

To Hunt or Not to Hunt: The Historical Context of the Antihunter/Hunter Debate over “The Guns of Autumn”

Thomas L. Altherr
Metropolitan State College

In September 1975, CBS showed a documentary entitled “The Guns of Autumn.” Purporting to be an objective piece, the show in fact cast hunting in an extremely disreputable light and provoked an enormous outcry from hunters and sportsmen nationwide. In sporting magazines such as *Sports Afield*, *Outdoor Life*, and *Field and Stream* took the network to task for this “hatchet job.”

This resultant furor was hardly new in American culture, nor has the debate ended. Since the early days of colonization, whites either celebrated or opposed hunting as an appropriate response to the American wilds. Antihunters developed a variety of arguments against sport hunting: it was a cruel, barbarous survival of primitivism; it represented a retrogression in civilized progress; it was a juvenile activity fit for boys, but not for grown men; it was connected to other blood sports and societal violence; it was dangerous; it constituted an improper appreciation of nature; it fostered hypocrisy and immorality; and it was a distorted form of masculinity.

Hunting proponents answered these charges with their own barrage of celebratory prose: the sport was beyond the comprehension of antihunters who suffered from oversentimentality and other emotional deficiencies; hunting was an ancient behavior pattern responsible for advances in civilization; hunting provided a substantial economic boost to state and local economies as well as food for families; hunting was more “authentic” than purchasing slaughtered domestic meat at supermarkets; hunting fostered morality and manliness; hunters were the “true conservationists,” thinning out overpopulated herds and flocks; hunters shared in ecological processes and thus became one with Nature; hunters loved Nature best, even approaching religiosity in this perspective; hunting served as an antidote to work and routine; and the kill was necessary to full participation in the hunt, thus obviating the choice of camera hunting. Lastly, hunters at a loss for words, have referred to the paradoxical mystique of killing the objectified self in the pursued quarry one loves.

Since 1975 this historical debate has shown no signs of letting up, but to the contrary intensifying, as hunters feel increasingly under pressure to give up or defend their claims to sport. Recent and upcoming referenda on restrictions or abolition of sport hunting promise to return the nation’s focus to the ongoing three hundred or so years of argument on the place of hunting in the United States, which debate “The Guns of Autumn” crystallized in 1975.