

Assessing Dog Hunter Identity in Coastal North Carolina

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As wildlife managers grapple with restrictions or bans on pursuing white-tailed deer and black bear with dogs (i.e., dog hunting), it is crucial that researchers and managers understand how dog hunting contributes to identity in rural communities. We addressed this need with a case study in coastal North Carolina. We conducted 78 informant-directed, open-ended interviews and analyzed data using the theory of narrated identity. Dog hunting defined relationships with family, friends, and nature, was used to integrate others into the community, to cope with major life events, and to distinguish between the dog hunting community and others. Our results indicate dog hunting helps define identity for some rural communities. The vulnerability expressed within dog hunter identity suggests an opportunity to regulate dog hunting in ways that promote broad-based social legitimacy for the activity.

Keywords bear hunting, deer hunting, dog hunting, identity, narrative

For many Southern men, particularly those in rural landscapes, hunting is “woven into the very fabric of personal and social history” (Marks, 1991, p. 5). Historically, participation in hunting facilitated social relationships, differentiated men and animals, and connected people to the land. Elements of hunting (e.g., firearms, special equipment, dogs, hunting partners) were intimately linked to individual identity (Marks, 1991).

In most southeastern states, hunting with dogs (hereafter, dog hunting) for white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) and black bear (*Ursus americanus*) is a locally common rural practice. Although states have different regulations on where and how dog hunting is conducted, the practice is legal in nine southeastern states (Rabb, 2010). Dog hunters are a small minority of the total number of deer and bear hunters, but currently, many Southeast wildlife management agencies are struggling with how to regulate dog hunting because land fragmentation reduces access to large parcels of contiguous open space and exacerbates conflict between dog hunters and private landowners.

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Little research has focused on dog hunting or how it contributes to the identity of participants. Potential declines in dog hunting associated with land fragmentation and the possibility of outright bans make understanding dog hunter identity an important focus for research. Recent dog hunting controversies and county-by-county bans in some Southeast states (Rabb, 2010), however, threaten to eliminate dog hunting before wildlife managers understand its role in both wildlife management and rural communities. Dog hunting has the obvious role of facilitating wildlife management through wildlife harvest and funding generated from license fees, but it may also shape the identity of participants in rural communities.

Dog hunting may influence human well-being by shaping social stability, social relationships, and human–nature relationships among participants. Manfredo, Vaske, Brown, Decker, and Duke (2009) suggested wildlife managers face a moral imperative to consider the impacts their decisions have on human well-being. Research identifying the extent dog hunting contributes to hunter identity and how it does so is needed before wildlife managers can respond to this moral imperative. A basic understanding of dog hunter identity could be used to make emotional debates surrounding the activity more productive (Daniels & Walker, 2001). We began addressing this need with a qualitative study of dog hunter identity in coastal North Carolina.

Theoretical Framework

We used Paul Ricoeur's (1991) theory of narrated identity to explore how the stories of dog hunters define similarities among dog hunters and distinguish between dog hunters and others. Narrated identity refers to how individuals make sense of themselves through involvement with others. The narrative (i.e., story) unifies actions conducted over time, often including other people and the connections between those people and actions (Ricoeur, 1992). Ricoeur argued that one's experience of identity has a narrative structure that is created and recreated, negotiated and renegotiated through telling and retelling the narrative. The construction and reconstruction of identity occurs through a process called *emplotment*, which is "a perpetual weaving and reweaving of past and present events into characters, motives, situations, and actions" within the narrative (Clarke & Milburn, 2009, p. 313). The plot organizes events into a coherent narrative in which people become characters in the stories that are told, retold, and revised as their lives unfold (Clarke & Milburn, 2009).

Ricoeur argued that narrating an identity enables humans to conceptualize themselves as distinct from others, through time. Narrative construction of identity allows one to identify him- or herself and identify how s/he is different from others. *Sameness* refers to the aspects of identity that are fixed, remaining fairly consistent over time and making an individual recognizable (Clarke & Milburn, 2009). For example, when a dog hunter said, "it just got in our blood . . . you know, dog runnin'" he expressed long-term identification as a dog hunter. Also, *sameness* describes similarities with others who share the same attributes. By contrast, *selfhood* refers to differences from others and is created by contrasting oneself against others. *Selfhood* takes on an ethical dimension by holding people accountable to others for their actions (Clarke & Milburn, 2009). A *selfhood* narrative sounds like the sentiment expressed when a dog hunter explained, "there's a whole lot of land that we have hunted all our life and people come in and buy it and they still-hunt it and they don't want dogs runnin' cross it." He distinguished himself as a dog hunter from still-hunters, while still recognizing connections between both groups. In this article we use the language of dog hunters to ground our understanding of how selves are constructed

in narratives (Clarke & Milburn, 2009). The selves constructed in this manner provide the framework for understanding the local meanings of identity as shaped by dog hunting.

Study Area

We conducted our study at Hofmann Forest in coastal North Carolina (Jones and Onslow counties). During the study, dog hunting was prevalent in the Coastal Plain of North Carolina and particularly common at Hofmann Forest, where nine dog hunting clubs were active. The North Carolina State Natural Resources Foundation owned and managed Hofmann Forest, a 78,000-acre tract of contiguous pocosin habitat intensively managed for loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) production. Pocosin habitats are comprised of a dense shrub layer (Christensen, Burchell, Liggett, & Simms, 1980; Richardson, Evans, & Carr, 1980). This vegetation makes it difficult for hunters to see or walk through, making deer and bear hunting with dogs particularly practical. Hunters were allowed to run dogs on Hofmann Forest property for practice, hunting, and competitive field trials from August 1 through February 28. Gun season for deer began in mid-October and ended January 1, but bear seasons varied by county. In Jones County, the bear season was the second week of November and the third and fourth weeks of December. In Onslow County, the bear season began the second week of November and stayed open through January 1.

Methods

Because this research was an attempt to understand and explain how dog hunters understand and express their identity in their own social context, we employed a qualitative approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). We conducted semi-structured, open-ended interviews with dog hunters and used participant-observation to obtain field notes, meet additional informants, and corroborate data from interviews. We gained initial access to informants by holding a barbeque dinner with hunt club members at the beginning of the project. Members were interested in the outcome of our research because they feared dog hunting bans would occur. After the dinner, several hunt club members volunteered for interviews, and we built rapport with informants by accepting invitations to deer and bear hunts throughout 2008 and 2009. Often, additional dog hunters volunteered to be interviewed when we met in the field during hunts. During fall 2008–winter 2009, we conducted 78 informant-directed, open-ended interviews. Twenty-five of the interviews were semi-structured by the research team, and 53 were completely structured by informants. Interviews lasted from 20 minutes to 1 1/4 hours. The researcher used an interview guide but allowed the informant to direct the conversation. From fall 2007–winter 2009, we collected field notes during participant-observation. We reduced bias by using triangulation of interviews, field notes, and participant-observation (Silverman, 2001). Using three methods of data collection helped reveal multiple aspects of the narrative being studied, which created a more complex depiction of the social context (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002).

We transcribed all audio files (interviews, dictated field notes) and field notes into Microsoft Word documents and analyzed documents using Weft QDA coding software (Fenton, 2006). We used first-name pseudonyms for all informants to comply with confidentiality requirements. For example, a quotation identified as (Justin) was spoken by Justin during his interview. Quotations or paraphrases from field notes were attributed to speakers when possible (e.g., William, field notes) but otherwise were cited simply as (field notes).

Narrative Analysis

We used sameness and selfhood, the key elements of narrative identity theory, to examine dog hunter narratives used to communicate and constitute identity for dog hunting participants. We promoted consistency in our interpretation of the narrative using constant review and comparison of data (Draucker, Martsolf, Ross, & Rusk, 2007; Peterson et al., 1994). We systematically coded interview transcripts and field notes by identifying and grouping similar pieces of the narrative in a hierarchical fashion. With the data arranged in hierarchical coding schemes, perceptions and motivations of dog hunter identity began to emerge. As themes emerged, we categorized them as focusing on sameness or selfhood. We checked themes against observed behaviors of the dog hunters to confirm their validity (Draucker et al., 2007; Peterson et al., 1994). Given the theoretical framework rooted in narrated identity, we utilized a hermeneutic approach by focusing on reciprocity between quotations and the context in which they occurred.

Results

In this study, dog hunting began when hounds were released onto fresh tracks or into an area where deer or bear were thought to be present. In either scenario, the dogs used their sense of smell to follow the quarry's path (i.e., scent-trailing) until the dogs caught up to the target animal, requiring the animal to move to stay ahead of the dogs (i.e., the jump). After the animal was jumped, the race or the chase began, and dogs continued to follow the animal by sight or smell (usually the latter) until hunters put themselves in position to intercept the animal or the dogs. If hunters did not want to kill the animal being pursued, they got between the animal and the dogs and pulled the dogs off the trail. When hunting deer, hunters usually killed the deer as it moved ahead of the dogs. In contrast, most bears were killed when the dogs stopped (i.e., bayed) the bear by surrounding it on the ground or forced it to climb a tree (i.e., treed). In both cases, hunters subsequently found the pack of dogs holding the bear at bay and then decided to kill the bear or pull the dogs away. Dog hunters referred to all other hunters collectively as still-hunters, and we use this definition of still-hunting in this article.

Sameness

Stories about human–human relationships and human–dog relationships comprised the two major themes of sameness and within each there were essential sub-themes. Within the narrative of human relationships, dog hunting contributed to identity by giving meaning to family relationships and friendships, and providing means to integrate new people into local communities and cope with major changes. Within the narrative of human–dog relationships, dog hunting contributed to identity by shaping both the meaning of nature and how dog hunters related to nature.

Family. Many hunters described family and relationships in stories about dog hunting. Corey said, “When I was a baby in diapers, [Dad] would get up in the mornin’ and he’d load the dogs up, he’d load me up, the diaper bag up, and we’d go in the woods to hunt and so I have done it ever since.” For Corey, stories about dog hunting also defined intergenerational linkages in his family: “My family, my granddaddy, my uncles, right on down to my cousins—anybody that was raised up around us, that’s what we done—we dog hunted. I grew up doing it . . . it’s a family thing. . . . I just love, well, I love to be around the people.

It's just the camaraderie with the people." Even respondents who were not introduced to dog hunting by family members described the social aspect of dog hunting as constituting surrogate-family relationships. Robert described such a surrogate family constituted by dog hunting saying, "When I was 10 years old, I got diabetes and I was in the hospital for about a week or so and Brandon and Barney came to see me and invited me to go with 'em dog hunting and when I got better, where I could, I went with them and I've been ever since. I've hunted with 'em ever since they invited me that day." Bill stated, "Most of those guys that I'm huntin' with tomorrow I've grown up with as a child . . . they're kinda like my dads too—all 35 of 'em." Stories about the familial connections associated with dog hunting indicated that dog hunting meant family time and opportunities for family bonding. Dog hunters indicated that dog hunting was an activity that added meaning to their family relationships (especially father-son), which contributed to their personal and group identities.

Many hunters described dog breeding as another component of dog hunting that defined intergenerational familial relationships (e.g., father and son work together to raise a new litter of puppies). Matt told us about his daughter's dog, "the runt of the litter," being taken to a field trial, placing, and winning a trophy. "My daughter was tickled to death about it. It was 27th place and I didn't even know that they started giving out 30 places. It was 27th, but to her, that was just as good as first." Seth took pride in having "some of daddy's old bloodline," knowing he could keep "messin' with 'em and messin' with 'em [to breed better dogs]." He reminisced, "We had so many dogs and daddy raised so many dogs. We sold dogs all the way to Arkansas and everywhere else. And it's just the bloodline that you have . . . after you've fed him and looked after him all year and raised him and then you can turn around and do something with him to win . . . then it really says somethin'" (Seth). Dog hunters who participated in breeding their own bloodlines and competitive field trials punctuated the evolution of family relationships with stories about dogs.

Friendships. Informants' stories suggested dog hunting shaped friendships and friendships shaped dog hunting. Dale said, "dog hunting is really . . . about the camaraderie and the team." William added that he "was here for the bull-shittin'" (field notes). Paul talked about the camaraderie in his group, mentioning that "all these local guys come out and cook at my house—once a week, every Wednesday night." He explained that somebody volunteers to cook and "they do a big thing out at my shop or pool house even when me and my sons are out of town" (Paul). As with family relationships, dogs and dog hunting punctuated stories about the evolution of friendships. Dog hunting was the key element in stories about why the hunters shared homes, grills, porches, shops, and pools.

Competition was a common theme in stories about dog hunting and friendships. Informants often spoke about which hunter's dogs ran the most deer or results from formal field trials in which awards were given. When asked about this phenomenon, Corey said, "It's kinda a little bit of braggin' rights. Sometimes you go there and your dogs run the deer and your dogs up first and that's one of the reasons we have the field trials—to see if you can outrun your buddies. Braggin' rights." Mike described field trials as "an excuse for guys to get together, have a little competition, run the dogs, [and] hang out together." Another said, "We met a lot of new people through 'field trialing' and made lifelong friends" (Rick, field notes). Corey said that "we started doing the field trials and it seemed to have brought everybody together. I knew 10 times or a hundred times the people now in these clubs than what I used to. . . . I went to school with some of 'em and kinda

got away from ‘em. But the field trials brought us all back together.” Thus, the competitive spirit shared among dog hunters was an important aspect in strengthening friendships. Commonly, dog hunters demonstrated that friendly competition meant showing pride for their dogs or their buddies’ dogs. Also, participating in field trials allowed dog hunters to garner respect from their peers. Seth explained that “when you mess with dogs . . . after you get a name built up for yourself, that you really know what a dog is . . . they invite you to go judge the hunts to look at other people’s dogs.” Seth confirmed that it was an honor to be asked by one’s peers to judge a field trial because judges were responsible for assigning scores to dogs based on the dogs’ abilities to strike a scent trail and stay on it. To Seth, it meant a lot to have the support and respect of his fellow dog hunters because it meant they identified him by his expertise as a dog hunter.

Integrating Others. The hunt itself was used as a tool for integrating non-dog hunters into the community, and successful participation cemented integration within the community. Hunt club members typically made guest, novice, or young hunters the focus of the hunt (field notes). First dog hunts and first kills were described as rites of passage for the dog hunters. Several informants invited researchers to come on dog hunts to “see what dog huntin’ is all about” (field notes). One day in the field, we met a group already involved in a bear chase and Peter explained that “another member’s son was here to maybe take his first bear.” Likewise, when researchers hunted with deer or bear hunters, the focus always tended toward putting researchers (rather than a club member) in the right place for a shot at the deer or bear. On several occasions, when it sounded like the dogs had finally treed a bear, hunters stated they did not want to shoot the bear and turned to the researchers to make sure they were ready to go into the woods for the kill (field notes). In another case, a researcher killed a doe one hour into his first dog hunt for deer, and Rick (the club member mentoring the researcher) called over the radio, “Alright! The rookie got ‘em one!” (field notes). The almost zealous efforts to place novice hunters and non-community members, at least sympathetic ones, in position for a kill or at least in the center of the action suggested dog hunters believed participation gave non-community members a means to appreciate the meaning of dog hunting not available through stories, text, or videos.

Coping with Life Events. Because dog hunting shaped the meaning and constitution of families, friendships, and community for participants, it stands to reason that dog hunting also stabilized those institutions in the face of traumatic change. This phenomenon was reflected in how the dog hunting community grappled with the tragic death of a young club member. The man’s father, Rick, revealed that his own interest in dog hunting and competitive field trials was the result of his son introducing him to dog hunting (field notes). He acknowledged that his background in dog hunting was different from most because he did not start until he was 41 years old and “wasn’t raised by a ‘hunting dad’ ” (Rick, field notes). Instead, his son had initiated him to dog hunting. Rick said, “It came a little late but a father and son had finally truly bonded. Our relationship became more than a father and a son—we were buddies” (field notes). When Rick’s son passed away, dog hunting and the relationships created through dog breeding and field trials became the foundation from which he dealt with his loss. Because Rick was struggling with emotions, he asked a member of the research team to read a letter including the following excerpt to his fellow dog hunters at a barbeque dinner:

Words can never describe how badly I miss him. Hunting season is coming up and I really don't know if I can stand it without him. I do know I cherish the memories. I am so thankful I joined 'his sport' back in 1997. . . . And the friendships made from "our sport" are equally as important. In closing I want to thank these friends for being there for me and our family through this difficult time. (Rick, field notes)

This letter was meaningful to Rick because dog hunting defined his relationship with his son and the community's response to the loss of his son.

Dog hunting played a central role in social responses to an array of traumatic disturbances in addition to deaths. Matt mentioned, "there's several Relay for Life cancer hunts and benefit hunts" and if "somebody gets in a car wreck . . . they throw a field trial for it. And it's a quick way . . . to raise a couple or three thousand dollars or so." In stories about these types of events, dog hunting was linked to community efforts to maintain community identity in realms ranging from high school traditions, hunter safety courses, and diverse charities (field notes).

Dogs. Dog hunter stories explicitly and implicitly demonstrated that bonds with dogs shaped the meaning of being a dog hunter (field notes). The focus on dogs extended beyond hunting hounds. "Pet" dogs rode in pickup trucks with the hunters on trips to the field (field notes). Corey mentioned that he owned 13 hunting dogs and added, "I've got two house-dogs. I've got a little lab puppy and I've got a dachshund." When asked to describe his dogs, Matt said, "I've only got eight walkers [hounds] right now. I've got two labs and a rat terrier at my house as pets." The stories about "pet" dogs suggested that even hunters who did not associate hunting hounds with companionship, associated dogs with companionship (field notes). Many narratives implicitly tied dog hunters to hunting hounds and described the dog's activities as those of the hunter. Corey said, "your dogs up first and that's one of the reasons we have the field trials—to see if *you* can outrun your buddies" (emphasis added). In this case, "you" and the "buddies" being outrun were both the hunters and the dogs that were actually running.

Nature. Informants' stories suggested dogs served as a key connection with nature. Interestingly, informants tended to pair stories about the importance of dogs as a link to nature with claims that killing was not an important way to connect with nature. Hunters spent much of their time socializing by their trucks (beside the forest), but they were always listening to the dogs work in the forest (field notes). Dog hunters listened to the chase and told stories about what was happening in the forest based on what they heard (field notes). Dog hunters connected the changing intensity and pitch of the dogs' voices to dogs scent-trailing, jumping, baying, or treeing, and even speeding up or slowing down as the scent trail became hotter or colder, respectively (field notes). Seth confirmed his favorite thing was "hearing the dogs run." "Yeah, I'd sit right there. If they would run right there in that block, around and around, I'd sit there all day long." When asked about their favorite aspect of dog hunting, Bill and Barney both said, "I like listenin' to the dogs."

After Barney said that listening to the dogs was his favorite part of dog hunting, he added, "If I wanna kill a big buck, I'll go still-hunt." Many hunters emphasized their interest in listening to the dogs outweighed a presumed interest in killing big bucks. "It ain't all about killin' somethin'. Hearin' the dogs run is wonderful. . . . It ain't all about killin'" (Robert). Some older respondents frankly admitted they had killed enough (deer or bear) in the past and did not care about killing more. "I enjoy messing with the dogs—that's

the part I enjoy. If it was up to me there wouldn't really be an open huntin' season. There would be an all year long dog [running] season" (Matt). Another hunter added, "I've killed several bear in my life. I don't plan on killin' no more" (Bill). Informants were clear that hearing the dogs run, not killing, constituted the most crucial element of their experience in nature.

Informants discussed dog hunting as a way to understand problems with nature. During the study, one of the common stories shared by informants revolved around an incident when a club had about 20 dogs become sick during a hunt and lost half of those dogs within a week. A hunter had two of his dogs necropsied to find the cause and it was determined the dogs had come into contact with the herbicide paraquat. Barney lost a dog to the chemical, and expressed concern for the wildlife as much as the dogs. Barney said, "if somethin' is hurtin' them dogs, you know its killin' deer and bear and other wildlife."

Selfhood

Informants' stories distinguished between dog hunters and still-hunters based on stereotypes associated with trespassing. Dog hunter narratives delineated between self and society with stories about dog hunting heritage and animal well-being.

Still-Hunters. Informants often used stereotypes about trespassing to define the boundary between dog hunters and still-hunters. Informants' stories highlighted what they believed to be a pervasive stereotype held by still-hunters—that dog hunters turned dogs loose on whatever property they wanted, whenever they wanted (field notes). Matt noted, "It takes a good bit of land to hunt these dogs. They can cover . . . a good amount of ground in a short period of time." Corey said that the still-hunters "bad mouth the dog hunters and then the dog hunters, they come back and they bad mouth the [still-] hunters." "And some of the dog hunters, don't get me wrong, need to be bad mouthed because of some of the things they do . . . a few bad apples will give everything a bad name" (Corey). However, Corey carefully pointed out on the issue of trespassing, "still-hunters do it too." Corey explained that both dog hunters and still-hunters "have got some outlaw people that'll pull right up and shoot in your front yard." Informants argued that they respected property rights despite differing views of still-hunters. "There's a whole lot of land that we have hunted all our life and people come in and buy it and they still-hunt it and they don't want dogs runnin' 'cross it and that's their business" (Corey).

In many cases informants' stories reflected resignation to the end of dog hunting and a belief that the end was tied to still-hunters concerns about trespassing. Several informants made statements to the effect of "dog hunting ain't gon be around as long as it has been" (field notes). Such expressions of vulnerability to stereotypes associated with trespassing were often followed by discussions about potential collaboration between themselves and other stakeholder groups. Gabe lamented, "I don't know. I just wish we could get together and wish we could, ya know, come to a median. I got no problem with a man not runnin' dogs on his private land. . . . I don't know. I just wish that we—we could work out somethin'." Many dog hunters noted that conflict between dog hunters and still-hunters was detrimental to the heritage of hunting itself. When asked whether still-hunters or the non-hunting public were the greater risk to dog hunting, most agreed that conflict with still-hunters was more problematic, mainly because of the trespassing issue and "buttin' heads" between the two groups (field notes). "I don't want to down the still-hunter because we need to stay united. The sports fishermen is fighting the commercial fishermen so one of 'em is gonna phase the other out. And I don't want the huntin'

to get phased out in either aspect” (Corey). “I think a non-hunter may be a little more objective. A still-hunter, they put their time in staking out where they want to put their stand, they sneak in there, get in their stand, and they’re there for an hour and all of a sudden a pack of dogs comes through there. And so, that builds up some animosity” (Matt).

Several hunters made more extreme comments, threatening they would quit hunting all together if dog hunting were banned. Paul said, “If it goes away, I’m done.” He elaborated, saying that he had nothing against still-hunters, but he does not like to still-hunt. Similarly, Corey said, “If I had to still-hunt, I’d probably quit. I just like being involved with the dogs.”

Society. Dog hunters described a lack of appreciation for dog hunting heritage and views of animal well-being as differentiating themselves from broader society. Informants described dog hunting as a valuable part of North Carolina heritage and believed that others did not recognize dog hunting as a part of the state’s heritage. Dog hunters considered the lack of social appreciation for dog hunting heritage as “the writin’ on the wall” (field notes). Dog hunters said “the country is out to get dog huntin’” (Paul). Bill summarized this concern saying, “I just think people don’t understand . . . that [dog hunting] is our heritage.” Many hunters adorned their trucks with bumper stickers or license plates that reflected their participation in dog hunting, one reading “Bear Hunting with Hounds: Our National Heritage” (field notes). Several hunters pointed out that the Plott hound, the most common dog used for bear hunting at Hofmann Forest, is the state dog of North Carolina (field notes). Originally bred in the mountains in the western part of the state, the breed has over 200 years of history in North Carolina (American Kennel Club, 2010). The fact that a noted bear hunting breed bred is the state dog indicates its importance in North Carolina history, but dog hunters believed demographic change and time had erased the knowledge from public memory (field notes). Thus, dog hunters contrasted their belief in the importance of dog hunting heritage and historical importance of dog hunting with those of non-dog hunters, and this distinction strengthened their identity by separating them from others.

Informants believed lack of awareness about dog hunting heritage made the public assume dog hunting was about gaining an unfair advantage in efforts to kill quarry, and argued it was actually a natural response to the unique ecology of places where they hunted. Dog hunters often characterized other people’s opinion of dog hunting as being about the kill. “What those people don’t understand is that [we] don’t kill every deer that the dogs run” (Brandon). “You can’t kill all the deer you run. . . . You just ain’t going around killin’ everything. A lot of times you’ll break the dogs off and you sometimes don’t even see the deer. It’s not as easy as a lot of people think it is, and it ain’t a killin’ sport like everybody thinks it is—that you just shoot, the dogs run ‘em out to you and you shoot ‘em dead” (Robert). Dog hunters meant that their methods were not 100% effective, but they believed they were stereotyped by others as using dogs to “cheat” their way to more successful hunts (field notes). Dog hunters described their methods as emerging from the natural habitats in eastern North Carolina. “You can’t even hardly walk through there without a machete in your hand, so . . . the dogs are just practical. I mean, pretty much you got to have ‘em” (Dale). Another hunter added, “You really can’t still-hunt on that club because the woods are so thick” (Robert).

Many dog hunters described perceptions of animal well-being as distinguishing between themselves and broader society (field notes). Most hunters described their dogs as athletes. It was apparent their descriptions were worded to refute claims that dogs were

starved or poorly maintained. The “Humane Society might not like the way they look because they got a few bones showin’ but they’re in runnin’ shape. They can go out there and run 12 or 14 hours. And you take one that’s as wide as I am . . . and in about 2 hours he’s gon be suckin’ air” (Corey). “I treat my dogs like if I was a dog I’d want to be treated” (Robert). “They got the opinion that it’s cruel—the way we run the dogs . . . that you’re bein’ inhumane to ‘em. And they . . . don’t realize how happy them dogs are when you back up there and you put ‘em in the truck” (Gabe). Often, dog hunters added that owning and maintaining dogs was expensive, and they seemed to use money as evidence they were concerned about the dogs’ well-being. They cited dog food, wormer and other medicines, vet bills, gas for trucking the dogs around, and maintenance of dog pens as costs they absorbed to care for hunting dogs (field notes). Paul shared surgical bills on his “best dog” that totaled nearly \$15,000, half of which was related to an injury inflicted by a bear.

Informants’ stories often contrasted their somewhat teleological views of animal well-being (fulfilling its purpose) with perceptions that others focused too much on utilitarian views (minimizing stress or pain). Dog hunters asserted that hounds’ characteristic and defining activity was running and hunting. “I think that’s what they were bred for and that’s what they strive for. They want to be out and they want to be chasin’ somethin’. When they get tired, they’re done. When they don’t want to do it no more, you can’t make ‘em do it” (Robert). Also, dog hunters argued the expenses they incurred to facilitate dog hunting (e.g., collars, gas, hunting club dues) contributed to dog well-being by allowing the dogs to fulfill their purpose. “You have to buy stuff—feed for my dogs, collars, tracking collars, gas for the truck” (Matt). Matt admitted that he spends “probably \$4,000 a year counting the hunting club dues.”

Dog hunter stories did emphasize more utilitarian views of well-being, but only for activities that made hunting and running less stressful for dogs. Hunters mentioned training dogs at night during summer because over-heating was a concern during hot summer days (field notes). Hunters described colder weather as better for running dogs because the risk of overheating was low. However, on a deer hunt in December 2009 that was particularly cold, several hunters had lined their truck bed with straw so that the dogs did not have to rest on the cold, usually wet, truck bed. Several hunters put plastic windshields along the sides of the dog boxes to further enclose the dogs. A hunter expressed regret about not putting his windshields on because he did not realize how cold it was going to be that morning (field notes). Another hunter said, “Highways are deadly to ‘em. We’ve come so far in the past 10 years—ya know, trackers on dogs . . . it’s really been a great help . . . to be able to be able to find your dogs” (Bill). Bill meant that with technology advancements in the form of VHF radiocollars, dog hunters were more likely to quickly locate and pick up a dog that had made it to a highway. Without a VHF collar, the dog could run up and down the road for an extended period of time, increasing its chances of being hit by a car. The dog hunters’ meaning of dog well-being was rooted in teleology, while by contrast, dog hunters believed everyone else thought that dog well-being was based on apparent comfort and minimizing stress.

Dog hunters distinguished between themselves and others using views on wildlife well-being in addition to dog well-being. Hunters described wildlife as being accustomed to the dogs and easily able to out-distance the pack. “If the deer wants to, he can get so far ahead of them dogs, where he can just walk. Some deer’s been run and they know what they’re gonna to do when they get jumped. They got one area they want to go to. They know when they get there, most time they’re safe. And they’re going to make a quick escape to it” (Robert). Hunters mentioned that exhaustion was a possibility in some cases but often followed with the caveat that hunters would break the dogs off the track if necessary (field

notes). Bill explained that younger deer seemed more susceptible to exhaustion and they would actually help the deer and stop the chase when possible. “I mean we’ve actually picked ‘em up outta the bottom of the ditch ya know, and get ‘em out of the water, where the small deer are kinda exhausted . . . and try to help ‘em get on along—pull the dogs off of ‘em. So most of your deer hunters are conservationists. They’re not just out to run the deer to death.”

Discussion

Dog hunting was a constitutive part of identity for participants. The practice defined who and what they identified with and how they differentiated themselves from others. Narratives shared by informants wove dog hunting into the social fabric constituting family, community, self, and means for addressing disturbances (e.g., death, illness, migration) to these key elements of identity. Dog hunting provided a stable platform upon which dog hunters could create and maintain relationships in a local social context. The degree to which dog hunting defined identity among Hofmann Forest hunters warrants future research addressing the extent this phenomenon is reflected in the southeastern United States.

Our results suggest banning dog hunting may destabilize rural communities by removing critical elements of community identity and means through which communities cope with challenges to their identity. Although some contexts such as highly fragmented urbanizing communities may require restrictions on dog hunting, an outright ban on the practice should be weighed against potential damage to human well-being in rural dog hunting communities. Accordingly, wildlife managers have a moral imperative to mitigate impacts of such decisions to the extent possible (Manfredo et al., 2009). As a start, decision-making regarding dog hunting would benefit from the same careful consideration given to public policies affecting other disappearing cultures such as fishing in Vuelas, Canary Islands (Macleod, 2002) or vanishing dialects like Ocracoke Brogue on Ocracoke Island, North Carolina (Wolfram & Schilling-Estes, 1995).

Dog hunters’ approach for differentiating between themselves and others regarding animal well-being may provide useful insights and challenges for both environmental ethicists and wildlife managers. Dog hunters’ narrative identity included teleological and utilitarian perspectives. Dog hunters tended to use a utilitarian approach when defending their activities against critiques from outside groups. Their stories described measures they took to care for their dogs, and they used their personal experiences with deer and bear chases as evidence that dog running did not stress wildlife. Some studies support these assertions about limited stress associated with deer chases (e.g., Progulske & Baskett, 1958; Sweeney, Marchinton, & Sweeney, 1971; Gavitt, Downing, & McGinnis, 1974). Dog hunters focused more on a teleological version of well-being in their internal narratives about the impacts of hunting on dogs. This teleological ethical perspective has gained rapid acceptance, use, and interest in recent years (DesJardins, 2009). While the approach is not yet common within wildlife management fields, it provides a unique perspective on ethics associated with hunting, hunters, and treatment of wildlife by focusing on the right action being associated with the characteristic activity or telos of individuals.

Dog hunters also contributed a new perspective of how hunting links participants to nature. Whereas many accounts of the phenomenon focus on humans joining nature by enacting their role as predators (M. N. Peterson, 2004), and non-hunting groups have viewed hunters as unethical killers and promoters of violence (Heberlein & Willebrand, 1998; Minnis, 1997), dog hunters focused on experiencing nature through dogs. Qualitative

studies of (non-dog) hunters in New Zealand and Vermont support the conclusion that dog hunters are not focused on the kill. Reis (2009) determined that New Zealand hunters “almost dismissed” (p. 584) the killing aspect and were “highly satisfied” (p. 582) with hunts that did not end with an animal being killed. In a study of Vermont hunters, Boglioli (2009) determined that hunters derived satisfaction from “engaging in the process of hunting” (p. 68) rather than from the kill itself. This study of dog hunters’ narrative identity, however, goes further by suggesting even the process of hunting was secondary to the process of working with dogs. Dog hunters distinguished between themselves and others based on distinctions of how they used hunting and dogs to connect with nature, which supports research comparing how hunters and the general public characterize the motivations and identities of hunters differently (Heberlein & Willebrand, 1998; Minnis, 1997; M. N. Peterson et al., 2009).

Informants believed distinctions between themselves and still-hunters rooted in trespassing conflicts would determine the fate of dog hunting, and this belief created a sense of vulnerability among dog hunters. The inability to control the direction and distance that dogs traveled during a chase clearly played a role in the trespassing conflicts that arose. Unfortunately, not all dog hunters restrict their efforts to tracts of land that are large enough to contain the chase.

Our results indicate dog hunters may welcome opportunities to make dog hunting more socially acceptable, even if such opportunities create restrictions on dog hunting. Dog hunters described a sense of vulnerability to the whims of outsiders and a suspicion that changes in how dog hunting is regulated are imminent. Also, they acknowledged that irresponsible dog hunters were partially to blame for tensions between dog hunters and still-hunters. Thus, dog hunters in our study recognized a need for compromise and good faith negotiation with other stakeholders. Dog hunter narratives, however, suggest they may accept an absolutist ideology for property rights that makes participating in any negotiation over access difficult (M. N. Peterson & Liu, 2008). Despite these challenges, Georgia used legislative action in 2003 to move toward a compromise position on dog hunting by requiring permits and minimum acreage (Georgia Department of Natural Resources, 2010).

Familiarity with the narrative identity of dog hunters provides useful information for wildlife managers hoping to enhance opportunities for dog hunters or increase appreciation of dog hunting among other stakeholders. Agencies could use dog hunters as allies for protecting large areas of open space because they have a vested interest in large tracts of land. Agencies could promote social acceptability by stressing the unique and irreplaceable cultural heritage inherent within dog hunting culture. Further, dog hunting represents a unique cultural practice in other parts of the world. For example, dogs are used for big game hunting in Sweden, and trained hunting dogs are mandatory in some European countries for small and big game hunting (to ensure swift, humane kills) (H. P. Hansen, personal communication, December 16, 2009). In North Carolina, dog hunters bred the state dog, the Plott hound, and it is the only American hunting hound that is not linked to British ancestry (Dog Breed Info Center, 2010). Recognition that dog hunting and dog hunters are a valuable part of cultural heritage may help alleviate some conflicts with exurban immigrants in rural areas who lack appreciation for dog hunting but tend to respect the idea of protecting local heritage (e.g., disappearing dialects or crafts).

Hunting with dogs represents an incredibly diverse array of practices worldwide (e.g., using dogs for hunting or recovering big game, squirrels, rabbits, upland birds, waterfowl).

Future research should explore key elements of dog hunter identity regionally and internationally and attempt to identify any cross-cultural trends and themes. Further, future research should explore how other hunters and non-hunters talk about dog hunters and consider hunter identity using alternative theoretical models such as cultural politics.

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