

Mercury (Hobart)

Aiming for sustainability
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If you believe the slogans, duck harvesting is "senseless slaughter", a "barbaric massacre". If you believe the science, sustainable wildlife use enacted through practices such as waterfowl hunting is a powerful conservation tool.

Don't take my word for it. Recommendations for sustainable use come direct from the IUCN/World Conservation Union, on which Greens Senator Christine Milne serves as vice-president. Similar sentiments are found within the Ramsar convention on wetlands, an agreement aimed at ensuring the health and longevity of ecosystems.

Surely the "green state" would jump to adopt internationally recognised conservation principles, and to its credit the Tasmanian Government is trying to do so. Why, then, such bitter dispute over duck season?

Two words: animal rights. Forget science -- ideology is all the rage (unless science says duck hunting is bad, in which case it must be accepted as gospel). Unfortunately, animal rights ideology just happens to oppose any form of animal use for human benefit, regarding it as akin to the bad old days of slavery.

In the often zealous world of animal rights, to farm, eat meat, wear leather or even drink milk is to commit animal cruelty. Yes, leather belt wearers, that includes you -- so unbuckle and pray you're wearing clean underwear.

Eating ducks means "using" animals, and it is on this premise that opposition to duck hunting generally rests. "Cruelty" by ideology, not by fact.

Animal rights followers have every right to their personal lifestyle choices and to encourage others to follow the same path if they want. What they do not have is the right to distort the truth.

The facts about duck hunting are simple. It is a controlled, stringently regulated activity with bag limits set on the basis of population estimates, which are in turn derived from a selection of different assessment tools.

This carefully considered system, based on world's best practice, ensures birds can be harvested without threatening the viability of the total population. Emphasis is placed on the overall sustainability and health of the species.

Hunters view ducks as a wonderful natural resource and are at pains to ensure there will be waterfowl populations for generations to come. Because ducks are so valued, there is the incentive to protect their precious habitat. In contrast, anti-hunting lobbyists are on record calling for wetlands to be drained.

DUCKS are not randomly blasted from the sky by drunken rednecks. During duck season, hunters are on the wetlands for one purpose: to efficiently obtain fresh, organic, free-range meat.

Accurate shooting is paramount to achieving that, and an ethical obligation that each hunter accepts as integral to what they do. As anyone who has tried shooting knows, it is a skill that takes patience, long hours of practice at the range and self-discipline.

Hunters stand at the forefront of conservation. They remove introduced predators, undertake habitat rejuvenation and freely volunteer their time to ensure the long-term sustainability and continued breeding success of waterbird populations.

In contrast, protesters enter the wetlands just once a year, on opening weekend, with like-minded folk recruited from the mainland to bolster the numbers for the cameras. Their airfares would be better spent on gloves, gumboots and supplies to build nesting boxes.

Hunting, like fishing, is not for everyone. It is a deeply personal choice, but it is also a way of taking direct responsibility for your decision to eat meat. Whether you harvest animals from the wild or buy pieces of them on a foam tray, you are still partaking in the process of killing. The only aspect that differs is the stage you are involved at and the level of responsibility you take.

The sad part is that hunters and animal rights followers have common ground. Consider this: both groups seek a sustainable lifestyle and both act to reduce the effect of intensive farming by treading alternative paths.

However, hunters know something animal rights lobbyists do not, or cannot bear to admit. Hunters know there is room for more than one set of beliefs and choices.

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