

## Hunting in the National Park System

*Al Lovaas*

Chief Scientist  
Alaska Regional Office  
U.S. National Park Service  
2525 Gambell Street  
Anchorage, Alaska 99503

HUNTING IN AREAS OF THE NATIONAL Park System is often considered an aberration. Various vigorous attempts to open the System generally to hunting have not succeeded and the National Park Service (NPS) by policy continues to allow hunting only where specifically authorized by law. But while most of us had our backs turned, figuratively, hunting snuck up on us. It is now authorized in about two-thirds of the acreage within the System. In Alaska alone, sport and subsistence hunting are permitted on acreages equal to more than half of the total of 80 million acres in the System, and many areas in the "South-48," primarily national preserves, lakeshores, seashores, riverways, and recreation areas, are also open to hunting. A seeming

anomaly for an agency usually perceived as strictly protectionist.

Accommodating hunting requires wider dimensions of resource management by NPS, dimensions many employees would probably just as soon not have to deal with. But, as federal employees, we must administer laws regardless of personal biases about them. While individually we don't necessarily have to enthusiastically support hunting, collectively we must accommodate it where legal—and we must do it in good humor, safely, with minimal impact to other resources and more benign visitors, and without jeopardizing wildlife population integrity. Our fundamental responsibility, however, remains protection of the resources. But, while nationally hunting per se is becoming more controversial, what is to one person only a bloody, mangled, lifeless carcass, is to another the ingredients for rabbit liver mousse tureen!

Easy for him to say, must think those who know me, because I am a very enthusiastic hunter. But, for the record, I have never personally supported hunting in national parks and monuments—not that this matters, since I am employed to help administer the law, not to write it. National preserves and the various types of recreation areas established by Congress (partly to maintain hunting opportunities in a crowded world) are a different matter, as is subsistence in Alaska. But opportunities to observe and study wildlife in protected areas are of inestimable value. And any necessary population reductions in those areas can be made in ways that do not hamper those opportunities. Resorting to hordes of red coats for the job would do so.

You may wonder why a nice guy like me so enjoys hunting. I am of an earlier generation than the majority of today's employees, a generation that was closer to the earth. In my Lake Wobegon eastern South Dakota home, when we wanted a chicken dinner I caught a member of our flock with a wire leg hook, lopped off its head on the old chopping block, and, after the last flops and quivers, proceeded with the plucking and gutting. I neither enjoyed nor was upset at the bloodshed. It was just a chore, not nearly as onerous as cleaning the poop out of the chicken house, but also not fun, as was gathering the eggs or anticipating the success of the setting hens. I doubt, on the other hand, that my son has ever touched a live chicken. The pallid, insipid, cellophane-wrapped poultry products in the supermarket, from animals killed and bled by unknown hired assassins, inspire no thoughts of nature or the earth in him.

On our little acre on the edge of town (we were really only gentlemen farmers, primarily during the food rationing of World War II) we also raised two pigs each year and kept a cow. The pigs were as much pets as barnyard pigs can be, but, as a matter of course, they were eventually bopped between the eyes with a .22 and turned into succulent pork. I can only recall one time when that bothered me: I observed my dad hurrying toward the kitchen with a dishpan of blood from a freshly slashed pig throat, the raw material for my favorite Norwegian blood sausage. That scene turned me off the sausage for at least a week, until its fragrant aroma in the frying pan lured me back. He had to hurry because of something I'd just as soon not know

about working with the blood before it clotted (uff da, that older generation was made of stern stuff, and tempered by the Depression). I'm not sure my son has even seen a live pig since visiting my sister's Minnesota farm when he was about four years old. My sister's family and I shared a prime beef from the farm's acreage each year for a number of years.

And, I doubt the kid has ever touched a cow, to say nothing of planting his head into one's flank twice a day while filling a pail with milk the old-fashioned way, squirting a warm stream into the inevitable cat's mouth at intervals. I'm positive he never did anything as gross as clean the manure out of a barn. The chores, the milking and feeding, *had* to be done every day come drought or blizzard, and developed in countless youngsters a sense of responsibility that stood them in good stead when they entered the labor market following failure of the family farms.

(Incidentally, the sweet, unadulterated, unpasteurized cream led to my first inkling that life isn't necessarily fair. My mother and I, both prone to gaining weight, enviously watched my father who, after devouring a meal based on such things as fried sidepork or pork roast and plenty of home-churned butter (and remember the eggs from our chickens), would have a piece or two of pie and then turn to his favorite food: two or three helpings of homemade bread covered with thick, sweet cream and slathered with maple syrup. He never gained an ounce.)

The reason for this rambling discourse is an attempt to illustrate the realization we had, although

we didn't stop to contemplate it, that all life comes from the earth. The pasture across the road nurtured our cow in summer; the vast farm fields surrounding the town (which afforded summertime jobs) and our little alfalfa patch provided the livestock feed, and our huge garden (I *hate* weeds!), berry patches, and the asparagus growing wild in a nearby ditch provided fresh food. We eagerly pursued some of the millions of pheasants found in South Dakota in those days (now largely gone around our town, victims of clean farming, herbicides, and roadside mowing) and the waterfowl that streamed noisily overhead all day and all night during migration.

I wouldn't have traded that hunting for anything. Ah, the whisper of feathers and cupping of wings before the decoys, and the smell of fresh shotgun shell powder smoke in the pre-dawn of a crisp fall morning. I lived to hunt, as manifested in my choice of a dubious career in wildlife management and research. Besides, there wasn't that much else to do at our idyllic little house on the prairie. I did often wonder what a mountain really looked like and dreamed, while reading *Outdoor Life* magazine, about how I would love to chase a deer or elk around one.

I recently heard the noted author Richard Nelson, in an interview with public radio, say that he was anti-hunting until he lived with Eskimos and came to realize we are all products of the land. Then he gladly participated. I believe hunting is a completely natural way of cropping the earth, and a lot more fun than any other. As someone said, "walking in the woods without a gun is like taking

your sister to a dance." Which is to say, there is a vital difference between becoming a part of the changing kaleidoscope of nature and merely observing it. And my son is not all bad: He did contribute a couple of caribou and a few ducks to the family larder. But his tastes range more to boom boxes, motorcycles, and girls; no Lawrence Welk champagne music or lutefisk and lefse for that young man!

Contemplating nature, there is nothing like a South Dakota blizzard to emphasize its power. As long as I am inside, warm and snug, I love a blizzard. When the radio announced our town's school had to be closed, euphoria swept over us youngsters as we relaxed for a free day of reading and games. I'm sure TV would ruin the mood of isolation. I could watch for hours as the snow blew past horizontally, propelled by a howling wind out of the arctic wastelands that are North Dakota. At times the sheets of white would blot out even nearby trees and buildings, filtering into and out of huge drifts, piling up against the doors and increasing the sense of isolation and helplessness. If you dared to venture out, even for a bit, the wind seemed to suck the breath right out of your lungs.

One winter after I left the area, rotary snowplows all the way from Yellowstone were drafted to help open the roads. On the other hand, I'm scared to death of tornados, enjoy thunderstorms if the lightning doesn't come too close, and am entertained by *mild* earthquakes. But while hunting provides a sense of *participation*, storms and earthquakes illustrate our *subservience* to nature.

To my vegetarian friends I want to note that I don't dine only on venison, salmon, and halibut; I also eat and enjoy little embryos (plants, that is). But, I'll admit tearing apart a living, breathing leaf of lettuce or wrenching a quivering carrot or terrified turnip from from the very bowels of the earth of my garden leaves me queasy. After all, lettuce, carrots, and turnips can't run and can't hide.

So, be charitable. Remember, hunters, trappers, and fisherpersons are legal park visitors and, like other visitors, they usually have a deep appreciation for wildlife and fish, and for the natural conditions that support these resources.