

# Communicating a Pro-hunting Message: Pitfalls to Avoid

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*Abstract:* The key to communicating a pro-hunting message is knowing what not to say and what not to do. This paper outlines 12 of the most common mistakes made when trying to communicate a pro-hunting message in a debate with someone staunchly opposed to hunting or in an interview with a reporter. With practice, each pitfall is easily avoidable. The necessary first step to avoiding them, however, is to be aware of them. In other words, by being able to recognize the “pits,” the pro-hunting debater will be better able to sidestep them and to achieve his/her goal of communicating a positive message about hunting.

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I have been studying the animal rights movement for about 8 years and have presented seminars across the country on the anti-hunting movement as part of a program called “Preserving the Privilege” that I developed in 1995. Over the years, I have reviewed over 500 different sources of information dealing with perceptions of consumptive use of wildlife and have identified 9 distinct domains of anti-hunting beliefs and over 60 different claims used in anti-hunting arguments in the United States (Minnis 1997b).

Based on my observations of and involvement in hunting/anti-hunting debates, I have concluded that the key to communicating a pro-hunting message is not so much knowing what to say as it is knowing what not to say and what not to do. Advocates of anti-hunting who are sophisticated in argumentation know that there are certain “corners” that novice pro-hunting debaters will tend to allow themselves to get backed into, and they know how to verbally “bait” the hunting advocate. The challenge facing the hunting advocate is to skillfully avoid these pitfalls.

The objective of this paper is to provide a list of some of the most common mistakes made when trying to communicate a pro-hunting message in a debate with someone staunchly opposed to hunting or in an interview with a reporter. Along with a list of “don’ts,” a few tips for handling some of the pitfalls are suggested. A more detailed discussion of the “do’s”—such as specific strategies to use in hunting/anti-hunting debates—can be found in Duda 1990 and Minnis 1997a.

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## **The Pitfalls**

There are at least a dozen pitfalls to communicating a pro-hunting message, and they are listed here in no particular order. Keep in mind that this list is meant to help the hunting advocate foster and maintain support of those who are undecided about hunting and not to try to convince an anti-hunter that hunting is acceptable.

1. Losing one's temper. A pro-hunting debater should do everything humanly possible to control his/her temper because name calling and confrontation serve only to bolster anti-hunting sentiment. Hunting advocates are generally very sensitized to the "anti's," and skilled anti-hunting advocates know that it doesn't take too much to inflame or provoke a verbal or physical reaction from a novice pro-hunting debater. Usually, the anti-hunter's goal will be to incite a violent response from the pro-hunter and to get that interaction "caught on tape" for future discrediting of hunting.

2. Becoming extremist. A pro-hunting debater should be careful to avoid expressing extremist views, which are opinions that are far to the political left or right and tend to be held or supported by a small percentage of a population. Garnering and maintaining widespread public support necessitates that the hunting advocate keep to the moderate point-of-view. One example of being pushed to express extremist views happens when an anti-hunting debater baits the pro-hunting debater into justifying literally every activity on earth that involves a human killing an animal. More specifically, a novice pro-hunting debater may get backed into trying to defend the use of live animals as targets in shooting competitions, which he/she may or may not feel comfortable with or capable of doing.

3. Arguing welfare with an animal rightist. Sometimes a hunting advocate may find him/herself in a debate with someone who is opposed to all uses of animals for any human purpose or benefit, or in other words, an animal rights advocate. Animal rights advocates tend to use animal welfare arguments (which deal with humane, responsible use of animals) as a smokescreen to advance their anti-use agenda. In these cases, it is critical that the pro-hunting debater avoid arguing about animal welfare issues (e.g., humaneness of a type of hunting method) and focus on exposing the true agenda of the animal rightist (e.g., ending all hunting).

4. Debating the ethics of eating meat. As implied in several of these pitfalls, the pro-hunting debater needs to stick to his/her pro-hunting message and not get off on a tangent. One tangent that skilled anti-hunting debaters know is a relatively easy one to steer the pro-hunter into deals with human consumption of animal flesh. The pro-hunting debater should not get into a debate about the merits of vegetarianism versus omnivory, and he/she should also avoid becoming a defender of factory farming. Although the pro-hunter may support meat-eating and animal husbandry practices,

he/she needs to keep to his/her points. If the opponent does bring up factory farming, the pro-hunter may want to call attention to the idea that harvesting wild game logically should reduce the demand for factory-reared animals.

5. **Arguing about details.** A hunting advocate should take care to avoid getting caught up in a debate about the specifics of hunting techniques or equipment. For example, in a conscious effort to coax a bowhunting proponent into a corner, an anti-hunter may assert that arrows cannot penetrate the game animal's body far enough to kill it and only cause wounding and crippling. In an attempted rebuttal, an avid bowhunter may feel compelled to "educate" the anti-hunter about the differences among broadhead types and how several types have razor-sharp "cut-from-the-start" edges that easily penetrate flesh. However true those "facts" may be, the bottom line is that they do little to advance a pro-hunting message. The basic rule-of-thumb should be to focus on the broader issue of sustainable use and the mainstream acceptance of responsible use of animals.

6. **Repeating negatives.** Usually, the negative part of a question challenging hunting will be something that is purposefully misleading or inflammatory and does not warrant being directly mentioned in the response. The pro-hunting debater must be careful to avoid repeating the negative part of a question when responding. For instance, if a pro-hunting debater is asked how he/she can condone the killing of innocent animals, he/she should not respond by saying, "I don't condone the killing of innocent animals . . ." because doing so may be perceived by the audience as one of two nonsensical but emotionally stirring alternatives: either that "innocent" animals are indeed being killed by hunters or that perhaps the pro-hunter condones the killing of only "guilty" animals.

7. **Making things up.** Never intentionally lie, exaggerate, or spout "facts" about which you are uncertain. In particular, if you are talking with a reporter and do not know the answer to a question, admit it and say in good faith that you will find and share the answer with him/her as soon as possible.

8. **Trusting too much.** There is no such thing as "off the record." A hidden video camera may be rolling, a tape recorder may be on, or the person may be fastidiously taking mental notes . . . never say or do anything that you don't want on the front page.

9. **Labeling hunting.** A pro-hunting debater should not allow the challenger to reduce hunting to a single dimension such as "trophy" because this does an injustice to the hunting experience. Describing hunting by labeling it as "sport hunting," "meat hunting," or "trophy hunting" depicts hunting as providing only one purpose (e.g., for recreation, food, or trophy, respectively). Hunting often involves multiple motivations and provides multiple benefits, not just a single one, and this is an important message to communicate to those who are undecided about hunting.

10. **Arguing about necessity.** A pro-hunting debater should not allow him/herself to be backed into saying that some animal uses are not "necessary" (in a general sense). In instances when the necessity of hunting is questioned, the hunting advocate should challenge the person who asks about necessity to define what he/she means by "necessary" (i.e., "Necessary for what?"). For many hunters, hunting is necessary because it is the only activity that provides the unique package of benefits

of wild game meat, exercise, outdoors experiences, nature observation, and family interaction.

It is very common for hunting advocates to defend hunting based on their belief that it is a necessary wildlife management tool. A skilled anti-hunting debater will more than likely offer an immediate rebuttal to such a defense by claiming that this justification for hunting is used for only a few game species (e.g., cervids, especially white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*)) and is not necessary for wildlife management as a whole. It is important for the pro-hunting debater to be aware of this tactic and prepared to handle it.

11. Not taking the high road. An anti-hunting debater will often attempt to take the "high road" and relegate the pro-hunter to the "low road." These attempts to frame hunters as the evil-doers to animals and anti-hunters as the saviors of animals can be countered by the pro-hunting debater communicating the fact that hunters are, in their own way, "pro-animal activists" in the sense that hunters have a long history of contributing to habitat management and the welfare of wildlife populations.

12. Trying to convert a committed anti-hunter. As with any activity in our pluralistic society, there will be some who are vehement opponents to the activity and some who just as passionately are proponents of the activity. Accordingly, it is a fact that some people will never accept hunting as a legitimate activity regardless of any attempts at persuading them otherwise. The novice pro-hunting debater may expend his/her energies trying to "convert" the anti-hunting debater when instead he/she should be focused on fostering and maintaining the support, or at least the informed consent, of those who are undecided about hunting. Rarely have I ever seen or heard an anti-hunting debater try to convert the pro-hunting debater; rather, the anti-hunter knows to target his/her messages to the uncommitted audience and often succeeds because the pro-hunting debater is too busy focusing on changing the anti-hunter's mind.

## Conclusion

To be a successful advocate of hunting, one must first understand the intent and tactics of the opposition. Toward this end, a list of the most common pitfalls faced by pro-hunting debaters was presented. With practice, each pitfall is easily avoidable. The necessary first step to avoiding them, however, is to be aware of them. In other words, by being able to recognize the "pits," the pro-hunting debater will be better able to sidestep them and to achieve his/her goal of communicating a positive message about hunting.

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