

Unsportsmanlike conduct: The canned-hunt industry

by [Dean Peerman](#) in the [March 6, 2007](#) issue

Chad Mason, Mennonite pastor and self-described “gun-loving pacifist,” made a strong and—to some readers—persuasive argument for hunting in “[Armed and defenseless](#)” (June 27, 2006). But there is one kind of hunting that Mason would, I suspect, strongly disapprove of: “canned” big-game trophy hunts in which animals are placed in fenced or walled private “preserves” and are easy targets with little or no chance of escape. Sometimes the animals are made even easier targets: they are lured to feeding stations or small-field food-crop plots—or are simply herded toward the pretend-hunter. The animals, whether exotic or native, are often quite tame; they have been raised in captivity and do not fear human beings. Some of the animals are so domesticated that they have been known to lick the hunter’s hand before being slain. Some are tied to a stake or drugged before they are shot. A few have even been shot while still caged.

Canned hunts constitute a burgeoning industry, in part because old-fashioned hunting in the wild has become more difficult and less accessible as a consequence of diminishing ranges and herds and the encroachment of suburbia and exurbia. At present there are at least 1,000 canned-hunt operations in the U.S. (if bird preserves—which release birds just in time for the hunter to shoot at them—are included, the number is closer to 3,000).

It is also a highly profitable industry. Here’s what the hunter pays: Axis deer, \$1,350; Aoudad sheep, \$1,500; buffalo, \$3,000; elk, \$3,500 and up; red sheep, \$4,500. Rarer creatures cost much more—up to \$20,000 for an oryx, ibex, yak, impala, rhino, lion, leopard, jaguar, tiger, zebra, giraffe or other “exotic.” But a budget-conscious hunter can sometimes bag a boar for as little as \$50. For some time canned-hunt operators offered a virtual warranty: “No kill, no pay.” But the hunters were not required to be good shots, and it was discovered that too many of them were merely wounding animals—leaving them to painful, prolonged deaths—then refusing to pay. So the operators changed the policy to “No kill/no wound, no pay.” They also insist that the

hunters cart off any animals they cripple.

Many of the animals are aging or ailing castoffs of prestigious zoos (including Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo, according to the Wildlife Protection Network). In order to make room for more of the cute, newly bred animals that draw crowds, zoos routinely dispose of their elderly residents in a way that brings in revenue. But in an effort to avoid bad publicity, they do not sell directly to the canned-hunt people; the animals first pass through the hands of a dealer.

Luminaries who have participated in canned hunts range from Rush Limbaugh to Bill Clinton. Others who have taken part include both presidents Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, former Massachusetts governor (and presidential hopeful) Mitt Romney, former Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach and entertainers Ted Nugent and Troy Gentry.

Of these, only country singer Gentry has been arrested in connection with the "sport." In 2004 in Sandstone, Minnesota, Gentry bought a tamed black bear named Cubby for about \$5,000 and used a bow and arrow to kill it. He then had a videotape of the killing edited to make it appear as though he had done the deed in the wild rather than in a small enclosure (and he had the bear tagged and registered accordingly before having its hide sent to a taxidermist in Kentucky). Killing the bear wasn't illegal, but under the Lacey Act it was illegal to fraudulently label it as having been killed in the wild. Gentry pleaded not guilty, but this fall he changed his plea to guilty to avoid a trial and a possible five-year prison sentence. He was fined \$15,000 and cannot hunt in Minnesota for five years. Said Gentry: "I relied on the experts around me for guidance, and I regret that today."

Cheney, however, perhaps qualifies as the canned-hunt champion. Two years before the incident in which he accidentally shot a hunting companion, he and nine buddies—GOP stalwarts and donors—in one day killed 417 of 500 domesticated ring-neck pheasants released in front of them at an exclusive country club near Pittsburgh. Cheney himself is credited with killing about 70 of the birds. The same day the group also killed a large number of equally tame mallard ducks.

A variant of the canned hunt is the Internet hunt, in which, via a remote-control device, one can, with the click of a computer mouse, activate a rifle mounted many miles away and carry out desktop killing of confined creatures from the comfort of one's living room. It's really more like playing a video game than actually going

hunting—except that in this case the targets are not cartoon characters but live, sentient beings.

Since it eliminates even the illusion of adhering to the “fair chase” principle, such killing has been condemned by the National Rifle Association—which does support canned hunts. Internet hunting has even been outlawed in Texas, which has more than 500 canned-hunt locations—far more than any other state. Ironically, remote-control killing was originated by Texan John Lockwood, a rancher and entrepreneur whose Live-Shot.com Web site had gained several hundred members. Lockwood’s rationale was that the enterprise allowed handicapped people to hunt.

Some states have banned or at least restricted canned hunts and/or Internet hunts, and bills to halt these hunts are pending in several other states. But many people—and not just animal rights activists—feel that there is a need for federal legislation outlawing such practices (even states that have a ban do not prohibit the sale of exotic animals to states where canned hunts are legal). Two years ago Senator Frank Lautenberg (D., N.J.) introduced a bill that would ban canned hunts—the Sportsmanship in Hunting Act. Representative Sam Farr (D., Calif.) presented a similar measure in the House. Also in the House, Tom Davis (R., Va.) is sponsoring a bill to ban Internet hunting. With the change in congressional leadership, these long-stalled bills may finally get a hearing—and perhaps passage as well.