

WRITING LESSON

THE ETHICS OF HUNTING



The YES! Magazine article, **What's the Harm in Hunting?** by **Alyssa Johnson**, is a story about how hunting is an expression of our relationship with nature and the moral complexities of this relationship.

Students will use Alyssa Johnson's story to write about the morality of hunting, and if hunting can be done in a respectful and humane way.

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What's the Harm in Hunting?

It's an expression of our most fundamental relationship with nature, but can you really be moral and be a hunter, too? Our intern headed into the wild to find out.



Alyssa on her first hunting trip. Photo courtesy of Alyssa Johnson.

By Alyssa Johnson

Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Spring 2011 issue

BEFORE THE CRACK OF DAWN ON A SUNDAY, I GOT INTO A TRUCK WITH TWO GUNS AND TWO DOGS IN THE BACK. My friend Ken Reid was driving. His hunting buddy Rone Brewer sat in the backseat with my dad, Allen Ballinger, who also hunts, but came along as photographer this time. We were on our way to kill some quail.

When we at YES! Magazine started working on our Spring 2011 issue on

animals, I thought of Ken immediately. Ken hunts, but also gathers and grows as much food as possible for his family of four, while still holding a day job in the city. He has an extensive garden in his average-sized yard, a worm bin, five chickens, and four honey bee colonies on his garage roof. He gathers mushrooms, fishes, and hunts whenever he can find the time.

It was the hunting that interested

me. Hunting is part of our most primitive relationship with animals. But with access to modern agriculture, it seems like murder—unnecessarily carried out for pleasure at another’s expense. Modern agriculture has freed us to be better than that, right?

Ken—who takes death more seriously than anyone I know—told me not to bring a gun unless I was really ready to take a life.

But Ken is a “thinker.” When he does anything, he does it for a good reason, and he will tell you why at the slightest provocation. If he hunts, I thought, it must make good moral sense. Can you be a moral hunter? I wanted to find out.

Ken agreed to take me hunting and I envisioned shooting a Bambi’s-mom-type doe. She would stagger tragically and collapse in a pool of blood. I pictured either crying over her beautiful carcass, or feeling my heart turn to stone and becoming a hardened killer. Maybe both.

Ken thought we should start by hunting quail, and pheasant if we came across any. I was a little relieved: Birds don’t have doe eyes. Ken—who takes death more seriously than anyone I know—told me not to bring a gun unless I was really ready to take a life. I wasn’t, so I didn’t.

Three hours of driving brought us to “Quail Heaven,” snow-covered basaltic wetlands east of the Columbia River near Royal City, Washington. Upon our arrival I surveyed the land and didn’t see any wildlife, but as we hiked further, there were plenty of traces: tunnels dug by mice, deer scat, coyotes howling in the distance, and the snow tracks of our chosen prey, quail and pheasant. The landscape seemed barren, with only sagebrush and short Russian Olive trees, which have loads of skinny branches

exploding with greenish brown fruits the size of capers. But the land isn’t as barren as it looks—the birds there are fattened on these fruits.

The first wild animal we saw was a porcupine sitting on its haunches with paws tucked into its chest. The porcupine wasn’t scared; they’re generally left alone. Predators learn quickly that attacking will get them a face full of spines. Ken’s dog, Scout, has had the unfortunate experience three times—this time he kept his distance. A hunter won’t bother them either, unless “you were really hungry”, says Ken. Then “if you needed to you could walk right up to it and kill it with a stick.”

As long as Ken and his family aren’t starving, he’s no threat to porcupines. The porcupine represents the kind of cute critters who are threatened less by direct threats, and more by indirect actions—for example, when humans take their land for agriculture. Or a golf course. Or a shopping mall.

There is no escaping the effect modern life has on our fellow creatures. Raccoons feed off our compost in the night. Bats are dying in the air flux around wind turbines. Entire ecosystems have been displaced by factories producing various products: toilet paper, flu vaccine, plastic trinkets. And then there’s our food system. Even vegans can’t claim they don’t kill animals.

In 2002, Oregon State University professor Steven Davis calculated that, per acre, vegan agriculture kills more animals than raising



From the YES! Spring 2011 issue: Should we eat meat?
Chicken truck painting by Sunaura Taylor

livestock, because field animals such as mice and bunnies are regularly killed by harvesting equipment. Of course, this equates one rat to one cow. Also, it is per acre—and vegan agriculture could feed the world with far fewer acres.

No one, regardless of their food choices, is completely innocent of the harm caused by our current food system. Vegan, organic, or not—pesticide and fertilizer runoff damage habitat. That’s after the initial ecosystem displacement, of course. The nature of agriculture means no matter how we grow our food, we will cause the deaths of animals—if not by machinery or chemicals, then by starvation from disappearing habitat. For us to live, others will die.

In fact, “Quail Heaven” was threatened, by a proposed irrigation reservoir that would have flooded thousands of acres of Eastern Washington wetland habitat. But hunters like Ken joined with nearby residents and environmental groups to protest. They succeeded in delaying the construction indefinitely.

The porcupine is safe for now.

Scout, along with Rone’s dog, Cork, ran around sniffing everything, excited to show off his ability to “see” birds by smelling them. The quail aren’t prancing around in open meadows like I envisioned when I heard “Quail Heaven,” at least not when we’re around. They were taking shelter under the brush; we needed the dogs to find them. It’s a unique evolutionary partnership: Man uses dog for his keen sense of smell, dog uses man for his intellect and firearms.

Per acre, vegan agriculture kills more animals than raising livestock, because field animals such as mice and bunnies are regularly killed by harvesting equipment.

When the dogs smell a bird, they stand stiff and still, “on point,” with their noses pointing directly at the bird. Someone scares the bird out,



Photo from Alyssa’s first hunting trip. Courtesy of Alyssa Johnson.

and then the guns take over.

Several minutes after the porcupine incident, Scout went on point. We were near a crowded grove of Russian Olive trees with overgrown brush and branches underneath—lots of hiding places for quail. My dad and I pushed through the branches and kicked around, but no bird came out. Scout didn’t move—insisting a bird was there. We kept kicking around, walking all over the branches, and I wondered how this works. Where are the birds? Where will they go? Aren’t we in the line of fire?

Finally my dad found a quail. The bird, peeking out from the brush, had been tromped on as we were kicking around.

Ken held the bird. It wasn’t struggling, just looking around—stunned or maybe scared. It was hurt, and we weren’t going to nurse it back to health. Ken bashed the quail’s head against a rock as hard as he could, three times. The bird opened and closed its beak twice, shuddered from head to toe, then lay still. “This reminds me of that grouse,” he called out to Rone as he joined us from over the hill.

Ken had talked to Rone many times about a grouse that he killed when he was fourteen. Just like this quail, he had held it in his hand while its pulse waned and it shuddered into death. It

was a sobering experience, and for Ken it set off a lifetime of scientific moral contemplation that led him to a very strict stance. “Many vegans and omnivorous people consider their conscience clear because they did not willfully commit the killing act,” Ken told me. “For me it is the opposite.”

This quail was the first cute-animal death I had witnessed (insects don’t count), but I felt strangely okay. I was sad for the bird, but after hours of conversation and pages-long emails from Ken and Rone, I had come to understand how I could feel compassion and still be okay with killing for food. I was participating in the process of life and death—a process that would happen whether I liked it or not.

Participation made moral sense to me. When we don’t take part in the lives (and deaths) of the animals we eat, when we pass responsibility from consumer to farmer to CEO to stockholder, animals are disrespected, as evidenced by the horrific conditions in concentrated animal feeding operations. Some choose to absolve themselves of the responsibility by becoming a vegetarian or vegan. But short of living in the woods and foraging for edibles—a lifestyle that most climates would not support—they too must claim some complicity

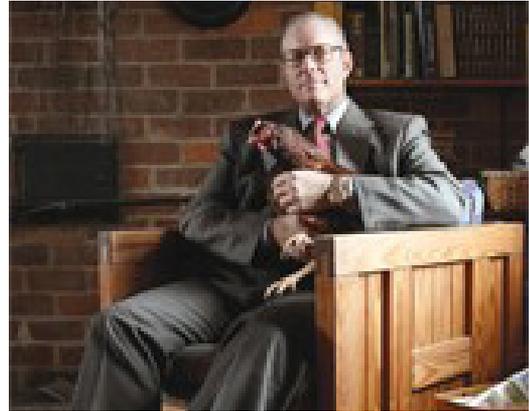
Hunting is brutal, but so are the indirect environmental effects of building cities of skyscrapers, mining rare earth metals for electronics, and building wind turbines. We are killing animals either way—hunting is just more direct. Ken would say, more honest.

Ken and Rone recognize that to live on this earth requires causing harm, and participating through hunting creates a deep connection to nature that is very fulfilling. But it’s about more than human feelings; it’s about preserving a natural way of life, for us and for the animals we hunt. Hunting leaves them in their natural homes. Sustainably harvesting wildlands for meat, mushrooms, and other living things fosters a beneficial and respectful relationship with the ecosystems we are harvesting. Gathering all the food sources we can naturally allows us, to some degree, to plow down less habitat for agriculture. Hunting goes a long way

toward protecting and improving animal life.

The next time Scout points, my dad is able to flush out a bird. Rone shoots and misses. The next one Rone shoots falls. Cork brings it back.

Later, Rone shoots another but the bird doesn’t drop—it flies off and lands on a



From the YES! Spring 2011 issue. Farmer Joel Salatin: How to Eat Animals and Respect Them, Too. Photo by Mike McGregor.

nearby knoll. Cork finds it and brings it back, chomping just a little until the bird lies still. This isn’t killing out of compassion, Ken explains. The birds have a defense mechanism—they have sharp claws, and release poofs of feathers when they’re caught.

Ken shoots one bird at close enough range that the expanding shot could have pulverized the bird, making it inedible—a wasted death. But when Scout brings it back, only the head is bloody. “Oh good,” Ken says, “That’s what I was going for.” Twenty years of hunting make it look easy, even though he says it’s not.

I wonder aloud whether a new hunter, maybe me someday, would spend all her time wounding and pulverizing, causing suffering and wasting birds’ lives. Ken has me point at the top of a telephone pole in the distance. Since my right eye is dominant, Ken says, “Now close your left eye.” My finger is right on top of the pole. “You see, aim comes naturally,” he says. I’m a natural killer. Rone shows me how he holds his gun at the ready, with his index finger pointed down the side of the barrel. Point and shoot. We’re all killers.

By the end of the day, Ken and Scout have killed four quail, and Rone and Cork have killed six quail and two pheasant.

A couple weeks later, I had dinner at the Reids' to make sure it was for a good cause.

Ken's wife, Rebecca, cooked us a beautiful meal with as much local food as possible: fried razor clams they dug themselves, homegrown, homemade grape juice sweetened with the

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honey from their own bees, and of course quail and pheasant, cooked in a tomato-based sauce and served on risotto. The wild bird tasted like they had had rich lives, and a homeland full of Russian Olive.

I haven't killed yet, but I will. I want to participate, because even the little I have done thus far has given me a much greater respect for life. The experience connected me to nature in a way hiking and camping never did. I understand why Ken feels accountable for owning a house on land that used to be woods, or why he gets so angry about developments lying on top of what used to be prime Seattle farmland.

No one is suggesting that we get all our food from hunting and foraging—there are too many of us now—but we need to gather all the food sources we can naturally to reduce our need for agriculture.

We can protect the land by using it. We can ensure that life is respected by participating in the dirty work. Rather than hiding in our cities and vilifying those who intrude on “pristine” wildlands, we should bravely accept our place as a predator, a natural participant in the cycle of

life and death.

Alyssa B. Johnson wrote this article for *Can Animals Save Us?*, the Spring 2011 issue of *YES! Magazine*. Alyssa is a former editorial intern at *YES!*

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Is hunting moral?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/the-ethics-of-hunting

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

No More Bear Skin Rugs

By Stro Hastings, Grade 6

Imagine riding along in a bumpy jeep with a high caliber rifle and a shotgun in the backseat. It's a beautiful day for hunting and there's plenty of ammo to last a good long while. This is what hundreds of people do every day for food and money. Some people even do it for a living. The question is: Is hunting moral? Hunting is moral, because animal populations are growing rapidly and without any hunters there would be too many to live with!

The YES! Magazine article "What's the Harm in Hunting?" expressed the morality of hunting very well. Alyssa Johnson told how they followed fair chase rules just like Tom Lewis, an almost lifelong hunter. He hunted, stopped for over ten years, and then started again. He supports hunting and thinks that it should be allowed as long as people are following fair chase rules. This means that people cannot go out and kill as many deer as they want. They have to leave some for other hunters. They also cannot trick the animals, such as shine a bright light in a deer's eye to make him stand still.

Another problem is poaching. Poaching is when people illegally hunt an animal. An example of poaching is the hunting of African elephants, which are illegal to hunt because they are an endangered species. Yet, people still continue to hunt them because they are rare, and hunters can get a lot of money for just one of them.

Commercial hunting is a big issue because it means animals are only being killed for money. For example, many people want bear skin rugs, or rabbit fur mittens. It's terrible, but the worst part is that most people just throw away the rest of the animal—they don't even eat it!

However, some varieties of hunting are moral. There's an invasive rodent species in Louisiana that's destroying an ecosystem. There is also a bounty on this small animal because

its population is wiping out the environment. Some people might be against this, but others probably support it because this animal is destroying a habitat for native species. In most cases people don't need to hunt, but in this case they do.

The point is, hunting is moral. Is commercial hunting moral? No, because making bear skin rugs is just wrong, and should not be supported. But hunting for food is moral, as long as everybody is hunting with fair chase rules. In the future I hope to go on a hunting adventure with Tom Lewis. I think it would be fun and exciting, but we would definitely have to hunt with fair chase rules.

Part 5: Sample Essays

Hunting the Ohio Way

By Johnny Bobo, Grade 9

Is hunting moral? Apparently this is a controversial topic that is widely debated among many groups of people. However, until our teacher asked us to write a response to this prompt I never knew there was a debate over the morality of hunting. In southeastern Ohio, hunting is just another activity during certain times of the year. Some people hunt and others do not. So why is the morality of hunting strongly debated in other parts of the country?

The main argument against hunting is that people believe it is immoral to kill animals just because we can. These people believe that animals deserve our respect and that killing them is a violation of their personal rights. However, if these people are truly against violence towards animals, why do they only protest hunting? In the article *What's the Harm in Hunting?* Alyssa Johnson states that, "No one, regardless of their food choices, is completely innocent of the harm caused by our current food system. Vegan, organic, or not—pesticide and fertilizer runoff damage habitat." The people that protest hunting believe they are not responsible for any deaths of animals, but they are also involved in the killing of animals—just indirectly. These groups of people have the right to protest hunting, but they need to get some more solid reasons.

I am not all for hunting. I've tried to go hunting before and it never interested me. For some people though, it is an amazing experience. Not all people who enjoy hunting are blood thirsty, crazy rednecks like some of the people opposed to hunting believe. Most people who legally hunt are just like everyone else. They may hunt for fun, but nothing they kill goes to waste. People who hunt for some of their meat are no different from people who go to the supermarket to buy their meat. Hunters are just taking out the middle man. They are killing and preparing their own meat instead of having someone else do it for them.

Hunters, though, are the only ones being targeted. People opposed to hunting believe it is unfair for us to walk out into the woods and kill animals because the animals have no way to defend themselves. Although, when you think about it, which is worse: hunting an animal that lived a full life in the wild, or slaughtering an animal that spent its entire life living a farm? It is my opinion that as long the hunting is done legally it is as humane, or, in some cases, more humane, than getting your meat from a farm or slaughterhouse.

Hunting is not just a way to obtain meat. Hunting can be used to remove an invasive species from the area, control the population of an animal with few natural predators, and protect livestock. In our area of Ohio we are practically overrun with white-tailed deer. If it weren't for hunting, the white-tailed deer population would sky-rocket, which, in turn, would lead to more deer-related car accidents, the starvation of many deer due to a lack of food, and the possible loss of crops due to the deer needing to find alternate sources of food. However, the hunting of deer is not a free-for-all. Before each deer season, the population in the area is determined and bag limits are set based on the deer population. Hunting can also be used to control the populations of predators if there is an abundance of them or a shortage of their prey. Without hunting, many animals would starve due to a lack of food. So, ask yourself which is more humane and moral, hunting animals or letting them starve to death?

If someone asks me if hunting is moral I will tell them it is. I may have this opinion because of where I live or the way I was raised, but as long as hunting is done legally, I do not see a problem with it. If a person wants to hunt for their meat, let them. People who go the store to buy their meat are doing the same thing; they just didn't kill it themselves.

Don't Jump to Conclusions

By Lisa Schwartz, Grade 11

Like many people today, I initially thought hunting was awful. I found it disgusting and couldn't bear the thought of killing an animal. Although I'm no vegetarian, I couldn't bring myself to kill the meat with my own hands. I think a lot of people view hunting similarly to the way I used to. Now, I realize I didn't know much about hunting before; I had formed a stereotype in my head about hunters. I never knew the true benefits it could have for the animal.

The more I read Alyssa Johnson's YES! Magazine article, "What's the Harm in Hunting?" the more I realized that for some people, like Alyssa's friends Ken and Rone, hunting is a way of life, and a way to truly connect to nature. Although hunting does kill the animal, it can also preserve the habitat for the other wildlife around it. If an animal is hunted, it still lives in its initial habitat, which helps nature tremendously. People who gather their food from the wild are probably the most well-liked by Mother Nature because they prevent habitats from being destroyed for agriculture or being modernized for malls and development.

Alyssa's writing has reversed my opinion not only on hunting, but also on hunters themselves. I had viewed hunters as burly men that wore camo pants and had no concern for the animals they killed, or wildlife in general. Ken and Rone are completely different. They respect the animals they kill and feel a special connection to nature when they hunt. Their hunting experiences have made them more aware of the sacredness of life, and helped them be a part of the cycle of life and death.

This does not mean I think hunting is okay as a sport. I strongly disapprove of those who hunt simply for the fun of it. I do not understand why killing an animal should seem

amusing or entertaining to any human being that has any kind of morals. I also dislike the fact that many hunters go for bigger game, such as deer, simply so they can have the antlers to hang up and brag about. Many people that hunt big game could actually get the amount of food they need by hunting much smaller game, but it wouldn't give them as much to boast about. I think killing an animal should never be anything to show off; it is highly disrespectful to the animal's life, which is just as important as any human's life in the eyes of God. After all, we are all his creatures. Therefore, people who hunt big game and waste much of the animal make the killing of the animal a waste of life.

Now that I have learned more about the benefits of hunting, I think more people should be educated on the topic. Although there will always be some people who may disrespect the lives of animals and hunt to see who can get a deer with the biggest antlers, or how many turkeys they can kill, more people might hunt ethically if they realized they could do it usefully and respectfully. So, next time you hear someone talking about a hunting trip, don't jump to conclusions. Maybe next time you should tag along.

The Double Standard of Killing Animals

By Jenny Courtney, American River College

In Alyssa B. Johnson’s article, “What’s the Harm in Hunting?” the author states that her interest in hunting was piqued by the idea that our access to modern agriculture has made the age-old practice of hunting seem superfluous and gratuitously violent. To further this point, Johnson asks the rhetorical question, “Modern agriculture has freed us to be better than that, right?.” It becomes clear by the end of the article that the author’s answer to this question would be no. I agree with Johnson in this respect and believe that thoughtfully regulated hunting has done more to advance the welfare of animals than modern agriculture ever has. As a vegetarian, I believe that when people engage in the act of hunting with the goal of procuring meat, it is a moral enterprise. In fact, I see it as more moral than our industrial food production system—even though the former is seen by many as unnecessary, and the latter is cast as a requisite for maintaining the average American’s quality of life.

Our modern agricultural system has created such distance between man and his meat that we are no longer cognizant of all the costs involved in its procurement. Because of this, I believe that the only thing modern agriculture has freed us from is a sense of personal responsibility. We now fail to make connections between the plastic-wrapped meat we find in the supermarket aisle and all of the environmentally destructive actions that were required to deliver it. Since we no longer have to get blood on our hands to obtain meat, it has allowed us to treat other sentient creatures in a callous manner. To meet our country’s great demand for beef, cows are kept in incredibly close quarters, which encourages the spreading of infections and the need for large amounts of antibiotics. Large-scale poultry production requires that chickens be kept in very small cages. This environment

is stress-producing and causes many neurotic behaviors, such as feather pecking and cannibalism. To discourage this behavior, chicken beaks are cut off, and chickens are fed anti-stress drugs and kept in dimly lit rooms.

A double standard exists in this country when it comes to the issue of killing animals. When it happens on a large scale and in a mechanized environment, the majority of the population sanctions it. However, if the killing occurs in nature and is done by an individual with a gun, a portion of the population sees it as cruel and perverse. The meat industry kills millions of animals each year, and, in some places, this occurs under inhumane and unsanitary conditions. But, because factory farming occurs behind closed doors, it is never thought of as egregious or excessive. Hunting, on the other hand, is a tightly regulated practice by means of seasons and bag limits. Yet, is seen by some as a barbaric activity that is only done by cold-blooded individuals.

It seems to me that the interpretations of these two different activities need to be reversed. Hunters in general seem to have much more respect for animals than factory farms in the meat industry. Many hunters put a lot of emphasis in the ethics of “fair chase.” Hunters following these principles will not shoot at prey that have been corralled by mechanized vehicles, confined by artificial barriers, spotted from the air, or helpless in any capacity. More than half of these tactics are used in the meat industry. Proficient hunters also take pride in not drawing out the death of a prey and try to make each kill as clean as possible. Hunters appreciate the true cost of their meat because of the money, time, and energy that goes into a successful hunt. When meat is hunted through “fair chase,” there are fewer environmental costs (i.e. habitat fragmentation,

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Jenny Courtney essay continued)

decline in biodiversity and large scale use fossil fuels for transportation) that are required to keep our agricultural system afloat. Unlike the meat industry, hunters play an active role in the conservation of the habitats of the species that they kill.

Five years ago, I became a vegetarian because I realized that I could no longer condone the actions of an industry that causes so much undue suffering to such a large amount of animals. I am able to support hunting as a morally sound practice because the animals being hunted have had the chance to have a better quality of life, and are not just viewed as commodities. If I ever had to eat meat again, I would rather it come from an individual that took pleasure in a single kill, rather than from someone who felt nothing while killing hundreds of animals in a single day.
