

Game consumption and attitudes to hunting in the Netherlands

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In the Netherlands, per capita game consumption is low, but during autumn and Christmas, many consumers eat game, once or twice. Restaurants supply a big share of this game. Anti-hunting activism is a potential threat for the supply of game and therefore, to this part of restaurant business. The Dutch Organisation for Animal Protection (Dierenbescherming) claims that 97% of the Dutch population is opposed to hunting. This seems contradictory to the modest but widespread game consumption. The present paper explores this contradiction. By conducting street interviews, 276 usable questionnaires were obtained. 52% of the respondents consumed game, 48% didn't. Roughly a third of the respondents were opposed to hunting, another third were pro and the other third were neutral. Opponents of hunting were more numerous among respondents not eating game. Reasons for not eating game were the perceived complexity of preparation, cost and difficulty in buying game, not liking the taste and vegetarianism. Restaurants were the dominant places for game consumption, indicating that the perceived complexity of game preparation limits home consumption. Possible explanations for the contradiction between the present research and the report ordered by Dierenbescherming are explored. Differences in methodology and lack of information about hunting possibly play an important role. The paper concludes with recommendations for the restaurant industry.

Keywords: animal protection, restaurant offerings, meat eating, anti-hunting activism, consumer opinion survey

Introduction

Although in industrialised countries practically all food comes from agriculture, many people want to eat 'something from the wild' like mushrooms, wild vegetables, and game. The intensity of this eating from the wild is different per country – the Dutch are among the smaller consumers of wild foods (Schulp et al. 2014), but at least they eat some game.

The restaurant industry plays an important role in game consumption. In autumn, many restaurants offer special game arrangements. Just one successful example is the East Gelderland region, Achterhoek, where around 25 restaurants have been cooperating for 33 years in offering game arrangements. Availability of game is important for this segment of middle- and high-class hotel restaurants. In 2006, Blauw Research published a report ordered by the Dutch animal protection organisation Dierenbescherming. They reported that 97% of the Dutch population considered hunting as a recreational activity as unacceptable. Hunting for other purposes was considered slightly less unacceptable, but as a whole the attitude of the Dutch toward hunting was reported to be very negative. This is not completely astonishing for a country where the Partij voor de Dieren (Pro-Animal Party) is represented in Parliament.

Dierenbescherming is a powerful organisation with a membership of 180 000 and with influence with government and a variety of industries. The organisation explicitly states the objective to put an end to hunting as a recreational activity (www.nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/De_Dierenbescherming). The

commission to Blauw for the report therefore is in line with this strategic objective.

All the same, the very high anti-hunting scores reported by Blauw raised the suspicion of the authors, considering the numerous restaurant offers of game arrangements, especially in autumn and winter, and the offering of game in supermarkets during November and December, even in discounters like Lidl (personal observation). It is unlikely that restaurants and supermarkets make so much effort for just 3% of the Dutch population. Also, the endeavour of animal protection organisations aiming at a complete abolition of hunting should be a concern to restaurants that offer game arrangements. In this article, we therefore present a countercheck on the attitude towards hunting of the Dutch. We complement this with a survey on game consumption and based on the results we provide recommendations for the restaurant industry on how to cope with the reasons of many potential customers not to eat game and with the threats posed by anti-hunting activism.

Literature review

Many factors come into play when explaining the low consumption of game in the Netherlands (henceforth NL).

A first possible reason could be the low hunter participation in NL. The number of hunters in NL is the lowest in the EU, expressed as a percentage of the population: in 2010, 0.17% of the Dutch were hunters, as contrasted with 0.43% in

Germany and 12.45% in Italy (Schulp et al. 2014: 299, Table 3). Also, the hunting regulations in NL are very strict. Only six species can be hunted on a regular basis: hare, pheasant, partridge, mallard duck, rabbit and wood pigeon (Flora & Fauna Law, Ch. 5, 1.2, Title II, Hunting). In the interest of agriculture, forestry and fisheries, and to regulate the population, people with a hunting license are allowed to kill certain quantities of animals after acquiring an exemption from the relevant authorities (Flora and Fauna Law, Ch. 5, 1.3). Species for which these exemptions are frequently granted are roe deer, red deer, fallow deer, wild boar, the majority of goose species, mute swan and widgeon.

In NL, hunters are, with very few exceptions, amateurs or volunteers. Professional hunters are rare. Some of them are gamekeepers, employed by a group of sportsmen with a large hunting area; some are employed by nature protection organisations as foresters. The 28 000 hunters in NL are cooperating in approximately 300 Wildbeheerseenheden (WBE, Game Management Units) that make arrangements about quantities of game to be shot for regulation of population size, damage prevention and other non-consumption related hunting activities. These activities are performed as voluntary work; all the costs are borne by the members of the WBE. (www.knjv.nl). The majority of Dutch hunters are members of the Royal Dutch Hunters' Association (KNJV).

The hunters' activities result in an amount of home produced game of between 459 000 kg (Schulp et al. 2014, 301, Table 5) and 600 000 kg (Op den Beek 2013, 79). This is not nearly enough to provide the game consumed by the Dutch; much of the game consumed is imported. The most recent figure for game consumption in NL is 12 000 000 kg p.a. (Op den Beek 2013, 79). Included in this figure is an unknown amount of meat from farmed animals like red deer, fallow deer and sitka deer (Reinken 1995). From the data of Schulp et al. (2014), game consumption of only 7 million kg p.a. can be calculated. The difference between Op den Beek and Schulp et al. can be partly explained by the less recent data Schulp et al. used.

The modest production of game meat in NL certainly cannot be blamed on a shortage of game animals. The country has the highest density of hares in the EU and the density of roe deer is average (Schulp et al. 2014, 296). These authors do not mention the numbers of waterfowl (ducks, geese), which are considerable, e.g. 2 million hibernating geese.

The consumption of game may be modest, but apparently it appeals to many consumers, especially restaurant visitors, as something special, just once or twice a year. Among game eaters, the attitude toward hunting generally is positive (Ljung et al. 2012).

The attitude toward hunting and to eating animals in general demands some attention. For a broad theoretical concept explaining human eating habits, especially about eating meat, the idea of Harris (1985) is very useful: 'Good to think is good to eat'. To vegetarians, clearly killing animals for food is not good to think, and therefore, dead animals are not good to eat. Singer supplies a further ethical underpinning of this stance (Singer 1975, 2000). Briefly, because animals can suffer, just like humans, inflicting suffering upon animals is wrong. Singer is not specific about slaughtering or hunting: all killing of animals is equally objectionable.

Pollan (2006) describes in chapter 18 in great detail his first hunting experience and his ambiguous feelings about

hunting, even if he is a convinced omnivore. In chapter 17.4 he proposes that many people have even worse feelings about hunting than about eating slaughtered meat, although farmed animals generally are much worse off in terms of animal wellbeing than game is.

Fischer et al. (2013) deal with this subject on a broader basis. Using interviews with both hunters and non-hunters in different East African and European countries, they analysed attitudes toward hunting. They suggest that moral arguments play an extremely important role in the legitimisation and delegitimation of hunting practices through discourse. In particular, study participants referred to the motives of hunters as a factor that, in their eyes, determined the acceptability of hunting practices. Moral argumentations exhibited patterns that were common across study sites, such as a perceived moral superiority of the 'moderate' and 'measured', and a lack of legitimacy of the 'excessive'. Respondents used implicit orders of hunting motives to (de-) legitimate contested types of hunting. For example, hunting as a subsistence activity is acceptable to most respondents, but many respondents reject hunting for food in cases where other sources of meat are available. Hunting as a method for regulation of game populations is acceptable as long as the hunters do not start 'playing God'.

In the matter of eating animals, Korthals (2004) takes a middle stance: he considers husbandry as a contract between man and domesticated animals: man provides food, protection and decent living conditions, and in exchange, man is ultimately entitled to eat the animals. He objects to intensive husbandry because it is, in his eyes, a breach of contract: animals get a rotten life and are eaten all the same (2004, 123–125, 137). Korthals does not deal with the acceptability of hunting.

It may be game meat, it may be slaughtered meat, in NL, as in most industrialised countries, vegetarianism is on the increase. Vegetarians are estimated at 800 000, approximately 5% of the population (Heinrich Böll Stiftung 2014). Dutch statistics about vegetarianism are hard to find. The figure of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung may be on the conservative side.

Both the report of Blauw Research (2006) and the present countercheck stand in the context of hunting, meat consumption and game consumption in NL.

The report of Blauw Research (2006) was created from a sample of 1 278 persons approached for an on-line survey; the response was 502; the response rate, therefore, was 39%. Blauw Research first asked the respondents' opinions about reasons for hunting, and then, reasons acceptable to them. Table 1 summarises the answers to these questions.

The respondents reacted with statements about hunting and in their judgments about government policy relative to hunting and game management, most were rather negative towards hunting. All these questions were introduced properly, so that the respondents knew what they were being asked about. It is remarkable that regulation of the population size (supposedly in the interest of the animals) is considered as the most acceptable reason for hunting. All reasons that are in the interest of humans, including traffic safety, are considered as much less acceptable, and hunting for pleasure as practically completely unacceptable. Blauw

Table 1: Existing and acceptable reasons for hunting (*n* = 502)

Reason	Percentage of respondents who think that this reason exists	Percentage of respondents who think this reason is acceptable
Regulation of population size	73	65
Prevention of damage to agriculture	58	40
Recreation	57	3
Consumption	33	14
Traffic safety	18	28
None of the above	–	21

Research applied a detailed differentiation of the respondents, based on gender, educational level and age.

Methodology

We used the method of questionnaires completed by the researchers – actually a form of extremely short and very structured interviews. This method will yield a high response rate, although the rate of non-response cannot easily be measured.

The questionnaires were taken in busy streets in the provincial capitals Groningen and Leeuwarden on three Saturdays in June 2014. In contrast to Blauw Research, we registered no respondent characteristics (gender, age, level of education) in order to keep the interviews as brief as possible. The structure of the questionnaire will become clear from the ‘Results’ section, because we closely follow this structure in presenting the results. The original interviews were conducted in Dutch. In this way, we collected 276 usable questionnaires. Population size was set at 100.000, which resulted in a sample size of 271 for 90% reliability. The 276 usable questionnaires, therefore, were enough.

The questionnaire starts with factual questions on the self-reported behaviour of the respondents concerning the consumption of game. Only the last question addresses the opinion of the respondents.

Data analysis limited itself to simple counting of the answers and calculating the different responses as percentages of the entire population or as a percentage of the categories ‘Eaters’ and ‘Non-eaters’.

Results

The first question was: ‘Do you ever eat game or game products?’

The result of this question is in Table 2, indicating that approximately half of the respondents (occasionally) eat game and the other half don’t.

Respondents who answered this question with ‘Yes’ are subsequently indicated as ‘Eaters’, the others as ‘Non-eaters’.

Table 3 summarises the frequency of game consumption. It is clear that for most ‘Eaters’ it is a matter of just once a year. The high frequency in seven respondents was caused by a high rate of ready-bought game pâtés and similar game containing products.

As for places of game consumption: the restaurant is dominant (Table 4). Not many game eaters venture home eating, possibly because it implies home cooking. ‘Elsewhere’ includes eating at friends, parties, etc.

The ‘Non-eaters’ answered the question for their reasons not to eat game as summarised in Table 5.

The reason ‘too difficult’ refers to game recipes in cookery books that indeed tend to be on the complicated side.

Table 2: Do you eat game?

Response	Number of respondents	Percentage (<i>n</i> = 276)
Yes (‘Eaters’)	144	52
No (Non-eaters’)	132	48
Total	276	100

Table 3: Frequency of game consumption

Category	Frequency of game consumption, approximately	Number of respondents	Percentage (<i>n</i> = 276)
Eaters	Weekly	7	3
	Monthly	33	12
	Yearly	104	38
Non-eaters	Never	132	48
Total		276	100

Table 4: Where do ‘Eaters’ consume their game? (*n* = 144)

Place of consumption	Number of respondents	Percentage of game eaters (<i>n</i> = 144)
At home	11	8
In restaurant	87	61
In restaurant and at home	32	22
Elsewhere	14	9
Total	144	100

Table 5: Reasons for ‘Non-eaters’ not to consume game

Reason	Number of respondents	Percentage of non-eaters (<i>n</i> = 132)
Too difficult	18	14
Too expensive	15	11
Don’t like the taste	18	14
Vegetarian*	37	28
Other	44	33
Total	132	100

* Vegetarian: respondents who do not eat dead animals. Not further specified into vegans, etc.

'Expensive' refers to the (partly real, partly perceived) high cost of game. 'Don't like the taste' refers to the high flavour intensity of most game. Generally, the taste of many modern consumers is for tender meat with low flavour intensity. For instance, breast fillets of chicken are preferred over the legs. 'Vegetarian' is a self-explanatory reason for not eating game: if don't eat dead animals or even any animal product, you will not eat game either.

'Other' reasons were very mixed. To some respondents, it simply never occurred to them that you could eat game. Others had no idea where to buy it or how to prepare it.

The last question was about attitudes toward hunting. Table 6 gives the figures for the whole sample of respondents.

From this table, we can conclude that the opposition to hunting is considerable but by no means dominant.

When considering the attitudes in the groups of eaters and non-eaters, clear differences become visible (Table 7).

Opposition to hunting is strongest in the category 'Non-eaters'. Surprisingly, in the category 'Eaters', 20% are opposed to hunting. Apparently, to them the link between game and hunting is not clear. In spite of their game consumption, a considerable minority of the 'Eaters' is indifferent to hunting rather than positive.

Equally surprising is the high percentage of the 'Non-eaters' who are not opposed to hunting: either neutral or even in favour. This attitude might be explained as: 'hunting is fine with me as long as I don't have to eat the brutes – because 'I don't like the taste or cooking is too difficult'. On the other hand, the number of those who are opposed to hunting (72) is greater than the number who declared to be vegetarians (37 respondents, see Table 5); therefore, 35 non-eaters are opposed to hunting but do eat other dead animals.

Discussion

The present research reveals that opposition to hunting is not nearly as great as the report by Blauw Research (2006) states. This must be due to several differences in methodology. For a start, Blauw created a representative sample of

Table 6: The attitude toward hunting of the whole sample ($n = 276$)

Attitude	Number of respondents	Percentage ($n = 276$)
In favour of hunting	89	32
Neutral toward hunting	86	31
Opposed to hunting	101	37
Total	276	100

Table 7: The attitude toward hunting, differentiated between 'Eaters' and 'Non-eaters'.

Attitude	Number of respondents		Percentage of the category	
	Eaters ($n = 144$)	Non-eaters ($n = 132$)	Eaters ($n = 144$)	Non-eaters ($n = 132$)
In favour of hunting	63	26	44	20
Neutral toward hunting	52	34	36	26
Opposed to hunting	29	72	20	54
Total	144	132	100	100

1278 persons first. These people were approached on-line and asked to complete the survey, but the decision to do so was beyond the control of Blauw Research. With the response rate being only 502 persons, 39% of anti-hunt respondents may be over-represented among these 502 people. In the present research, the percentage of anti-hunt respondents is 37% (Table 6); therefore, this might be a likely explanation.

The present research did not have to deal with the problem of non-responses. Of course, as long as an interviewer was busy with one respondent, dozens of potential respondents were passing by, but this cannot be counted as non-response.

Another difference between Blauw and the present research is in the nature of the questions. In the present research, we started with questions about facts: eating game at all and frequency and place of eating game. Only after these questions, were the 'Non-eaters' asked about their reasons not to eat game. Only the final question asked for an opinion: 'Are you for or against hunting, or are you neutral?' Here, we got the amazing figure of 20% of the 'Eaters' who declared themselves to be opposed to hunting. For this we do not have a decisive explanation. It might be a kind of socially desirable answer, leading to this inconsistency, much like a character from a Dutch comic: 'Of course I want to be a vegetarian all day, just not during dinner' (Studio Jan Kruis 2007: 24).

This is stark contrast with the approach of Blauw: starting immediately with opinions and continuing to ask for ever more detailed opinions instead of facts. In this way, the danger of socially desirable answers is immanent.

However, the main weakness in the approach of Blauw is this: in line with the strategy of Dierenbescherming, they start immediately with a question about hunting as a recreational activity ('shooting for fun'). This question smacks of framing: people are inclined to adapt themselves to the usage presented to them (Rijksoverheid 2014) and the question is likely to bring about indignation about hunting in general. Although many respondents are somewhat more lenient about other objectives for hunting, the tone has been set: hunting is wrong (see also Fischer et al. 2013). Meanwhile, the respondents have never been informed that the hunters perform all the more acceptable forms of hunting as volunteers, in their spare time and at their own expense. In NL there is no 'hunting for pleasure'. The whole research is based upon a wrong assumption.

The present research gives a more realistic picture of the attitude toward hunting than Blauw Research has provided. All the same, there is no room for self-satisfaction among hunters, wholesalers of game and restaurant owners. The opposition to hunting is considerable and is backed by very powerful and well-funded organisations that have the ear of politics and the media. A further handicap for the hunting and game consuming community is the small volume, both in terms of kilograms and the amount of money involved and certainly also in terms of the number of hunters (Schulp et al. 2014).

In the present sample, vegetarians may be over-represented: they make up 13% of the sample, which is well above the 5% given by the Heinrich Böll Stiftung (2014). The high level of game meat consumption and the high level of support for hunting therefore cannot be explained by an underrepresentation of vegetarians.

Limitations and recommendations for further research

The present research builds upon interviews taken in the north of NL. Even if the interviews were conducted in an urban setting, the presence of country-based people might have influenced the results. It is not to be discounted that in the strongly urbanised Western part of the country results could have been different.

Interviewing restaurant owners who focus on game dishes might be a valuable complement to the present research.

Recommendations for industry

The present research provides insight into the reasons for the limited game consumption of many 'Eaters' and for the reasons of most 'Eaters' to consume their game in restaurants rather than at home. This probably mirrors the opinions of part of the 'Non-eaters' that game preparation is difficult. Organising workshops for 'Easy Game Cooking', demonstrating that a game stew is just as easy to prepare as a beef stew, might be a worthwhile activity for restaurants, at the same time strengthening the relationship with the customers and stimulating them to taste the more complex preparations in the restaurant.

The problem 'I don't like the taste' is less easy to solve. It is worth trying actively to educate the customers, making them try game pâté, for example, so that they grow gradually accustomed to the taste, and hopefully learn to appreciate it.

Some 'Non-eaters' did not know where to obtain game. Partly, this problem is solving itself due to supermarkets that in season have game on offer. In order to stimulate the consumption of local game, hunters might exert themselves to become more visible, especially when they have difficulty in getting a good price for their game.

Finally, the KNJV will hopefully be in a position further to extend their information activities to the general public and to highlight the advantages of game, both from a gastronomic and nutritional perspective.

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