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Taking aim at Internet hunting

- Wayne Pacelle
Wednesday, March 16, 2005

You won't find much agreement between Safari Club International, the world's leading trophy hunting organization, and the Humane Society of the United States. But one little patch of common ground has appeared just outside San Antonio, Texas, where a man named John Lockwood has managed to earn the disapproval of both groups.

Lockwood owns a 336-acre exotic hunting ranch in Central Texas. There the owners stock exotic wildlife -- from Barbary sheep to blackbuck antelope to wild boar -- and offer them up to fee-paying clients to shoot. It's "no kill, no pay" hunting, and the killing is all but guaranteed given that confined animals have no opportunity to escape.

Lockwood has now taken the idea of canned hunting one step further: He has devised a means of targeting and shooting animals by remote control via the Internet. Clients going to his Web site, www.Live-shot.com, can see their prey on camera, manipulate a firearm mounted on a mechanized tripod, wait for their moment, and deliver deadly fire with the click of a mouse.

A hunter, using the best rifle, might be able to take a shot at an animal from half a mile. Now, thanks to Lockwood, a hunter can fire a shot from hundreds, even thousands of miles away.

It's an imprecise method, and apparently Lockwood expects a fair number of wounded animals. But he's got that problem figured out as well. "If the customer were to wound the animal," as a report in the San Antonio Express- News explained, "a staff person on site could finish it off."

"Trophy mounts" taken in these heroics will then be prepared and shipped to customers, just like when one orders a jacket from L.L. Bean. If the idea catches on, Lockwood expects to do very well for himself -- although, he insists, that's not his main purpose.

His real concern is to furnish recreational opportunities to "disabled hunters." And so, we're to believe, there is a charitable element to it as well.

All of this was still on the drawing board until a few days ago. According to news reports, the first victim of Live-shot.com was a boar, shot as an experiment by someone sitting at a computer in Germany. Another kill is planned for April, and after that Lockwood hopes his hunting innovation will be fully operational for any Internet user.

It will, too, unless authorities act quickly to stop the whole vile enterprise. So far, the Virginia Legislature has passed the first bill banning Internet hunting. Similar bills are pending in 10 other states, including California, where state Sen. Debra Bowen has introduced SB1028 to combat the practice.

The California Legislature should act swiftly on this bill before Internet hunting spreads. For its part, Congress should act immediately, because the activity involves interstate

commerce.

Bad ideas have a way of breeding, and it doesn't take a sinister turn of mind to see how the technology of remote-control hunting might readily be applied to the sniper killing of human beings.

Even the Safari Club International -- a group that rarely sees any form of hunting it doesn't fancy -- has taken a stand. "It doesn't meet any fair-chase criteria," says Jerod Broadfoot, a lobbyist for the Safari Club, told the Medford Mail Tribune in Oregon. "You are not on the location. You're not even there." National Rifle Association spokeswoman Kelly Hobbs agrees. "The NRA has always maintained that fair chase, being in the field with your firearm or bow, is an important element of hunting tradition," she said in an interview with the Sacramento Bee. "Sitting at a desk in front of your computer, clicking at a mouse, has nothing to do with hunting."

If allowed to spread, the whole practice would turn the experience of hunting into a cheap and garish game. It would mark a complete abandonment of any pretense to fairness, honor or moral self-restraint in the treatment of wildlife. Lockwood and his customers clearly cannot be relied on to restrain themselves. At the state and federal level, the law must do it for them, in the interest of community safety and of public decency.

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Page B - 11

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