



Answers to misconceptions about hunting

The following answers have been compiled by Dr.L.H.Thomas, secretary of VAWM, in reply to points raised by MPs and peers following letters he sent them in March 2001, March 2002 and September 2003, in advance of debates in the two Houses. A number of additional points have been added.

1. Most of the 550 supporters of VAWM are general practitioners spread across England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland, Many have had years of clinical experience with all common species of domestic and wild animals. Most of them do not ride to hounds, but many have first-hand knowledge of hunting. Some are academics with a wealth of research experience, five are veterinary professors and six are fellows of the Royal College of Pathologists, a collective authority that must be second to none in the on going debate on hunting. Furthermore the group does not seek primarily to protect personal liberty or livelihood, a country sport or however many jobs in the countryside. First and foremost it seeks to protect the welfare of wild animals in the wild.

2. Science cannot definitively provide answers to the questions of cruelty and suffering. They are not concepts that can be measured and so-called scientists that pretend that they can be are deceiving themselves and the public. For the most part the answers can only come from careful observation and professional opinion, which the veterinary profession is uniquely qualified to give.

3. Hunting is the natural and most humane method of controlling the fox population and the three other quarry species - humane for a number of reasons (see below) but perhaps most important because it is intrinsically certain and leaves no wounded or damaged survivors.

4. Shooting inevitably produces a percentage of animals that are wounded. No amount of training can eliminate mistakes by the beginner, the reckless and the downright unlucky. Shooting can only be as certain as death by hounds when a close or point blank shot is applied directly to the head as happens in the slaughterhouse or when a deer is shot having been brought to bay by hounds.

5. Research sponsored by the All Party Parliamentary Middle Way Group has shown that up to 60% of foxes may be wounded by shotgun shooting and up to 48% by rifle shooting.

6. Hunting performs a vital search and dispatch function whereby the weak, the sick and the injured are discovered and quickly dispatched. No other method of culling performs this function and if the Hunting Act is not repealed the long term welfare implications for all the quarry species will be profound. No animal welfare organisation can begin to substitute for some 20,000, specially bred, scenting hounds covering the countryside 2-4 times a week for six months of the year.

7. Hunting uniquely reproduces the natural selection process whereby weak and sick animals are culled in direct relation to their debility, thereby promoting the health and vigour of the species. Unlike other less discriminate methods of control, hunting specifically targets the quarry species.

8. Natural death in the wild, in the absence of predators and without hunting is not a beautiful mist that gently descends; it is protracted pain, sepsis, gangrene, starvation, hypothermia, for days probably weeks before death finally supervenes.

9. Natural biological control of fox numbers and the other quarry species will not occur until lack of nutrition, due to overpopulation, and probably disease are so extreme as to suppress reproductive activity or cause widespread mortality. Death under these circumstances is likely to be painful and protracted and clearly does not represent a healthy and vigorous wild life species. Furthermore the population level of foxes, at which this so called control might occur, would see levels of predation totally unacceptable to farmers and the overall balance of other wildlife.

10. Non lethal methods of population control by immunocontraception or hormone treated baits, although theoretically possible and attractive to research groups, are unnecessary and impractical. Even if such methods could be developed they would undoubtedly be expensive and difficult to implement and to maintain as an ongoing exercise. There can be no justification in trying to develop such unrealistic and potentially expensive methods of control when the presently available, cost free and proven methods, applied properly, are more than adequate for the job. Artificial control of animal populations also raises important ethical and environmental safety questions.

11. Foxes carry several unpleasant diseases that are transmissible to man and domestic animals, e.g. mange, leptospirosis, canine distemper, certain tapeworms and rabies. As yet the tapeworms and rabies are not a problem in the UK but mange can be a very real problem. Hunting with hounds, including terrier work has the unique capacity to detect and cull foxes that are debilitated by mange. Hunting played a large part in the control of an epidemic which spread from the south west into southern counties and the West Midlands in 2003/4.

12. The sporting or recreational element of hunting is irrelevant to the central issue of animal welfare except in so much as it happens to be what pays for this particular method of humane control. It is totally immaterial to the hunted animal whether opponents or proponents of hunting regard it as a sport. Hunting is a combination of recreation, wildlife management and pest control and should be judged solely on what is best for the welfare of the quarry species not by misguided anthropomorphism or social or moral prejudices.

13. Hunting dress, tradition and socio-economic class are also totally irrelevant to the central issue, namely the welfare of the quarry species.

14. Drag hunting and trail hunting are not a realistic substitute for hunting. Drag hunting in particular is a relatively fast and demanding equestrian sport that bears only a superficial resemblance to hunting. Neither activity offers any benefit in terms of wild life management or pest control and many landowners will not allow them on their property for this reason. They are of little interest to the large body of foot and car followers that like to follow hunting.

15. Hunting seeks to manage rather than exterminate populations of the fox and other quarry species and by its presence in the countryside exercises a restraining influence on other more intensive methods of culling such as shooting that might otherwise lead to a serious decline in numbers of valued indigenous species.

16. Efficiency should not be the sole deciding factor in choosing the method of culling. Shooting may, for example, be more efficient than hunting in terms of numbers killed but that doesn't make it as humane. And research has shown that hunting is not necessarily less efficient than other methods of culling. Rather, it is not exploited to its full potential.

17. Hunts perform a vital role in sheep farming areas and have always been responsive to "call-outs" to deal with foxes causing predation problems at lambing time.

18. Comparison of culling methods solely on the basis of numbers killed per unit time in a given area is misleading for a number of reasons. First, the critical question is not '*How many are dead?*' but '*How many are left?*' Second, a few foxes killed in spring, such as pregnant or nursing vixens, will have a much greater impact on fox population dynamics than the same number killed in autumn. Third, cost should be worked into the equation. Hunts provide a service that is free at the point of delivery.

19. A balanced wild life population will not result from a 'hands off' approach. In the man-made countryside, control of an over-successful species is best achieved by a combination of legal methods undertaken by farmers, gamekeepers, landowners, naturalists and huntsmen, with their divergent interests using the appropriate methods of control for their particular circumstances.

20. Hunting is not morally indefensible. What is indefensible is to ban the most humane method of control and condemn the four quarry species to death either by so called natural causes - starvation, injury and disease or the less certain and therefore less humane methods of control.

21. No hunting person kills or culls animals for pleasure any more than animals are killed in the slaughterhouse for pleasure. It is something that has to be done to preserve the health and vigour of wild animal populations that are without natural predators in our present day countryside. Man has a responsibility to manage the countryside he has created and the wild life populations therein.

22. To state that hunting is "not acceptable in a civilised society" is to totally misunderstand wildlife. Wild animals do not live in a civilised society and those that would put them there do them no favour whatsoever. It demonstrates a profound ignorance of the true role of hunting in wild life management and animal welfare.

23. There is nothing intrinsically or morally wrong in using a pack of hounds to hunt wild animals any more than it is wrong to use a fishing rod to catch fish or a shotgun to kill pheasants. On the contrary hunting with hounds is entirely natural to the four quarry species since it does not use any alien human technology for which the quarry has no natural defence.

24. Comparative neuroscience including comparative psychology has recently gone a long way towards demonstrating that wild animals almost certainly lack the complex brain and mental abilities necessary to experience fear as a human would and the human concept of death. Thus the anthropomorphic view that hunted animals flee in terror of their lives is to deny or be ignorant of this substantial body of scientific evidence.

25. Wild animals are by evolution used to hunting and being hunted. What might be a devastating experience for a domestic animal or man is part of the pattern of normal life for the wild animal. Fear, better described as "alertness" in wild animals, is essential for their survival.

26. The concept that it is biologically wrong for predators to predate on other predators is demonstrable nonsense. Wolves and lynx have preyed on foxes for millennia and still do in North America and central Europe. Hounds and terriers are the natural descendants of these predators. Foxes themselves prey on weasels, stoats, rats and cats, if they can catch them; and in the northern limits of this kingdom the Golden Eagle may feed its young on a diet dominated by fox cubs or cats! Eagle Owls also take fox cubs and killer whales prey on seals.

27. A pack of hounds is essential for hunting, the primary purpose of which is to catch the quarry. The suggestion that it would be fairer to use a single hound - one against one, is to totally misunderstand the nature and purpose of hunting. A single scenting hound would be quite unable to find and hold the scent of the quarry during the tracking phase of a hunt. As it is some 80% of foxes detected, elude hounds due to the scent being lost.

28. Terrier work and digging out of foxes is an integral part of hunting and an essential and humane component of pest control, equally or more humane than trapping or shooting since it is certain. It is the only method of control that can dispatch wounded or diseased foxes that will naturally seek sanctuary below ground. And fit and healthy foxes that are inadvertently flushed out (bolted) and hunted above ground will prove their fitness and health (and often do so) by evading the hounds in the process of natural selection.

29. Foxes and the other quarry species are not hunted to the point of physical exhaustion and collapse. After initial flight the hunted animal appears remarkably unconcerned and simply keeps ahead of the slower scenting hounds. Even in the short final phase of a hunt when running hard and they are caught up by the more durable scenting hounds, the pace is no faster than all four quarry species are naturally equipped to sustain. Quarry that evade hounds rapidly return to normal activity.

30. The chase is not deliberately prolonged. Apart from this not being in the interests of hunting and the strong likelihood of the scent being lost, it would be extremely difficult to effect. When prolonged chases do occur it is usually due to a sequence of different foxes being scented.

31. The kill is almost instantaneous and certain through destruction of the neck and thorax made possible by the considerable power weight ratio the hound has over the fox. But the actual cause of death is largely academic what is important is how quick and how certain. The subsequent dismemberment of the carcass, if it occurs, may not be a pretty sight but it is of no consequence to the dead animal. In the case of deer death comes when at bay from a close range shot to the head by a trained marksman. Deer hounds do not attack the quarry.

32. Cock fighting, bull baiting and dog fighting, which were gratuitous acts of cruelty on a *captive* animal, totally deprived of its natural avoidance strategies and for no other purpose than betting, competition, and spectacle, a century or two ago, have rightly been abolished. In no sense can the hunting of a *free-living* wild animal, with all its natural avoidance strategies available, be equated with these practices.

33. Hunting does not corrupt young people on the contrary it teaches them a proper respect for wild and domestic animals and the countryside. Extrapolation to hunting of research that relates domestic violence with animal abuse is wholly inappropriate and without foundation.

34. The charge of “Chaos in the Countryside” is fabrication and propaganda by the League Against Cruel Sports. For a start 90% or more of hunting takes place on private land. This is one of the major attractions for the mounted followers. And disturbances are often a result of provocation by anti hunt protesters, who think nothing of getting amongst mounted riders, waving placards, shouting obscenities and in many cases physically attacking riders and horses. Without this provocation the only disturbance or obstruction a hunt might cause in the countryside is to hold up traffic on the road to walking pace for the short time it takes to move from one property to another.

35. Huntsmen exercise remarkable control over their hounds and are entirely capable of stopping or diverting the whole pack during a hunt. It is further remarkable how foxhounds, for example, will ignore other forms of wildlife such as deer, pheasants or hares, when drawing coverts. Nevertheless regrettable accidents do occasionally occur but the charge that hounds are largely out of control when hunting is without foundation.

36. Hunting causes remarkably little disturbance to other wild life because it is natural; unlike shooting, which can produce a timid and shy population particularly of deer,

37. Hunting can be readily supervised. Because it is a collective and public activity held on appointed days, hunting readily lends itself to supervision. The new regulatory authority to succeed the Independent Supervisory Authority for Hunting through the hunting associations will perform exactly this function. Supervision of other methods of culling is almost impossible.

38. It is not enough for the anti hunting lobby to claim they know about hunting simply because they live or have lived in the country or they have followed one or two hunts. Richard Course, a former executive director of LACS, underlines this point in part of his forthright submission to the Burns Inquiry (2000):

*“The dogs easily outpace the fox within a minute or two and kill it within a second or two. How the fox is located is totally irrelevant to animal welfare considerations. **It took me ten years to realise that irrefutable fact** - others will never realise it because bigotry, prejudice, narrow mindedness, class animosity, and ignorance blind people to the truth.”*

39. The charge of cruelty is the only legitimate charge to be answered by hunting and since it is demonstrably the natural and most humane method of control, the motives and morality of those that go hunting is no business of others in a democratic society and certainly not a matter for Parliament. Put another way – can it be credible that the thousands of law abiding people from all walks of life that support hunting could be so morally corrupt as to require censure by law? Only the supremely arrogant could answer yes to such a question.

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