

Dealing with a taboo: Do hunting and fishing bring us closer to nature?

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A relational and embedded perspective can engender the most effective stewardship. Hunting and fishing involve complex tasks and vivid outdoor experiences in nature that can help to build a profound sense of participation in a natural ecosystem and a related community of practice. Credit: J. Miller. From *Nature Sustainability* (2024). DOI: 10.1038/s41893-024-01379-7

Buying fish, sausage or meat saves you from breaking a social taboo in some industrialized nations, especially when hunting and fishing are conducted for recreation. In a [perspective article](#) in *Nature Sustainability*, a research team from the natural and social sciences and environmental philosophy, with Professor Robert Arlinghaus from IGB, adds a new perspective to the topic of "recreational use of wild animals."

The hypothesis is that an emotionally intense interaction between hunters or anglers and [wild animals](#) can create a particularly strong sense of responsibility, described as "[environmental stewardship](#)." And this in turn would be an incentive for many to commit to lifelong environmental and species protection action.

However, the research team distinguishes this intense experience of nature from more superficially conducted [hunting](#) and angling practices, which do not necessarily foster feelings of stewardship.

The research team sheds light on the psychological and emotional side of recreational hunting and fishing. "Because of the powerful emotions evoked and the mentorship of like-minded participants, hunting and angling have the capacity to form character traits that are life-long and ethically central to becoming an environmental steward," said Charles List, professor emeritus of philosophy at SUNY Plattsburgh University, New York, US, co-author of the study.

"Hunting and fishing generally require an intensive engagement with natural processes, ecosystems, the living creature and the annual and daily cycles. Through the experience of searching, finding, catching, taking, killing and processing of wild animals, hunters and anglers also become part of the natural food web.

"This close psychosocial integration into nature can create a strong sense of responsibility to protect wildlife and [fish](#), which we call stewardship," added Prof. Arlinghaus, sustainability researcher and fisheries professor at the Leibniz Institute of Freshwater Ecology and Inland Fisheries (IGB) and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin.

Superficial interactions lead to the outsourcing of responsibility for the animals

However, there are also practices that are more of a short-term intervention. This does not necessarily promote a sense of responsibility for conservation of wildlife and the environment.

"There are examples of hunting and fishing experiences being dominated by market logic, for example in small put-and-take fishing ponds or in hunting experiences for specially bred wild animals released in small enclosures, known as canned hunting.

"These practices lead to only superficial experiences of nature. They are designed to satisfy the desire for a quick reward. There is often no intensive examination of the personal relationship with nature and own impacts on the lives of animals," explained the first author Dr. Sam Shephard of Ave Maria University in Florida.

The practice of hunting and fishing can generate skills and knowledge that are useful for conservation and management. However, the crucial

factor is not the practice itself, but what it triggers for people psycho-emotionally. Fishing according to the principle of catch-and-release, for example, can strengthen the sense of responsibility for a fish when it is released out of respect for the creature or to protect a natural population of fish through self-constraint.

However, catch-and-release can also be a prime example of a superficial economization of wildlife use, for example if the release event is carried out for purely economic reasons to maintain the attraction of a commercially operated fishing stretch. Similar tensions exist in specific forms of hunting.

"Stewardship arises when people become aware of the consequences of their own actions and draw personally binding conclusions that lead to the sustainable management of animal populations, including to self-constraint about how many animals to take and how," explained associate professor Erica von Essen of Stockholm Resilience Center.

She suggests that such stewardship can often operate independently of formal harvest regulations. In Sweden, for example, hunters are currently protesting against moose quotas which they consider to be too high, deliberately refraining from harvesting moose.

Reduced to a management task: Emotional approach to killing socially tabooed

Hunting and fishing can also be reduced to the act of killing for reasons of pest control or the control of invasive species. In this case, the animals are viewed as aggregated biomass that must be disposed of for a specific purpose.

"Reducing killing to a management task promotes a rational, but not an

emotional approach to nature. To avoid criticism, hunters and anglers in industrialized countries often take on the role of rational wildlife and fish managers and distance themselves from the more emotional or cultural dimensions of their activity because these are increasingly tabooed in society," said anthropologist Dr. Thorsten Gieser from the Czech Academy of Sciences.

According to the authors, this means that some traditions that were once used to honor prey are now abandoned or only used very discreetly due to a lack of social acceptance. This may shift the emotional bounds of hunter and anglers towards wildlife into a direction that undermines environmental stewardship.

"It is important to take a differentiated view of the various recreational hunting and fishing practices. An important basis for this is to remove the social taboo on killing wild animals in the context of recreational fishing and hunting because such practices can build very intense emotional connections and experiences about the consequences of one's own actions that may then lead to pro-environmental behavior and support for conservation action," concluded Arlinghaus.

More information: Samuel Shephard et al, Recreational killing of wild animals can foster environmental stewardship, *Nature Sustainability* (2024). [DOI: 10.1038/s41893-024-01379-7](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41893-024-01379-7)

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