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BECOMING PART OF THE FLOCK

MEMORIES FROM HENNEPIN KEEP ME ON THE 'MORAL HOOK'



BY STRACHAN DONNELLEY, PH.D.

As my youth falls a half century behind me, I find I am drawn to revisit my early days of duck hunting near Hennepin, Illinois. At the time, the experiences were emotionally, if not spiritually, deep, though more or less mindless. Reflecting on these experiences as an adult helps me see how I came to understand my aboriginal membership in historically deep, biotic communities—an understanding that serves me well today.

I started hunting when I was 8, 10, or 12—I cannot remember exactly—under the rigorous tutelage of my father, Gaylord Donnelley. He gave me a single barreled, 20 gauge shotgun with a hammer cock. I was to learn gun safety and the art of shooting before moving on to



One of the Donnelley boys—Strachan or Elliot, circa 1950

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double-barreled or pump shot guns, which everyone else used.

My father owned a farm intended for fall duck hunting with two small lakes on it near Hennepin. The farm was named Windblown Bottom.¹ This is in historical, storied duck hunting country along the Illinois River, the regional home of folk artists Robert Elliston, Charles Perdue and others who were important decoy carvers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Near Hennepin are Henry, LaSalle, Peru, and other rural towns, which—like Cairo further south—have their own uniquely Illinoisan and Midwestern pronunciations.

My early duck hunting had its distinctly human component. Family weekend trips to Hennepin included my mother, several dogs (Labrador Retrievers), friends of my parents, and occasionally my brother, Elliott, four years older and already an accomplished hunter. We always stayed at the widow Isa Turner's house in Hennepin, which though the county seat, was a small town, everyone knowing—and watching—everyone else. For dinner, we invariably went to the Ranch House, the local supper club, where we were joined by Paul, a local contractor, and Buttons, the local police chief, and their families. Paul and Buttons were our hunting guides, both seasoned duck callers. The dinners were lively, jovial, if not ribald, and there were many Isa Turner house stories, including guests peeing out upstairs windows, because it was too cold to go downstairs to the bathroom.

There was also a weekend with an eccen-

¹In 1982, Windblown Bottom Duck Club, containing Coleman Lake, came under Illinois state management through the gifts and efforts of Gaylord and Dorothy Donnelley. Today it is known as the Donnelley State Wildlife Area, located two miles north of The Wetlands Initiative's Sue & Wes Dixon Waterfowl Refuge at Hennepin & Hopper Lakes.

tric cousin, Thorne, who bought a new car every six months (he had a Lancia sports car at the time), driving with his head out the window as we left for Windblown Bottom in the pre-dawn darkness, cursing his windshield wipers for not working. I mentioned that the windows were merely fogged on the inside, wiped my side, and looked at the road ahead. Cousin Thorne would have none of my youthful suggestion and braved the six-mile ride in a cold morning wind.

We always had breakfast at 5 a.m.; were assigned a black lunch pail with coffee and sandwiches, each painted with a name of a dog (my favorite was “Joe”); and proceeded to the farm and the modest Windblown Bottom club house. We were guided along the way by blinking red lights of a nearby coal-burning power plant.

Once at the farm, we quickly put on hip boots. Day was coming, and we needed to be in the duck blinds before dawn. We drove in the darkness past the power plant, which was next to the river, to duck boats and then headed for the blinds along shallow channels.

Often, it was cold, Midwestern cold, with ice on the lake, which we occasionally had to break to get to the blinds. In the dark, just ahead of us, flocks and flocks of wild ducks—mallards, black ducks, teal, pintail, and more—would take off into the dark sky, thousands of birds. The landscape was all wildness and silence. We humans were but shadowy creatures. We would break a hole in the ice in front of the blind, put out the duck decoys, climb into the blind, and await the light of dawn and returning ducks.

After dawn and the early morning return flight of ducks (if there was one), we would sit back in the blinds and scan the lake for flocks of mallards, black ducks, and swift moving blue-winged teal. On rare occasions, high flying pintail would come over the lake.

Mere specks in the sky, the pintail would set and cup their wings, masterfully carving and slicing their way down to the water. Their commanding performance transformed the natural landscape of the lake and its surroundings into a background stage for their art. (Such pintail shows are never-endingly magical.) Other times, we settled for watching butterflies and small song birds.

FIRST SHOT

I remember well the first duck that I shot. I was hunting with my father. It was bitterly cold, 8° F, with a 40 mph wind. A single duck came in from the right side of the blind, flying downwind. I stuck my gun out the left side and shot. The bird dropped dead in the water and floated against the ice. It was an American goldeneye. (While hunting, I never saw another goldeneye before or since.) I looked at my father. As I remember, neither of us said a thing.

Another time, I was shooting with my mother, Mimi. She was always more interested in the dogs, especially petting her favorite female Labrador, Widgeon, than in shooting. A flock of teal landed among the decoys. I got up; the birds flushed; and I shot. Three teal fell into the water. Looking up from Widgeon, Mimi shouted, “Great shot!” and sent Widgeon out to retrieve the birds. I looked around the lake, then back at the teal in the water, filled with an adolescent son’s pride.

A curious thing characteristically would happen as the days warmed up. I would leave the blind in my hip boots and wander alone, wading amidst the willows, looking for potholes and wounded ducks. Often I found them. They would flush, and, with luck, I would shoot them and tuck them in my hunting coat.

On one such excursion, I wandered over to the nearby, smaller lake and climbed into

an empty blind. I was alone, with no decoys, but I did have a duck call. (I was very much the rookie duck caller.) A flight of 40 or so mallards flew over. I called. They turned. I kept calling and, after a number of swings over the lake, they lit in the water in front of me. I cannot remember whether I shot or not. No matter. I, all by myself, had called wild birds on their home turf, a solitary bottomland lake along the Illinois River. I was visited by a feeling of excitement never before experienced.

Enough of youthful memories and stories. What do they mean? How do they help shape my adult recognition that I am a member of the “biotic community” that Aldo Leopold so eloquently wrote about in *Sand County Almanac*? These stories are critical, I think, to my adult understanding of my place in the natural world.

Were these hunting trips introductions to nature and its wildness (here wild ducks)? Yes. Were these trips further bondings with my family, with a new, enhanced familial status? Yes. Now I could bring something of my own to the table. Did I feel remorse and pangs of guilt when I shot the ducks and looked at their unimaginably beautiful, feathered forms lifeless on the floor of the blind? Yes. (Hunter’s emotions are decidedly not simple.)

Leopold, too, unapologetically writes of his own experiences hunting and fishing. Most famously, there is the story of the shooting of the wild mother wolf in the essay “Thinking Like a Mountain,” from which he gained intimations of the importance of large predators to their ecosystems.

We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes—something known only to her and to the moun-

tain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters’ paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view.²

Leopold also describes killing his first wild (black) duck; his crafty luring, hooking, and landing of a large wild brook trout; his love of autumn woodcock hunting, as well as his delight in their springtime mating dance. (He learned to take only so many woodcock in the fall as to allow enough dancers in ensuing springs—a fundamental insight for any adequate conservation ethic.)

Woven into the same writings, Leopold expands on his “Land Ethic,” where he defines the human good and bad, right and wrong, in terms of our protecting and promoting the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. He enjoins us to become members and plain citizens, rather than conquerors, of the land. By “biotic community,” he means much the same thing as “land”: the abiotic and biotic elements, including flora and fauna (above and below ground), of the ecosphere and the ecosystems in which we humans live.

Despite the robust moral demands of the Land Ethic, Leopold never condemned hunting and fishing, though he does claim them to be atavistic sport. Why this moral silence? Is this a sign of his own moral immaturity or lack of insight?

Similarly, why did duck hunting, including killing the birds, not morally repel me, and does not to this day, though I have lost all youthful trigger itch? In particular, why did pothole hunting and especially calling the ducks to the blind so deeply stir me?

²Leopold, A. *Sand County Almanac: And Sketches Here and There*, Oxford University Press, USA, 1987.

Now, I can hazard a guess at what was happening to me. Like Leopold, I was experiencing deep-time, well-honed predator instincts, interests, and satisfactions. I was implicated in predator-prey relations that psychologically and behaviorally bound me to natural landscapes, to evolutionary and ecological time and space.

Leopold, too, could not live without wild things. Perhaps for both of us hunting and fishing afforded an explicit and decisive entry into the biotic community and prompted life-long philosophical and moral reflections. In one sense, the biotic community and predator-prey relations are amoral, natural realities and processes spawned by the crafty blind Tinkerer. However, for us humans, biotic communities and natural processes have come to hold a deep, complex cultural and moral significance. We know, however imperfectly, that these communities and processes are how earthly life, including human life, comes into being—an earthly life laced with innumerable values.

OFF THE MORAL HOOK?

Why might recognition of our aboriginal status in nature, our membership in the biotic community matter so much? Precisely because the recognition so radically underscores our moral situation and demands squarely facing ultimate stewardship responsibilities. There are several forms of stewardship or caretaker ethics which enjoin us to care for the earth and all the creatures that dwell therein. But if we do not explicitly and emphatically count ourselves as among the earth's creatures, and as integral participants in earthly communities, we all too easily let ourselves off the moral hook. We will devalue nature, assuming that it does not matter to us humans. Such an externalist, instrumental attitude towards nature seems to pervade present moral and civic practice. However, if we own up to our

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Sire, favorite family hunting hound, circa 1950

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biotic community membership, we recognize that we are a central and significant factor in immediate and future threats to nature and, ultimately, ourselves.

For example, there are too many of us humans (6.7 billion and growing), taking too many of the earth's material resources, wreaking too much havoc to ongoing evolutionary and ecological processes. What are we going to do about this daunting human overreaching and natural injustice? Perhaps the earth will survive our human onslaught, but at what cost? What goodness and values, including those of human life, painstakingly evolved over natural (evolutionary, ecological, geological) and cultural time, will be lost? Do we dare collectively condone such moral and spiritual guilt, such sins against earthly life and being?

If deep, existential recognition of our membership in the biotic community would help to stem this disastrous moral slide, then we must morally educate, or re-educate, ourselves in a hurry. If hunting and fishing, among other means, are effective avenues to explicit recognition of biotic community membership and attendant moral responsibilities, then readers of Leopold should move past their ethical puzzlement and ponder anew Leopold's (and other's) hunting and fishing activities in their widest, biotic community contexts. Nature's complex, dynamic, and uncontrollable interconnectedness and interactions defy moral simplicity. There are no easily drawn bright lines between the good and bad, the right and wrong.

LARGE PREDATOR DUTIES

In marginalizing our membership in biotic communities, and specifically our implication in predator-prey relations, we marginalize fundamental moral issues that already confront us. Let me be more specific.

In the United States and elsewhere,

whether by intentional design or no, we have extirpated large predators from their native landscapes, with real, usually negative consequences. Consider the ecosystem problems now facing many metropolitan areas: an overabundance of deer, Canada geese, even wild turkeys. This overabundance threatens regional flora and fauna, as well as human well being (e.g., Lyme disease, car accidents).

What should we do in the absence of former large predators? Arguably, we must take over their large predator roles in keeping regional ecosystems healthy and resilient. For the sake of the biotic community as a whole, we should cull the superabundance by whatever means we deem most morally appropriate and acceptable.

But this is only the beginning of biotic community responsibilities. Actually, it is not the deer, geese, or turkeys which are the greatest threats to regional landscapes and ecosystems. That prize emphatically goes to humans. What are we going to do about our own superabundance and overpopulation of biotic communities, our overuse of their life-giving resources; our pollution and disturbance of natural structures and processes? As members of biotic communities, from the regional to the global—as in fact the community's most effective large predators—we cannot in good conscience evade these facts and attendant responsibilities. Of course, this is exactly what we are doing.

Consider further ramifications of our present irresponsibility. To undermine biotic communities is to undermine and threaten the future of humanity, its very bodily being, the quality of its life, and whatever important capacities and values it harbors. Robust, bio-

logically and culturally diverse communities are as necessary to our inner well being as they are to physically active bodies. To impoverish biological and cultural communities is to impoverish ourselves.

In short, to continue to not recognize ourselves as predatory organisms with a long evolutionary, ecological, earthly past—that is, as members of biotic communities—amounts to a form of nihilism, a willful destruction of earthly, including human, values. If some find this ironic, odd, or indeed blasphemous, so be it. It is, as far as I can see, the truth.

Did my own road of moral and philosophic reflection begin, at least in part, in hunting Hennepin's Windblown Bottom? If so, what role does hunting, fishing, or predation in general have in the genesis of civically important philosophic and moral worldviews? Leopold and others would answer unequivocally: No doubt a great deal, certainly more than urban, human-centered citizens might think. The relatively unexplored relations of human predation to the recognition of our deepest moral responsibilities is a matter worth further pondering, informing, hopefully, ever more ethical civic action.

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The Wetlands Initiative is a nonprofit corporation dedicated to restoring the wetland resources of the Midwest to improve water quality, reduce flood damages, and increase wildlife habitat and biodiversity. The Wetlands Initiative is committed to developing ecological and economic models for large-scale wetland restoration that can provide a solution to systemic water quality and other environmental problems.

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