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Duckpond Plantation Hunting Club: Discovering the Ethics of Hunting

Co-winner of the Ella V. Schwing Award

When I first heard my fiancé was vice president of a hunting club, I didn't know what to think. Was he going to take me camping out in the wilderness? Would I be the only female surrounded by redneck alcoholic men? Would there be an arsenal of firearms and dead animal heads lining the walls? Perhaps I've watched one too many episodes of *Duck Dynasty*. Still, when I arrived for the first time, I had an open mind. Yes, there were stuffed animal heads and guns all over the place. But I realized that these were not the stereotypical hunting club members the media portrays. Clergymen, bankers, attorneys, pharmacists, and other reputable professionals make up Duckpond Plantation Hunting Club. They spend their time conforming to regulations and ethical principles as much as actually shooting animals. This is what struck my interest most. I wanted to know more about the rules, not just the hunt. On recent trips, I found out that the licensing process, along with the state and federal regulations, show that hunting is not a free-for-all savage sport, but rather a scientifically controlled practice and philosophical privilege.

Duckpond Plantation Hunting Club is an exclusive, members-only organization, established by the Godfrey family in the 1980s. Currently, the president is Jarrell Godfrey. The vice president is his son, my fiancé, John Godfrey. Duckpond consists of only ten members during any given year. For years, it has been the same ten members. Only recently, there was a large turnover when the Godfreys decided to raise the dues. It didn't take long to find new members to fill their spots because the club is family friendly (some clubs are men-only). The president and vice president looked for members who have careers and families to weed out more competitive hunters. The members enjoy the social aspect as much as the hunt itself and do not care to have members who only focus on "bucking out" (killing the maximum amount of deer allowed by wildlife and fisheries.) The Godfreys want their land to foster relationships between members rather than just being a place where hunters focus only on the kill rather than one another.

The family founded their club on 3,000 acres of land in Saint Joseph, Louisiana. There are twenty deer stands on the property. A deer stand is a simple, four-walled,

wooden structure, about the size of a walk-in closet, painted dark green in order to camouflage the hunter from the deer. There is a small gap at eye level all the way around the structure, so the hunter can see into the woods. Upon arrival, hunters immediately go to the skinning shed, where they choose their deer stand from a map of the property on the wall. They mark their stand with a name tag provided in the shed. There are two hunts per day, each lasting about three hours. During that time, hunters wait and watch for deer. After the evening hunt, which ends at sundown, hunters meet up at Duckpond's lodge hall where they eat, drink, and tell stories of that day's hunt. Members then return to their own camps where they sleep in small cabins, trailers, and RVs.

I got to experience this first hand when John took me on my first hunt over Thanksgiving weekend, which was the opening of rifle season. We started our hunt by getting into an ATV and riding to the skinning shed, where we chose deer stand number nine. It took about twenty minutes to get to the stand from the skinning shed. When we got there, we parked on the side of the stand but didn't get in. (We weren't really looking to shoot any deer, so we didn't feel the need to be camouflaged). We sat in the ATV for about three hours, where we heard plenty of squirrels but didn't see any deer. Nevertheless, I realized hunting can connect you with nature. The birds chirping and the sun setting was very calming and beautiful.

The time spent with John gave me an idea of what it was like to hunt, but I still wanted to know what had to be done to get there in the first place. I learned the process is basically the same across the United States. You have to begin by complying with state regulations, some of which have been in place since the late 1600s. Before this time, hunters in New England had nearly killed off the deer population (Grandy, Stallman, and Macdonald 108). By the late 1800s, "imposing bag limits, rest days, closed seasons, and buck laws," became common throughout the United States (Grandy, Stallman, and Macdonald 109). These regulations are still prevalent today. For example, bag limit still refers to the number of deer a hunter is allowed to kill per season. In Louisiana, the bag limit is six per season. When hunters purchase licenses, they get a specific number of tags, which they place on deer they kill to help the state keep a yearly inventory to make sure the population isn't over hunted.

To get a license, if you were born after 1971, you must go through a hunter safety course and pass a test at the end. Father Gregg Riley, a licensed hunter safety instructor and honorary member of Duckpond Plantation, explained that these courses are "pretty much universal now." The course is two days long and includes several hours of instruction, covering units on basic shooting skills, basic hunting skills, safety guidelines, survival skills, and understanding wildlife. According to Father Riley, this is the longest part of the licensing process, which deals with the individual hunter. There are other regulations dealing with hunters as a group. State and federal officials, for example, decide how long the deer season will be and how many deer hunters are

allowed to kill. Father Riley told me that this is the job of state biologists, pointing out that there is a specific scientific formula involved in figuring out, "the number of deer [hunters] can successfully take during the season that will not diminish the herd based on the habitat and the environment." Every year, they conduct a survey of the environment and the deer habitat. Also, when land owners make changes to the ecology, biologists take it into account. For example, this year the Godfreys cleared timber from the land. The deer like to hide in the brush that grows in place of the cut timber. This is a change in the environment that may affect the deer population at Duckpond Plantation, so when biologists see this during their survey, they factor it into their calculations.

Once they have the information from the survey, the state biologists determine the deer season, meaning how long it can be and how many deer are allowed to be killed. I discovered that the hunting club gets a certain amount of tags per year from my first visit to Duckpond about a year ago. Now I know where the tags come from and who decides how many are dispersed. It isn't just random. "They've got a formula," says Father Riley. "It's all pretty scientific, and [they] are trained, they go to school, they've got a degree."

Even the process of determining which deer to kill is scientific. Father Riley told me something about a "cull buck." This is a deer, "that is not healthy, whose antlers are not formed right, kind of deformation." Sometimes hunters intentionally kill a deer like this to, "take him out of the gene pool... so that the other deer will be healthier." However, John tells me there are different theories about how to maintain a healthy herd. He says some people think that if you kill does (female deer) that are less desirable, you will create a healthier herd. It's better if bucks (male deer) have to compete for fewer females. Others think you shouldn't kill female deer at all because the more female deer in the population, the more they will reproduce and the better the herd will be. Every hunting club member at Duckpond Plantation wants a healthy herd, but not every member agrees on how to go about it.

Although trained professionals make these rules, not every hunter agrees on the length of the season and number of deer they can kill. After he explained all the rules and regulations, Father Riley revealed that, "the average hunter doesn't always agree with the seasons and the limits they set, but that's different." He didn't elaborate, but later John explained that most hunters want a healthy heard and know that a certain amount of ethics are involved, but there are a few who don't. "Some people aren't land owners," he said. "And they just don't care." It is true that you do not have to be a land owner to care about the ethics of hunting. In fact, there is a portion of material covered in the hunter education certificate curriculum, which all hunters have to complete, that discusses the ethics involved. In a section titled, "Being an Ethical Hunter," all hunters are encouraged to be respectful of land owners and nature. This section gives a specific example in which, "an animal appears beyond a hunter's effective range for a clean

kill." It states that if hunters are ethical, then they would not take the shot ("Being an Ethical Hunter").

However, some hunters who rent a membership to Duckpond feel entitled to kill as much as possible with little regard to the ecology. This is true especially amongst the less mature hunters. In his study of a deer camp in Pennsylvania, Simon Bronner suggests it is the younger hunters who behave this way. He quotes a hunting club member who now appreciates the ethics, but remembers, "When we were younger, we looked forward to the kill" (14). But at Duckpond, sometimes it's the older hunter who still look to "buck out." Last year it was a man in his late thirties who tried to kill as many deer as possible, which is behavior you would expect from a teenager. In fact, the Louisiana Hunter Education material suggest hunters go through stages on the way to becoming a true sportsman, who appreciates, "the out-of-doors and the animal being hunted, the process of the hunt, and the companionship of other hunters" ("Five Stages"). One of the early stages is limiting out, which is the same as "bucking out." Some hunters get stuck in this stage no matter how old or experienced they are, never becoming true sportsmen.

However, Father Riley would remind immature hunters that, "hunting is a privilege and not a right." He is always thinking about the future. "If we want our kids and our grandkids to enjoy what we have enjoyed," he said, "we have to be good stewards of it...it's all part of the environment; it's all part of God's creation." He feels a responsibility to not only future generations, but also to God. This is something referred to as Christian stewardship, which is the responsibility to, "recover God in the creation" (Kearns 57). In this case, this means preserving the deer population because God created it and other aspects of nature. This is consistent with Father Riley's respect for science, since Christian stewards "seek to make aspects of what science has to teach us about the current situation more accessible, and to incorporate that knowledge within a religious worldview" (Kearns 58). For Father Gregg, hunting involves both science and religion.

When I first encountered this world, I didn't take it seriously. After taking a closer look, I found hunting is more complex than just men killing animals. It is a methodical and planned out venture, involving scientific formulas and strict regulations. In turn, these regulations convey a philosophical and even religious undertone. People like Father Riley show that hunters want to be good stewards, following the rules so that they may preserve God's creation for future generations.

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