TWO PREDATORS ENGAGED IN TIMELESS RITUAL:

Cry me a river. That's what I say to the animal rights activists protesting blood on the snow in northwestern New Jersey, where nearly 300 black bears were killed during a six-day season ending last weekend.

A shot of adrenaline. That's what I say to the 7 percent of the 4,400 hunters who actually bagged one. It must be quite a rush to kill a huge bear, though it's not my idea of fun.

Wildlife management. That's what the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection was doing. They sponsored this legal blood-letting to help thin the burgeoning population of Ursus americanus expanding into this part of America's eastern megalopolis.

Black bears are basically omnivores. They are fun to watch from a distance, being curious, ingenious, agile and fuzzy. But there's no humor in having them scare your children or destroy your campsite, bird feeder, garden shed, dumpster -- you name it -- just to find food. They have an undeserved reputation for aggression, but attacks do happen. And with weights commonly in the 400- to 600-pound range and four long legs, they are strong enough to tear down a patio deck and fast enough to run more than 30 miles per hour.

Black bears are not always gentle and retiring. They pestered our field camps in Alaska for years. (I worked there in the early 1970s on archaeological projects.) Though I never had to kill one, my colleagues did. On several occasions, I had to fire noise-making shots with the .44-caliber magnum I kept beside my pillow. Though we were mostly worried about grizzlies, black bears were a chronic threat to our food and to a lesser extent our safety, forcing us to: lug firearms around during the day (a short-barreled, 12-gauge, pump-action shotgun was the recommended weapon); build expensive caches high in the trees; hike with the constant noise of bells on backpacks; and wait patiently for them to move on before we could get back to work. I still get scared when I remember the smell of bear halitosis in my tent at night and the mauling of a colleague who had both her arms chewed off by a black bear shortly after we played Frisbee together.

Animal rights activists are absolutely right that we must be compassionate to other creatures. Certainly there is a more expensive but more humane way to kill a surplus population of bears, such as tranquilizing them into teddy bear dreams by shooting them with hypodermic darts from helicopters. Hunters are absolutely right that their sport satisfies something deep in the human psyche. Stone cut-marks on bone are among the earliest clues to hominid behavior. Kill and butchering sites are common archaeological excavations.

The Inuit (Eskimos) of the 19th century had no choice but to kill seals that have since become favorite stuffed toys for animal activists. The New Jersey hunters do have a choice whether to hunt or not, thanks to the invention of grain feedlots, slaughterhouses and fast-food joints en route to their hunting grounds. But they do not have a choice to set aside millions of years' worth of instinct that evolved to help ensure our survival. Hunting is so much more than obtaining free-range meat or satiating a blood lust. The ice age cave paintings portray it as a religion. For modern men, it's the ultimate in male bonding, better than football.

One inviolate rule of evolution is that there must be an excess population from which the most fit will be selected. The excess population of bears in New Jersey has just been selected upon by human predators. After the hunt, and due to some combination of blind luck, activity schedule, habitat preference, wariness or coloration, those bears left remaining in the woods of New Jersey are probably the ones more likely to stay out of suburban trouble.
I'm not a PETA member, though I am a person for the ethical treatment of animals. But I do know two things. Homo sapiens is an animal that hunts. And hunting can help keep the world in balance.