



the

# Wild Heritage

By Todd Tanner

“Why do I hunt? Well, I hunt because . . .”

Yeah, right. As if there’s an acceptable answer to that question, one I can regurgitate to non-hunters at Christmas parties and still offer with a straight face to my fellow sportsmen, people who already know in their hearts and guts and bones that we hunt for the same reasons we breathe. Because we don’t have a choice.

Just as some human beings are born with the gift of artistic talent and others have an innate facility with numbers, we hunters seem blessed with a genetic predisposition toward the chase. It’s who and what we are, not so much on a personal level – that actually comes out when we ask ourselves, “Am I a deer hunter, or a bird hunter, or an elk hunter?” or “Do I hunt with a rifle or a bow or a shotgun?” – but rather on a cellular level, even a spiritual level.

In other words, we hunt because we have a visceral connection to the land, one we simply can’t ignore. A connection, I might add, that stands in stark contrast to the social and cultural insanity that surrounds us.

For how else can you describe a world where so many bright,

*The true hunter still feels that awesome bond with the land and with the thousands of generations who walked the earth before us.*



THE SKINNING ROOM AND HUNTING WITH A LONGBOW BOTH BY THOMAS AQUINAS DALY

talented people sit passively in front of their television sets and computer screens while their real lives slip on by, a society where Madison Avenue advertisers set the agendas and the folks we see day in and day out – our friends and families and coworkers and neighbors – are defined by the Powers-That-Be as . . . that’s right, say it with me . . .

“Consumers.”

Forgive me for being blunt, but what a horrid, demeaning title. And the fact that so many of us accept this label without taking offense shows that we’ve broken our sacred bond with the natural world.

Even worse, we’ve turned toward the bright, beguiling, vacuous lights

of a culture that no longer revels in the changing of the seasons or the richness of the earth, a culture bereft of the steadying influence of heritage and tradition. In this new reality, where food comes in sterile

plastic packages and important concepts like “meaning” and “purpose” grow ever more illusive, far too many Americans are left to hope that each new distraction (or each new purchase) will fill the void they feel in their hearts.

Yet as hunters, lashed to the bedrock of our outdoor

legacy and holding tight to the ancestral knowledge that flows through our veins, we retain a clarity that’s increasingly rare in the modern world. We see through society’s shallow trappings and we know, if not consciously, then intuitively, that our time afield is a direct conduit to sanity and balance and tradition, a lifeline running back ten thousand years to an era when humanity could still tell the difference between reality and illusion.

You could even say that our connection to the land lends a special clarity to the rest of our lives. Our relationships with our family and our friends, our passion



for nature, our understanding of how life works and where we fit into the grand scheme of things, our role as stewards and caretakers – all these truly important aspects of our existence are influenced by the fact that we are hunters. We have a purpose, and it's not simply to multiply and consume.

Which doesn't necessarily mean that all the other answers to our original question – we hunt because we love the outdoors, or because we love to eat wild meat and fowl, or because we love the excitement and the challenge – are wrong. They're not. But in and of themselves, they're incomplete. They're the ripples on the pond obscuring the quiet depths below.

**H**ere's something you might not have heard before. Thom Hartmann, who's brilliant book, *The Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight*, offers tremendous insight into why modern societies can't seem to live in a responsible, sustainable manner, has also developed what he calls the "Hunter in a Farmer's World" hypothesis.

Hartmann suggests that the social dysfunctions we call Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD/ADHD) can be traced back to our innate predatory nature. When those of us who are genetically wired as hunters are forced to adapt to a sedentary, risk-averse lifestyle, traits and behaviors that were once vital for our survival suddenly become unnecessary, even problematic.

As Hartmann notes, "Genetic scientists now suggest that ADHD is not a disease, pathology, defect, or disorder. Instead, ADHD is a genetic difference that would ideally suit a person to life in a hunting/gathering world, while those without the ADHD trait are better suited to a life of cautious, methodical agriculture."

Did you think I was kidding when I wrote that hunting was a genetic imperative, or that most hunters don't really have a choice? Or if we do have a choice, it's between recognizing and

accepting our rightful place in the world and succumbing to the pervasive illusion that humanity can exist apart from nature.

Just in case there's any doubt in your mind, we can't afford that particular fantasy. Not any more. If we're going to have any chance at all of saving our planet from threats like unchecked development, global warming and increasingly toxic pollution, we have to acknowledge the most basic of facts. The way we treat

the land is the way we treat ourselves. There is no separation. There can't be. It's simply not possible.

**S**ometimes I wake in the morning to the buzz of my alarm clock and as I lay there in bed, chained down by the warmth of my blankets and the absolute certainty that it's cold, dark and nasty outside, I decide that I'm not going to get up. Not today. I'm not going to dress in the predawn blackness; I'm not

going to spend another day in the rain and snow and wind; I'm not going to walk until my feet hurt and my knees throb and my back aches, all for the sake of a whitetail buck I probably won't see or a bull elk who knows better than to bugle within five miles of a dirt road.

Sleep beckons, pulling me back into my dreams, back to a place of comfort and serenity, and it's so easy to justify my decision, to snuggle up to my

wife and slide that gentle slope into tranquility, that I wonder how I've ever done it before; how I've managed to rise and dress and slip out of the house on a thousand other mornings.

Then I remember something. It's not especially profound or insightful – unfortunately, I'm not the kind of person who has regular moments of inspiration – but it's important nonetheless. I remember that I'm a hunter. I

am a hunter. And with that simple realization my perception changes, as do my priorities, and I can climb from bed while the love of my life dreams on, oblivious to the ancient call coursing through my veins.

Maybe in the end, that's what hunting is really all about. The act of remembering. Remembering that we're part and parcel of the natural world, and that we still have a vital role to play.

Author Daniel Quinn makes a strong case that modern cultures have consciously cast aside both the skills and the stories of our ancient hunting and gathering ancestors. He calls this phenomena, where we treat the first 100,000 years of human existence as if they don't exist, "The Great Forgetting."

The Great Forgetting. What a perfect title.

Yet some of us – the true hunters among us – seem able to access at least a portion of that long-lost information.

Perhaps we don't know where it comes from; whether it's passed down through the genes we share with our forebears or through some spiritual connection to a younger, more perfect world. But we still feel that awesome bond with the land and with the thousands of generations who walked the earth before us.

So when I head out into the woods in my wool jacket, my longbow in hand and my cedar shafts nestled in their leather quiver, I hunt with as much passion and honor as I can find within myself. I respect both the animals and the beautiful world in which they live. I give thanks for all the gifts, great and small, that come to us when we immerse ourselves in the outdoors. And I try to do my part as a steward, hopefully leaving the landscape in a little better shape than I found it.

I never ask myself why, though.

I'm a hunter, and that's all I really need to know. 

*Editor's Note:* This column was a prize-winning entry in the Sierra Club's "Why I Hunt" essay contest.

