

Hunting animals is wrong

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The [debate about hunting](#) [1] in the Ecology & Place strand of **openDemocracy** has been mainly focused on human communities and their ways of shaping the landscape. Of course, hunting is partly about those things – but only partly. It is also about animals, and about the ways we should treat them.

Even if we agreed with [Roger Scruton's](#) [2] rose-tinted vision of rural harmony, and of the role played by hunting in bridging the gap between landlord and tenant, squire and farmer, haves and have-nots, this does nothing to justify hunting either then or now. And if there *is* a proper debate, it is surely about the justification of hunting, not about its history.

Moreover, isn't all this stuff about class conciliation a bit skewed? The same people who argue this point – Scruton included – also talk of the Labour Party's opposition to hunting as an expression of 'class war'. You cannot have it both ways. Either hunting unites the classes or it divides them. It seems to me obvious that it divides them.

The animal's point of view

Why did a debate about hunting take off in Britain? Essentially, because people have been learning to see hunting from the animal's point of view. When, like Descartes, people believed that animals were automata, with no feelings but only a kind of invisible clockwork inside, they had no qualms about treating them in whatever way seemed enjoyable or useful.

We human beings have moved on since Descartes' day. We know not just that we are animals, but that we belong to the same family tree as other mammals, that our physiology and bodily processes are just like theirs, and that our mental processes too are from the same general pattern.

Some people believe that animals have rights. I don't go that far, since I recognise that rights are a kind of social construct. Rights exist only when there is also law and contract and litigation. But just because the other animals fall short of us in those respects (lucky things) it doesn't follow that they have a lesser capacity to feel fear, pain, grief, anxiety, distress and all the other emotions that lead us to take pity on each other. You just need to look at a dog with a broken leg, or a mouse caught by a cat, to recognise the symptoms of pain, fear and panic. If you pity people then you will pity these animals too.

This is what the debate over hunting is really about. If I saw a child being pursued across a field by a pack of dogs, I would be horrified: his fear would be my fear, and his pain when caught would be my pain. This is what I feel when I see a fox in the same situation.

This doesn't mean that I value a fox's life as I would a child's; rather that I am an animal with sympathies, and my sympathies go out to those who suffer. When I see the fox running for its life, I take sides against its attackers. I want to stop this cruel and unnecessary thing.

But I have no hope of doing so: it is all happening too fast, I am not an athlete, and besides I don't know how to call off a pack of dogs. So I stop and think. I remember that this thing is happening only because some human being set it in motion. And human beings are governed by laws, and can be punished for disobeying them.

So naturally I am drawn to seek a legal solution. It would be enough to pass a law forbidding hunting, and this thing need never occur again. So that is what I decide should be done. I begin to lobby for a change in the law. And others do likewise. This is what we have been witnessing, and the process is now, at long last, coming to its rightful conclusion, and the law will, in all probability, be changed.

Respect, not rights

But, say the advocates of 'liberty and livelihood', you are trampling on our rights. You are denying our ancient freedoms. You are taking away our livelihoods. This is the argument that has been rammed down our throats (though not, I am pleased to say, on **openDemocracy**).

It is surely obvious what is wrong with this argument. You cannot pass a law without curtailing someone's freedom. Call that freedom a 'right' if you like, it makes no difference. Freedom must be curtailed if people are to be governed. Few rights are absolute, and most can be qualified in the interest of the greater good.

That is the point of the analogy with bear-baiting. People who hunt protest that it is unfair to make the comparison, and I take the point that bear-baiting has a sadistic aspect which may be (and I assume for the purpose of argument, is) absent from fox-hunting. But the argument about liberty and livelihood would apply equally to both sports. And if it justifies hunting it justifies baiting. Since it doesn't justify baiting, it cannot justify hunting.

We have to accept that a law banning hunting will make it impossible for people to hunt or to make a living from hunting. That is simply a tautology. And how do you protest against a tautology? [Hugh Brody](#) [3] and [Rupert Isaacson](#) [4] are on uncontroversial ground, when they describe the role of hunting in pre-agrarian communities, and present it as an integral part of a valid way of life. I can even agree with them that we ought not to invade those communities, or threaten their hunter-gatherer habits, or confiscate their territory, since hunting and gathering are part of their social identity and cannot be taken away without destroying them.

But people in developed societies such as Britain are not hunter-gatherers. Our relation to the landscape is not even the relation briefly enjoyed by our agrarian ancestors. There are far more concerned urban ramblers than farmers – people who go out from the towns in search of what remains of a mutilated and pillaged natural world. Our attitude to the few surviving animals is one of tender concern and apprehension for their future. We know that these animals depend on us. They are on our conscience in a new way.

For we – all of us, farmers and hunters alike – have marginalised animals, removed their natural refuges and exposed them to constant fear and danger. We have to evolve a new and more creative relation to the landscape if we are to treat them properly. I don't pretend to know what that relationship will look like. But I do know that it must begin in compassion. It must put concern for other species at the top of its agenda. Otherwise it will just be one more step towards the abolition of the natural world.

Of course, the hunting fraternity argues that it has an important role to play in conservation. They claim: we are not out to exterminate the fox or the deer, but to manage them. We look after habitats, control populations, ensure balance between species, look after boundaries and hedgerows. We are the true friends of wildlife, not you, the urban onlookers who do nothing to manage the land.

Some of that is true. But it is also irrelevant. We urban onlookers don't manage the land because we cannot: nobody allows us to try. And when we protest at the environmental destruction, the cruelties and the grim monoculture of those who *do* manage it (always, it seems, in the interest of their own profit and pleasure), we are simply told to stop interfering in matters of which we know nothing.

But it is urban onlookers who have awoken people to the damage done by large-scale agribusiness; who have made the most fuss about the removal of hedgerows, habitats, archaeological sites and ancient pasture lands; who founded the RSPB and who have agitated ceaselessly against the depletion of songbirds at the hands of farmers. It is people such as [George Monbiot](#) [5] who have been the voice of the land against those who claim to speak for it but who in fact merely own it.

And it is urban onlookers who have been first to speak out for animals, and to demand that the compassion that we extend to dogs and cats ought to be extended to foxes, deer and badgers. I concede that compassion will not be enough. But against those who say that it is merely another name for urban sentimentality, I would reply that it hasn't yet been tried.

A hunting ban will be only the first step towards trying it; one followed by other steps which, one by one, will unfold a new form of land management, replacing the unkind and damaging ways of modern agriculture, and bring about a new and lasting harmony between town and country. This is my hope at least, and nothing that I have read from the hunting fraternity persuades me otherwise. It is surely time to respect the natural world, to treat it naturally. Or, to use the old Anglo-Saxon word, to treat it 'kindly', according to our kind.

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