

'Right to hunt' vs. animal rights: What's fair game?

By [Patrik Jonsson](#), Special to The Christian Science Monitor / April 3, 2002

BETHUNE, S.C.

THOUGH just an hour's drive from the state capital, little Bethune is a nowhere town that's actually everywhere in rural South Carolina: It's the kind of humble haven of tractors, peach trees, and croplands where most of the state's residents live, and the big buck deer and the wild turkeys roam.

As South Carolina's wild-turkey season kicks off this week, hunters stalking these wobbly birds in the loblolly pines say that hunting, fowling, and fishing are the very essence of American self-sufficiency.

These pursuits, they contend, represent the pioneer spirit persevering in an age of plastic-wrapped meats and farm-raised salmon. For them, shooting game is as much of a "God-given right" as plowing the land.

Now, in fact, many hunters want to enshrine "the right to hunt" in state constitutions.

The moves come against a backdrop of pressure from proponents of animal rights. From trying to halt the mourning dove hunt in Wisconsin, to limiting Sunday hunting, to trying to stop the "culling" of heavy deer populations at Devil's Den Nature Preserve in Connecticut, animal-rights activists have been filing lawsuits and proposing laws that hunters say are limiting their freedom to hunt.

In response, hunters in at least 13 states – including Wisconsin, Idaho, Florida, Michigan, and Georgia – are climbing down from their deer stands in an unprecedented show of unity to formalize the right to hunt and fish.

Already, such efforts to amend state constitutions have been successful in six states since 1996: Virginia, North Dakota, Minnesota, Alabama, California, Rhode Island, and Vermont.

"There are so many different organizations fighting against the right to hunt, that [the constitutional referendum] is a way for the legislature to show their approval for something that's traditional," says Gene Houston, the assistant enforcement chief at the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries in Montgomery.

Status quo 'not working'

Standing on the porch of his hunting cabin, empty boxes of birdshot strewn about, Bethune game preserve owner Grady Roscoe says he supports the move to add more ink to the South Carolina constitution. He sees it as a safeguard against attacks on the hunting lifestyle by animal-rights groups.

"Hunters like to say, 'If you leave me alone, I'll leave you alone,' " says Mr. Roscoe. "Well, that's not working anymore."

Proponents in the South Carolina legislature say they expect the constitutional provision to go to voters for approval this fall.

Critics, however, say the efforts here and elsewhere are overkill.

These amendments, they say, burden vital state documents with superfluous provisions. What's more, they say hunters are using constitutions to forestall future debate on issues that deserve to remain in the public forum.

"I think that, because the number of hunters across the country is dwindling, the hunting community sees this constitutional amendment approach as a way to give themselves a public relations boost for an otherwise flagging pastime," says Jeff Leitner, a spokesman for The Fund for Animals, an animal rights group in Silver Springs, Md. "More and more Americans don't want anybody hunting in their backyard."

Even some hunting groups, like the US Sportsmen's Alliance, concede that the amendments may not be the ironclad protections they would like. Most would still leave hunting vulnerable to legislative whims.

Popular support, shrinking opportunity

Even if America is increasingly a suburban nation, polls show that hunting is almost as popular today as it was when Davy Crockett roamed the South. In 1996, 80 percent of Americans found shooting sports as acceptable as golf and tennis. In 2001, that figure had gone up to 87 percent, according to a Roper Starch survey. Half of those under 29 said they'd go hunting if a friend invited them.

Still, it's true that hunters are being driven deeper into the woods to escape encroaching sprawl. "Every time a farmer with a big tract of land sells the property and the houses come in, that's one less place folks can hunt," says Paul Erhardt of the National Shooting Sports Foundation in Newtown, Conn.

For well over 200 years, Vermont was the only state that guaranteed the right "to hunt and fowl" – an attempt to thwart the British tradition of "the king's deer," which only the wealthy were allowed to hunt.

Like their Vermont forebears, today's proponents of constitutional change see themselves pitted against an elite – this time urban liberals who are disconnected from the land but have growing influential on land policies.

Vermont's particularly strong constitutional provision has successfully thwarted efforts to limit hunting, says Robert Rooks, chief warden at the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department in Montpelier. When proponents "find out that it's contrary to the Constitution of Vermont, that's that, they're done."

To secure their future, hunters are also trying to shore up their own ranks.

Here at the 1,100 acre Back 40 Wing & Clay club, Mr. Roscoe says he's providing a venue for "city hunters," those who live too far away from wild places to hunt and have too little time to learn on their own. Women and teenagers are more than welcome, too.

The club is a "fair-chance ranch," where the turkey-shooting opportunities aren't predetermined. "One day, they're just where you thought they'd be, and the next day they're exactly not where they should be," says Patrick McCaskill, one of the club's turkey guides and a high school junior. "It's like fishing."

On this day, Roscoe and McCaskill ride the range, four-wheeling to a mill pond known to hold 14-pound bass. Red-tailed hawks hover in the rainy sky and raccoons snuffle in the leaves. The truck stops as the men spot a 24-pound turkey – the makings of a feast, and of a good hunting season. "People used to take the right to use this land for granted," Roscoe says. "Hunters can't do that anymore – or we'll become the endangered species."