

Examining Hunter Ethics and Morality

by Heidi Rao - Sunday, September 8, 2019



Photo credit: Eric Coulter, Bureau of Land Management

Aldo Leopold, the father of wildlife management, said, “Ethical behavior is doing the right thing when no one else is watching, even when doing the wrong thing is legal.” To put it another way, good hunting ethics are not usually covered by written laws. The real question is: What is the definition of ethics?

As I consider this question, I think of how often we hear people in general state something and then think to ourselves that he or she does not even know the meaning of that word. Or how often do we use the wrong word in place of the right word?

Regarding hunting, the word “ethics” or “ethical” is one of those words that often is misused. What is ethical hunting? What is ethical hunting behavior? Does everything we do in hunting get boiled down to ethics or do we use the word to justify why or the method of hunting? Regarding ethics, what is an unethical hunter?

Let’s consider the words “hunting camp,” words that usually conjure great memories of past hunts and anticipation of the upcoming hunting season. Hunting camps are fun places, made up of family and friends who add to the overall hunting experience. Hopefully, everyone knows everyone else’s personality and the season ends with no real personal problems between the members. When there are problems, it normally can be attributed to one of two issues. The first has to do with an individual not following the rules set by the camp, or second, an individual takes it upon himself or herself to pick up the mantel of “camp ethics police.”

Often the terms ethics and morals are incorrectly used interchangeably. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, ethics comprise a set of moral principles or morals as a set of individual beliefs concerning what is right or wrong. Ethics is correct and proper behavior within an activity. Morals, or morality, is an individual’s subjective preference regarding correct and proper behavior.

Not everyone has identical morality, nor do they rank their morals the same. Hunting ethics can fall within two categories. The first category consists of universal behaviors every hunter is expected to follow. These behaviors are usually called hunter ethics. The second category contains behaviors that might vary between different hunters. This category addresses hunter morals or morality.

Hunter Ethics

The first category of hunting ethics contains actions that every hunter is expected, if not required, to follow. If a hunter violates these rules there are normally legal or social ramifications. Game laws fall under this category. If an action is illegal, it is automatically unethical regarding hunting behavior. It is every hunter’s responsibility to research, know and understand all the laws pertaining to the game being hunted. Violations of game laws could lead to fine, imprisonment, loss of hunting privileges or a combination of these punishments. An ethical hunter follows the game laws, no exceptions.

Other ethical behaviors in this category are the rules set forth by the members of a hunting camp, hunting lease, hunting clubs and the like. Violations of these rules could result in club fines, suspension of membership or removal or expulsion from the lease or camp. Some of these rules that dictate ethical behavior include the safe handling of firearms handling such as all firearms are to be unloaded while in camp or when not in use. Other rules may pertain to tighter bag limits or antler-point restrictions within existing game laws agreed upon by the members of the hunting club or hunting lease partners.

Hunters' Personal Ethics (Morals)

The category of hunter ethics or morals is very personal among hunters. In this category, each hunter develops his or her own set of rules by which he or she hunts. These are the hunter ethics or morals that can change or evolve into beliefs that become more challenging as these are the actions normally not covered by written law.

A typical evolution of hunter ethics or morals would be in the case of a new hunter who starts out with limited knowledge of the game being pursued who then matures into an experienced and successful hunter. This typical model might involve a new deer hunter, for example, looking for all the advice on hunting he or she can get and taking advantage of any hunting opportunity available. Starting out, this hunter might seek out cull hunts to thin the doe herd on a ranch, hunt over a feeder, or in states where it is legal, to hunt from a vehicle. As this hunter's skills improve, he or she might make the personal choice not to hunt over a feeder. This is evolving hunter ethics or morals.

One hunter should not impose his or her personal hunter ethics on another. Is it unethical to shoot a duck on the pond? Is it unethical to wear blood-stained clothes in public? Is it unethical to shoot a dove sitting on a limb? The answer is if it is not illegal, it is up to the hunter. This does not mean to say it is a good decision, but you should not call these actions unethical.

Sometimes allowing a young first-time hunter to use more liberal legal hunting methods can be beneficial. Our goal as hunting mentors is to hook that young man or woman on our hunting and wildlife conservation heritage. Helping that first-time hunter to achieve some success with a first harvest, and then processing and eating his or her first animal is crucial.

I asked a game warden his opinion on personal ethics. He told me a story about personal ethics he said he will never forget. He was at the scene of a severely injured deer that was hit by a vehicle. After determining that the deer could not be saved, the warden put it down. Wanting to get the venison to a needy family, he pulled it off the road and field dressed it. As he was finishing up, he was approached by two laborers from Central America. They were in need of food so the warden offered them the deer. The laborers immediately started digging through the gut pile. They retrieved the heart and liver and took possession of the deer. Before they left, they asked the game warden why he had thrown good meat away pointing to the heart and liver. The game warden told me that was when he understood the real meaning of personal morality.

Remember: Personal morals are personal. Forcing your beliefs on others or accusing others of being unethical while following game laws could, in itself, be considered unethical behavior.

About the author: Heidi Rao's job requires her to travel the state of Texas, coordinating programs on a variety of outdoor-related topics, on many of which she is considered an expert. These topics include species-specific workshops (alligator, feral hog, white-tailed deer and waterfowl), small and big-game hunting, trapping, hunter responsibilities, game laws and ethics, and outdoor survival. Additionally, Heidi conducts shooting clinics on rifle, shotgun, handgun, archery and crossbow, reaching thousands of adults and youth annually.

Heidi is very involved with the National Rifle Association (NRA) and is an NRA Training Counselor, certified to teach NRA Shotgun, Rifle and Pistol instructor courses. She is also an NRA Shotgun Coach. She is a member of the Youth Programs Committee, meeting near the NRA Headquarters in Virginia each year. Lastly, **Heidi is pro led on NRA Women TV: New Energy.**

Heidi conducts seminars addressing different sportsmen and conservation groups on both the national and international levels. She is well respected in her field and has received numerous professional awards in hunting and conservation. Some of these awards include Professional of the Year and Executive Director's Awards presented by the International

Hunter Education Association and the Houston Safari Club's Conservationist of the Year. Heidi has written several books about hunting large predators in her area of Texas, teaching kids to hunt and shoot, and about firearms. These publications include:

- "Entering the World of the Predator,"
- "Entering the World of the Predator—National Parks Edition,"
- "Introducing Kids to Hunting and Firearms,"
- "How to Raise a Wild Child,"
- "A Boy's Guide to Firearms," and
- "A Girl's Guide to Firearms."