

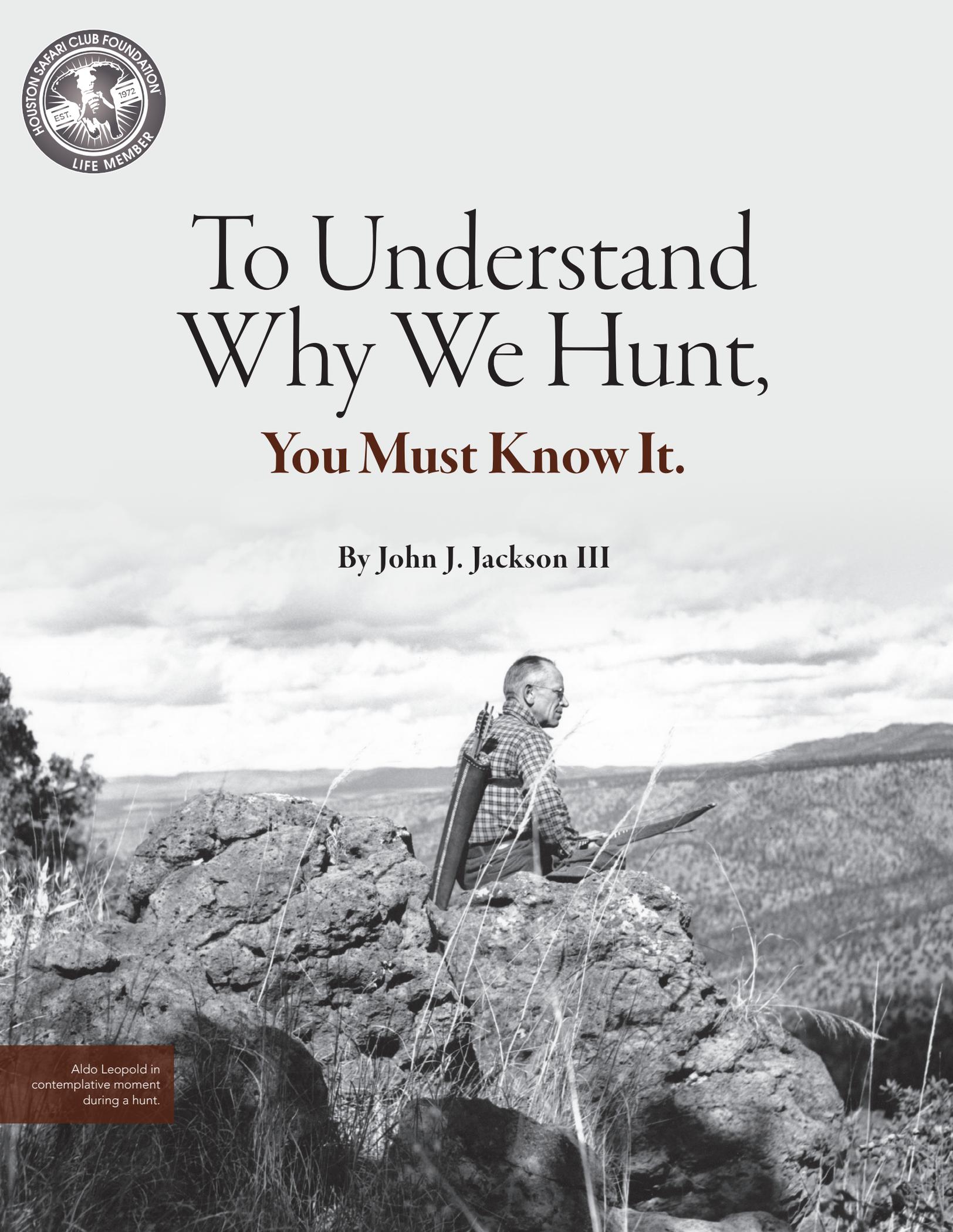
HUNTER'S ★ HORN™





To Understand Why We Hunt, **You Must Know It.**

By John J. Jackson III

A black and white photograph of Aldo Leopold sitting on a large, dark rock. He is wearing a plaid shirt and glasses, and has a rifle slung over his shoulder. He is looking out over a vast, hilly landscape under a cloudy sky.

Aldo Leopold in
contemplative moment
during a hunt.



“I have seen the royal lion, before sunrise, below a waning moon, crossing the grey plain on his way home from the kill, drawing a dark wake in the silvery grass.”
 — Karen Blixen, *Letters from Africa 1914-1931*

When called upon to explain why you hunt, is there a magic formula or “elevator statement” to answer the question? What does it mean in human terms to those that do it as distinguished from the conservation and ecosystem services provided by hunters which are far easier to define and express (conservation infrastructure, management budget revenue, law enforcement, research, habitat acquisition, etc.) No nonsense, the user-pay system works!

The extraordinary force it holds over us is not simple and does not lend itself to easy description. This article briefly explores the heartfelt expressions of genuine hunters and hunting community leaders rather than statisticians and surveyors. Hunting holds a higher-order cultural, spiritual and emotional appeal that is too complex and extraordinary to lend itself to a simple explanation. It is a genuine, intense, complex, relationship with the natural world and the game that forever holds us captive. It is as genuine as life, but

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how can we make others understand? How can the “call of the wild” be described, the euphoria one feels on a clear, blue sky spring day high on a mountainside, the exultation from having all your God-given senses really focused, the preparation and pushing yourself to new physical heights, the self-discovery and self-actualization when immersed in nature?

The above title phrase, “know it,” is quoted from Aldo Leopold. He is considered the “Father of Wildlife Management” and authored key works such as *Wildlife Management*, still a fundamental textbook, and *Sand County Almanac*, the foundation of the land ethic and the entire environmental movement. He advised, “I suppose it is IMPOSSIBLE to explain this to those who do not KNOW IT.” (Emphasis added). In short, it can not be explained to non-hunters. They have to “know it.” I have come to accept

this as axiomatic. Why we hunt defies explanation unless you know it.

Others have verbalized the frustration of explaining



"The way to hunt is for as long as you live against as long as there is such and such an animal; just as the way to paint is as long as there is you and colors and canvas, and to write as long as you can live and there is pencil and paper or ink or any machine to do it with, or anything you care to write about, and you feel a fool, and you are a fool, to do it any other way."

— Ernest Hemingway

why we hunt. Theodore Roosevelt wrote in *The Wilderness Hunter* that "No one, but he who has partaken thereof, can understand the keen delight of hunting in lonely lands." He also wrote, "But there are no words that can tell the hidden spirit of the wilderness, that can reveal its mystery, its melancholy, and its charm." A more contemporary hunter, Charley Dickey, in *The Hunter's Call* (1983) wrote, "I breathe because my body needs oxygen. I eat because my body must have energy. I hunt because I am a hunter. These are simple things which I accept, and perhaps no explanation is possible." Expressed differently, Ernest Hemingway in *An African Journal* (1972) wrote, "There is much mystic nonsense written about hunting but it is something that is much older than religion. Some are hunters and some are not." In short, get used to it.

Ron Spomer wrote that "Hunting is one of those pleasures that you won't understand if you have to have it explained, which is good because folks who enjoy it can't fully explain why."

Professor James Teer, one of Conservation Force's own founding board members, agreed. "I decided long ago that the joys and societal values of hunting cannot be described adequately to non-hunters..." in *It's a Long Way from Llano*, an autobiography, 2008.

Perhaps a quote from Karen Blixen of *Out of Africa* fame is a good sum up the point. Until she hunted, really hunted, she did not understand though she was surrounded by hunters and certainly had an inquiring and capable mind. After returning from a hunting safari she wrote to her aunt in Europe, "I owe an honest apology to hunters whose ecstasy over hunting I have never before understood. There is nothing in all the world quite like it."

The confounding difficulty when explaining why one

hunts is compounded by the divergence of game species, conditions, methods and skills, preparation, places, obstacles and scenery, and even the elements. A small collection of hunter quotations proves the point while also partially expressing the rich diversity of hunting.

Any claim by the uninitiated non-hunter that hunting does not have deeply rooted importance to those who hunt would be disingenuous. Aldo Leopold was not making it up. The tens of millions of hunters speak loudly of its hold on hunters. That should be respected and fostered. Its importance is as real and valuable to the human condition and quality of life as other higher order relationships that defy description like the love between men and women. It is so important to those that do it that it would be immoral to deprive us of it particularly when it has been proven to be such an essential tool of wildlife and habitat conservation. Hunters are an indispensable army, perhaps the largest in the world, of citizen conservationist and heroes. The growing human population and competition for survival space is making hunting even more relevant.

Do not apologize for not being able to express the indescribable joys of the hunt to the uninitiated. Many of the best people in the world are and have been hunters and hunters are pillars of wildlife and habitat conservation, like it or not.

But there is much more reason to examine why we hunt than explaining hunting to non-hunters. Certainly, we can heighten our own enjoyment and happiness from hunting by expressing what we can in words as well as all forms of art be that paintings, photography, sculpture, taxidermy, etc. (Yes, taxidermy is an art form as well as a monument in celebration of the hunt and respect for the

animal). We hunters are fortunate to know hunting and intimately know nature through the eyes of a hunter but we can always gain by knowing it even better.

Aldo Leopold succeeded in partially expressing why he hunted waterfowl when he wrote that he would go to his blind an hour early to hear the goose music. He also explained, "A deer hunter habitually watches the next bend; the duck hunter watches the skyline; the bird hunter watches the dog; the non-hunter does not watch."

I must add that knowing it does not mean watching it on TV and having Disney-stuffed animal-like toys among your possession or beloved pets in or outside of your home. Nor is photographic voyeurism remotely like the excitement and game changer of la Chasse.

Karen Blixen, in *Shadows on the Grass*, resorted to analogies when she wrote, "Hunting is ever a love affair. The hunter is in love with the game, real hunters are true animal lovers."

"The person who can take delight in a sweet tune without wanting to learn it, in a beautiful woman without wanting to possess her, or in a magnificent head of game without wanting to shoot it, has not got a human heart."

Jack O'Connor expressed the "magic on the mountain" in *The Bighorn* (1960). "The wild ram embodies the mystery and magic of the mountains, the rocky canyons, the snowy peaks, the fragrant alpine meadows, the gray slide rock, the icy, dancing rills fed by snowbank and glaciers, the sweet, clean air of the high places, and the sense of being alone on the top of the world with the eagles, the marmots, and the wild sheep themselves."

So how does hunting hold up against popular outdoor recreation? The golfer Sam Snead (1912-2002) wrote, "The only reason I ever played golf in the first place was so I could afford to hunt and fish."

Of course, hunting is far more than mere recreation for real hunters. Baroness Anne Mallalieu: "Hunting is our heritage, it is our poetry, it is our art, it is our pleasure. It is where many of our best friendships are made, it is our community. It is our whole way of life."

Ernest Hemingway made no bones about his love of the chase: "The way to hunt is for as long as you live against as long as there is such and such an animal; just as the way to paint is as long as there is you and colors and canvas, and to write as long as you can live and there is pencil and paper or ink or any machine to do it with, or anything you care to write about, and you feel a fool, and are a fool, to do it any other way."

Hunting is to be enjoyed over and over again. Perhaps the ultimate hunt is a safari in Africa, the pantheon of hunting experiences. Hemingway, in *Green Hills of Africa*, wrote, "I never knew of a morning in Africa when I woke up and was not happy." And he wrote, "All I wanted to do now was to get back to Africa. We had not left yet, but when I would wake in the night, I would lie listening,

homesick for it already."

Similarly, Robert C. Ruark in *Horn of the Hunter* wrote, "There was part of me, of us, back there on a hill in Tanganyika, in a swamp in Tanganyika, in a tent and on a river and by a mountain in Tanganyika. There was a part of me out there that would stay out there until I came back to ransom that part of me..."

Shortly before her death at the age of 77, Karen Blixen wrote, "If I should wish anything back of my life, it would be to go back on safari once again with Bror."

Of course, no description of hunting can be complete without a quotation from Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Hunting* (1972): "When one is hunting, the air has another, more exquisite feel as it glides over the skin or enters the lungs, the rocks require a more expressive physiognomy, and the vegetation is loaded with meaning. But all this is due to the fact that the hunter, while he advances or waits crouching, feels tied to the earth through an animal he pursues, whether the animal is in view, hidden or absent." He also wrote that "Hunting submerges man deliberately in that formidable mystery and therefore contains something of a religious rite and

emotion in which homage is paid to what is divine, transcendent, in the laws of nature."

Many hunters have expressed the total fascination and infatuation they have for the game they pursue. In sum, according to Hugh Fosburgh in *One Man's Pleasure*, "The essence of being a real good hunter is, paradoxically, to love the particular species of game you're after and have enormous respect and consideration for it." Karen Blixen said it directly with, "One feels that lions are all that one lives for." And indirectly when she wrote, "I have seen the royal lion, before sunrise, below a waning moon, crossing the grey plain on his way home from the kill, drawing a dark wake in the silvery grass."

So I too suppose that why we hunt and what it means to us cannot be described. The elevator statement reply to those that ask might best be, "You have to know it to understand, but I would not want to live without it." You are on good footing to add that you are a steward of the game you hunt, as, of course, hunters have to be, and you hunt and know the habitat as well as the game that you care so deeply about. Maybe add that like Aldo Leopold, you like the sound of goose music along with the smell of marsh grass before daylight, the bugle of a bull elk in a mountain meadow, the trumpet of a charging elephant, or hundreds of other experiences that one has to know to understand. Maybe tell them that because you are a hunter you have had hundreds if not thousands of to-die-for experiences emerged in nature. Tell them you can not explain a love relationship or the feeling of euphoria on a clear spring day, but it is some of the best life has to offer.

Thank you for asking. ★

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