with titles like *The Mindful Carnivore* and *Call of the Mild* chronicles the exploits of these first-time hunters as they wrestle with their consciences and learn to sight in their rifles.

The expansion of hunting into liberal, urban circles is the latest development in an evolving and increasingly snug



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coexistence between humans and beasts in North America. Jim Sterba's new book, *Nature Wars*, examines the paradox of the rebound of many wild species, particularly in the densely populated East Coast of the United States. Whitetail deer, turkeys, Canada geese, black bears, and trees are all doing wonderfully in 2012, thanks to conservation measures in the past and vagaries of history and cultural change. The problem, Sterba says, is that most modern North Americans have no idea what to do with these species. We gawk and gape; we feed them doughnuts; we

run into them with our cars; we are surprised and alarmed by their messy habits and occasional aggressiveness; we manage them all wrong; we want them gone from our neighborhoods, but we abhor the idea of killing them.

Sterba blames our ham-fisted interactions with these representatives of the natural world on two main factors: sprawl and sentimentality. Call it the Bambi and 'burbs theory of human-wildlife interaction. Sprawl brings people to wild species and in many cases creates better-than-natural habitat by increasing habitat "edges"—the complicated, resource-rich borderlands between forest and field that deer and other species love. In addition, sprawl brings goodies in the shape of high-calorie garbage in poorly secured cans. And sentimentality, born of an alienation from real nature and a diet of too much anthropomorphized wildlife on TV, makes people unwilling to take what in many cases is the easiest route in dealing with problematic interactions: killing the animals.



City folk are welcome  
Photo by Charlie Croskery.

Sterba can come across as a bit of a curmudgeon (he throws in a side discussion about those teenagers with their damn texting), but he is right. People need to suck it up and realize that in this crazy, anthropogenic world we live in, we sometimes need to kill to keep populations in check. If goose poop is throwing nutrient cycles out of whack, causing algae blooms, and imperiling lake species, then ready the roasting pan for some goose.

So how should we solve this "too much of a good thing" problem? Sterba proposes that local sharpshooters hunt overabundant deer and sell it at farmers markets, a genius way to use the locavore trend to pick up where declining interest in hunting has left a gap in population control. He also advocates wildlife overpasses and

underpasses, fines for feeding wildlife, and making wearing fur acceptable again when populations of furbearers need to be controlled. In general, he argues, people need to reconnect with real nature "in ways that, to put it bluntly, get dirt under their fingernails, blood on their hands, and even a wood splinter or two under their kneecaps and butts." In other words, he's all for hipsters taking up hunting.

It is high time. And all it takes is overturning two long-held beliefs among many urban liberals: that it is wrong to personally kill animals and that hunters are all rural conservatives.

If you eat meat, eating animals you hunt yourself is a more ethical alternative than eating those from the current industrial agricultural system. Rather than being **confined in small enclosures and dosed** with antibiotics and antidepressants, wild birds and mammals have been leading lives very similar to those their species have been living for thousands of years (though featuring more corn, soy, and suburban refuse, generally speaking). And instead of outsourcing their deaths to an underpaid slaughterhouse employee, you do it yourself, which seems somehow most honest. If you can't pull the trigger, you had better start collecting tempeh recipes.

Getting your meat from outside the industrial food system is also **better for the environment**. Wild game isn't fed on tons of grain that used excessive water, land, and fossil-fuel-based synthetic fertilizer. They aren't clustered in "**concentrated animal feeding operations**" that produce toxic and terrible-smelling lagoons of manure.

There's another facile belief that the new kids in the duck blind need to jettison: the idea that all hunting is somehow the cultural property of jerky guys with big trucks and a fondness for the country music and Republican candidates. The cartoon of the red-state hunter has held back many people who would enjoy hunting and find in it a good solution to their ethical and environmental concerns. These people felt, somehow, that hunting was not what their "tribe" did. Yes, lots of hunters are conservatives. But many political conservatives are ethical and

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environmental hunters who deeply respect the animals they hunt. And there have always been plenty of liberal hunters.

After growing up in Seattle and going to the University of Texas, Austin, I know plenty of urban, lefty hunters. I married into a family of gun-toting, game-cleaning, bleeding-heart liberals. They hunt to connect with nature, to round up some tasty protein, to help manage populations in the absence of their historical predators. They also fish, forage for mushrooms, pick wild asparagus, grow vegetables, and can and dry fruit. And they've been doing it since the 1960s. They were Michael Pollan before Michael Pollan was Michael Pollan.

In the 1990s, I went deer hunting with my friend Lon Ingram and his family in Texas and sat around the campfire after a day of sitting in a tree with a gun in my lap (and not seeing a thing) talking about things like immigrants' rights and how much everybody missed former Gov. Ann Richards. Lon says the motivation for his liberal clan to don hunter orange is "spending time in the woods with friends and family, primarily. Oh, and drinking more than you can get away with at home, eating unhealthy food, and farting. These are bipartisan pursuits."

Besides, hunting is green. Hazel Wong, a senior policy adviser at the Nature Conservancy, told me that to pass environmental legislation at the state level, "believe it or not, we work with hunting groups a lot." I wasn't surprised. Conservation in America was practically founded by hunters. Yellowstone was first envisioned as a giant game reserve that would create big populations of animals that hunters could nab as they spilled out over the boundaries. Our first conservation-minded president, Teddy Roosevelt, mowed down untold hundreds of animals in his long career as a sport hunter. And "hook and bullet" organizations continue to fight for land protection. You see, you need nature to go hunting. And hunters—liberal and conservative—generally like nature. That's why they are out in it.

So hunting is not a red state thing. It is a red meat thing. And, more than that, it is a necessary thing. In the lower 48, we have nowhere near as many wolves, cougars, and other predators as we would need to keep our deer populations in check. Without hunters, we would be up to our eyeballs in whitetail deer—scruffy, hungry, disease-ridden whitetail deer that relentlessly devour any flora they can reach, be it crops, garden plants, native groundcovers, or tree seedlings. In some places, we already are. In many places, deer overpopulation is so bad that teams of sharpshooters are called in to cull numbers.

State departments of conservation and game have been frantically trying to recruit more hunters. "Hunters are basically the only tool, other than cars, that we have to control deer in Missouri," says Missouri Department of Conservation spokesman Jim Low. To boost hunter numbers, the department offers a "hunter skills university" for adults interested in getting into the pursuit. And they have permits for "apprentice hunters" who want to try it out (with a licensed mentor) before they go through the trouble of taking the required safety classes.

One problem in deer management is that many hunters are mostly interested in taking big bucks with impressive antlers. But removing bucks doesn't do much to reduce populations. The number of does needs to be brought down to reduce the number of fawns born that season. Enter the hipster hunter, who is out in the woods for meat, not antlers, and is happy to shoot a tastier, smaller doe.

Changing blue state mores about hunting may help solve many of the problems of wildlife-human conflict. But there is one other solution: getting people out of the sprawl and into cities, where efficiencies of scale and density reduce the per-capita impacts on the environment while simultaneously creating more space for the rest of nature. I believe this is possible, given the right constellation of policies, incentives, cultural shifts, and energy prices. Right now, many people live surrounded by nature but don't understand it—the Bambi and 'burbs problem. But it is possible to become simultaneously more urban and more nature savvy. Then we can leave the woods to the deer and turkeys, except when we visit to admire them and/or shoot them for dinner.

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