

U of Alberta professor says:

'LET US PREY'

Hunting as a green activity: A Canadian biologist guts a deer in his yard to teach the value of the kill

By Robert Remington

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Dr. Lee Foote, a biologist and associate professor at the University of Alberta, recently invited students to his backyard for a class on how to gut a deer. Among them were vegetarians and anti-hunters who prefer ramen noodles to venison.

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— *Dr. Lee Foote, biologist and assoc. professor, U. of Alberta*

"I think I opened some eyes, some minds and maybe even some mouths," said Dr. Foote, a hunter. He had vegans up to their elbows in viscera as he demonstrated the traditional aboriginal uses of animal parts — the bladder as a water carrying bag, the fat for rendering candles, the hooves for rattles, smoked brains for tanning the hide, the teeth for jewellery, the stomach lining as a boiling bag — and how to properly butcher the animal to get choice cuts of meat, including the heart and liver.

Relating the kill to the aboriginal way of life poses a challenge to hunting abhorrents, who almost universally embrace native traditions as touchstones of environmentalism. In Dr. Foote's Edmonton yard — a typical, predator-free, fenced environment of grass and tall trees that humans have developed to mimic our safe ancestral homeland — students were challenged to confront the bloody reality of their existence.

"There is no such thing as a non-consumer," says Dr. Foote. "We all burn fossil fuels. We wear cotton and eat vegetables that have eliminated animals in perpetuity from the environments on which they are grown. The reality is that we all swim through a soup of mortality as we move through our lives. We kill bugs and animals with our cars. We destroy living creatures every day. It all comes at a cost."

Hunting, the 'green' activity

Dr. Foote, who makes a mean venison gumbo, is one of the thousands of Canadians who will take to the woods during this hunting season to kill a deer. By the time the season is over, more than a quarter million deer will die, their entrails spilled on the ground for ravens and coyotes to scavenge, their bones left to calcify in the woods. This, says Dr. Foote, is a beautiful thing.

"To most people geographically or generationally isolated from eating wild-killed meat, these activities seem barbaric, heartless and uncivilized. When uncivilized becomes a pejorative, it speaks volumes about how far cultures have drifted from a natural way of living," he wrote in a recent essay, "The Irreducibility of Hunting."

Animal rights activists, of course, greet this all with scorn. John Livingstone, a naturalist and author of the Governor General's Award-winning *Rogue Primate*, calls hunting "gratuitous, ergo evil." He once likened it to child molesting.

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"If you want to demonize anything you associate it with the most heinous behaviour," says Dr. Foote, who has been challenged to debates on campus by anti-hunting professors, ethicists and philosophers. To him, hunting is a "green activity" full of symbolism and native traditions that is less damaging to the environment than the hordes of weekend recreational enthusiasts whose year-round activities leave a far greater environmental footprint than those of hunters, whose activities are limited to two months of the year. Besides, he says, wild meat simply tastes better.

"I'm a little bit scared of the antibodies and growth hormones that cattle invariably get," he said. It's a misconception that wild game is lower in cholesterol, but, he says, it does have less fat. "In cattle, the fat marbles in intermuscular fibres. Elk and deer layer it, so you can trim it and get it down very lean."

It's enough to make a vegan vomit, but for the millions of Canadians who eat meat but deny the kill, listening to people like Dr. Foote makes you want to get a rifle and take responsibility for the death of your meal rather than leaving the messy business to somebody else. Dr. Foote believes his lifestyle is on the verge of a renaissance to rival the fly-fishing boom. "All it's going to take is one good movie by Robert Redford and we'll see yuppies heading into the woods in their SUVs to bag a deer," he says.

A dying breed?

National statistics, however, indicate he may be one of a dying breed. A 1996 Environment Canada survey, which tracked nature activities since 1981, showed drastic declines in those hunting. In Ontario, the number of hunters declined by 35% from 486,000 to 314,000; in Alberta by 55% from 186,000 to 84,000; in New Brunswick by 31% from 115,000 to 79,000. Recent federal gun registration laws have likely been a further disincentive.

The figures, however, do not account for the dramatic rise in hunting from the early 1960s to the 1980s, when the number of hunters grew at almost twice the rate of the Canadian population.

"We may be just a blip in time and are in fact at the same levels as before," says Dr. Foote.

To the anti-hunters he debates, most will concede that hunting strictly for food is defensible. But Dr. Foote also argues on behalf of trophy hunting, an activity animal rights activists regard as little more than murder.

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"It's often much harder to kill a mature animal than the young. I will usually take the first legal animal I encounter but I respect those hunters who establish their own set of rules, who set degrees of difficulty for themselves. Delay of gratification is usually considered an admirable trait in society and what most people don't realize is that for every successful hunt, there are many unsuccessful hunts."

To Dr. Foote, killing one's own food is much more admirable than buying it in a store. It's also safer.

According to U.S. National Safety Council statistics, people are more than 20 times more likely to die in a car accident than while hunting. Hunting is also safer than fishing, swimming, tennis, even golf. Football, the most dangerous outdoor activity, requires almost 2,200 emergency room treatments per 100,000 participants, according to NSC statistics. Baseball is second with 2,089. Fishing is at 141, tennis 119.7, golf 104.4 and swimming 93.3. Hunting required only eight emergency room treatments per 100,000.

Dr. Foote explains part of the opposition to hunting as neotenus behaviour, the genetical predisposition humans and chimps have to creatures with big round eyes and adorable facial features — the same visual trigger that motivates us to protect our infants.

A wild game disclaimer

He also has a secret weapon to sway the debate — his venison curry. At one potluck dinner with fellow academics and vegetarian students, he placed the following disclaimer next to his steaming dish:

This animal, like its ancestors and progeny, was produced locally. The meat herein was produced as a result of free genetic exchange (no artificial insemination). The animal was not castrated, or forced onto a synchronized breeding schedule. She lived to maturity (4 1/2 years) and reproduced at least once, but most likely had three sets of twins. The meat contains no antibiotics, synthetic steroids, artificial growth hormones or insecticide residues. Its production required no landclearing, fencing, fertilizing or feedlots. Her life did not contribute to the destruction of associated fauna and flora. No manure was collected or spread on erosion-prone pastures to produce (or as a result of) its growth. This animal was not confined, transported or kept in crowded conditions at any point in its life. The lean, unmarbled meat was not wrapped in plastic and Styrofoam packaging. No nitrates or sulfites were applied to prevent discolouration. No fossil fuels

were used for specialized refrigerator transport or cold-storage ageing. Associated inedible parts were not reconstituted into cattle meal or dog food. Inedible parts were fed to indigenous fauna (most likely coyotes, magpies and ravens). Her bones provided calcium to the aspen grove where she was feeding. Substantial calories were metabolized by the hunter over several days to secure this meat. She died quickly, and honourably. Before, as well as after, her death she was treated with reverence and respect. Allowing my participation in a natural cycle was this animal's gift to me. The energy that flowed from sun to plant to deer now also flows through me. This meal does offer reflection, natural continuity, appreciation, health, hope, and...