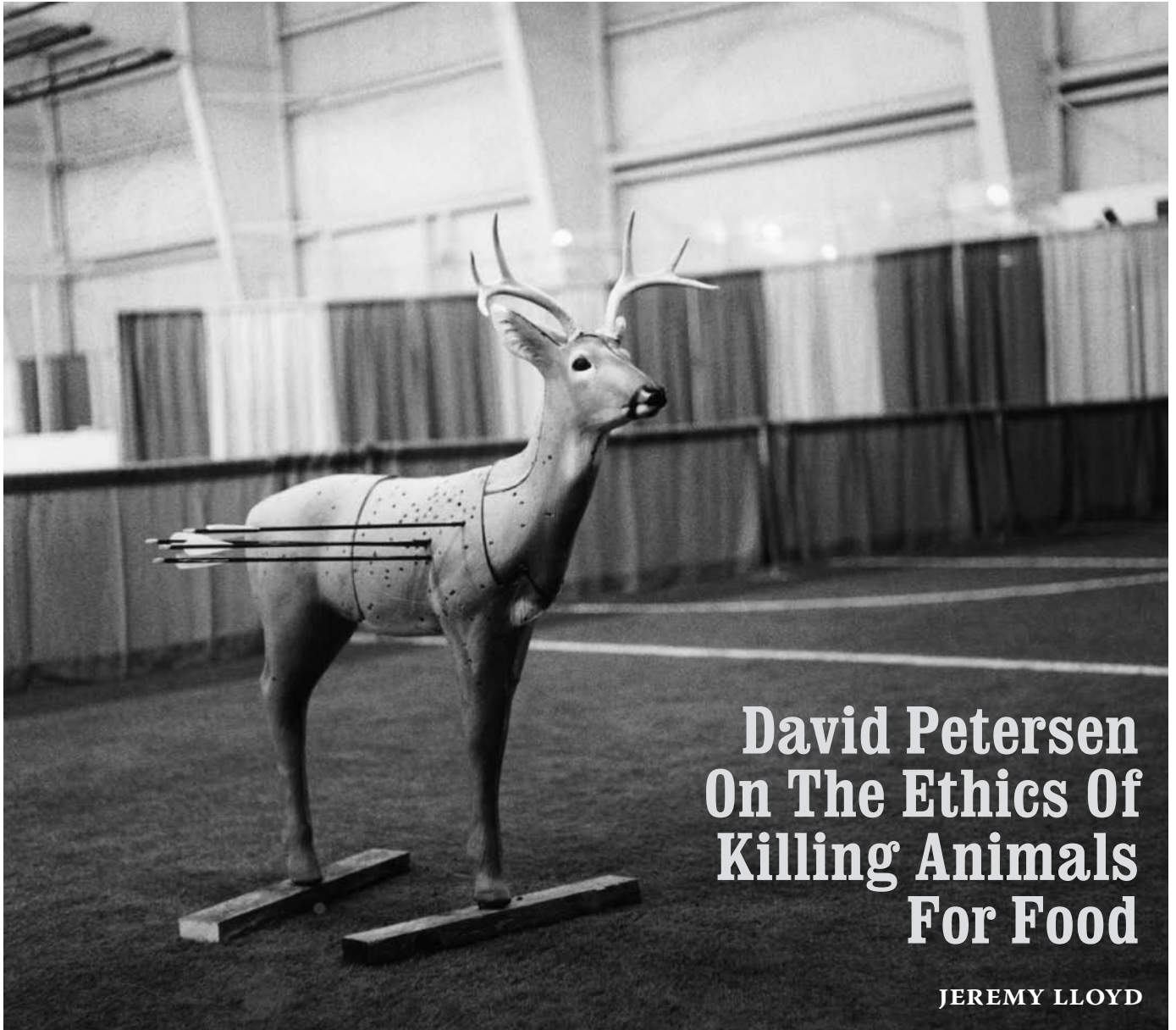


# THE GOOD HUNTER



SHARON LEE HART

## David Petersen On The Ethics Of Killing Animals For Food

JEREMY LLOYD

**W**hy is it that so many of my favorite subjects are conversation killers? Politics. Religion. Hunting. In my social circle the statement “I’m going hunting next week” tends to bring any discourse to a halt.

Though I grew up in Pennsylvania, the deer-hunting capital of North America, I never went hunting as a boy. Today I live in rural Tennessee — inside a national park, in fact — and I work at an environmental learning center. “In wildness is the preservation of the world,” Henry David Thoreau said. But in the twenty-first century we relate to wild nature mostly as mere visitors to it. Several years ago, wanting a relationship with wilderness that was closer to the one Native Americans and

early European settlers had, I went deer hunting for the first time. Two years ago I killed my first deer. I spent the next year eating the meat I’d hunted myself. In the process I deepened my connection with the land — land that hadn’t been cleared for crops but instead had remained wild.

The U.S. Census Bureau reports that the number of hunters in this country has been in gradual decline for the last two decades. In 2006 only 5 percent of the population identified themselves as hunters. This worries state fish-and-wildlife agencies, which depend on revenue from license fees to buy land and improve habitat. (Wildlife watchers and nature enthusiasts usually pay nothing for their enjoyment of these lands.)

*Fewer hunters means fewer memberships in organizations like Ducks Unlimited, which since 1937 has conserved more than 11 million acres of wetlands. But hunting entails picking up a weapon, aiming it at a living being, and sending a bullet or arrow through its heart. And many view this as cruel and barbaric.*

*David Petersen would like to change their perspective. His book *Heartsblood: Hunting, Spirituality, and Wildness in America* (Johnson Books) explained to me both the sadness and the powerful feeling of connectedness that I experienced when I killed a deer. "Nothing could be more in tune with nature," he writes, "and thus more moral, than to follow our omnivorous instincts, needs, and 'God-given' talents as hunters, openly and gratefully acknowledging the deaths that go to nourish our lives." He wades fearlessly into ethical debates with vegetarians and animal-rights advocates, and he lives what he believes.*

*Before giving up a conventional life in order to live closer to the wild, Petersen was a helicopter pilot in the U.S. Marines, the managing editor of a national motorcycle magazine, a mail carrier, a beach bum, and the western editor of *Mother Earth News*. He has written nine books ([www.davidpetersenbooks.com](http://www.davidpetersenbooks.com)), including *Elkheart: A Personal Tribute to Wapiti and Their World* (Johnson Books) and *On the Wild Edge: In Search of a Natural Life* (Holt). Petersen was a close friend of nature writer Edward Abbey, who died in 1989, and he has edited Abbey's journals, poetry, and letters. He is currently the Colorado field director for Trout Unlimited's Sportsmen's Conservation Project and co-chair of Colorado Backcountry Hunters and Anglers ([www.coloradobackcountryhunters.org](http://www.coloradobackcountryhunters.org)). Though Petersen has little use for what he calls "man-made" religion, he holds to a strong personal spirituality that he describes as a respect for all life on earth, rooted in ancient practices and informed by modern science.*

*I sat down with Petersen for several hours in the Strater Hotel in Durango, Colorado. Afterward he took me to the cabin he'd built in the San Juan Mountains. There he and his wife, Caroline, treated me to a delicious steak supper of elk and pronghorn antelope, both of which Petersen had shot with a simple longbow.*

**Lloyd:** Other than food, what type of rewards does hunting bring: Physical? Spiritual? A sense of place?

**Petersen:** All of the above and more. But as with all "good work," to use poet Gary Snyder's term, hunting can open these doors only if we think about what we are doing and why; only if we work at it honestly, with no loutish shortcuts; and only if we *intend* it to be physically, spiritually, and even aesthetically rewarding. We take from hunting what we put into it, just as with the rest of life.

Not all hunting is the same, and not all hunters are the same. One hunter may walk up the mountain to hunt like a real human animal and carry the meat back down; another may ride up the mountain on an all-terrain vehicle [ATV] and haul the meat back effortlessly. Spiritually, hunters can study and internalize the natural histories not only of their prey but also of our own omnivorous species, at once empowering and

restraining themselves with empathy. Or hunters can think of their prey merely as potential scores in the record book, stuffed heads on the den wall, which is the antithesis of spirituality and even basic human decency.

Growing up on the Great Plains, I hunted and ate cottontails, squirrels, and bobwhite quail, because that's what was available there. For the twenty-nine years that I've lived in the Rockies, I've hunted elk, because it's the most abundant and delicious wild game around. I do almost all of my hunting near my home. I walk up the mountain and kill an elk and have meat all winter. This is the norm for me, as it is for a majority of American hunters, if you replace the elk with white-tailed deer.

**Lloyd:** You've called hunting "our genetic dictum." How so?

**Petersen:** Humans evolved as wild animals among other wild animals in a wholly wild world. Sociobiologist Paul Shepard is the father of the field of human ecology, and in his book *Coming Home to the Pleistocene* he says humans reached ecological perfection during the Pleistocene, from 1.6 million to about fourteen thousand years ago. Then the climate changed, and their megafaunal prey died out. (Subsistence hunting was certainly a factor in the extinctions, but not the primary cause.) After that humans went from seminomadic foragers to sedentary farmers. But until that point, every human alive had been a hunter-gatherer.

Natural inclinations and aversions evolve over a very long time. Since we began farming, there's been just enough genetic change in our gut to allow us to better digest grains, but behaviorally, physically, and nutritionally we haven't changed one iota from our Pleistocene forebears. Ten thousand years of agriculture cannot supplant 6 million years of evolution. We are still the same human animals. So, though this inclination to hunt may be a disturbing mystery to some of us, and though it doesn't make logical sense as a means of feeding all of us, it remains an urgent biological imperative in many humans today, though often sublimated because of the culture and lack of wild surroundings.

**Lloyd:** Some people believe we have evolved enough by now that killing meat for food is obsolete.

**Petersen:** It depends what type of "evolution" you're speaking of. Certainly, from a cultural-evolution point of view, modern, well-nourished First World citizens have no need to hunt or raise our own meat. But the majority of us still eat meat. Is it a moral gain or loss to relegate the bloody task of making meat to slaughterhouse professionals doing their unpleasant work behind closed doors and off camera? As an alternative we can become vegetarians, but even vegans must accept responsibility for the deaths of the plants that nourish them. Life is eat-and-be-eaten. Unless you can acquire all your nutrients from the air, killing for food can never be avoided.

We human animals split from a common ancestor with chimps and reached our present form of mind and body millions of years later, only after having perfected hunting and meat eating. None of the several prehuman *Homo* branches that were strict vegetarians lasted. Our large brain developed

thanks to the specific combination of fatty acids found only in meat. Without hunting and meat eating, we'd still be fruit-and-berry-eating apes. The world, in many ways, would be better off.

**Lloyd:** Why, in a culture that glorifies violence, do some recoil at the notion of killing an animal to feed oneself?

**Petersen:** I don't know that I can answer that to anyone's satisfaction, especially my own. As a culture, we glorify *fictional* violence to escape from and harden our hearts against the reality of a truly violent world. And some hunters hunt from a comic-book mentality, trying to enact violent fantasy in a legalized and somewhat culturally acceptable fashion. The end result is the objectification of all nonhuman life. Modern humans are strange, deracinated animals living in an increasingly unreal "reality." But hunting is as real as the red blood on my hands after hauling home an elk.

**Lloyd:** What's your opinion of veganism as a philosophy and way of life?

**Petersen:** Veganism is a morally valid, albeit nutritionally extreme, attempt to live ethically in an overcrowded world of finite material resources and seemingly infinite cruelty. But is it worth the bother in the big picture of life and death on earth? Biologically speaking, the human animal, like our brother the bear, is an opportunistic omnivore. We have a predator's front-set eyes and an omnivore's gut, teeth, and nutritional needs. But at least vegans are thinking about life's problems and experimenting with theoretical solutions, which is more than I can say for most people, including most hunters.

There are many hidden ecological and economic costs of veganism and vegetarianism. Ted Kerasote, in his well-researched book *Bloodties*, coined the term "fossil-fuel vegetarianism" to describe what's going on today. If someone wishes to forgo meat — either for moral reasons or because they believe eating meat is unhealthy — I say more power to them. But how many vegetarians grow or gather *all* their own food? Practically no one falls into that category, which means you're buying farmed products. Somebody has cleared land, costing many birds and animals their homes. Maybe that land was cleared a hundred years before you were born, but you're a direct beneficiary of that destruction of the wild. Then there are all the chemical fertilizers. Even if you're using organic fertilizer, it has to be shipped using fossil fuels. Every spring a big diesel tractor will be used to till the soil and will smash burrows and kill countless moles and mice and burrowing owls and even deer fawns. This considerable carnage is all conveniently invisible.

**Lloyd:** Is predation ethical?

**Petersen:** Absolutely! But civilization has a broad bias against hunters and predators of every stripe: The Big, Bad Wolf. *Jaws*. Elmer Fudd. The list goes on. Remember, we didn't evolve only as hunters but as prey too. Before we learned to pick up



DAVID PETERSEN

a stick or rock and throw it at something good to eat, *we* were being chased, killed, and eaten by an impressive assortment of megapredators. It's no surprise that many of us tend to think of the predator as the bad guy, and to side with the underdog, the weak, the "helpless" and preyed-upon. What a wonderful world this would be if only the lamb *could* lie down with the lion. But what are the lion's choices at dinner-time?

One of my favorite cult movies, Arnold Schwarzenegger's *Predator*, plays on this theme of the hunter as pure evil. It's dismissed by most as a stupid, macho diversion, but this testosterone-drenched flick is also a surprisingly subtle sendup of trophy hunting.

My point is that, in our culture, in order to even entertain the idea of an ethical predator, the observer must approach the subject with an open mind. Ethical hunting is predicated on dignity and respect: Dignity in our private thoughts and public words as well as in our actions afield when, as hunter Aldo Leopold pointed out, nobody is watching us. And respect, not only for the animals we hunt, their habitats, and the greater natural world, but also for ourselves as hunters and human animals. Carry those two blessed burdens in your heart, and you will do no moral wrong as a predator.

**Lloyd:** What are the cultural origins of this bias against hunters in America?

**Petersen:** It depends on which America you are speaking of: Madison Avenue or Madison River, Montana; or, for that matter, New York City or upstate New York. Hunting is not looked upon as a cruel activity in most rural regions of the U.S. Whereas people in the city discuss the size of their financial investments, people in the country ask about the size of your winter woodpile and whether you've got your elk or deer in yet.

Where a bias against hunting does exist in this country today — essentially in the large population centers — it's a perfectly understandable phenomenon. Put people in an environment where hunting has not been a part of their families or culture for generations; where almost every visible aspect of wild nature has been erased and paved over; where hunting is no longer necessary to satisfy our natural cravings for meat; where guns are used only to commit crimes and enforce laws; where nothing about hunting's essential role in human evolution is to be found in any schoolbook below the university-graduate level — and naturally those people won't know or care about hunting. And what we don't understand or care about, we tend to distrust and dislike. It's a form of xenophobia.

On top of this, within the last generation or so, out-of-touch hunters and the burgeoning hunting industry have begun to supply the nonhunting public with a bounty of justifiable reasons to distrust and dislike them.

*(end of excerpt)*