

No Land, No Hunt

Transcript of Podcast

Hello and welcome to another Action Against Foxhunting Podcast. I'm Pip Donovan.

Illegal fox hunting continues to this day under the guise of trail hunting – the activity invented by hunts after the fox hunting ban in 2004. Whatever the hunts say, trail hunting is fox hunting.

Today, we're talking about land access. It might sound a bit dull, but it is absolutely crucial.

I'm joined by Dr Lynne Graham, a criminologist specialising in wildlife crime and a founding member of Northumberland Hunt Watch. She also brings ten years of practical experience monitoring hunts. Lynne, let's start with the basics. When we talk about landowners, who exactly are we talking about?

1. Who are the landowners

When we talk about landowners, we're really talking about the people and organisations that own or control the land on which hunting takes place. That includes farmers and large private estates, but also land-management companies and public or charitable bodies such as councils, trusts, and conservation organisations, such organisations including the National Trust and the Church.

There is also some overlap between hunting and landownership. Hunt masters, hunt officials and people within their wider social networks may themselves own or control land.

2. How important are the landowners?

They are absolutely crucial because land is the essential resource that hunting depends upon. Hunts need access to large areas of countryside, to access fox habitat, as well as the land that allows hunt subscribers to ride freely across countryside that may not otherwise be available to them. (SLOW) Land access also affects visibility and accountability so it can be a protective shield. Once hunts move onto large areas of private land, evidence gathering becomes much more difficult. That is why the loss of land can have such a significant impact on hunts. PAUSE They can adapt to many other pressures, but they cannot easily adapt to having nowhere to hunt. PAUSE

We've already seen examples of hunts amalgamating, disbanding or converting to lawful alternatives following the loss of land. The New Forest Bloodhounds are a good example. They were formerly a foxhound pack, but following the withdrawal of permission to trail hunt in the New Forest, they converted to Clean Boot Hunting

and have continued successfully in that form. So landowners potentially have enormous power to influence what happens.

3. Do all landowners hunt or support the hunt?

No, not at all. We frequently hear phrases such as "all farmers support hunting", but repeating those assumptions benefits hunting interests because it reinforces the idea that hunting somehow represents rural culture as a whole. SP It doesn't.

Hunt Community has cited 91,000 responses opposing the proposed trail-hunting ban as evidence of rural opposition to reform. (SLOW) Yet there are approximately 10 million people living in rural England. Even if every respondent lived in a rural area, which is unlikely, that would still represent less than 1% of the rural population. That doesn't demonstrate that rural communities as a whole oppose reform, or support it for that matter. If anything, it illustrates how hunting interests are often portrayed as representing the countryside as a whole.

The reality is much more complicated. Some farmers and landowners actively support hunting, others are strongly opposed to it, and many hold more complex views. I've spoken to many people who oppose hunting but feel uncomfortable expressing those views publicly. I once spoke to someone who opposed hunting but worked on a farm where hunting was supported. He felt that openly expressing his opposition could potentially cost him his job.

So we need to move away from treating farmers and rural communities as a single, uniform group. PAUSE: Rural culture isn't defined by one blood sport, and attitudes towards hunting are far more diverse than is often assumed. Some of our strongest support comes from people who live and work in rural communities.

91 000 = 1%

4. Why do landowners allow hunts on their land?

They don't all allow them. The presence of a hunt on someone's land doesn't necessarily mean permission has been granted. Hunts do trespass. I remember one occasion when a landowner contacted us after recognising their own land in one of our photographs. They were furious because they had never given permission for the hunt to be there.

Where permission is granted, the reasons vary considerably. Some landowners genuinely support foxhunting; have a deep cultural pride in hunting and see it as an important part of rural life. Others have longstanding family, cultural or social connections to hunting. In many cases, support is less about hunting itself and more about relationships, networks and community ties that have developed over generations.

The hunt community is often a close-knit social and economic network. Farming can be an isolated occupation, and some people are reluctant to risk exclusion from this important social or economic network. So, they may tolerate hunt activity, not always out of support, but also because of fear, social pressure, or economic dependency. Others may be tenant farmers who have inherited arrangements over which they have no influence. Some simply believe that what is taking place is lawful trail hunting.

4.1 SUB QUESTION: And what role does the hunt's relationship with farming play in that?

There is also an interesting contradiction. Many farmers have been conditioned to view the fox as a malicious pest that needs to be controlled. Hunt ideology not only depicts the fox as a threat, but also positions the hunt as best placed to manage that threat. In doing so, foxhunting is reframed as an **agricultural public service** rather than a blood sport. This has helped hunts build and maintain allegiances within farming communities for many years. SLOW Yet hunts require foxes to be present in order to hunt them, whereas many farmers would prefer them not to be there at all. PAUSE SLOW In reality, there is a conflict of objectives between the two. However, by presenting foxhunting as a form of pest control, hunts have helped create a perception that their interests and the interests of farmers are one and the same. This has encouraged some farmers to support a blood sport that does not necessarily align with their own interests.

Regardless of whether a landowner supports hunting or not, there is currently very little deterrent for those who knowingly facilitate illegal hunting. For the law to be effective, the consequences of allowing illegal hunting need to outweigh both the benefits of permitting it and the potential costs of refusing access. At present, it doesn't. At the same time, landowners who refuse access, experience hunt trespass, or feel pressured into allowing hunts onto their land need far greater protection.

5. How would you describe your relationship with landowners and farmers?

I would like to think we've built very positive relationships with local farmers and landowners, including people whose views on hunting differ from ours.

We've always tried to be respectful of the countryside and polite to the people who live and work there. We recognise that farmers and landowners can often face genuine social and economic pressures, and we don't approach people assuming that we already know what they think simply because they live in a rural community.

We've had landowners give us permission to access their land to monitor hunts. That level of trust wouldn't exist if they didn't know who we were and weren't confident that we would behave responsibly and respect their property.

6 How did you achieve that?

It has taken years to build trust and a reputation. Everyone locally, including the hunts, knows who we are. We behave professionally, we are polite, we respect people's property and we don't trespass. SLOW **Most importantly, we try to separate the behaviour we oppose from the individual person. Our opposition is to foxhunting;** it isn't based on hatred of the people involved. Confidentiality is also very important. Rural communities give us information, and they have to be confident that we're going to protect them – which we do.

But trust isn't only about confidentiality; it's also about how you treat people. We listen to people and try to understand their experiences rather making assumptions about them. We don't publicly shame people, or resort to name-calling and we avoid confrontation because, apart from anything else, it's usually counterproductive – and detracts from what is important – wildlife. SLOW When people feel personally attacked, they tend to become defensive and more entrenched in their existing views. I think a useful phrase is: **the one who controls their emotions controls the outcome** PAUSE.

Over time, people have come to recognise that our concerns are genuinely motivated by wildlife protection, rather than hostility towards individuals. When people realise that you're prepared to have intelligent, sensible conversations with them, and, importantly, that you're willing to listen to what they have to say, you begin to build trust. And once that trust and credibility develops, doors start to open that would otherwise remain firmly closed.

7. What advice would you give to new groups?

When we first started, I remember a police officer giving me one piece of advice: "You need to be absolutely squeaky clean." I took that onboard, and he was absolutely right. If you want to make a long-term difference, you need to be taken seriously, not just by the police, but by local communities and even by the hunts themselves. **Every interaction matters.** How you behave reflects on your group and affects whether people see you as credible. It takes years to build a good reputation and seconds to destroy it.

I'd say aim to become the group that local residents, farmers and landowners feel comfortable approaching. We regularly meet walkers, families and people who live locally, and we consciously try to be approachable. You want to be the sort of people they would happily invite in for a cup of tea.

And listen to people, including people you disagree with. Treat those conversations as opportunities to learn. I remember talking during one of our outreach events to an older gentleman who hunted. He was very much a traditional, old-school hunter, and he started telling me that he strongly disapproved of some practices associated with contemporary foxhunting because he considered them unsporting. Instead of arguing with him, I said, "Well, that's something we agree on. PAUSE Perhaps we've got more in common than what divides us."

Those conversations are far more useful than shouting at one another.

8 Why is this important?

Because we can't expect to change something unless we first understand it.

I once read in a foxhunting book that there is no other sport with such a long history and yet so poorly understood, and I think there's a lot of truth in that. I think the fact that we're still talking about how to end foxhunting, 77 years after the first Private Member's Bill attempted to address it and 22 years after the Hunting Act was passed, rather demonstrates that point. If we want to understand why foxhunting has continued for so long, we have to understand the relationships, culture and social networks that sustain it.

And that need for understanding also applies at an individual level."Many farmers or hunt supporters may never have had a constructive conversation with an anti hunt person. They may nevertheless have heard plenty of **stereotypes about what anti-hunt people are supposedly like**. Professional and respectful engagement can challenge those assumptions and break down those stereotypes. Understanding someone's motivation doesn't mean agreeing with them. It means understanding why they hold that position, because that gives you a much better chance of changing it.

And that lack of understanding influences how laws are written, interpreted and enforced. If we're trying to regulate something, we need to understand how it actually works in practice. When there is a gap between the knowledge of those involved in hunting and those trying to regulate it, problems can arise. That's one reason I think understanding hunting and its wider culture is so important. Without that understanding, it becomes much harder to interpret and apply legislation, so in turn investigate and convict offences. What's particularly interesting is that when weaknesses emerge in legislation, laws are often refined and strengthened over the years through case law. Yet, the opposite has happened with the Hunting Act, it has in fact weakened over the years. But that's probably a much bigger discussion than we've got time for today.

Overall, the more deeply something is embedded within culture, the greater the resistance to change. That's because people see it not just as something they do, but as who they are.

8.1 SUB QUESTION: So how do you encourage change within hunting communities?"

I think importantly, ending foxhunting doesn't require removing all the positive things that people associate with hunting such as the horses, friendships, economics, social events and sense of community. Those things can continue through lawful alternatives such as Clean Boot Hunting which could potentially be more inclusive as well and open the activity up to people within the wider rural community who enjoy the social side but don't want to participate in foxhunting. So a transition to

Clean Boot Hunting could create a more inclusive community. PAUSE SLOW The only thing that needs to disappear is the hunting of the fox.

Maybe lasting change is much more likely if some of that pressure for change also develops within hunting communities, rather than being perceived solely as something imposed upon them from outside.

9. What do you think needs to change?

Legislative reform is essential, **but laws alone do not automatically change attitudes and beliefs**. I think we need to distinguish between making prosecutions easier and actually ending foxhunting. They are related, but they are not necessarily the same thing. The effectiveness of law relies, at least in part, on people accepting its authority and choosing to comply with it. Over the last twenty years, we've seen continued resistance from within the hunting community, who consider the Hunting Act an unjust law imposed upon them by outsiders.

I think one problem historically has been a lack of deeper understanding of hunting culture itself. Hunting isn't simply an activity; it's embedded within a complex social world that underpins much of hunting's resistance to change and is connected to landownership and social networks. LONG PAUSE Culture helps drive resistance to change, networks help sustain the practice, and land enables it to occur. Pause Yet too often, **we focus only on the behaviour itself rather than the structures that make that behaviour possible**, that's why I think illegal foxhunting is better understood through the lens of social networks. If we want not only to improve prosecutions but ultimately to end illegal foxhunting, we need to understand and disrupt the relationships, and structures that sustain it.

9.1 SUB QUESTION: So what would that look like in practice?

So, I think reform needs to operate on several different levels.

Firstly, the legislation needs strengthening. Reforms such as recklessness and outcome-based offences could make enforcement and prosecution more effective. There also needs to be a meaningful deterrent for those who knowingly facilitate illegal hunting.

A ban on trail hunting and Terrier Work etc is important, but it needs to be combined with stronger landowner accountability, and sentencing guidelines to provide an additional layer of accountability and deterrent. That could also encourage landowners to take greater responsibility for what happens on their land, creating a more proactive layer of oversight in remote rural areas where police presence is limited, rather than relying solely on enforcement after an offence has occurred.

Prosecutions are reactive. By the time you're prosecuting an offence, the hunting has already happened and, potentially, a fox has already been killed and I'd say the majority of fox kills aren't even witnessed. If our response focuses solely on offences and prosecutions, we're dealing with **the visible manifestations of the problem rather than the underlying conditions that allow it to persist.**

One of the most important of those underlying conditions is access to land and the relationship with landowners. Hunts are remarkably resilient and have adapted to many challenges over many years, but the loss of land is much more difficult for them to adapt to. Without sufficient access to land then foxhunting becomes extremely difficult to sustain.

That's why I think measures such as stronger landowner accountability and land-banning orders should be considered. At the same time, we need to recognise that Landowners who experience hunt trespass, who refuse access, or who feel pressured into allowing hunts onto their land need much greater legal protection. The police need sufficient operational powers and resources to intervene effectively when suspected illegal hunting is taking place.

These issues are all interconnected. Part of this wider system is how hunting values are passed from one generation to the next. Like any long-standing cultural practice, hunting culture is reproduced over time, which is one reason why meaningful change is about looking beyond surface-level behaviours to addresses these deeper cultural issues that sustain it. Although perhaps that discussion is for another time.

Ultimately, if we want to end illegal foxhunting rather than simply improve prosecution rates, we need to understand the relationships and structures that have allowed it to persist and then strategically target and disrupt those. Landownership is particularly important because as it is where the cultural and social system meets the resource needed and that can actually be disrupted. PAUSE After all,.. we do not want to be having exactly the same conversation ..in another twenty years.

Conclusion

And no, we certainly don't want to be having this same conversation in another twenty years.

So what can you, the listener do about it? You can take a look at AAF's webpage (details are on the Podcast) and find out Land Access page. We have a lot of information there, including a very useful Landowners Letter, which you can download and send to any landowner you think either allows hunting on their land, or is troubled by trespassing hunts. You could also think about joining Action Against Foxhunting (it's free). To find out more, have a look at the links on our podcast.

Dr Lynne Graham, thank you very much for joining me. If anyone listening would like to know more about Lynne's research or wider work, please get in touch and I can provide further information or put you in contact with Lynne.

A key part of AAF's role is connecting and supporting people who want to take action, sharing information, experience and practical advice, and helping members turn their concerns into effective action.