

Hunting/Human/Nature

By MARY ZEISS STANGE

The paradoxical relationship between flowered, reproductive, social sex and the animalized, thoughtful hunt is an idea conveyed by primate omnivores who are themselves male and female, prey and predator, thinkers on plants and animals. The convergence of love and death produces, not a love of killing, but their shared identity in the cycle of transformation.

—Paul Shepard

I am a tiger. I was born in 1950, a Tiger Year according to the Chinese astrological calendar. In the past couple of twelve-year cycles, environmental organizations like the World Wildlife Fund and the Environmental Defense Fund have marked the occasion by using Tiger Years to focus public attention on the ever-more-dire plight of tigers in the wild, mounting ambitious educational and fundraising programs to save these endangered big cats, whose numbers in the wild total roughly three thousand.

THE EYE OF THE TIGER

An interesting twist, this: birth signs in the cause of conservation. Not that I belittle such efforts; indeed, I support them. I do not like to imagine living in a world without tigers. The idea of tigers going extinct in the wild—as they very well might; it may be too late to save them—I find profoundly unsettling.

But why? What has the tiger's fate to do with my own? I ask this question not to evoke the standard

responses about the accelerating pace of species extinction, the global issue of human overpopulation, the hideous consequences of human fantasies about “mastery” over nature. Rather, I ask it for two interrelated reasons that are, for me, at once theoretical and deeply personal.

The first is that I need the tiger to keep me in my place. As the late environmental philosopher Paul Shepard wrote, shortly before his death:

Large dangerous animals remind us that we are small in the order of things. It is still possible, Aldous Huxley once rejoiced, to get yourself eaten by a tiger. Without tigers, we become the big animal, subject only to larger, mindless forces—storms, floods, volcanoes, and the titanic insanity of atomic events, random and unselective. The celestial and mineral processes that contain us, unlike elephants, bison, elk, and tigers, are without living purpose. Without animals more powerful than ourselves, there are no intermediaries.¹

So, I need the tiger on the off chance that one just might decide to eat me sometime. A world without tigers would be one in which I might find myself too precariously perched atop my personal food chain, with

“Humans have been hunting as long as humans have been humans

no recourse but to imagine the cosmic forces ranged to do me in as impersonal, irrational, meaningless. My meaning, then, in some senses derives from the tiger's deliberateness, her stealth, her intentionality. Should I become her prey—even if only in dream or fantasy—it would not be a random or senseless occurrence. The kill effected by such a predator never is: it is always

accomplished with care, forethought, precision, purpose.

The fact that I am myself a hunter is, then, the second reason I feel my fate to be bound up with that of the tiger. As predators, we are kindred spirits, she and I. And as hunters, we have both in recent decades been endangered species. There is, then, a fearful symmetry to this relationship. It strikes at the heart of who, and what, I am. To say this symmetry is the subject of this essay is not, however, to suggest that I'm engaging in autobiography or mere solipsism. This essay is not just about me. It is about being a human animal. I—or you—might just as readily imagine the possibility of being eaten by a grizzly or a lion, a polar bear or a crocodile. But it is the tiger that sparks my inquiry. Because I am a tiger. And because we are endangered.

"TO WHOM THE GODDESS..."

Humans have been hunting as long as humans have been humans. But did hunting make us human? Back in the Cold War heyday of the "Hunting Hypothesis of Human Origins," this question was readily answered in the affirmative. Subsequent research and counter-theorizing, however, rendered highly porous the argument that it was the complex of behaviors associated with hunting—more specifically, male hunting—that set the course of human evolution in the direction of *Homo sapiens sapiens* roughly two hundred thousand years ago.

We do know, for a certainty, that for most of its time on earth up until about ten thousand years ago, humanity lived as hunter-foragers. We know that the two oldest continuous human cultures on the planet—the Australian Aborigines, and the peoples of the southern African desert, variously known as Khoi-San, Damara,

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historically hunter-foragers. And we know that, while we may not be able to decipher all of its symbolism, the first

great art our species produced, the cave art of the Upper Paleolithic, represents a recognizably—indeed, a startlingly familiar—artistic sensibility. As the late paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould remarked about sites like Lascaux and Altamira, we are far closer in time to these Pleistocene painters than they were to those first *Homo sapiens sapiens* who evolved on the African savanna two hundred millennia ago. “These paintings

speak so powerfully to us because we know the people who did them; they are us.”²



Prehistoric painting of a bison in the cave of Altamira

And these people were hunters. As Jared Diamond has pointed out, the images are drawn with a meticulous knowledge of animal behavior and anatomy: some of the bison at Lascaux are so finely detailed as to have tear ducts. The reason for this pre-historic naturalism is simple, as any serious contemporary hunter could tell you. One cannot successfully hunt an animal one does not know, and know intimately.³ And, as Jan Dizard outlines in his essay accompanying this one and as several of the contributors to our series surrounding the question of hunting also have emphasized, while the ritual dimension of hunting gets played out in different ways in varying contexts, it is a crucial element of the hunting experience: to mark in some ceremonial fashion this taking of life, toward the end of our own animal sustenance and survival.⁴

Whatever role it may or may not have played in our biological, and even our social, evolution, then, hunting indisputably both spurred and shaped our cultural evolution. It inspired image and invocation, song and story, ritual and dance, as humanity discerned its place in the larger scheme of things both mortal and immortal. And that place was on the side of culture, over against nature.

Far closer to us in time (and temperament) than those painters of the Old Stone Age, the myth and ritual of ancient Greece portray the central role that hunter-awareness played in the understanding of culture, at large and in relationship to nature. The historian Xenophon (fifth to fourth century BCE) maintained a

hunting ground on his estate near Sparta, complete with a temple to Artemis. There he held an annual festival in honor of the goddess of the hunt:

All citizens and neighbors, both men and women, took part in the festival. The goddess provided barley, wheat bread, wine, dried fruits, and a portion of the sacrifices from the holy pasture, and from the hunted animals too. For a hunt was held at the festival by Xenophon's sons and those of the other citizens, and any of the grown men who wished to also took part. They took game, some from the holy ground itself and some from Pholoe, boars and roe deer and fallow deer.⁵

This festival was a community celebration of shared values that went beyond mere recreation, or nourishment, or thanksgiving. Like many of his contemporaries, Xenophon believed that hunting was both an inducement to and a mark of moral rectitude. In his *Cynegeticus* (usually translated "On Hunting" or "Hunting with Dogs"), he argued that "to be taught what is good by one's own nature is best of all," and that natural lesson is nowhere better to be observed than in various forms of hunting. Significantly, in an age where women's social sphere was sharply segregated from the world of men, Xenophon objected, "What has sex to do with it? It is not only men enamoured of the chase that have become heroes, but among women there are also to whom our lady Artemis has granted a like boon—Atalanta, and Procris, and many another huntress fair."⁶

"To be taught what is good by one's own nature is best of all." But unlike the rarefied "Know Thyself" of her twin brother Apollo, the lessons imparted by the shaft-showering goddess were bought at the expense of getting dirt, and blood, under one's fingernails. Artemis—the Lady of Wild Things—was simultaneously the goddess of hunting and of childbirth, both protector and slayer of young, vul-



Leochares, *The Diana of Versailles*

nerable life. This Maiden of the Crescent Moon, who cheerily danced a celestial round-dance with her companion nymphs, was at the same time She Who Slays, a dark goddess who demanded animal and human sacrifice. As any of the guests at Xenophon's big backyard barbecue would have been the first to acknowledge, you wouldn't want to get on the wrong side of her!

Artemis was wildness, wilderness, itself: but wildness of a particular sort. One of her primary titles was *Agrotera*, meaning not simply the "outside world" as "outdoors," but more specifically the "world outside the city walls." That is to say, hers is the kind of wildness that exists in necessary tension with civilization. She is always just outside the boundary, across the border, over the edge.

Of course, hunters understand that intrinsic to the idea of boundaries is their permeability. They exist to be inhabited, crossed over. Dawn and dusk, the boundary-times between night and day, are the best times for hunting. The best places are those edges or "ecotones" where one kind of habitat gives way to another, where differences and distinctions inevitably blur. Hunting those edges, one discerns that in its workings the world is far more complex and subtle than the (Apollonian) intellect's too-facile distinctions seek to make it: domestic/wild, human/animal, culture/nature, rationality/instinct, male/female . . . life/death. Ultimately, what one learns "by one's own nature" is the lesson not simply of one's own mortality, but more importantly of one's participation in the life/death/life cycle of the natural world.

In an early essay titled "A Theory of the Value of Hunting," Paul Shepard suggested the importance of this lesson of Artemis. He asked:

What does the hunt actually do for the hunter? It confirms his continuity with the dynamic life of animal populations, his role in the complicated cycle of elements... and in the patterns of the flow of energy...Regardless of technological advance, man remains part of and dependent on nature. The necessity of signifying and recognizing this relationship remains. The hunter is our agent of awareness.⁷

There and elsewhere in his writings, Shepard emphasized that hunting is not for everyone, at one point observing (with an unconscious nod to Artemis?) that hunting is like childbirth: a little of it can go a long way.

And so it appears incumbent upon those of us to whom, as Xenophon put it, the goddess has given this

gift of the love of hunting, to assume our role as “agents of awareness” for culture at large. How better to address the question, “Does hunting make us human?” than to live the hunting life fully, conscientiously, ethically, and unapologetically? To teach by lived example, with humility and without regret, that all life feeds on death, including—eventually—our own.

ARE WOMEN TO NATURE AS MEN ARE TO CULTURE?

Of course, the idea of learning from one’s own nature—dare we call it “human nature”?—is rather more complicated for women than for men in Western societies, and has been for a few thousand years now. This may be especially true when it comes to the female capacity for the kind of violence that is inherent in the act of hunting.

Up until fairly recently, women were largely excluded from the environmental conversation. That has changed, and women—particularly women who hunt—may have a special, indeed a crucial, role to play in advancing the environmental dialogue. Years of researching the ideas and motivations of female hunters have convinced me that as a group women think through the meaning of their outdoor life in ways that help lend deeper and more coherent meaning to the phrase, “hunter-environmentalist.” These women are, intentionally or not, rewriting the story we as a culture tell about ourselves.

It begins with the fact that we humans are a predator species. The mirror tells us so. We have canine teeth designed for tearing into meat. We have eyes in the front of our heads, well-developed distance vision and excellent depth perception—all crucial for stalking and capturing prey. We see a rainbow of colors. We have hands designed to grasp, and while our fingernails are poor excuses for claws, these same hands can make tools—from slingshots to bows and arrows to semi-automatic rifles—that more than compensate for our lack of talons.

Yet being a predator means far more than anything a mirror shows. It means always being open to possibility, being fully attuned to your surroundings, paying attention with all five senses. It means being keen-eyed and quick-witted, stealthy and smart, confident and capable and courageous. It means knowing how to be patient and when to pounce. It means inhabiting the moment and trusting your own instinct.

What might it mean, more especially, for a woman? Despite millennia of patriarchal conditioning, women still know what it takes to be a predator. We always

have. Perhaps that is why, today, among American hunters the only constituency that appears to be growing is female. The research I’ve done on women hunters suggests that, for them, hunting has everything to do with female strength, and perhaps with something you could call—although many of them would not—real “power feminism.” Surely, being a hunter means living in the world honestly and without any illusions about our incapacity for doing harm. It also means letting much more wildness back into our lives.

In other words, women’s hunting recalls everything that women conventionally are not supposed to do or to be. Reconnecting with our predator roots means breaking the gender rules that cast Man in the role of Hunter—the active, culture-creating force in the world—and Woman in the role of passive, nurturing Nature Girl. So powerful has the cultural script been in this regard that even the framers of Second Wave feminism tended to buy into it—as, for example, when anthropologist Sherry Ortner posed the question, “Are Women to

“being a predator means...always being open to possibility, being fully attuned to your surroundings, paying attention with all five senses.

Men as Nature is to Culture?” and essentially answered it in the affirmative.⁸

Of course such thinking reflected less the biological or anthropological evidence, than the late twentieth century American cultural mindset that assumed—against the historical evidence, some of it indeed quite recent—that hunting was appropriately a male preoccupation, and that it related to a whole slew of other appropriately male activities. Men were questers, women nesters. Man the Hunter still ventured forth into the asphalt jungle, to bring home the bacon to his faithful mate, who—even if she was now humming “I am Woman, Hear Me Roar” as she did it—would lovingly prepare it with a nice side salad of greens from her garden.

Then, for a variety of social and economic reasons, American women began to hunt in significant numbers—a trend which commenced in the 1990s and continues today. These women clearly derive as much satisfaction from hunting as men, and hunt for many of the same reasons. However, I have found that they differ from male hunters in one perhaps surprising—and, I suspect, quite significant—way. It has to do with how women approach their capacity for violence.

Over the course of several years, whenever the op-

portunity arose, I have asked hunters I know (some very well, others only slightly) whether they consider hunting to involve violence or aggression. Men invariably have danced around the implications of the question: No, they have in one way or another contended, hunting only looks like violence to people who do not understand it. True, it involves killing (and nine out of ten men will quote Ortega y Gasset on “killing in order to have hunted” at this point in the conversation). But the hunter does not intend harm to the animal, and intention is what counts. If one doesn’t intend violence, then one’s actions aren’t really violent, even if they look that way. When I have responded, “Tell that to the last deer you knocked down with a Nosler Partition to the heart,” they have generally looked like they were the ones caught in the headlights.

Women have just as invariably approached my question differently. Yes, they have immediately responded, of course hunting involves an act of violence:

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How else can one characterize what it means to be on the receiving end of an arrow or a bullet? My

informed hunch is that because women in our society are not supposed to be truly capable of violence, they are more willing—even in some ways more able—than men to confront their responsibility for it when it comes to an activity like hunting. Largely unencumbered by the violence-related baggage every American male cannot help but carry around, women can more openly confront the violent implications of “killing for sport.” This places female hunters in a unique position, when it comes to communicating about values and ethics and exploring common ground with non-hunting environmentalists.

Hunting, after all, is a necessarily bloody business. It reminds us that we kill in order to live; we live by virtue of the deaths of other beings, sentient and non-sentient. As the poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder has remarked, even a parsnip is a miracle of creation, and, “If we do eat meat, it is the life, the bounce, the swish, of a great alert being with keen ears and lovely eyes, with foursquare feet and a huge beating heart that we eat, let us not deceive ourselves.”⁹ And, let’s also not deceive ourselves that by opting out of meat-eating we can ignore the blood that is still, inevitably, on our collective hands. Mechanized farm-

ing is lethal to animals and their habitat, and a farmer harvesting a field of soybeans wreaks more carnage in a single sunny afternoon than your average hunter could accomplish in an entire lifetime.

This, of course, is where hunting and environmentalism intersect: in a concern for the impact of our



The Death Flower

actions, indeed of our very existence, on the world around us. And this, I think, is where women’s hunting becomes especially significant. Women, after all, know about blood, and about the tissue-thin boundary between life and death. Hence Artemis as goddess of hunting and childbirth, embodying what every hunter, and more especially every woman, knows instinctively: that life and death literally feed off one another, and that a thread of violence is deeply interwoven in the fabric of our green world.

What hunting—by men and women—brings to the environmental equation is a sense of realism all too frequently lacking in what might be called American popular environmentalism—that tendency to want to preserve nature “untrammelled by man” as a wonderful place to visit, but one wouldn’t really want to live there. Canadian First Peoples rights activist Marie Wilson has termed this the “ship in a bottle” approach to wilderness and wildness, and has remarked: “I have this awful feeling that when we are finished dealing with the courts and our land claims, we will then have to battle the environmentalists and they will not understand why.”¹⁰ The “why,” of course, is that Wilson speaks for a culture deeply rooted in a hunting sensibility—that is, in a world in which we are all implicated in every death that serves to keep us alive.

What women’s hunting more especially offers here is an opportunity to explore different, more complex, and more constructive ways of talking about how we relate to the non-human environment. Up until fairly recently, like the hunting “fraternity,” the environmental movement in this country was pretty thoroughly male-dominated, in terms of its leading political activists and more especially its main theorists. That has changed over the past generation or so, and quite literally this change has been from the ground

up. At the grassroots level of activism stretching from Love Canal in New York to the Greenbelt movement in sub-Saharan Africa, women have—for a variety of very good reasons, many of them having to do with practical issues of hearth and home—become major leaders in environmental activism worldwide. At the same time, across an array of academic disciplines, “ecofeminism” has established itself as the cutting edge of environmental theory and practice.

Female hunters and environmental activists—and there are many women who are both—have a key role to play in the dialogue we as a society desperately need to advance about what it means to live, in this ever-more-imperiled natural world, as very human animals. The simple fact that the hand that rocks the cradle can also wield a .30/06 should tell us something, and not just about the shifting demographics of hunting or about the changing circumstances of women’s lives. Women’s hunting forces us—men and women, hunters and non-hunters alike—to rethink our relationship to, and responsibility for, the non-human world in some fresh, provocative, and constructive ways. And we do not have a minute to lose. We are all in this together.

“Tyger, Tyger, burning bright . . .”

I had this dream, some years ago.

I am a tiger. A big, beautiful, female Bengal tiger, luxuriating in the setting sun on a late summer day, lazily sweeping flies away with my long powerful tail, idly contemplating the glint of sunlight on the creamy fur of my big, brawny paws, which I gave an occasional lick. I am alone, and in a cage, the old fashioned sort of zoo cage, like they used to have in the Bronx Zoo.

The deep green world beyond the bars is deserted—the zoo has closed for the day—and utterly still, but for the hint of a breeze now and then. But something in my world has changed. I notice that the door to my cage is open. Wide open. I have no idea who opened it, or when. I stand up, and take a few tentative steps toward the open door.

Poised at the edge of the concrete platform, I poke my head out the door and, gazing left and right, see that beyond the few trees and other cages that have always constituted the entirety of my world, there is a vast park, with a forest beyond, and tall buildings beyond that. I gather my strength, leap through the door and, in the next bound, over the wrought iron fence. A refreshing breeze caresses my fur and brings my nose a lusciously enticing commingling of unfamiliar fragrances.

I realize I’ll have to fend for myself now. No keeper will come by with a nice slab of meat anymore. And if one were to, now that I am out of my cage, I might just have to eat him instead, lest he try to lure me back in there.

I give my cage one last backward glance. Shrugging my shoulders, I indulge in a long, slow, big-cat stretch. I discover the pleasure of unfettered movement. My pace quickens, my stride lengthens. It’s time to depart from the man-made path I’ve been treading. I pounce onto the grass and sprint toward the trees and the rising full moon.

Not long after having this dream, I started hunting.

I think the tigers are going to make it.

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NOTES

1. P. Shepard, *The Others: How Animals Made Us Human* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1996), 330.
2. S.J. Gould, “Up Against a Wall,” *Natural History* 105, no. 7 (July 1996): 16-18.
3. J. Diamond, “Drowning Dogs and the Dawn of Art,” *Natural History* 102, no. 3 (March 1993): 22-29.
4. See “Does hunting make us human?” at www.humansandnature.org.
5. Xenophon, *Anabasis* 5.3.7-10, quoted in J.K. Anderson, *Hunting in the Ancient World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), at 31.
6. Xenophon, *Cynegeticus: The Sportsman*, Project Gutenberg e-Book, H.G. Dakyns, trans. (released December 15, 2008; updated January 15, 2013), Chapter XIII.
7. P. Shepard, “A Theory of the Value of Hunting,” *Transactions of the Twenty-Fourth North American Wildlife Conference*, (Washington D.C.: American Wildlife Institute, 1959), 510-511.
8. S. Ortner, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” in M.Z. Rosaldo and L. Lamphere (eds.), *Woman, Culture, and Society* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1974), pp. 68-87.
9. G. Snyder, “Survival and Sacrament,” in *The Practice of the Wild* (New York: North Point Press/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), 184.
10. “Wings of the Eagle: A Conversation with Marie Wilson,” in Judith Plant, *Healing the Wounds: The Promise of Ecofeminism* (Philadelphia, PA: New Society Publishers, 1989), 216-17.