

It was November the eighteenth of last year. My companion and I are travelling to Deer Island to collect specimens for a biological sampling program. As we proceed, a peculiar trend starts to become obvious. Periodically, a vehicle will pull over to the side of the road and as many as four armed men jump out, all sporting funny little fluorescent orange touques. Packing up a small bundle of belongings, they then all plunge into the forest, their grim enthusiasm evident even from the car. "What on Earth is going on?" I ask, wondering if some axe-wielding psychotic is at large. My driver, who has lived in the province for considerably longer than my three years here, is nonchalant with her reply; not in the least surprized that what appears to be the elements of a small rag-tag army is taking to the woods.

"It's the last day of the deer season tomorrow," she says, "things get pretty intense towards the end. 'C couple of years back, some guy was actually hit by a stray bullet over on the North side. Right in the car."

I spend the rest of the journey contemplating the security of the glove compartment, slouched down to the point where my fidgeting eyes are at the level of the door lock.

As we approach the ferry, other signs serve to put my feelings in perspective. In this part of the province, it appears to be fashionable to hang your kill up by the neck from a flag pole in the front yard. I must have counted seven deer slung up in a grotesque aphorism of celebration, pride and a complete lack of respect for what was once a magnificent animal. At first, I must admit to feeling a little disgusted but after a while, a monumental depression would attack me as yet another animal would come into view in a similar position of humiliation and degradation. Then too were the pick-ups, with the spoils of slaughter gracing the roof or even the hood. Dripping and dried blood generously spattered along the panels of a cabin, containing hoary chestnut cats, this was the mobile manifestation of the slaughter-pole. The boastful exposure of the day's destruction or that of the previous one, presented for all to see; the abject terror still evident in the freeze frame of the animal's deep, dark dead eyes and protruding tongue.

There can be no doubt that the issue of hunting is a very emotional one. To save, the prospect of hunting and extinguishing the life of what they see as a beautiful wild animal is quite abhorrent. After all, we live in what we would like to call a civilized society. Surely if the necessity to hunt animals for meat is removed simply because it is so easily available, what purpose and joy can be gained by the wanton extirpation of wildlife. The obvious enjoyment given by the act of killing to those that hunt must surely be a reflection of attitude - one which is to be recognized as extremely unsettling.

To others, hunting represents a legitimate and respectable pastime. The ability to conquer the wilderness (albeit with a high powered rifle) and to procure nourishment from one's own endeavours without intervention of domesticity (and packaging) is a healthy spirit that promotes self-respect. Further, it could be argued that the real hunter is an environmentalist. A person that has great respect for the wilderness and its ecology, the real hunter relishes the opportunity to become a part of the ecosystem. This then would be a far cry from the blood thirsty drunken lout that engages in the rape and pillage of a natural resource - the grisly picture often painted by antagonists of the hunting fraternity.

Despite the obvious philosophical arguments that can rage with fire and passion on this issue, other equally if not more legitimate concerns exist. Many hunters disregard the boundaries of privately owned land, quite often endangering the lives of the people who live there. Furthermore, recent reports indicate that the deer population is actually declining in the 1980s. The possibility that hunting, which last year claimed nearly 20,000 animals, is responsible at least on part for the decrease is a very real one.

For some people, the fact that society condones what they consider to be a barbaric activity, is a reflection on the humanitarian condition. The infliction of cruelty and suffering, together with the depletion of indigenous fauna, is not to be tolerated. Until such a time when hunting and other forms of animal abuse including factory farming and experimentation have been made redundant or banned outright, these people will never rest. They will never tire of seeking to educate other as to the extent abuse and exploitation of the animals with whom we share our world.

Dr. Bruce Cumming is just such a man. Starting in 1982, Dr. Cumming, a professor of Biology at UNB, has been singularly outspoken on all aspects of animal rights. In November of 1987, he was to become a figure of some public prominence when, surprising two brothers who had shot a deer illegally on his property, he refused to let them leave with their prey. As a result, Dr. Cumming was charged with assault and subjected to what many saw as completely unwarranted insults and humiliation by the presiding Judge.

Last week I talked to Dr. Cumming about hunting in particular and why he feels that it is imperative to tighten legislation on several aspects that characterize the freedom to kill wildlife in New Brunswick.

Steve Griffiths: On preliminary consideration one might expect a person who has taken a stand against hunting to have either one of two broad arguments. The first of these might be that hunting is considered a morally repugnant indulgence, that the desire to kill and maim other animals is thoroughly undesirable for a sensitive intelligent race of beings. The second contention might be that left uncontrolled, overzealous hunters may cause an imbalance to the environment if not contribute to a severe decline in numbers for a particular species. Would you care to comment on that?

Bruce Cumming: On your first point, we can break it down quite simply to why do we kill? What is the need to kill? We don't need to kill wantonly and the most reprehensible thing for me, is that people are killing for fun. This sort of behaviour to me is morally wrong, yet it is a form of violence that is encouraged by society. One could easily ask at this point 'where does it all end?' Even now criminal studies concerning violent offenders have indicated that quite often these individuals have had a previous record of abuse to animals.

S.G.: Wouldn't you say that is rather too much of a generalization? I don't think that I could accept that all hunters are blood-hunting maniacs.

B.C.: No, no, not at all. The desire to be out in the woods and the desire to stalk the prey may be seen as exciting. But does the final act have to be committed? On the back of my car during the hunting season, I have a sign which says 'Hunt with a camera, not a gun', because photography for me is the obvious alternative. People can show just as much, if not more, skill by taking pictures rather than trying to kill wildlife.

S.G.: It is interesting that you alluded to the possibility that a lack of respect for animals, through hunting and other forms of animal abuse, might be an indication of, or a stimulus for, violent behaviour in society. Do you really believe this?

B.C.: As a young man, I joined the army where I was literally trained to kill people. Later after coming out of the services I lived on a farm where I would sometimes shoot at rabbits. One day, one of the animals reared up... and it was as if I looked straight into its eyes through a telescopic sight. I suddenly thought why have I done this? I've taken the life of this animal quite unnecessarily. Afterwards, I began to feel a kind of revulsion towards anything that involved taking the life of another thing

without any reason. The sad thing is that these kinds of feeling are completely alien to many people; society has taught us not to take this (killing of animals) into consideration. It is this unthinking aspect that bothers me the most. Even worse, as you suggested, are the psychopaths in society who kill for fun... who are sadistic and cruel.

S.G.: I could suggest to you that in most of us lie the feelings of extreme violence and yet as conscientious individuals these feelings are repressed...

B.C.: I would say yes, there is a killer... well no, not a killer INSTINCT, because many children are seen to be kind to animals, but they may soon become habituated by their parents' standards. How can they possibly assess moral issues at that age? Even the Judeo-Christian mentality has a profound influence here. We are told that God gave man domination over all other animals. Trappers and hunters actually cite this teaching to me, it is used as a mandate. Even the current Pope says that God gave man animals to use for his own purpose.

