

By Sean Neilson

“I hunt fair chase,” reads the headline of the advertisement that catches my eye. A hunter clad in camouflage, a knit sweater and a blaze orange hat climbs up a hillside hauling a banged up external frame pack. Strapped to it is what looks like the world’s largest caribou head.

Being relatively new to hunting, I ask myself, “Do I hunt fair chase?” It seems like I should. What is “fair chase”?

The ad directs me to a website explaining that fair chase is a hunting ethic begun century or so ago with the creation of the Boone and Crockett Club.

This ethic means many things to many people; basically it dictates that hunters should adhere not only to the law, but also meet higher standards to honor the animal and the environment.

Digging a little deeper into the fair-chase question, I find that there are nearly as many definitions of fair chase as there are hunters. Guides, outfitters, law enforcement officers and all types of hunters—sport, trophy, subsistence, whatever—they all have their own opinions of what fair chase is.

For Dave Safine, a hunter from Seward who considers himself a sport hunter, it's about respect. "Trophy hunters are doing it for the experience and they might want to shoot some great big caribou and put the rack up and don't care about the meat. To me it seems that they don't have as much respect for the animal."

Gustavus hunter Erik Lochman shows his respect to the animal, "by putting in an honest effort, taking it cleanly and saving all of the meat—every last scrap." Erik's wife, Kathy, adds, "saving all of the meat makes all of the difference in the world."

David Peterson has written two books on hunting ethics and also cites respect as a significant component. "A whole lot of ethics comes down to respect. If you disrespect the animal, before and after the kill, which too many sportsmen do, you're also disrespecting yourself as a human being and you're disrespecting the whole concept of hunting."

He specifically points to fenced hunting as an example. "There are certain methods of hunting (high-fence hunts) that are just flat dishonorable. They may be legal, but they dishonor the animal. They reduce it to an object that needs no consideration at all—no respect."

Fenced hunts place wild animals, typically deer or elk, within a fenced enclosure from which the animals cannot escape. These "game ranches"

vary in size and management, and for the most part are relegated to the Lower 48.

There is, however, at least one such operation in Alaska. Bill Burton runs a ranch on Kodiak Island stocked with bison and elk. The bison are free ranging. The elk, however, reside in a 600-acre plot enclosed with an eight-foot-tall fence. Burton has plans to double that area in the future as his business grows.

Burton is quick to acknowledge the criticisms of such methods. “A lot of people don’t like the idea of raising elk, period. They don’t like the idea that you have such a magnificent animal being raised on a farm.” Burton feeds his elk a supplement called “Antler Max.” “It’s supposed to help produce real big antlers and I think it really does make a difference. We get some tremendous antlers on them.”

Burton defends his ranch for what it can offer and doesn’t try to paint it as something that it is not. “If there’s an older person that can’t get around and would like to get a nice elk, well, there’s a situation for everybody and we provide a service in that way. We do have some tremendous trophies, but we don’t offer it as a truly wild hunt because it’s not.”

Peterson characterizes fenced hunts simply: “There can be no fair chase if there is no chase.”

Many hunters defer to hunting organizations to define fair chase, but even among such organizations there is disagreement. The two most prominent clubs—Boone and Crockett, and Safari Club International—disagree on the issue of fenced hunts. While SCI allows for them, Boone and Crockett does not, at least for trophies being considered for their record book. In addition to defining and promoting their own ethics, these clubs score trophy animals for their size, which stirs up another ethical pot.

While guide Ralph Miller from Delta Junction believes, “hunting organizations like SCI do more for ethics than any laws do,” several other guides feel the contrary is true.

George Siavelis, a guide for 25 years from Aniak, says, “I’ve been dissatisfied with SCI and those groups. As soon as you start having competitions on who gets the biggest animal, it’s pretty hard for human beings to not get caught up in that. Eventually it gets to a point that even though they say they’re hunting for the right reasons, often they’re not.

These groups don’t do enough in the area of teaching their own what should really be important in these hunts, which is respect for the animal and that success by killing an animal is not the most important thing.”

Ed Schleif of Anchorage experienced enough to drive him away from guiding. “The first thing they do is prop up the animal and get out the tape measure and that measures their success. They’ll say, ‘How big was it? Man, I really wanted to make the record book.’ Some of these guys never even touch the animal. They shoot it, and they take their picture of it, they measure it and then they simply tell the assistant guide to gut it. They don’t have anything to do with the hunt. These guys are basically shooters and not hunters. That hunting ethic can ruin hunting. I found that aspect of hunting so distasteful that I got out of guiding.”

Jayar Daily, vice president of Boone and Crockett, responds to these criticisms by explaining, “Hunting is comprised of a set of choices: some that are governed by rules and regulations, and some that are personal choices. What’s fine for one person is not necessarily fine for another. Our hope is that hunters continue to raise the bar on their personal ethics in the field, especially as they become more experienced.”

An interview for this story with SCI was not obtained despite multiple attempts by the author.

Weapons of Choice

For some hunters, fair chase is about balancing the choices of weapons and equipment against the desire to kill an animal as quickly and humanely as possible. Safine struggled with the decision to not use a rangefinder “I decided against it because it takes a little bit out of the hunt. The more technology you use, you make the hunt easier for yourself, and probably more humane to the animal. But at the same time you know the exact range so it takes out some of the sport.”

Schleif, a bowhunter, goes even further. “Instead of using peep sights and rangefinders on a compound bow, I hunt in an even more primitive way and use a longbow or a recurve bow with no sights. You have to get in much more closer. Hunting with a bow, to me, is the ultimate in hunting ethics.”

For some hunters the most ethical choice is a high-powered rifle, because it is more likely to kill the animal quickly and humanely. Again, hunter Dave Safine: “I prefer a rifle because I am not trained and skilled enough with a bow and arrow to do it [kill] effectively. For me it’s the most efficient way to take game--and most humane for me. There are people that can be very good with a bow and take things humanely. I don’t have any problem with bow hunting, but I’ve known a lot of people who have lost moose while

bow hunting. You can be off a little bit with a rifle, but you don't have to be off very much with a bow and you miss or cripple it."

Room for Improvement

While hunters might disagree over what fair chase means, most agree that there is room for improvement. Hunters, guides and law enforcement officials have ideas about what can be done to raise ethical standards.

Alaska state trooper Todd Machacek with the Bureau of Wildlife Enforcement feels, "About 95 percent of the hunters are trying to do the right thing," and estimates "only 2 percent or less of the hunters are involved in some type of criminal activity." He goes on to explain, "There are probably three ways to look at why people break the law. Some is ignorance, some is intentional, and some is because they feel needy—because they actually feel like they really do need the meat to stay alive."

When it comes to enforcement, Machacek looks to other hunters for help.

When folks hesitate to give their name when reporting an infraction, he tells them, "You guys (the hunters) are the game wardens. You're everywhere.

There's only a small number of us out there. On any given day you're lucky to have 30 or 40 of us actually in the field at one given time over the whole state."

Some would say that while law enforcement certainly is necessary, it is not a panacea. Says Ralph Miller, “They need a law against stupid. There’s no stupid law on the books in Juneau. How do you write a ticket or enforce common sense? You can’t regulate that. You cannot regulate ethics or morals.”

Larry Bartlett, owner/operator of Fairbanks-based outfitter Pristine Ventures looks to his own profession to take on what he sees as a negative trend in fair chase. “Many companies aren’t taking an active role to turn that trend around. The problem is not going to get any better unless the folks in charge of getting these hunters into the field are taking an active role to make a difference.”

Mark Richards has lived a subsistence lifestyle in a remote part of the Upper Yukon for 25 years. He feels that by prioritizing the conservation of public lands, fair-chase ethics will follow naturally. “First and foremost, assure that public lands remain mostly wild in order that wild animals may inhabit them. If hunters just concentrated on that one thing—wild public lands for wild animals—everything else would fall into place and the role of a hunter would become clear.

Richards hopes to promote this ethic by bringing a chapter of a new hunting organization, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, to Alaska. According to Petersen, who serves on the BHA board, the organization “was founded to provide a home for the great many hunters out there who don't feel a kinship most hunters’ groups. He explains, “We should all be hunting-ethicists and wilderness activists. It’s what we owe nature.”

Perhaps the most compelling approach to promoting a higher ethic comes from two hunters in Southeast who spoke about sharing.

Owen James, a Tlingit subsistence hunter, feels that sharing his knowledge with other hunters is at least one way to encourage a better hunting ethic.

“One time when I sighted in my rifle I used a whole box of shells up. One of my friends was kind of laughing at me. We went hunting and this guy used over half a box of shells shooting at one deer and he kept on missing. So he looked at me and asked, “How come you don’t shoot?” I said, “Well, I was waiting for you to finish.” So I shot and I hit it with the first shot right in the back of the neck. He just looked at me and said, ‘Owen, could you do me a favor . . . Can you help me sight my rifle in?’ I said yes, I could. So I helped him.”

Hank Lentfer, a hunter who also points to sharing, doesn’t even like the words “fair chase.” “The term doesn’t really resonate with me. In fact, it

kind of turns me off,” explains Lentfer. “Hunting is just not a sport. To me it’s a practice of gratitude as much as anything, so the challenge is to deepen my sense of gratitude. Lately I’ve been taking people into the woods who are new to hunting, so part of my challenge is sharing that sense of gratitude with people that are new to the activity of hunting.”

For Lentfer the fairness is not in any chase, but rather how the animal is taken.

“It all comes back to fair death to me, not fair chase.”