

Performing Manliness

On the Meaning of Poaching in Dutch Society

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Poaching has been studied in terms of instrumental behaviour, as an economic strategy of the rural poor. However, poaching has always been of marginal economic significance in the Netherlands. Still, it has not disappeared in the course of this century. On the contrary, game-keepers being preoccupied with catching poachers, and a special police force being entrusted with keeping poaching under control, point to an increasing importance. To understand this phenomenon one has to consider that poaching as well as the efforts directed against it are exclusively male domains. To hunt and to be hunted is a challenge to the men involved: a challenge to measure their strength and cunningness. It is one of the scarce opportunities to perform "manliness": a notion which in "unexciting" modern societies is becoming an anachronism.

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Introduction¹

Once in a while local newspapers in the Netherlands make mention of poachers arrested for trapping or shooting game and using violence against game-keepers and policemen. These reports make us aware of a remarkable phenomenon. Most people expect poaching to have disappeared from the rural areas; and if it occurs incidentally, they cherish romantic ideas about the men pursuing it. A poacher is regarded as the "Robin Hood of the Dutch polder", a noble character fighting the "rich hunters" and outwitting the village policemen.² In public opinion poaching is not denounced as a crime, rather it is seen as a petty offence. Paradoxically, poaching is more readily accepted than legal hunting which is condemned as a bloodsport by many Dutch people.

Dutch hunters, however, raise objections against the "myth of the noble poacher". Backed by the Game Laws, they draw a dividing line between hunting and poaching. Legal hunting requires a hunting permit which is granted only to people who have access to hunting grounds, either as property or on

lease.³ Most fundamentally, hunting is defined as a legal activity by the Law. Poaching on the other hand is defined as illegal and therefore as a crime.

Hunters despise poachers. In former times they denounced them as "two-legged pests", "noxious insects", "parasites", "loafers", "thieves" and "murderers".⁴ Nowadays they call them "criminals", "souteneurs" and "green mafia".⁵ Traditionally, the fight against poachers has been a major concern of hunters. Punitive measures against hunting offences are as old as hunting regulations themselves. In the course of this century the hunters' preoccupation with poaching has not diminished. In addition to an ever growing number of gamekeepers, a special police force has been established to counteract hunting offences. Moreover, hunters have started to take control over this task themselves. More and more hunters organize to keep watch on their hunting ground.

Nevertheless, hunters and poachers do have things in common. One of the most outstanding characteristics of both categories is their predominantly being males. As far as hunting is concerned, women hold a marginal position.

According to an unauthorized estimation there are "some dozens" of female hunters in the Netherlands against thirty-three thousand male hunters.⁶ Poaching does not seem to attract women at all. Female poachers are virtually non-existent. Both, hunting and poaching, are most fundamentally male-oriented activities, and so is the fight against poachers.

It is amazing that hunters make such a fuss about "losing a rabbit" – at least this is how poaching is defined in public opinion. Their passionately despising and fighting poachers, indicates that more is at stake than "just a rabbit". What is at stake then, will be discussed in this paper. In the following paragraphs I am going to examine the effective motives of poachers and the way in which they have changed in the course of this century. More specifically, I want to investigate which concepts are central to the self-perception of poachers and to what extent poaching enacts male identity. In contrast to the widely accepted idea that poaching is instrumental behaviour, I want to point out its expressive and communicative significance.⁷ To understand why in public opinion poachers act as "noble bandits", whereas hunters deny them any human qualities at all, it is necessary to focus not only on the poachers' self-perception, but also on the changing image of poaching which is held among hunters, the authorities and the encompassing community.

Local poachers

De Nederlandse Jager ("The Dutch Hunter"),⁸ a weekly magazine, was published by and for Dutch gentleman-hunters from 1895 onwards.⁹ Each week reports on the apprehension of poachers by game-keepers and policemen occupied a prominent place in this magazine. As might be concluded from these reports, poaching was quite common all over the Netherlands during the first half of this century. But it was most prominent in the areas bordering Germany and Belgium, i.e. Drenthe, Limburg and Brabant (see map). Moreover, poaching occurred on a small scale. Usually there were not more than one or two men involved, employing techniques which allowed to seize

only a small amount of game. Most offenders were guilty of poaching with dazzle-light and gun or with snares and wires. Moreover, ferreting rabbits and catching game with nets, traps and cages was reported.

Those techniques required a thorough knowledge of the terrain and the game. They were employed by men of all ages who had the opportunity to roam an area frequently without catching anybody's eye and who unfolded their illegal activities during their daily business – at work or on their way to work. Those poachers were local men who seized the game not far from the place where they lived. Their range of action was limited to some kilometers – distances they could walk or cover by bike (Jagers 1985). Their trapping instruments, once installed, had to be checked once or twice a day, which made poaching a time consuming pursuit. Because of these limitations poaching remained a small-scale activity during the first half of this century.

According to the writings of gentlemen-hunters poachers were usually found among landless labourers and crofters. Indeed, poaching appeared to be endemic on poor soils, such as the sandy soils of Drenthe, North Brabant and the Veluwe and in areas characterized by rigid property relations, such as the Haarlemmermeer.¹⁰ Statistics on poaching in the province of North-Holland (1912-1933) demonstrate that during World War I more hunting offences had been registered than in the twenties.¹¹ Those illegal activities increased again in the thirties; probably as a symptom of the economic crisis. According to gentlemen-hunters poaching was directly connected with the mass unemployment of those years. Men on the dole were said to have no other choice than to improve their income by selling poached game (DNJ 1935: 55). Poaching became prominent as an economic strategy again during World War II (DNJ 1943: 171; 1946: 6-7). Gentleman-hunters considered poachers not only socially but also morally inferior. This attitude was reflected in the way they treated poachers when they got hold of them. Caught by a gentleman-hunter or his keeper, they received a shower of bullets more often than a charge (DNJ 1963: 14-15).



The Netherlands: Main poaching areas.

However, people in rural areas held a different opinion about poaching. They discriminated between local poachers who formed part of the community and conducted their "secret" activities for their own food-supply, and poachers who traded the animals they killed. The last category was called "professional poachers". According to the rural population there was no evil in small-scale poaching such as

conducted by villagers, nor in gathering activities. Whatever nature had to offer – and this applied for example to dry wood and berries, but especially to game – they considered nobody's property. Whoever seized it, became its owner. The rural population felt entitled to the game. This attitude was probably connected with customary rights in former days, such as the commons (Jagers 1985). Gentleman-hun-

ters, mostly the urban rich and absentee landowners, were regarded as intruders who "stole" the game from the local people, the more so as peasants felt that they, mostly involuntarily, fed the animals with their crops. If local poachers seized the game, the peasants did not complain, as the rabbits, hares and pheasants which formed the poachers' main quarry, used to ravage their fields (Buskens 1983, Jagers 1985). They even warned poachers of game-keepers or policeman approaching (Wichers 1965: 34), or let them hide their utensils in the barn (Jagers 1985).

In this attitude notions of collective rights clashed with the private hunting rights which gentleman-hunters claimed. The State, protecting the interests of the landowners and the holders of (hunting) privileges, labelled poaching and gathering activities as "theft" which was punishable by law. However, in the rural setting the boundary between legal and illegal activities was differently drawn. By local standards it was neither legal nor illegal to make use of natural resources; rather it was considered legitimate (cf. Traimond 1984:538). The game-keepers' efforts to fight poaching were seen as directed against the local community as a whole.

This, however, did not apply to professional poachers. Those men who (partly) made a living out of poaching were found among travelling people, merchants, bandsmen, fair-ground-proprietors and innkeepers. Those categories often held a marginal position in a rural community, a position which was mirrored by living at the periphery and being more mobile than other villagers (Buskens 1983). Strikingly poaching by these groups has been reported mostly from the Dutch border areas, where it went hand in hand with smuggling. Game killed on Dutch ground was sold at German and Belgian markets (ibid.: DNJ 1982: 741-42).

In the eyes of gentlemen-hunters professional poachers were much worse than local men; they were labelled as criminals. One of those hunters wrote in the hunter's magazine:

"Smuggling, stealing, drinking, fighting, mole-catching and vagabonding are alternated by

snaring, stalking, and the most daring raids at plain daylight. ...especially when they go out together at night, after playing cards and drinking, and having blackened their faces with the burned corks of the gin-bottles they've emptied. I know such rabble whose way leads directly to the game-keeper's house at night, to intimidate this man... Usually these are bad characters who have been in jail for several years and who shrink from nothing" (DNJ 1929: 408).

The rural population by and large shared this attitude concerning professional poachers. Villagers despised and kept aloof from these men. In their opinion they were "criminals" addicted to liquor, work-shy, maladjusted and immoral (Buskens 1983). This image flourished because those people dwelled outside the local community and pursued trades which were disrespected. In other words, they offended the standards of the moral community. Even the local poachers despised the professionals, accusing them of catching too much game and pursuing their activities in times when animals were caring for their young – which they considered a serious offense against nature (ibid.). Most of all local poachers criticized the "professionals" for poaching for a living, not as a sport (cf. Bromberger & Dufour 1982: 358, Traimond 1984: 357-58). The use of weapons and physical force against representatives of the law was considered typical of professional poachers.

The conflicts between hunters and poachers point to a social antagonism which was not only connected with the differences between rich and poor, but also with the contrast between rural and urban setting, local and dominant culture. Dutch poachers at the beginning of this century were usually men from a rural surplus population, landless labourers, crofters, travelling people. Poaching increased in times of economic crisis, under pressures of rigid property relations and poverty. Poaching was endemic in the Dutch border areas, where the arm of the central powerholder did not reach. Moreover, in the peasant communities local poachers were accepted, and, if in need,

helped and supported as long as they remained within the bonds of the moral community.

To hunt and to be hunted

According to gentlemen-hunters poaching was synonymous with cruelty to animals, and the snares and wires which poachers used, were considered instruments of torture (DNJ 1932: 23–24). Local poachers, however, lived up to a code of honour which hunters were either unfamiliar with or which they ignored deliberately. Among poachers ideas about the most effective methods to catch game differed considerably. Local poachers in North-Limburg, for example, repudiated the use of weapons and dazzle-light (Buskens 1983). They thought that the game would not get a “fair chance” to escape. Traps and snares, on the other hand, they considered “natural means”. As game-keepers told me, poachers took pride in making their own tools. Especially snares, loops made of brasswire, bore the stamp of their maker, who by his product distinguished himself from other poachers. Game-keepers used to recognize poachers by the snares they discovered in the fields (cf. DNJ 1985: 22–23). Poachers emphasized that working with snares was an art which required not only technical skills, but also the capacity to identify with one’s prey. There was no point in seizing game at all costs, but rather to “play the game” – as one of my informants expressed it. A good poacher anticipated the behaviour of the game. He had to use his eyes, nose and ears as much as his prey did. He had to move like the game, walk the same paths. Only then he would be able to catch it according to the rules.

Poachers who used different tools and techniques, also gave much attention to craftsmanship. As an ex-poacher told me, men working with dazzle-light considered their ways superior to snaring. Usually they set out with the two of them. The man walking in front carried the dazzle-light. In former times they constructed it themselves, from an empty tea-box with an eyehole, behind which a carbide lamp was fastened. With such a light they shone the fields and fringes of the woods in search for game which, blinded by the light, stood still unable to

move.¹² The second man, equipped with a gun, shot the paralyzed animal. This led to its immediate death, preventing the game to escape wounded and to fight for its life for hours – which often was the case when caught in a wire. This, according to my informant, was one good reason to prefer the gun and dazzle-light. Another was that this procedure led to a direct confrontation with the game, a contest between man and animal. In the ex-poacher’s opinion snaring was a kind of assassination, killing unexpectedly like a sniper.

Competent poachers were respected in the local community. Their knowledge of animal behaviour and their agility – which was vital when laying traps, setting snares or stalking game – gained much recognition (Wichers 1965: 107; Buskens 1983). Poaching gave them a chance to compete with and to distinguish themselves from other men. Poachers from one village rarely worked together, more often they were rivals. They also measured themselves against animals. They were proud of their skills and knowledge. Typically, the stories they told were about a “cunning” hare which they caught at last, sometimes after their rivals had tried in vain. One of my informants gained much respect among the other poachers in his village because he was known for catching hares with his bare hands. His fame spread all over the area and even reached the local police station.

Local men would not call themselves poachers, but hunters. And hunters they were, although they were hunting in a quiet, discreet and cautious way. This was only partly due to the forbidden character of their activities. Their disguise and secrecy was necessary to mislead the game-keepers. For the greater part, however, it was connected with their attitude towards nature. Poachers regarded themselves as men “in their natural state”. They felt one with nature and the game. As one poacher expressed it: “I am part of nature. I am familiar with all the sounds and smells. I know all plants and insects. By sniffing at the leaves on the ground I can tell if a wild boar has passed my way. I am a fox, a beast of prey.” The relationship between game-keepers and local poachers was one between the hunter and the

hunted. "Beast of prey" formed a metaphor which expressed the self-image of local poachers. Like predators they seized the game quietly, and they never killed more than they needed to support themselves. And like predators they were abused by hunters and game-keepers. Both parties were opponents in a contest which had a playful character. The poachers' efforts to evade game-keepers and the struggle of this last category to get hold of them, can be interpreted as a "game".

I am using the concept "game" in an analytical sense, as coined by Huizinga to denote a formal, structured and regulated activity (1938). According to Huizinga "games" are characterized by their standing outside "ordinary" life as being not "serious" but at the same time absorbing the participants totally. "Games" proceed within their own boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. Moreover, many "games" promote the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise (cf. Caillois 1961: 4).

The definition given by Huizinga characterized the encounter between local poachers and game-keepers. Mostly it occurred at night under the protection of darkness when the protagonists had the terrain all to themselves. The fields and woods at night formed a stage for the performance of male values. Poachers and game-keepers observed the same rules. The "game" was about outwitting the other without harming one another. The use of weapons was absolutely forbidden. The loser was expected to accept the victory of his opponent in a gentleman's way and to surrender without offering any resistance. As can be concluded from anecdotes told by gamekeepers and poachers, fairplay formed a vital aspect of their encounter in the woods and fields.¹³

According to the rules, there was only one way to get hold of poachers, that was to catch them redhanded. The method that led to success was to stand guard in the fields. This was a time-consuming task which game-keepers had to fulfil in addition to their daily work. The unpredictability of poachers made their task even more difficult, but at the same time more

challenging. Game-keepers rarely knew beforehand when and where the poachers were going to appear. Having discovered snares, they could stay there and wait for the poacher to arrive, but it was impossible to predict which route the men with the dazzle-light would follow (Jagers 1985). Poachers tried to mislead the keeper, to secure their catch and to escape unnoticed.

This game could only be played in a local setting where game-keepers and poachers agreed on the limits within which to operate and on the lawful tactics to pursue. They knew one another personally which added to the social control that was exerted on the "competing teams". Moreover, there were spectators to watch the game. Not only did the villagers accept poaching, but they also enjoyed the stories which were told about foolhardy men outwitting the authorities. What made those stories popular was that other men could easily identify with poachers without indulging in poaching themselves. To watch and to discuss poaching and to share the stories told about skilled poachers, contributed to the masculine identity of those involved. To play the "game", poachers as well as game-keepers (or policemen) had to display competence, smartness, dexterity, self-control and level-headedness, qualities which were highly appreciated facets of masculine behaviour (Jagers 1985). Poaching and fighting poachers was a game perfectly suited for men. Vigour and skill, luck and risk made this game exciting and challenging. To face the cold and dark, to sacrifice a good night's rest and to bear physical hardships only heightened the attractiveness of the game.

"Rough" poaching

In the course of this century the local poachers who observed their own code of honour and who played the game according to the rules, have given way to different categories. The behavioural standards once shared by poachers, game-keepers, policemen and the local community, are more and more abused by men who do not belong to the rural setting. To an increasing degree poachers are using guns, operate in gangs and capture big amounts of

game to sell it. Due to motorization, local loyalty has given way to greater mobility from the fifties onwards. When poachers began to make use of ever faster cars, they were able to cover a hundred kilometers and more in one night. Moreover, modern guns brought about changes in poaching techniques. New techniques are combined with old ones: dazzle-lights, for example, are still used, but they are intensified by halogen lamps; snares are still set, but not one or two, rather a hundred or more in a row. Nowadays these men employ dogs, mostly greyhounds, which are released from cars to catch hares or roe-deer. These techniques are called "rough" poaching. In contrast to local poaching in former times, modern forms are large-scale, organized, commercial and violent operations.

In the fifties Dutch hunters were alarmed by the increasing rate of poaching wild boar, roe and red-deer on the Veluwe, an area of heath and woodland in the central Netherlands (see map). At a rough estimate, more animals disappeared each year than was compensated by natural increase (DNJ 1979: 310–13). According to hunters and the police, "rough" poaching in this area was conducted by "criminals" from the big cities, mainly Arnhem and Utrecht. In addition to exploiting "female beauty", *souteneurs* from Arnhem applied themselves to poaching with cars, using the headlamps as dazzle-lights and killing the game with guns. As research has shown, "rough" poaching was concentrated around the big cities and in an area where large villages (Putten, Ermelo, Nunspeet, Elspeet, Nijkerk and Harderwijk) were situated (Van der Zalm 1975: 26). In contrast to the local poachers in olden days, modern poachers were from urban working-class origin [ibid.].

What happened on the Veluwe leads one to suspect that after World War II poaching has become more an urban than a rural phenomenon. This holds true for other areas in the Netherlands as well. In the western part of the country, men from the urban subculture of Amsterdam and The Hague – "pubcrawlers", "burglars" and "hooligans" as gentleman-hunters called them – were poaching in the dunes of Noordwijk and IJmuiden as early as the

thirties (DNJ 1985: 22–23). After World War II the same phenomenon was observed in North Brabant. The cities became the "hotbed" of professional poachers. In the sixties complaints about poaching inhabitants of tinker camps were heard all over North Brabant. Motorized gangs from camps in Eindhoven and Helmond (see map) operated in De Kempen, an area of woodland which besides small game housed roe-deer (DNJ 1973:277). The notorious "Kempen-gang", which prowled around the district in the sixties, made a reputation not only for jewellery theft, but also for large-scale poaching. Characteristic of these gangs was illegal possession of firearms and the use of violence. As the story goes, these gangs cooperated with henchmen to intimidate policemen and game-keepers by shooting their dogs, smashing windows and threatening members of their families (DNJ 1973: 277: 1977: 649).

The urbanization and criminalization of poaching went hand in hand with its increasing commercialization. Although the law restricted the transport of and trade in game,¹⁴ poachers managed to find enough buyers for their catch, mostly owners of restaurants and poulterers who were not so strict when it came to obeying the law. More than eighty percent of the catch of Dutch poachers was traded in Belgium (Schetters 1979: 159). Modern poachers prefer big game (Van der Zalm 1975: 37). Not only is the flesh of deer, roe and wild boar traded at a higher price than of hare and rabbit, but also do malafide taxidermists pay a lot of money for the almost full-grown embryos of those species. Poachers roaming the Veluwe preferably lay hands on (bearing) female roe-deer.

However, modern poaching is not only conducted with the purpose to make money, nor is it exclusively located in the subculture of criminals, *souteneurs* and thieves. Different marginal groups seem to be attracted to poaching, as for example the already quoted inhabitants of tinker camps. In spite of its violent character, "rough" poaching does not lack elements of play. These men do not poach to consume or sell their catch. They know more efficient ways to make money. Poaching is rather a competition between men from one camp or between

different camps. A policeman put it this way:

"If one wants to be a man of standing at the camp, if one wants to be respected, one has to be a skilled poacher. That is to say one has to show up with a large catch. A man who shoots fifty rabbits in one night, well, he is a tough guy. They do not poach to eat the game. Next day they usually bury their catch somewhere near the camp. They poach just to show off. When those guys return to the camp in the morning, boy, they throw open the trunk, and the whole camp gathers around the car to have a look at the catch. And then they come up with the stories how they took the police in."

Other marginal groups of urban origin indulge in poaching, too. As can be concluded from the charges I came across in the records of a game-keeper,¹⁵ poaching connected with illegal possession of firearms, formed an activity which was conducted by men from the working-class areas in big cities. Other remarkable characteristics of these men were their professional status and age. Most of them were unskilled labourers or "without profession". On the average they were between sixteen and twenty-five years of age. Investigations after the backgrounds of Veluwe-poachers came up with analogous results. Most of the men who were charged for "rough" poaching there were about twenty to thirty years old (Van der Zalm 1975: 49). In other areas in the Netherlands poaching seemed extremely popular among adolescents up to twenty years (ibid.: 50).

This category is marginal in several respects. Young males from lower class origin living in working class quarters or the periphery of the town often are part of a subculture of adolescents who want to distinguish themselves from the established. Poaching and the use of firearms are such a mark of distinction; the more so as it is not uncommon among those males to compete for status offending the law and using violence. This is closely connected with prevailing ideas about masculine behaviour. In this subculture a man can earn the reputation of being a "tough guy" by wearing guns or knives, by nightly raids, poaching with

stolen cars, fighting the game-keepers and the police (Downes 1966). Poaching is a form of male sociability serving male identity functions. To take part in poaching, but also to discuss it and to share the stories told about it, contributes to the masculine identity of those involved. In contrast to local poachers in former times, modern poachers do not find support in the rural setting where they conduct their illegal activities. On the contrary, "rough" poaching lacks any legitimacy in our society.

Manhunt

In the fifties game-keepers and the police were powerless to do anything against "rough" poaching, as the professional poachers were much better equipped than the representatives of the law. With the support of the hunters' association a special policeforce was established in 1955. Its members were recruited from the state policeforce. They were mostly men from rural background, grown up in a family of farmers or game-keepers (DNJ 1979:311). Many of them possessed a hunting permit. This special squad consisting of twelve men and six dogs, was entrusted with the task to fight "rough" poaching on the Veluwe. Its strategies soon turned out to be successful. The policemen confiscated "cartloads" of firearms and trapping implements and arrested dozens of poachers. Only three years after its establishment, another two detachments were installed in North Brabant (in Boxtel and Zundert) where poaching was endemic. Later the squad was enlarged with detachments in other provinces: Ommen (Overijssel), Zeist (Utrecht), Maasbracht (Limburg) en Hansweert (Zeeland) (DNJ 1981: 404-405). It was no coincidence that the seven detachments which in 1981 counted 47 members, were situated in areas which traditionally were afflicted by poaching (see map).

This special police squad had control of better trained men and better technical equipment than private game-keepers did. In the fifties, when most game-keepers went on patrol by bike, the squad did so by car. Therefore it was called the "flying squad". To keep up

with modern poachers, the squad is not only equipped with land rovers and fast cars, but also with radiotelephones, infrared glasses and modern weapons. As can be concluded from the annual report of the "flying squad", poachers equate the police as far as the technical equipment is concerned. In 1976 for example the squad confiscated 24 cars, two walkie-talkies, 267 guns, 95 revolvers, 223 parts of firearms and 21 hitting and stabbing weapons (DNJ 1977: 647).

It has become quite popular among young men joining the police force to take service with the "flying squad" (DNJ 1985: 35). Some of them told me that the fight against delinquency – as they use to define poaching – is too important a task to leave it to a small group of badly equipped private persons (i.e. game-keepers and hunters). This last category, however, interferes with their work to an increasing degree. Especially hunters with limited financial means, who cannot afford a full-time game-keeper, organize to take measures against poaching. More and more hunters of neighbouring hunting grounds establish private patrol services. The risk to run into armed poachers does not frighten them, on the contrary.

A hunting farmer from Brabant told me that he and his neighbours have had a number of exciting encounters with poachers. Some days before our interview he – in cooperation with his neighbour – had forced the "guys from the camp" off the road. However, they managed to escape in their "big American car" across a meadow. When they tried to get back to the main road – with full speed and shrieking tyres – they crashed into a truck, overturned and went broke in a ditch. The men were collected by an ambulance, and the police took up the damage. Driven by curiosity my informant went to take a look. Afraid of revealing his involvement, he passed the scene of the action in his car, with reduced speed and an "innocent" look on his face.

This way of handling poachers flourishes in rural communities where local men have leased the hunting territories. The number of farmers and other villagers attaining a hunt-

ing permit has increased considerably since World War II. In contrast to absentee gentleman-hunters, they live near their hunting grounds. Rural hunters strongly despise professional poachers from camp- or urban background. This is not only because these poachers incroach upon "their" territory, but also because they offend their moral code. Therefore rural hunters take the law into their own hands and fight the poachers with their own means. Whereas the police, and especially the "flying squad", are warning them not to offend the law, the rural hunters appeal to the Game Laws to legitimate their behaviour. The Game Laws, after all, oblige owners of a hunting permit to provide optimal living conditions for the game.¹⁶ Serious efforts to live up to these rules are supported by the State granting a subsidy for communication equipment to be used by cooperative bodies of (local) hunters. According to my informants these cooperative ventures have already paid rewards, as poachers learn to avoid the areas where there is surveillance. However, I wondered whether their efforts are stimulated exclusively by the words of the Game Laws and the wish to push back poaching. There are indications that the attraction of hunting has even increased by the playful elements which lie in the confrontation of hunters and poachers.

As has already been suggested, poachers were attracted to their "secret" activities by the challenging position of being a hunter and at the same time the hunted. Members of the "flying squad" and game-keepers also experienced the encounters with poachers as a "game". To catch a poacher these men have to identify with him, anticipate his behaviour and perceive the environment as he does. In this "game" the representative of the law is the hunter, the poacher is his prey. As a policeman explained, the fight against poaching is a man-hunt:

"The relationship between the policeman and the poacher is one between the hunter and his game. Both go out to catch something, not to come home flat" (DNJ 1954: 271).

On the other hand, game-keepers and police-

men can be forced into the role of the animal when a poacher outwits them, escapes or is acquitted by the court after having been arrested. The roles of poachers and their prosecutors not only resemble each other, they are complementary. Both are familiar with the same terrain, both watch the same animals, study their habits and try to catch them with cunning (cf. Bromberger & Dufour 1982:369). The social game which both categories take part in, presupposes shared values and standards.

However, "rough" poaching corrupts the standards which hunters are proud to live up to. Poachers represent the negative self-image of hunters. Whereas hunters operate within demarcated territories, the boundaries of which are protected by the Game Laws, poachers do not care about boundaries. They roam the country freely; professional men even operate on a national scale. Hunters observe legally fixed seasons, pursue their activities at daylight and refrain from hunting on Sundays. Poachers do not care about Sunday's rest and closed seasons. They pursue their activities all year round. Only local poachers observe restrictions during the breeding season. All categories prefer to poach at night, when no legal hunting takes place. According to hunters there is only one legitimate technique to kill game, i.e. by shooting it with a gun in a sporting manner (Dahles 1988). Poachers, however, employ various techniques and use different means. As far as they use a gun, they handle it in ways which offend – even pervert – the sporting code which hunters endorse. Hunters deriving their identity from hunting for pleasure, accuse poachers of killing animals for the meat or for the trade – which in their eyes form inferior motives. Moreover, hunters and poachers are each others opposites as far as their social background is concerned. Whereas hunters usually belong to the established and well-to-do, poachers come from the lower classes; professional poachers even from marginal groups.

The terminology which has been introduced by "rough" poaching alludes more to "warfare" than "play". Gentleman-hunters complaining about professional poachers call them "two-

legged enemies" of the game (DNJ 1940: 344), freebooters (ibid.), the "natural opponents of hunters" (DNJ 1963: 14). Game-keepers compare the encounters with gangs of poachers to a "clash of two armies" (cf. DNJ 1984: 214–15). The fervour with which hunters, game-keepers and policemen try to distinguish themselves from these men, reminds us of the images of the enemy which are constructed in times of war. The enemy is defined inferior in legal, social and moral respect and "dehumanized". Groups at war deprive one another of human qualities.

To a certain degree this holds true for the relationship between hunters and poachers. As has already been noted, hunters and their helpers associate poachers with animals. The more despised a category of poachers, the lower the species to which it is compared. Whereas local poachers are equated with predators, i.e. animals which are covered by the Game Laws and the moral code of hunting, professional men are merely seen as "pests" to be exterminated.

The way in which hunters and poachers fight each other, resembles strategies of war. Countries at war recruit soldiers who are armed and uniformed. In hunting circles a comparable process has taken place. Game-keepers have provided themselves with the symbols of the legitimate authorities: uniforms, weapons and identity cards. Moreover they assured themselves of the assistance of men who by virtue of their profession already wore arms and uniforms, i.e. policemen. With the establishment of rural hunting associations this trend continued among hunters. The way in which some of these associations have organized the surveillance of their hunting ground reminds one of a military patrol. Their members wear camouflage outfit and are armed with knives, guns and cartridge belts. They drive about in range rovers equipped with walkie-talkies and flashing lights.

The fight against professional poachers is fought with all means. Rules of fair play which characterized the confrontation between local men and game-keepers have disappeared from the relationship between poachers and their prosecutors. Hunters, game-keepers and po-

licemen have adapted their behaviour to the more violent character of poaching. A policeman who had served a number of years in the "flying squad" told me that clashes with poachers, fighting and shooting battles, wild chases with cars, are daily routine at the squad. A number of game-keepers, policemen and poachers has already been killed in the fight.

The quest for excitement

In the course of this century poaching underwent fundamental changes. In the first half it was predominantly a local and small-scale phenomenon, pursued by men of all ages. In addition to supplementing the meagre cottage cooking pot, poaching formed a risky "sport" for the village men. By perverting the values and standards of the gentleman-hunters in a playful manner, poachers expressed their disobedience to the Law and to the powerful. The conflicts with the game-keepers and the village policemen were a battle of wits. The sheer risk and excitement of poaching, and the obduracy which these adventures brought, had to be counted among the effective motives.

Professional poachers, operating in the border areas and, since the thirties from the growing urban centres, pursued their activities on a large scale. Most of them were young males from the urban working classes and from marginal groups. These men were the "Robin Hood of the polder" as little as local poachers had been. Rather poaching – besides other petty offences – formed (and still forms) an arena for the male youth to prove themselves. In their motives commercial and adventurous elements met. Especially in some urban subcultures delinquency, violence and clashes with the authorities form a strategy of constructing and performing masculinity.

Poaching contains a message of lower-class male self-perception which challenges upper-class male identity as it is partly enacted in the hunters' code of honour. It is not by coincidence that male identity is presented in terms of a competition – a competition between man and beast and simultaneously between two human males. In modern western societies competitive "games" and sports are crucial in sustaining

controlled forms of *macho* aggressiveness, because few occupational roles (such as in the military and the police) offer regular opportunities for fighting (Dunning 1986: 282–83). In societies where aggressiveness and physical violence is reduced from social interaction to a considerable degree, poaching catches up the theme of what it means to be truly masculine and enacts it in a period and environment which is set apart from ordinary life. This involves a displacement of competitive and aggressive impulses in the animal world to protect humans of the powerful emotional forces which are potentially threatening for human relations if openly expressed (cf. Marvin 1984). In spite of the increasing violence the encounters between poachers and the authorities are not devoid of playful elements. The fight exerts a great attraction even on hunters, game-keepers and policemen. They are not scared off by the risk to get injured or even killed. On the contrary, this risk seems to heighten the attraction. After all, games use to become more challenging the more is at stake.

That hunters share this point of view and feel attracted to this "game" is closely related to fundamental changes that have afflicted hunting. Gentleman-hunters who dominated hunting in the first half of this century formed an exclusive group. They were part of a land- and powerholding elite oriented towards an urban and national frame of reference. Those hunters kept their distance towards poachers. By entrusting game-keepers with the care for the hunting ground and the game, they barely got into touch with poachers. True is that they looked down on these men. Yet they did not despise them as vehemently as their keepers did. Especially the local poachers were judged mildly, as hunters recognized their being driven by the same passion. Gentleman-hunters have not disappeared completely, but had to accept new categories of rural hunters beside them. Ever since the rural hunters have started to counteract poachers themselves, the fight has become more intense and violent.

Moreover, since hunting facilities have become scarce, the number of hunters has increased considerably; in the course of this century it has multiplied by nearly five.¹⁷ Not only

were hunters forced to share their hunting grounds, but also had they to subject to ever increasing legal restrictions. Especially the newcomers, villagers with modest means, suffered under these conditions. Often they had to content with small and less attractive hunting grounds. More and more prospective hunters find it difficult to get access to hunting facilities at all. It comes as no surprise that hunters hold ambivalent ideas about poachers. On the one hand they despise and hate them for perverting their standards of good behaviour. On the other hand they cannot do without them as the fight against poaching makes up for deteriorating hunting facilities. Because of its criminalization poaching lost its legitimacy all together, at the same time legitimizing the hunters' countermeasures.

Hunting poachers is adventurous, even dangerous, and compensates for the loss of certain privileges which hunters have suffered because of complex changes in Dutch society. That they risk their lives and hover at the verge of illegality even heightens the attraction. Behind this is the element of freebooting which – because of increasing restrictions – has vanished from legal hunting almost completely, but is still present in poaching.

Seeking for heightened tension is a phenomenon which Elias and Dunning (1969, 1986) call the "quest for excitement". The more people are subjected to restrictions and regulations, the more their life gets routinized, the more unexciting it becomes, stimulating them to search for compensation which they find in thrilling (leisure) activities. Not only hunters are looking for exciting recreations, rather this aspect is found in all kinds of poaching, too. Moreover, romanticizing poaching – as happens in public opinion – is closely connected with the "quest for excitement" in our society as a whole. Poaching still provokes the creation of legends because poachers carry out things which many a male is dreaming of, but which are given no room in his well-regulated life: i.e. adventure, freebooting and revolting against the established order.

Notes

1. I would like to acknowledge The Royal Dutch Hunting Association and the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries financing the fieldwork for this study. This paper is part of my thesis discussing the changing self-perception and self-legitimization of hunters in the Netherlands. I am most grateful to the members of the "Promo-club" of Albert Trouwborst for comments on an earlier draft.
2. A number of social historians have interpreted poaching (in different European areas and at different times) in terms of "social banditry". Cf. Hobsbawm who coined this concept (1972: 89); Eckardt (1976: 126–139); Hilton (1976: 260–66). Thompson, studying poaching in eighteenth century England, points out that those poachers were not quiet social bandits as defined by Hobsbawm, but that they shared some of the characteristics (1975: 64).
3. Nowadays each hunter has to have access to at least 99 acres of hunting ground. Before 1954 there was no such limit. Hunters received a licence whenever they could prove having access to land, even if they shared a terrain with numerous other hunters.
4. Cf. "De Nederlandse Jager" (1928: 611–12; 1929: 406–409; 1932: 177–78, 611–12).
5. Cf. "De Nederlandse Jager" (1969: 25–26; 1973: 277; 1984: 79–81).
6. Unfortunately there are no official figures about the number of female hunters.
7. This approach is inspired by the work of Leach (1976) and Goffman (1959), and by authors analyzing the way in which male self-perception is expressed, cf. Simic (1969), Driessen (1983) and Marvin (1984).
8. In quotations the same is abbreviated "DNJ". The magazine was first published by a Dutch aristocrat in cooperation with a commercial publisher. About ten years after its first appearance the magazine became the voice of the Dutch Hunters Association which was established in 1904. The magazine still appears every other week.
9. The concept gentleman-hunter denoted men with upper-class background, large landowners of aristocratic or bourgeois origin, who were hunting for pleasure. Nowadays this term may denote the educated middle-class hunters. However, it has passed into disuse.
10. The Haarlemmermeer, the area in which nowadays Amsterdam Airport is located, had been a lake which was drained at the beginning of this century. It became an area for investments by bankers and rich merchants of the adjacent urban centres, forcing up land prices (Noordam 1987: 255). The poverty among the local tenants

and the prospering game contingent led to an increase of hunting offences.

11. Between 1912 and 1933 statistics on the charges for hunting offences in the province on North-Holland were published in DNJ. This province was of special interest to the hunters because of the poaching in the Haarlemmermeer.

year charges	year charges	year charges
1912 321	1919 442	1926 276
1913 447	1920 346	1927 228
1914 511	1921 306	1928 193
1915 488	1922 291	1929 176
1916 441	1923 350	1930 192
1917 622*	1924 294	1931 192
1918 383	1925 364	1932 281
		1933 137

* among which 296 for trespassing.

12. This technique showed some variations. One of my informants poached with the dazzle-light without any helper. He always went out alone, having fastened a torch to the barrel of his gun. Others went poaching with the three of them. The man in the rear, carrying neither gun nor bag, had to mislead the game-keeper to enable his two colleagues to escape safely.
13. Examples can be found in literature, such as the novel "Wildschut", published as a continuing story in DNJ (1954); Starrebreek (1944); van Eggermont (undated).
14. Cf. the Game Laws 1977, section 60-68; in: Kramer (1983).
15. One of my informants, a game-keeper whose name must be kept secret, allowed me to take a look at the charges he made between 1967 and 1985. During this period he charged 33 men for hunting offences, of whom twenty were living in a big city (more than 100.000 inhabitants), the remaining thirteen were from neighbouring villages. More than half of the urban poachers were living in "working class" quarters; two were from a "camp" at the periphery of the city. Eighty percent of the urban poachers were between twenty and thirty years old; the remaining twenty percent was about ten years older. Almost all charged made illegal use of a gun.
16. Cf. the Game Laws 1977, section 19; in: Kramer (1983).
17. At the turn of the century about 7.000 hunting permits had been granted. In 1935 this number had risen to 13.000, and to 20.000 in 1950. In 1975 it reached even 40.000, declining to about 33.000 these days; cf. Dahles (1990).

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