

# HUNTING, FISHING, CONSERVATION

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## *How Free Was the Taking?:* Ethical Issues about Hunting in America before the 1820s

When exploring the topic of hunting in the eras prior to the 1830s, most sport or environmental historians have easily assumed that the practice was just a parade of carnage, characterizing it as a relentless slaughter of the faunal abundance that virtually every Euroamerican traveler found marvelous. To be sure, many people in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national periods fired away or shot arrows at almost any animal that moved, reveling in the 'free taking' principle that undergirded wildlife law at the time. But such a picture is hardly complete on several counts. First, every colony, territory and succeeding state promulgated laws and public policies to control what they considered unwise or immoral hunting practices and techniques even as they encouraged the killing of what they declared vermin and predators. The effective uses of each law is debatable, but each displayed the emergence of a type of thinking that would return in later conservation movements. Second, some sportsmen, most notably the anonymous author of *A Sportsman's Companion* (1783), were already formulating a set of wildlife and hunting ethics that would persist in later codes of sportsmanship. Third, writers and diarists of the periods took a keen interest in documenting and describing the techniques of hunting, especially those of indigenous peoples, illustrating that hunting was not simply slaughter but a culturally integrated ritualistic sporting activity. And fourth, there was an emerging, if infrequently voiced, anti-hunting perspective, probably an offshoot of some of the protest against cockfighting, bull baiting, and other blood sports.

This paper examines each of these four elements of ethical debate about, and description of, pre-1820 American hunting, drawing on such primary sources as colonial, territorial, and state laws, legislative journals, travelers' accounts, contemporary diaries and journals, newspaper stories, periodical essays, books and manuals, poetry and art. The methodology is interdisciplinary, centering, however, on an historical focus. Although the paper does not depart from the important points John Reiger makes about sportsmen in the post-Civil War conservation movement, it maintains that there were important pre-1820s rehearsals of the debate over hunting. Additionally the paper suggests areas for future research in pre-1820s American hunting.