

Waterfowl: Past, Present & Future

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Evolution of animal and plant species has been taking place ever since life began. Global weather change has been a major contributory factor to evolution.

A recent climatic period is known as the Ice Age, and it has been a major turning point in the evolution of animal species. If we are to consider the Ice Age as a marker, many changes have taken place during this period, a major change being melting of the world ice and ice caps being confined to the poles.

The annual migration of some bird species from the cold breeding grounds in the northern hemisphere to the warmer foraging grounds in the tropics is a climate related phenomena. Of the birds that have evolved to migrate seasonally. The waterfowl are a large and conspicuous group.

The abundance of waterfowl in regular seasonal movements has attracted man and beast from very early times.

The past

The earliest record of waterfowl being used as a food source is shown in the Egyptian hieroglyphics. In one wall of Menna's tomb, for example, the deceased is shown standing in a small skiff (flat bottomed boat), hurling a boomerang and felling wild ducks. A 3,300 year old illustration from the tomb of King Tutankhamun too shows the young monarch clutching what appears to be waterfowl by the legs.

However, the habit of consuming waterfowl has not been that significant in medieval Europe and Asia when compared to Northern America. The native Indians of North America has had a history of waterfowl consumption. The "Thanksgiving" which was originally a festival to thank the weather gods for a good crop harvest, was later changed to a feast, where waterfowl was a delicious food item. As the Europeans settled in the Americas and expanded the railroad to the North, the fate of waterfowl become affected to a greater degree.

Hunting waterfowl in the Americas developed initially as

a means to a special food source for the family. This seasonal hunting, developed as an industry with the opening up of farmlands and the expansion of settlements. In the 1850s, the railway to the Mid West, introduced refrigerator and freezer cars for beef and farm produce. Waterfowl too were killed in millions and their flesh transported by rail to the cities, fulfilling the demand for red meat. Duck shooting became popular around the year 1850. Techniques to attract waterfowl to selected water bodies, and special gun and boat building techniques were developed. Much literature on duck shooting exists. The book "American Wild-Fowl Shooting by Joseph W Long" published in 1879 details the methods of hunting waterfowl in the western states of USA giving comprehensive details of duck haunts, habits and methods of shooting. It also deals with the guns, blinds, boats and decoys used in hunting.

In 17th century England hunting waterfowl was the preserve of high society. Swans and cranes were property of the crown. The right to harvest them was given to the various guilds and societies patronized by the upper classes. This was not the case in America, anyone whosoever wished could capture ducks or kill them. As a result the number of occupational and pleasure hunters increased in numbers and waterfowl were taken in great numbers. A method to attract waterfowl was established with the introduction of decoys. Images of waterfowl were moulded with earth and were placed in strategic locations on the mud flats to attract the birds. Coconuts were also used as decoys to attract flocks of waterbirds flying overhead.

However these crude methods of decoying were not very effective in luring the massive flights of waterfowl that frequented Northern America. A totally new industry began by the year 1900 to turn out life-sized wooden replicas of the waterfowl. These floats painted in brilliantly natural colours, in feeding, sleeping and preening postures, to look like live birds were produced in millions.

Special guns were developed for waterfowl hunting. These could shoot dozens of birds at a time. With the advent of the shotgun at the turn of the century and its production being off an assembly line, anyone could afford a gun. The shooting extended at night as well. The demand

for waterfowl meat in first class hotels in the cities was high. The situation worsened with a hunter bagging over 500 birds in a single shoot out. The federal government in 1910 prohibited the sale of wild game. Enforcing rules and regulations, the federal government took over the responsibility for all birds migrating to America, and with legislation in place the carnage was controlled. The decoy industry also took a beating by 1918; legislative enactments being applied, the decoys survived only as collector's items fetching high prices. Even today surviving decoys fetch high prices at auctions and private sales. The older the decoy the higher the price. The industry has not ceased completely. Decoys are still manufactured for duck shooting.

Elsewhere too, the general trend for waterfowl meat and decoying was practiced. As a result the term fowling came into the vocabulary, and one who caught wild birds was called a fowler.

The addition of wildfowl to the medieval diet, by both noble and lower classes, was a common practice. Cookbooks of the day and individual manuscripts contain multiple recipes for the use of fowl. Types of fowl mentioned include: pigeon, crane, heron, swan, duck, goose, quail, teal, widgeon, woodcock, partridge and pheasant. Many other birds are also mentioned in the cooking and hunting manuscripts of the period.

Falconry and other efficient methods of gathering of fowl on a large scale using decoying relied on the participation of many individuals. This was more common in the later Middle Ages as the lower classes provided labor as an obligation to the nobility. These hunting methods are thought to have developed in Eastern Europe, and later in the medieval period further westward eventually reaching England in the late 1500s. The principle behind this method of hunting was to lure the wild flocks to a body of water, and then drive them into an ever narrowing net.

Decoying involved the construction and maintenance of large systems of nets. Landowners who had a decoy usually employed a man to act as the keeper of the decoy. These methods often passed from father to son or from brother to brother.

Waterfowl formed part of the diet in India. It was also sport for the upper classes. The present day Keoladeo Ghana National Park in Bharatpur now declared as a Ramsa Wetland and a UNESCO World Heritage site was initially a private, manmade water body for duck shooting.

The early history of this wetland is very interesting; "The Keoladeo Lake, before the area was developed, was no different from the arid scrub woodland of the surrounding area. The only difference was that it had a natural depression, which filled up with rainwater during the monsoon and attracted waterfowl while the water remained.

In 1899 this area was developed into a duck shooting reserve by Prince Harbhanji of Morvi State in Gujarat, during the time he was the Administrator of Bharatpur. Inspired by the duckshooting reserves he had visited in England, he

got bunds and dykes constructed so that the water-holding capacity of the depression increased. The lake was divided into 10 units, each with its own sluice gates to control water levels. Naturalists planted trees for birds to roost on. The area was crisscrossed with paths to enable hunters to access the entire wetland. Some of the pathways are still paved with the bricks laid at that time. In 1901 the entire area was flooded for the first time



with water released from the Ajan Bund.

The freshwater marshes soon began to attract a large population of migratory birds. Lord Curzon, together with Commander-in-Chief Lord Kitchner, inaugurated the first duck shoot in Keoladeo Ghana when it was officially opened on December 1, 1902. The party shot 540 birds. On another shoot on November 12, 1938 the Viceroy and the Governor General of India Lord Linlithgow was the top scorer with a total of 4273 birds (3044 birds in the morning, and 1229 birds in the afternoon). While the last duck shoot took place in 1964-65, the Maharajah was allowed to continue shooting until 1972. In 1972 the Wildlife Protection Act was passed and hunting became illegal."

Apart from this Dr Salim Ali the eminent ornithologist of India describes the 1938 November shoot in his auto biography thus; "Numbered butts were allotted to the guns, distributed in strategic spots all over the lake. The whole operation worked with the mechanical precision of an army

maneuver, with men of the state forces drilled as beaters to keep the birds moving over the guns and not letting them settle." Dr Ali commenting on Lord Linlithgow says; "he did distinguish him self by creating what must surely be a world record, of firing 1900 rounds of 12 bore ammunition from his own shoulder that day. Only one who has let off even a paltry 100 shots in a mornings snipe shoot and got his shoulder black and blue will appreciate the magnitude of this almost superhuman performance."

The present

Though large organized shoots are not found today, the shooting for sport is very much alive. Private water bodies are now being advertised for private shoots. The mode of advertising is mainly through the World Wide Web.

In the United Kingdom there are private water bodies allocated on a weekly basis, for pleasure. The shoots are on a specific day of the week while on the other days the waterfowl are fed to lure them to the location. The prospective pleasure seekers are supplied with guns, hides, decoys and even trained dogs to retrieve the birds once felled.

In the Indian subcontinent the shooting and trapping of waterfowl goes on unabated. This is what a Indian news paper said about the large water body Chilka Lake; "Poachers are killing thousands of migratory birds, including protected species, at one of Asia's largest lakes. The hunters, who until recently were armed with nets and guns, have now started using pesticides and opium to kill the birds that use the picturesque Chilka Lake in eastern Orissa state as their winter abode. Until the 1980s, local residents occasionally killed migratory fowl to eat. Large-scale hunting began in the 1990s to meet the growing demand for bird meat."

The present day Americans interpret the situation in a totally different perspective. They justify the hunting on economic factors and for maintaining and conserving the existing water bodies.

Many reasons are adduced for hunting and its economic power; "Hunters are good for the economy. Not only do hunters buy hunting gear, but they also fill their gas tanks and coolers. Sales and motor fuel taxes paid by Minnesota waterfowl hunters were over \$7.8 million dollars. They stay in resorts and eat at many small local restaurants. For many small communities, their economic survival relies on hunting. Most significantly, hunters pay for habitat. Without habitat on the ground, there won't be any ducks or geese in the sky. Hunters pay special excise

taxes. The Wildlife Restoration Fund collects the excise taxes on certain hunting equipment and distributes the money to different state natural resource agencies. According to the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, over \$ 481 million dollars was divided to the state agencies in 2002. In addition, Minnesota state income taxes paid by Minnesota waterfowl hunters exceeded \$2 million dollars and federal income taxes of \$9.6 million. Hunters may be the most important source of conservation funding."

Conclusion

The Earth has evolved through a period of 4.5 billion years to its present stage. In this process of evolution, the Land plants and Land animals evolved 395 million years ago, Dinosaurs 195 million years and Birds a 136 million years ago. Humans *Homo sapiens* evolved, about a million years ago.

In analysing this period of 4.5 billion years, it is seen that changes have been governed by natural causes; such as changing weather, volcanic eruptions, and meteorite impacts. As a result of natural evolution certain life forms continue to flourish, while others have vanished.

But ever since humans reached their present stage in the process of evolution they have in the name of development changed the norms of evolution in a major way. Having started life as hunter gatherer man too was a part in the food chain as a predator of some sort. But his form of predation was not very effective. His form of killing for food was with simple tools such as sling shots or boomerangs.

The hunter gatherer changed to farmer, and agriculturist. It was this change in man that brought about threats to the environment. This change brought destruction to several other living beings. In this process man has eliminated many predators from Planet Earth.

After a million years of destruction Some humans have now turned conservationist. Man now decides who lives, where and for how long. He is the decision maker on how many animals may is to live in a demarcated habitat. Because of this we have seen the mass scale culling of elephants in the African Continent.

We recently experienced the ill-conceived idea to bring down the migratory bird population in order to control the spread of the Bird Flu epidemic.

The behavior of *Homo sapien* has turned him into a super predator on the Planet Earth, much worse than all the predators he decimated.