

***The Long Spring* Essay: can hunting continue in 21st Century Europe?**

Laurence Rose, revised 7 August 2018

This essay expands on pages 251-2 of *The Long Spring* (Bloomsbury, 2018). The views expressed are my own.

In early 2016, as I was travelling through Spain, France, the UK, Sweden, Finland and Norway, gathering material for my book *The Long Spring*, I became increasingly uneasy about the fragile coexistence between conservation and hunting, especially in three of the six countries I passed through.

In France, making hunting the right of everyone anywhere as a tenet of Revolution has defined it as a cultural heritage. But 40,000 French hunters are giving up each year because they have nothing left to hunt outside special, expensive, areas, many of which are supposedly protected under EU law for other species. These specially protected areas are managed by hunters for hunters and offer little or no added value to the species they are protected for, and in many cases are clearly detrimental.

From the Revolution onwards, the land has been regarded as a resource for all, and traditionally, if land is not explicitly closed to hunting, it is explicitly available. The pattern is changing, though. A quarter of a century ago three-quarters of hunters roamed almost where they pleased, but since the turn of the millennium shooting over land leased by syndicates has prevailed. The reason is not hard to deduce: in the ordinary, undesignated land conservationists call the wider countryside, nature has been impoverished for lover, watcher and killer alike. Had revolution come later, *égalité* might have meant a ban for all instead.

In the world famous Camargue wetland only about fifteen percent of the land is protected from shooting. Everywhere else, management has intensified, with water more tightly controlled between embankments, freshwater pumped in and out of the system, and vegetation stripped from banks and higher ground, with a consequent loss of wildlife. Perhaps the most telling fact is that the value of shooting leases increases with proximity to a nature reserve. In the Camargue, it seems conservation benefits shooting, but it is not clear that this is a reciprocal deal.

Sweden's brown bears, one of the most endangered European mammals, are still hunted, despite the species supposedly having the highest level of protection under EU law. Traditionally, bear hunting is assisted by a special breed of dog, known as Plott, and hunters argue that the breed will go extinct if bear hunting is disallowed. American Plott enthusiasts are invited each year to take part in the killing of a quota of bears set county by county by hunting administrations staffed largely by hunters. To get round EU law, the bears are killed on spurious grounds of livestock protection, in order to assuage a minority field sports lobby over a majority of objectors.

In Britain forty million non-native pheasants are released every year. Millions are killed on roads, nourishing a population of crows and buzzards that are then shot to prevent them depredating next year's stock of poult (the former legally, the latter either illegally, or with secretly-issued government licences). The surviving pheasants are shot for fun, creating an over-supply of pheasant meat that outstrips demand many times over. This stark separation of recreational hunting from food supply is relatively recent, as competition between commercial shoots has ratcheted up the 'bags' offered – to 500 birds a day in some cases. As a result, the

majority of shot pheasants are dumped. This summer the *Shooting Times* became the first mainstream shooting institution to break hitherto solid ranks, to condemn the greed of these estates.

Grouse shooting has also seen a surge in intensity as it, too, has become a largely commercial operation. Even so, it has enjoyed increasing public subsidies, which take no account of the fact that it is one of the main causes of conservation failure in National Parks, where in the interests of maintaining unnaturally high densities of grouse, vegetation is denuded, landscape uglified, species diversity reduced, raptors eliminated and water catchments buggered.

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By the end of my journeys, I was rethinking my views on hunting and conservation. Traditionally, calls for greater control of hunting take one of two forms – oppose it outright on moral and/or cruelty grounds, or take a morally neutral stance and manage it to minimise its impact on species and habitats. It occurred to me as I was completing my book that neither considers the cultural implications in this 21st century of giving individuals proprietorial rights over our impoverished common heritage. Conservation is a cultural issue, and we risk sending out confused cultural signals as long as we are trying to fine-tune practices that appear increasingly to come out of a cultural backwater: all the traditions and practices of hunting in Europe date from a time of abundance, the like of which we have not seen for decades. I concluded that there is a conservation case for reevaluating hunting, not just a moral one.

I had to challenge myself as to what the difference was between cultural signalling and moralising - pontificating on the rights and wrongs of people's chosen lifestyles, and to reassure myself that there really was a meaningful third way. As conservationists we have – rightly – always worked from a non-anti-hunting perspective: opposing it out of dogma or moral outrage weakens the power of our conservation-driven arguments. We address those practices, legal or otherwise, that we have clear and just cause to want to change on grounds of conservation impact. The problem is, there has been barely any cooperation from within the field sports industry, whose opposition to reform – and reformers - has become ever more shrill and intemperate. Grouse and pheasant management have become more monocultural and more environmentally unsound, at a time when the natural environment needs the opposite. The industry has successfully lobbied for pro-shooting, anti-conservation measures that include the controversial hen harrier brood management scheme. The stated aims of this scheme are to reduce hen harrier predation of grouse chicks and to improve the conservation status of hen harriers. Linking these two aims is the proposal to remove chicks from nests on grouse moors and to relocate them in places where harriers have yet to colonise, or where there is no grouse shooting for the harriers to conflict with. Shooting interests invented it, conservation bodies point out it goes against all the principles of species management enshrined over decades in EU and UK domestic law. Put simply, by side-stepping illegal harrier killing, the scheme effectively condones it. That makes it cultural, too. A clash of two cultures, one progressive and based on the common good, one outdated and based on exercising dominion over nature for private ends.

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I realised what while we need to see a fundamental cultural shift, that doesn't have to mean dogmatic opposition to hunting and calling for the complete elimination of field sports. Conservation does need, though, to address hunting as a whole, to challenge the underlying causes of the particular bad practices we want to see eliminated. We need, simply, to reverse a basic presumption about the place of hunting in 21st century Britain. This presumption, hitherto, is that we all have an absolute right to hunt. If a woodcock flies over your field, you can kill it before it flies over your neighbour's field where he or she might have wanted simply to enjoy watching it. If you own a lot of land, you can kill a lot of wildlife that legally isn't yours, no questions asked, if you stay within the law.

So what if hunting were not a right, but a concession? And what if concessions were very difficult to gain and very easy to lose? What if, in order to be given a concession to shoot wildlife you had to make the case that it was overwhelmingly in the public interest?

No conceivable case of sufficient robustness could be made for hunting foxes with hounds, for example, so no concession would be granted (so it might as well stay banned). A case for controlling rabbits and red deer would be straightforward, and the by-products are marketable; shooting pheasants and grouse would be a tough but, for some applicants, not impossible sell.

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Approaching the problem of moorland management from this cultural angle would mean that the RSPB and other conservationists would not be debating the best way to control the excesses of what we currently call driven grouse shooting. This debate is dismaying not because it is happening between friends, but because it is diverting the finest conservation minds away from the real problem, which is not, I have to point out, driven grouse shooting. The problem of abusive habitat management and illegal raptor killing in the uplands stems from grouse shooting, not driven grouse shooting. That is, from the grouse shooting culture, which, in all its forms, has resided permanently at the border between legality and illegality since 1954. We have made the mistake of following the wrong scent trail. Analysing where the worst impacts are being felt, and linking this to the most intensive form of shooting, may seem rigorous and logical. But it assumes that other versions of the sport will remain the gentlemanly and benign pursuit some believe them to be today. Far more likely is that, if conservationists achieve their goal of banning or licencing driven grouse shooting, nothing much will change on the ground as the bad practices we think we are targeting will simply re-emerge between slightly translocated goalposts. We need hunting policies that address the fundamentals, and that can be applied across all forms of the sport, based on a principle that it is nobody's birthright.