

“Part of My Life. . . Part of My Identity”: Hunting, Fishing, and the Development of Jimmy Carter’s Conservation Ethic

John F. Reiger

Department of History
Ohio University, Chillicothe

President Jimmy Carter’s failures in domestic and foreign policy seemed to overshadow his accomplishments.’ He did, however, have some real successes, one of which was the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act. Signed into law on December 2, 1980, just before he left office, it was the culmination of four years of effort by the Carter administration and Congressional allies. Though supported by powerful environmental groups, this controversial legislation required the firm backing of the executive branch, without which it might never have passed.

At the signing ceremony, Carter proudly proclaimed: “We are setting aside for conservation an area of land larger than the state of California.” For him, the signing of the bill was one of the most “pleasant occasions in my life,” and historians agree that the Alaskan legislation was among the most important environmental achievements in American political history.’

Why did Jimmy Carter feel so strongly about the need to preserve and manage the natural world for future generations? What factors, if any, in his childhood and early adult life encouraged the development of a conservation ethic? This research note will try to answer these questions by examining Carter’s own environmental autobiography, *An Outdoor Journal: Adventures and Reflections*, published in 1988.

An analysis of Carter’s early life reveals the central role played by “blood sports” in his socialization as a confirmed sportsman and conservationist, one who pursues game fishes, birds, or mammals according to a prescribed code. One important rule of the code states that the hunter or

1. The original version of this research note was presented at the 1992 Conference of the North American Society of Sports History, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

2. Carter, *Keeping Faith: Memoirs of a President* (New York, 1982), 582.

3. Ibid

4. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, 1982), 272 and 301; first edition published in 1967.

angler must demonstrate a genuine commitment to the perpetuation of both game and habitat.⁵ Carter's experiences in hunting and fishing, especially with his father, show the evolution of a conservation ethic that would have a major impact on the preservation of North American wilderness.

Entitled "Childhood," the first section of Carter's *Outdoor Journal* tells us much about the development of his hunting and fishing interests. He described the book as "a labor of love," for "the recollections of my early childhood have been especially moving." Among the most cherished of these memories were walking beside his father as they followed a bird dog in its search for quail: being included in the adult male world of fishing trips to the Okefenokee Swamp on the Georgia-Florida border; and sitting in a boat with his mother while she teased him that she could always out-fish him—"a habit she continued." Carter recalled, "even after I had grown up to be President."⁶

Although it is clear that both his parents played a role in inculcating a love for hunting and fishing, his father seemed to have had the more profound influence. When asked why he hunted and fished, Carter habitually answered: "My father and all my ancestors did it before me. It's been part of my life since childhood, and part of my identity, like being a southerner or a Baptist" (p. 5).

The blood sports were, for him, intertwined with history, tradition, and manhood.⁷ In preparing to join the long line of ancestors who had made hunting and fishing central components of their lives, Carter received his teaching under the watchful eye of his father: "When I was a boy, my daddy provided . . . instruction [in hunting and fishing] as though it were his natural and pleasant duty." and "I would have considered it inappropriate and somewhat disloyal to seek advice or information elsewhere unless Daddy specifically asked someone to take me hunting or approved of my fishing with another adult" (p. 9).

Even when his father, or a trusted friend of his father, was unavailable for Jimmy's outdoor instruction, Carter would "hang around the checkerboards, whittling benches, or barbershop" in the hope of hearing "the few acknowledged masters of the woods and fields" give their observations on who had the most success in training bird dogs, who obeyed the unwritten code of the sportsman and still bagged the most quail, who scored well in the difficult shooting in a dove field, and who caught fish when no one else could. In recounting their exploits, this "master class of outdoorsmen" taught Jimmy much, but he would always check with his father "to confirm some of

5. See Chapter I ("American Sportsmen and Their Code") in John F. Reiger, *American Sportsmen and the Origins of Conservation* (Norman, 1986); first edition published in 1975. Also, see Thomas L. Altherr, "The American Hunter-Naturalist and the Development of the Code of Sportsmanship," *Journal of Sport History*, 5 (Spring 1978): 7-22.

6. Carter, *An Outdoor Journal; Adventures and Reflections* (New York, 1988), 1.

7. A recent work that deals with these subjects is Stuart A. Marks, *Southern Hunting in Black and White Nature and Ritual in a Carolina Community* (Princeton, 1991); also, see Ted Ownby, *Subduing Satan: Religion, Recreation, and Manhood in the Rural South, 1865-1920* (Chapel Hill, 1990).

the more questionable statements and claims or to assess the veracity of the participants” (pp. 9-10).

During all hunting excursions, Jimmy’s father imposed strict rules that could never be broken. None was more important than “We shouldn’t ever kill anything that we don’t need for food.” This rule made good sense in an agricultural society, where killing animals was as natural as eating. Whether chickens, hogs, and sheep. or quail, squirrels. and rabbits, they all ended up on the Carter dinner table, gifts, they believed. from the Almighty. As a result, Carter never experienced anything but the briefest “twinges of uneasiness when a beautiful and swift quail or waterfowl is brought down. or when a valiant trout finally is brought to the net” (p. 12).

When Carter was growing up, his peers would have thought him “effeminate, or even depraved,” if he had expressed misgivings about the right to hunt and fish, or the taking of life. Indeed. what he called “one of my life’s proudest moments” was shooting his first quail, “on the wing.” with his own .410 shotgun. Picking up the bird, he ran the quarter mile back to the house to show it to his father, leaving his gun on the ground where he had dropped it. After a long search that involved several other people besides Carter and his father, they found the shotgun. The future president “was thankful that my daddy never mentioned the abandoned gun again, at least to me” (pp. 13 and 43).

While no one in his youth would have thought to question the morality of his hunting and fishing, Carter came to the presidency in a period of growing “animal rights” sentiment. Although he never seems to have been harassed in the field for his love of blood sports. he did experience a demonstration in front of the First Baptist Church in Washington, D.C.. against what he ironically referred to as “my murderous habit” of hunting. He had just returned to the Capital from his first Christmas home in Georgia since becoming president. While in Plains, he had gone quail hunting during the day and had eaten the bagged birds that evening for supper, facts that were routinely conveyed to the public by reporters present at the dinner (p. 13).

After pushing past the anti-hunting activists on the sidewalk in front of the church, Carter had to answer questions about his hunting put to him by his Sunday-school students. He referred them to Scripture, using passages that defend both hunting and fishing. thereby revealing that he saw no distinction between the two blood sports, at least on the issue of the right of people to use other animals, of any kind. for sustenance (p. 13).

Although Carter employed a Christian defense of hunting and fishing when circumstances dictated, one does not sense from his writings that religious justification, as in the Genesis reference to humans having “dominion” over the rest of Creation. played a significant role in developing his conservation ethic. Far more important were the long traditions of hunting and fishing as sports that must be practiced according to strict rules. even though, in many instances. there is no referee present to call foul if one of the rules is broken.

Still, it is obvious that his meditation about the killing involved in blood sports helped to develop a sense of responsibility regarding wildlife. As he revealed: "I have been made to feel more at peace about my hunting and fishing because of my strict observance of conservation measures, including the deliberate protection of overly depleted game and the initiation and support of programs to increase the population of species that seem scarce." In the very next sentence in his *Outdoor Journal*, Carter asserted that "it was because [added emphasis] my father liked to hunt that he was an active worker in the Chattahoochee Valley Wildlife Conservation program, directing my work as a child in this effort" (p. 13). He and his father worked together to improve wildlife habitat, knowing that a controlled "harvest" on the one hand and a healthy habitat on the other are the twin guarantees of "quality" hunting and fishing in the future.

Like so many of his fellow sportsmen since at least the 1870s Carter came to adopt what has been called the "code of the sportsman," with its commitment to the perpetuation of both game and habitat." He argued, in fact, that his "fellow hunters and fishers, in personal practice and through formal organizations, are the very people most dedicated to these same worthy goals." He observed that "they are the prime founders and supporters of Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, and similar institutions whose purpose is to protect habitat and increase the population of their quarry" (pp. 13-14).

The impulse to conservation may be inherent in the code of the sportsman, but the opportunity of doing conservation work is not, of course, the main reason people hunt and fish. Rather, it is what Carter called "the challenge" of the blood sports that is their chief appeal, and "it is the strict circumscription of hunting and fishing-those unwritten rules of ethics, etiquette, and propriety-that define the challenge" (p. 14).

Game must be in numbers great enough to allow a "harvest" without endangering the future of the species, but not so abundant as to make hunting or fishing too easy. Similarly, the capture of target species must be difficult, the more difficult the better.' As Carter recalled: "I've never wanted to shoot another rail" after a hunting expedition to the Georgia coast that had these slow-flying birds as its main quarry: "I soon reached the legal limit without missing a shot," he lamented, "and still remember the facile experience with distaste."¹⁰

In summation, we can make four conclusions about Jimmy Carter's involvement with blood sports. First, he hunted and fished and enjoyed these avocations: second, hunting and fishing were important in the culture in which he grew up and were part of the socialization process; third, these

8. Reiger, *American Sportsman*, 25-49; and Altherr, "The American Hunter-Naturalist," 7-22.

9. José Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting* (New York, 1972), 74-76; originally published in 1943

10. Carter, *An Outdoor Journal*, 14, Virginia (*Rallus limicola*), King (*Rallus elegans*), Clapper (*Rallus longirostris*), and Sora (*Prorzana carolina*) Rails are compact, chicken-shaped marsh birds that fly reluctantly, and weakly, only after being forced out of the heavy cover in which they live.

recreational experiences helped develop a conservation ethic in the adult Carter; and fourth. he received criticism for engaging in these sports. which caused him to think more deeply about his responsibilities to the game and its habitat. Clearly, the special interest he took in environmental legislation during his presidency stemmed from a sincere and abiding love of nature. which began with those hunting and fishing trips with his “daddy” so many years before.