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We Are Similar – But Not the Same

Swedes are among the most enthusiastic travelers in the world. They travel at home; they travel abroad. When not traveling, however, Swedes at rest tend to gravitate to activities that more often than not are related to nature. A nearness to nature does run deep in the Scandinavian psyche. Swedes on vacations takes to the mountains, the sea or the forest.

Whether you support it or not, the fact is for thousands of Swedes –and Americans – one way to enjoy nature is to hunt. Yet there are some astonishing cultural differences between Swedish and American hunting traditions, according to Professor Thomas Heberlein of the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

A Swedish hunter would find the American deer hunt utterly foreign, Heberlein says. The American hunter sets out alone before dawn to hunt on public land where there is a very real possibility that another hunter, someone completely unknown to him, is standing within a hundred yards. There is no assurance the other hunter has any training. He may not have fired a gun for years. He could even be legally blind!

The Swedish hunter, on the other hand, knows his fellow hunters are trained and have practiced with their firearms. He can be sure that only those in his hunting party will be hunting in the same area. Hunting in Sweden is a group experience – many Swedish hunters would have a hard time choosing between bringing the thermos or the rifle, if forced to make the choice.

Hunters make no excuses for their sport. Hunting is as natural as the seasons, a primordial human role in the cycle of life. A generation ago, the make-believe targets in pre-electronics arcades were most often animals, not the martial arts masters or virtual monsters that our children today slaughter without remorse and banish into digital oblivion. The instinct to move our limbs and stalk our prey, an instinct deeply rooted in humanity, takes on tragic proportions when played out elsewhere in society: in the office, on the highway, on street corners or in neighborhood homes.

Carried out in nature, however, re-enacting this ancient foreplay to survival is a solemn and serene experience. Consider how the hunter sacrifices modern comforts, casts himself amid nature's hazards, resorts to cleverness and relies upon cunning merely to position himself within reach of his prey.

Comparing hunting and our different ways of dealing with nature and firearms elicits some clear differences between Sweden and America. From my account of my first moose hunt as an adult to Professor Heberlein's compelling analysis, this issue examines the cultural implications of hunting in Sweden and America – a way of life that is directly connected to our reverence for the natural.

ULF MÅRTENSSON

About the Cover: The forest plays a major role in a Swede's life, whether for collecting mushrooms or berries, sports, casual strolls or, as in this photo, hunting for game. The silhouette of the Swedish moose is probably one of the best known national symbols.

The Gun, the Dog and the Thermos

Culture and Hunting in Sweden and the United States

Is hunting with dogs efficient or unethical? Is the hunt a social event or an individual challenge? Thomas A. Heberlein, a professor of rural sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, asks these questions as he compares the white-tailed deer hunt of Wisconsin with the moose hunt of Sweden. Even among avid hunters, cultural differences play an important role in how people view and pursue hunting in the two countries.

Hunting in Sweden and Wisconsin are in many ways very similar. In Sweden, hunting plays an important role in both rural and urban culture. The moose is a highly visible symbol, featured in advertising, pictures, tourist trinkets and road signs. The newspapers cover the moose hunt as page-one news. Prominent people, including the king, hunt. Some businesses close on the opening of the moose season. There are five Swedish-language hunting magazines. Hunters have had considerable influence in the political process, recently opening up small-game hunting in the mountains. Hunting issues cut across all political parties in Sweden and none has taken an anti-hunting position.

Hunting is also part of the dominant culture in Wisconsin. During the deer season, some schools and businesses close for the entire nine-day period. Hunting discussions dominate the newspapers. Only in Wisconsin would the question of the effect of the Green Bay Packers-Denver Bronco football game on the deer kill be seen worthy of discussion on the front pages of newspapers. The governor hunts and has been active to reintroduce elk (Cervus elaphus) into the state.

In both societies, wildlife is managed scientifically. Scientific knowledge is used to set harvest levels and make sure that the sport harvest does not harm the wildlife population. The seasons are set according to science and the hunting rules have the force of law. In Wisconsin, wildlife agents have law-enforcement responsibility. In both societies, the wildlife is managed and regulated according to rational scientific principals.

In spite of many similarities, however, there are strong differences in hunting practice and culture. The Swedish moose hunter dropped into the middle of a Wisconsin deer hunt will find common practices strange, just as the Wisconsin deer hunter will be puzzled by what happens during a typical Swedish moose hunt. These misunderstandings go beyond the difference in prey species and ecosystems and help us better understand human-nature relations. I have categorized these differences in terms of three important symbols of the hunt in Sweden: the dog, the gun and the thermos bottle.

The Dog: Fair Chase and Efficiency

Wisconsin hunters are shocked that Swedes hunt moose with dogs. Swedish hunters are equally appalled that dogs are illegal in the deer hunt. The contrasting role of the dog is explained by the origins of sport hunting, social values and economic realities.

Ungulates (hooved, plant-eating animals such as deer and elk) and predators were hunted on the American frontier for food and safety, not for sport and recreation. A new class of industrialists who had the

leisure and wealth to pursue game for sport emerged as America urbanized in the mid-19th century. For this group, the pursuit of game was to be done in a stylish way with costume and ritual – orientations imported from European hunting aristocracy. To climb a tree and shoot an animal at a water hole was not the way of the sportsman. Nor was hunting deer at night with torches blinding the animals considered appropriate. But most despicable was the tradition of "crusting" deer – chasing them with dogs on the deep-crusted snow until the animal could go no farther. Using dogs for deer hunting symbolized the rural subsistence hunter who would kill an animal in any way possible. The fight between the urban sportsmen and the rural subsistence hunter lasted more than 20 years at the end of the 19th century, but in the end the urban dominance won. Banning dogs for deer hunting was one of the major battlegrounds in this conflict.

Rural people denied by law opportunities for efficient hunting and for market hunting began to adopt the sport hunting tactics after the turn of the century. This new style of hunting was popularized by the urban sportsman in national magazines and through the advertisements of the arms and ammunition companies. The emphasis in hunting was on sport. The idea of sport is to place limitations on oneself to make the objective (be it dropping a white ball in a small hole, as in golf, or bringing home meat for dinner, as in hunting) more difficult. These limitations included restricting the number of shells a shotgun could hold for waterfowl hunting, establishing shooting hours, limiting live decoys, outlawing baiting – and outlawing dogs.

This conflict between frontier and city, between rural and urban hunters, is not part of the Swedish legacy. The dog for the Swede is the symbol for efficiency, rationality and humanity. You can stand in the forest all day, or you can be efficient by using the dog to chase the moose. If a moose is wounded, you can reduce its suffering by finding it quickly with a dog. Most important, a wounded moose is valuable. An average moose could produce 130 kilos of meat. With meat selling for 110 SEK per kilo (approx $6.50/lb), a moose could be worth 14,300 SEK or, at 8 SEK per dollar, nearly $1,800. Why would one risk the loss of nearly $2,000 worth of meat by not using a dog? In contrast, the average white-tailed deer yields about 55 lb. of meat; at $2.00/lb, the downed deer is worth about $ 110. If a lost deer were worth $1,800, would Americans use dogs to find the killed or wounded animal?

Hunters in both societies get visibly emotional about the use or non-use of dogs. We move here from tradition and economics to sentient beings – the prey. The Wisconsin hunters tend to feel that chasing the prey with dogs is taking unfair advantage of the quarry – not stalking or killing the game in a "natural" state. The Swedish hunter is willing to give ground on the fair chase issue and say if Americans want to make

it more difficult to kill a deer by not using a dog, that is their business – like playing a round of golf with only irons. But when it comes to the loss of valuable meat and the suffering of a wounded animal, the Swedish hunter shows strong reactions.

Wisconsin hunters defend banning dogs even for tracking wounded animals by claiming that few animals are lost because they can be tracked by hunters on snow. They also claim that few are lost because of the high hunter densities – someone will find and recover the dead deer. Wounded deer not found are supposed to feed predators. The best estimates, however, from a review of over 50 hunting studies conclude that "on average, 30 percent of the legal harvest remains in the woods." If Wisconsin is average, that means we lose between 60,000 and 90,000 deer a year to crippling loss from the hunt – enough meat to feed the 200 wolves in Wisconsin many times over.

Without dogs, the Wisconsin deer hunt has evolved practices that take advantage of the natural movements of deer in the morning and the evening. Hunters go to their stands in the dark long before the opening time of half an hour before sunrise. Likewise, they stay on stands with loaded guns until long after dark hoping to see a deer. The Swedish hunter usually does not begin hunting until well after sunrise on organized hunts where the dog chases the moose past stationary hunters.

Because of the twilight nature of the deer hunt and other factors, 925 hunters have been wounded and 58 killed since 1985. To combat these risks, states have been requiring hunters to wear bright colors. In Wisconsin, more than 50 percent of the coat must be blaze orange, and if you wear a hat it must be blaze orange. Many hunters wear pants of blaze orange as well. The Wisconsin deer hunter is dressed up in a fiery suit like a jack 'o' lantern and can be seen for miles in open country. Thus, not using dogs leads to long hunting days in strange costumes, with higher accident rates and more lost wounded game. This is a powerful legacy from a 19th-century conflict.

The Gun: Freedom and the Wild West

In both Sweden and Wisconsin, the hunter needs to be certified, to have a place to hunt and to have access to the most necessary and symbolic element of the hunt – the gun. America has the international image of the Wild West, while Sweden has the image of a controlled and regulated society. It follows that the hunting rules governing guns and access in Wisconsin are designed to promote and protect individual freedom and increase hunting opportunities. In Sweden, rules tend to promote safety and protect public and private interests.

The wildlife in America belongs to the state, not the landowner. In

colonial America, the people replaced the king and ownership of wildlife fell to the states. This tradition makes all wild animals specified by the state as legal game accessible to the hunter. The complication is that the animals that belong to the public may reside on private land. The hunter may be denied access to private land by the owner.

Wisconsin has several million acres (2.2 acres = 1 hectare) of national, state and county-owned forests that are open for hunting to all. One can hunt anywhere on public land (except for parks and designated reserves) during the nine-day deer season. Private lands are generally hunted by the landowner and his or her relatives and friends. Only a small amount of land is leased for deer hunting in Wisconsin.

With a place to hunt deer assured, the Wisconsin citizen who wants to hunt must have a hunting license. To obtain the license a resident pays the state $20 for a permit to take one antlered deer during the nine-day season. Other permits may be available to take an antler-less deer at a cost of $12 each. If you were born before 1973 (over 25 years old in 1998), nothing more is required. There is no training or shooting proficiency required. You may obtain a license even if you are legally blind. And there are blind deer hunters in Wisconsin. This is actually touted with some pride by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource, as giving recreational access to the handicapped. Physically handicapped people can get special permits to allow them to shoot from vehicles and use crossbows rather than rifles. The overarching value here is to promote access: no one should be restricted from hunting for any reason, even lack of vision.

If you are under 25 years old, you must take a hunter training course to hunt. This course includes a minimum of 10 hours of instruction (the average is 18 hours) and possibly a shooting opportunity. (This is not a shooting test, since there are no proficiency standards required.) One need only take a course and have a supervised shooting experience once in a lifetime. No renewals are required. Most of the students in these classes are under 16, since more than 90 percent of the hunters in the U.S. learn before they are 20. Eventually, as the hunter population ages, every hunter in Wisconsin will have had to go through this program. But today, most hunters have no formal training.

Gun ownership in America is protected under the U.S. Constitution and has a strong interest group, the National Rifle Association, actively defending these rights. In Wisconsin, anyone over 18 years old can purchase a rifle or shot gun simply by showing identification and stating that he is not a convicted criminal or drug addict. The firearms are not registered. A person may own any number of firearms. Guns do not have to be stored in locked areas, or with trigger locks or be otherwise disabled.

In Sweden, the wildlife is owned by the landowner, not the general public. There is little if any public land open for moose hunting. To hunt moose you must own land, lease land or be a member of a hunting team with land access. Because Sweden is a rural society with low population density and people have ties to the land, access is not a major problem, but structurally it acts as a barrier. The private land restriction also reduces hunter conflict by separating hunting groups. Other hunters can not legally hunt in your moose management area.

Licensing, testing and gun ownership all converge to limit hunting access to only the most committed. A basic hunting permit can be bought at any post office for 200 SEK ($24). Nothing is required but identification. In order to hunt, however, you need a firearm, and firearm ownership and storage are strictly controlled in Sweden. Firearms are registered with the local police. To get a permit to own a firearm, you must have a reason. Hunting is a legitimate reason, but you must demonstrate a regulated amount of training. All hunters have to pass a theoretical examination with five parts. Typically, preparing for this exam takes months; the manual has 355 pages and deals with wildlife biology as well as firearm safety. Applicants must also pass a shooting test; they must show proficiency shooting at a standing moose at 80 meters and at a moving moose at the same distance. Re-certification can be required by landowners or the leader of the hunting team every year.

Having passed the written and shooting tests, you can get a permit to own a hunting firearm. The number of sporting firearms is restricted to six without special permission. Firearms must be stored in a locked safe or disabled (bolts removed) and with trigger locks. You may lose the right to own a firearm if you are convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol or if the firearms are not stored properly.

From a Swede's point of view the American deer hunt would be very strange. You would go out early in the morning in the dark on public land and have the very real possibility that another hunter, from another party unknown to you, could be standing within a hundred yards. There is no assurance that the other hunter has had any training, has fired a gun recently or is not legally blind. The American hunter hunting in Sweden, on the other hand, knows that the hunters are trained and have practiced with their firearms and that only those in the hunting party will be hunting in the same area.

The Thermos: Collective and Individual Interests

If a Swedish moose hunter were forced to choose between carrying his gun or his thermos, it would be a difficult choice. The campfire and gathering to drink coffee together are as much a part of the Swedish hunt as the moose itself. The American hunt, on the other hand, is governed by fierce individualism and competition. When the Wisconsin hunter returns home, the common question is, "Did you get your deer?" Note the personal pronoun: "Your" deer, not "a" deer. Is there really a

deer running wild with the hunter's name on it? Wisconsin hunters hunt hard in part to avoid the stigma of coming home with out "their" deer.

The Swedes hunt moose in teams. The teams have an official legal standing linked to a particular piece of land. The team leader is formally responsible for representing the team and making rules for the conduct of the hunt and the safety of team members. The permit that allows one or more moose to be taken is issued to the hunting team, not any one individual.

Moose are managed collectively by the landowner, the hunters association and the state. Nearly two-thirds of the hunters in Sweden are dues-paying members of the Swedish hunters' association. This organization has responsibilities for game management.

Moose hunts, like most activities in Sweden, are carefully organized. Special places to stand are built before the hunt begins. The shooter is positioned at one of these and usually cannot leave without the permission of the hunting leader or dog handler. Aimless wandering in the forest is not permitted as part of the hunt. Often the shooting direction from the stand is restricted to protect other hunters. Shooters are assigned to stands either by the team leader or by lot and hunters are taken to or directed to the stands. Guns are usually not loaded until the hunter reaches the stand and they are unloaded when the hunter leaves the stand. What is "hunting" and what is "not hunting" are sharply defined.

Even when they are alone in the woods, the Swedish hunters stay in touch using walkie-talkies. Moose sightings are reported to the dog handlers, and when a moose is killed all are notified. Using the dog, each hunt is a driven hunt – a certain piece of land is covered with the dog handler and moose are supposed to move past standing hunters at specific locations. After each hunt, the team usually gathers around a fire to drink coffee, discuss the hunt and plan the next one. Often there are two hunts during a day, sometimes three. The typical hunt takes between one and three hours.

The collective nature of the Swedish moose hunt increases the social control. Actions are not private and any shot taken must be explained and accounted for. Missing a moose means either a lack of shooting skill or bad judgment for taking a poor shooting opportunity. A wounded moose is seen as a serious ethical and economic problem. Shooting more than once is a concern because of the waste of meat. In my experience on 15 hunts in six days of hunting in three locations where seven moose were taken, all but one was taken with one shot. The other was a huge bull that was shot a second time when it did not fall or move after the first shot. This animal was taken down by another visiting foreign hunter. That evening after the hunt there was a fairly lively discussion about whether a second shot had been necessary.

The collective nature of the Swedish moose hunt focuses on the meat, not the trophy. After each hunt, the dead moose were taken from the woods to a building with equipment to lift the animal and were quickly skinned, with the lower legs and head removed. Within two hours of falling, the moose was a hanging carcass. I was the only person who took pictures on any of these hunts. There were no pictures even of the trophy moose. Although the Swedish hunter takes pride in a good shot, the ownership of the animal and the ultimate success go to the team. Because the individual hunter does not get recognition, there is less incentive for the hunter to take low probability shots.

The Wisconsin deer hunt reflects the individual freedom that is the hallmark of American society. Permits for deer are issued to the individual, not the party. Although hunting parties are common in the deer hunt, they have no legal standing or formal leader, and membership changes from year to year. They are never referred to as teams. While some hunts are organized as drives, where moving hunters play the same roles as does the dog in the Swedish hunt, most hunting is done on an individual basis, or informally organized among other hunting partners. Guns are often loaded in the dark at the car to take advantage of the possibility of seeing a deer while going to a deer stand. Hunters are free to leave stands when they wish. Moving hunters are not seen as disrupting the hunting opportunities of others. Indeed, roaming hunters are more likely to push deer past the standing hunters. In short, once in the woods the Wisconsin deer hunter is pretty much free to do what he or she wants and to go where he or she will.

The hunt lasts all day long. There are no collective campfires (at least I have never seen one, heard of one or seen one pictured in a sporting magazine). Hunters may come back to their cars or cabins to drink coffee and have lunch. But this is done on an individual basis. Hunters with thermos bottles will drink coffee alone on the deer stand. Indeed, the hunter that gets the most admiration is the one that can go in the woods in the dark in the morning and stay all day, alone on the same deer stand and leave the woods only after dark.

One of the obvious consequences of individual competition is that the Wisconsin hunter is willing to take shots with a low probability of success. He or she may never get a chance at that deer again. Our research on over 2,000 deer hunters in a controlled hunting area over 10 years showed that over 50 percent missed their first shot at a deer.

A deer that is killed is tagged by the individual. The deer are taken from the woods and sometime before the hunting season ends they have to be registered a government sanctioned a check station (often a gas station, bar or grocery store). At that station, a second tag is put on the deer and it has now been officially counted. It cannot be butchered before it is registered. Either before or after the registration (or both) the deer with hide and head on is hung (usually head up) from a "buck" pole in they yard of the hunting camp or at the hunter's home. Deer may hang there for days to be admired by passers-by. In many small towns in rural areas the registered deer are listed in the newspaper along with the name of the hunter. Deer with large antlers are photographed and published in rural newspapers. This is especially true when the successful hunter is very young or when the deer is the first a hunter has shot.

THOMAS A. HEBERLEIN
PHOTOS: PETER EKESTRÖM

Conclusion

So what does this little tale of the dog, the gun and the thermos bottle tell us? Is there anything important here or is it simply the entertaining tale of a traveler?

Looking at hunting in two countries helps us understand ourselves in a way that one more survey of national hunting attitudes and practices can never show. The analysis shows dramatically how tradition and culture influence how different groups influence nature through wildlife management and hunting. Even ideas about wilderness per se are culturally bound. Wisconsin hunters think the way they hunt deer is right. Dogs are wrong, party hunting is a bother, drinking coffee around a fire is a waste of time and a big deer should be shown off. The Swedish hunter thinks the opposite. Dogs are necessary for the hunt, the hunting team is the most efficient way and safest way to hunt, coming together at a fire is an important part of a hunt and showing off a trophy moose would not be lagom.

The role of culture is obvious in hunting. It may be a bit less obvious in other human-nature relationships. But the analysis should make us question American ideas of National Parks, species restoration and wildlife preservation and management. Perhaps they, like hunting, are just a wee bit culture bound.

Thomas A. Heberlein is a Professor of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Professor Heberlein has conducted a number of studies of Wisconsin deer hunters and has participated in the hunt for more than 30 years. In Sweden he participated in 3 moose hunts and has conducted one survey of moose hunting team leaders.

Note:
In this article, the word moose has been used to refer to the Swedish älg (Alces alces). In North America, the elk is another species altogether (Cervus elaphus). In Sweden, the common name for the American elk is kronhjort. This can result in all sorts of confusion when Europeans and North Americans speak in English about elk and moose.