

by Gerhard Damm

Pro-Hunt Campaigning

When an anti-hunting crusade or anti-sustainable use message spreads across the web, many ordinary folks feel compelled to post their support on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and so on within minutes. They may feel that they will be noticed if they don't show empathy with the animals;

that they don't appear as nature lovers. In many cases they fall for cleverly made-up stories which touch hearts and emotions. The nature of the social media prevents many users taking time to evaluate facts, background, context and consequences. A passionate urban public seems to accept complex issues at simplified headline value, especially if the anyhow scant information is manipulated by skilled media artists into easily digestible and emotion-touching denominators; complex problems are reduced to 140 character tweets. The story of Cecil is a case in point!

On the other side the millions of hunters apparently are too complacent to support pro hunt drives or engage in countering anti-hunting messages. Probably they also don't want to be noticed; they may fear potential smear attacks or other niceties from the opposition. Hunters also apparently expect the good news to be delivered by their associations and clubs, complain if they get bad news, or just simply put their head into the sand, saying "I still can hunt, so why rock the boat!"

This must change! Hunters have the better arguments and scientific evidence on their side! In an article in New York Times I recently read that the omnipresence of social media has created a new sort of shame culture. The author said that "in a guilt culture you know you are good or bad by what your conscience feels. In a shame culture you know you are good or bad by what your community says about you, by whether it honors or excludes you. In a guilt culture people sometimes feel they do bad things; in a shame culture social exclusion makes people feel they are bad."

The article explained that the world of social media is a world of constant display and observation. The desire to be embraced and praised by the community is intense. People dread being exiled and condemned. In this environment, moral life is not built on the continuum of right and wrong; it's built on the continuum of inclusion and exclusion. In traditional shame cultures the opposite of shame was honor or "face" — being known as a dignified and upstanding citizen. In the new shame culture, the opposite of shame is celebrity — to be attention-grabbing and aggressively unique on some media platform.

Until now hunters did not actively fight this "new sort of moral system" that the anti-use spin doctors propagate; we did not aggressively dispute their unfounded claim to moral authority and their definitions of correct and incorrect action or behavior. Hunters rarely appear in public podium discussions and talk shows to showcase their superior conservation results in the field!

I submit that we need to debate with our adversaries publicly, often and consistently. We also need to include into these debates more representatives of indigenous people who have freely chosen trophy hunting as their conservation model.

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The millions of individual hunters should actively engage anti-hunting activists. Hunters should disseminate on all networks the indisputable facts underpinning good conservation! Disseminating factual information wide and far can counter the emotionally-loaded anti-use propaganda. Talk to your neighbors, friends, and colleagues, whenever there is an opportunity!

We need to use all personal and social networks available – create campaigns and petitions, and show presence on discussion forums! Only if we show the world the hard facts, figures and science of conservation in an understandable form will we be able to reach the hearts and minds of people of good will. Well-meaning people, who rightfully care about and advocate for wildlife, need to have access to factual and science based information and have a right to know how real conversation works in the remote and not so remote regions of the world. These good people are – just as the hunters – concerned with the environment; they care for wildlife and nature.

The fact that hunting involves the killing of animals may be unsettling to many non-hunters and nature lovers. One doesn't have to like hunting, but even if hunting doesn't coincide with somebody's own beliefs such individual aversion does not imply that hunting is amoral. Therefore it is essential that hunters use every opportunity to conclusively explain the differences between conservation and preservation and show that good conservation produces surpluses and that surpluses produced by nature can and need to be harvested.

Ultimately, we need to reverse the present “hunters vs. non-hunters” situation, since both groups care for and love wild places and wildlife. Shane Mahoney, known to most readers from his columns in African Indaba and other publications, advocates this cooperation. “Hunters need to take the lead in a broad-based conservation coalition, ... and once again welcome all those who care for wildlife, helping them to understand hunting or to accept its contribution, even while they remain less than totally comfortable about it”, he said.

Mahoney also repeatedly said that hunters need to evaluate their actions in the field and from this individual insight discover and establish their own personal True North; their individual vision of an ultimate good like Fair Chase standards and respectable sustainable hunting practices worth defending even at the cost of unpopularity and exclusion! Importantly, hunters have to internalize all the good arguments for their daily dialogue with non-hunters.

If we don't go out and argue facts and figures with a strong knowledge and with conviction; if we don't passionately fight for what we believe in, we will lose the war. We need to constantly involve non-hunters in public debates! Hunters have the better arguments! Hunters care deeply for wildlife and wild spaces. This unites us with most of the non-hunters.

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This is the very reason that I recommend that hunters from around the world vote on the motions of the

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debate in New York City (4th May 2016) between two very eminent representatives of our hunting community and two of our most vocal opponents - HSUS president Wayne Pacelle and Borne Free CEO Adam Roberts. The high stake of this live debate is the public perception of hunters and of our actions.

Teddy Roosevelt once said

“People don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care”

- the founder of the National parks movement in the United States and the great conservationist Roosevelt knew that hunters do care for wild landscapes and biodiversity. He was a passionate hunter all his life!

It is up to us to prove to the world that hunters care for wild landscapes and wildlife!