

by Joe Pinson

The State of Conservation in Oklahoma's Most Rural Counties



Natural Beauty Marred by Carelessness

Tucked away in the southeastern corner of the state lies Oklahoma's most diverse terrain. From the pine-covered Kiamichi and Ouachita mountains to the hardwood bottoms and swamps along the Red River, this unique area is home to everything from black bear to alligator. It also boasts the poorest counties in the state. Poverty and a suppressed economy have made their mark, and conservation is rarely a prominent subject among citizens.

Driving through the small towns that dot the southeastern-most counties, one might have entered another country. Slow paced and quiet, somewhat dilapidated, many of these communities peaked early

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in the 20th century. Now, they seem left behind, forgotten. The moment one looks closely, perhaps turning off of the main thoroughfares onto the numerous graveled back-roads, it becomes impossible to ignore a sense of apathy.

Carelessly discarded trash litters the roadsides—most popular seems to be cans from varieties of cheap light beer. Household trash and old tires are dumped into creeks by individuals ingrained with a multi-generational mindset of disregard. Certainly not representative of the majority, it is prevalent enough to mar the natural beauty for all who seek to appreciate it.

Oklahoma's Whitetails: A Conservation Success Story

Along those same roads, seeing wildlife is almost a certainty, especially when the sun is low on either horizon. Like elsewhere in the country, the most popular of game species is the whitetail deer.

Whitetails in Oklahoma are themselves a shining example of successful conservation efforts. Unregulated hunting for market and sustenance nearly eliminated them from the state by the turn of the 20th century. Through conservation efforts of individuals and organizations, populations rebounded. Trap and transfer operations led by the Oklahoma Department of Wildlife and Conservation (ODWC) reintroduced whitetails into portions of the state that had not seen a deer track in years.

Today we take deer sightings for granted. However, taking our right to hunt for granted is ill-advised. Where species populations were once the issue, social and public perception now present the greatest threats to ethical and sustainable hunting.

Conservation Starts at Home

When the subject of conservation is broached, it often invokes images of Africa's giant mammals or South American rainforests. For some, that represents their backyard, and those places are near and dear. To others, they represent a cause; an outlet for philanthropic environmentalism. For the rest of us, as noble (and important) as it is to save the rhino and the tapir, conservation must begin in our own backyards. Southeastern Oklahoma having been my backyard for seventeen years, I set out to find what we are doing right. I also wanted to take an honest look at needed changes.

Changing Mindsets in an Area Resistant to Change

While the impact of poverty in Southeast Oklahoma cannot be denied, it is questionable at best that poverty excuses hunting violations. There is no doubt that a number of deer and other game species quietly find their way from forest to frying pan every year, taken outside of the boundaries of local game regulations. The traditional mindset of hunting to feed one's family tends to rationalize such behavior. Compared to more heinous game violations, such as wanton waste, it seems understandable. However, it does not hold up to scrutiny today the way it may have for previous generations of hunters.

Lt. Dru Polk is an Oklahoma State Game Warden stationed in McCurtain County. That single county has roughly the same amount of land area as the state of Delaware. The entire seven county district patrolled by Polk and fourteen other wardens adds up to 8,831 square miles of what Polk describes as

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“the most rural and roughest environment in Oklahoma.” He is no stranger to poverty being used to excuse game law violations.

“I believe 40 plus years ago this was a reality.” Polk says “I have lost several cases within our judicial system due to the so called ‘socio-economic issues’ of our area. I have arrested many individuals over the years claiming to need meat for their families, but they’re driving a King Ranch with a Browning X-Bolt and a case of beer. This doesn’t sit well with me. There are truly those in need and given the opportunity I have always taken care of these individuals. Today, I believe it’s a lack of respect for our game laws and a mindset of those laws not really meaning much.”



Results of a successful anti-poaching operation conducted by Oklahoma Game Wardens. The deer were donated to families in need.

Youth, Boredom, Beer, and Backroads

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Poaching is a major issue around rural communities, with so called “road-hunting” being the primary complaint. Thousands of miles of isolated roads patrolled by a handful of wardens is prime environment for this violation. Interestingly, otherwise honest citizens sometimes engage in this activity.

According to Lt. Polk, “Many people would never intentionally break the law, but for some reason don’t feel our wildlife laws meet the same criteria as the rest of the laws within our judicial system.”

One of the more troubling trends noted is the evolution from harvesting an animal for sustenance to killing for thrill, especially among younger generations.

“Not many years ago individuals would go out and shoot one or two deer illegally, utilizing the majority of the animal, and leaving little to no part of the animal to spoil,” Polk states. “This still happens in many occasions, but there is a new and growing trend of our younger generations killing for sport and not sustenance. I have found in the last several years a growing trend of calls involving freshly killed bucks with no head and no meat utilized or taken. The headless deer is normally a mature buck which was illegally killed for the prize of his antlers.”

The Future of Hunting Depends on the Positives

Despite our flaws, the outlook is far from negative. While wardens work to break the “we’ve always done it this way” mentality of certain individuals, many more are becoming increasingly involved in conservation. Overall, a mutual respect between hunters and game wardens helps unite us in a common goal to perpetuate not only hunting, but healthy and balanced populations of wildlife. For hunters, the importance of this cause grows as our way of life faces unprecedented modern challenges.

As hunters, we cannot deny that we are killers. No matter how it is phrased, when an animal is “harvested”, that animal is killed. It cannot be assumed that the rest of the population is as accepting of this reality. In an age of social media, those who oppose hunting loudly disseminate their agenda.

While hunting is no longer threatened by dismal populations of game animals (largely in thanks to conservation efforts by hunters), it is threatened by perception. When discussing illegal activity by poachers, we often hear how “they give all hunters a bad name”.

Faced with anti-hunters who place more value on the life of an animal than that of a human, any illegal, immoral, or unethical actions by hunters provide them with ammunition to attack the sport. It is hard to converse with people who hold such radically different views than our own. It is not the anti-hunter that needs involvement in our conversation—it is the non-hunter.

The Vital Non-Hunter Connection

Warden Polk puts it quite well. “For the last 20-plus years as a Hunter Safety instructor, I have taught my students that there are roughly 10% of the population which either hunts or fishes,” he says. “There is also the other end of the spectrum of roughly 10% who adamantly opposes hunting or the legal harvest of any animal or fish. So, you have approximately 80% of the population that can be persuaded one way or the other, depending on the actions they see first.”

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The role of non-hunters as partners in conservation is important, but their acceptance of hunting is paramount for its future. We are surrounded by individuals that do not partake in hunting, but neither do they condemn it. These are often members of our own families.

A conflation of hunting with poaching is detrimental to this relationship. Consider the number of animated children's films and TV shows that portray the hunter as a villain. Entertaining they may be, but if we cannot counter that sort of portrayal with ethical actions and a conservational attitude, support of our way of life will continue to erode as fewer young people are brought up with a familiarity of hunting.

Wardens Condemn Individual Actions; Public Opinion Condemns Entire Groups

In my corner of Oklahoma, it is no challenge to kill a deer. The challenge is harvesting an animal within the constraints of the law, ethically and morally. It may seem innocuous to test the boundaries of regulations, but does it serve us to do so?

There is that aforementioned independent mindset of "we've always done it this way" running deep in the citizens of Southeastern Oklahoma. Regarding conservation, this must be personally altered at the individual level. We should act as hunters with the consideration of how our actions will appear to non-hunters. Will it lead them to support us, or will it drive them into the ranks of those who hope to see an end to the sport? If the men and women tasked with enforcing our game laws would frown on a behavior, we can safely assume that it is harmful to the public image of hunting and threatens the rights of future hunters.

Joe Pinson (<https://joepinsonwriting.com/>) is a freelance outdoor and agricultural writer and a resident of Southeastern Oklahoma. All photos in this article are courtesy Oklahoma Department of Conservation and Wildlife Game Wardens.