

by Simon Roosevelt

# Hunters are the Original Conservationists



*But hunters must reclaim their rightful place at the table by emphasizing fair chase, game management and wilderness protection. From remarks delivered at the Wild Sheep Foundation's annual finale banquet on January 18, 2020.*

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here tonight and thank you for being here. By “you” I mean all of you here in this room; but equally I mean the larger you, collectively: The Wild Sheep Foundation here in Reno and in North America—Canada, the US and Mexico. And in the world—in the IUCN, in Europe, in Asia. I hope I haven't left out any other place you are working.

You already know something about what I am going to talk about tonight: You all know that the number of American hunters has declined and is declining. You have read or heard that we are down to around 5% of the US population. Thus our common fear, that hunting will end. Participation will die away. Some of the freedoms we have enjoyed since this country's first days will erode away.

But something worse has already happened: The much bigger group of people in conservation—the ones who are today more widely recognized as leaders in conservation than we are—don't know us and

by Simon Roosevelt

don't know anything about us. We are being forgotten while we are still here.

They don't know that we hunters founded the conservation movement and that we are still driving much of it today. This is a problem, and it's our problem. We should be working with these non-hunting conservationists and gaining their support. And we need to do this now.

On the one hand, this requires some changes. When everyone still knew, or remembered, what being outdoors really is about, there was no need to explain. And, if we're honest, we hunters aren't by nature inclined to explain ourselves.

On the other hand, you're already doing this. You already gather coalitions around your issues. You are engaged through grassroots programs such as 1Campfire. You have an incredible youth program. You are headquartered in one of the world's leading centers of conservation passion—Bozeman, Montana. These folks see your interest in conservation. You have opened your doors to that community. That's smart.

But the rest of the conservation world is big. We could use their help. They need ours and they can't succeed without us—whether they know it or not. All together, hunters and anglers and wildlife-watchers make up about 40% of the US population. The outdoor industry says the all-in number of Americans going outdoors is nearly 50%.

Recruitment, retention and reactivation of hunters is essential, I agree, but the objective I'm speaking of is different. It's bigger, but it's easier. Toward this objective—to remind and educate the larger conservation community for the common good—over the last several years I have convened the Conservation Roundtable.

This is an occasional gathering of conservation groups including hunters—notably your Wild Sheep Foundation—and non-hunters. We have met twice on our own, twice with Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke and twice with the current Secretary, David Bernhardt.

We now have an active list of issues including two of yours: big-game habitat corridors and the Desert National Wildlife Refuge. The entire list includes other issues of importance to us hunters—and to the campers, hikers, bikers and paddlers who more commonly represent conservation to the modern world.

In working with them, they soon realize—and help us remind the world—that hunters created the conservation movement, that we hold knowledge and have experience that is essential to their goals.

There is something else we can do, something the founders of conservation also did: They created a new language for hunting, which helped them earn the leading role in restoring wildlife. And it should be easier for us than it was for the founders of conservation—hunters, all of them.

By the beginning of the 20th Century, hunting in America was destroying wildlife. Hunting was open to all, at all times and by all means. It was done to supply restaurants and the clothing trades, and much else. It went full-on like this until wildlife was too hard to find.

by Simon Roosevelt

This was hunting. So the founders of conservation coined the term “market hunting.” In so doing, they not only changed the meaning of the word, but also persuaded society that hunting—which was the problem at the time—would become the solution. By enacting game laws, they redefined “hunting” and introduced “poaching.” And by creating and publishing the Fair Chase Ethic, they moved hunting away from market slaughter and also made it more than sport: They made hunting into conservation.

They were the first to use the term “conservation” in common talk and print; and they said that Fair Chase is “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals.”

By creating forest preserves and refuges, limiting harvest, stopping erosion and funding wildlife agencies, the founders demonstrated how a personal and often solitary pursuit advanced the conservation of wildlife and habitat, and so was good for the whole of society.

Their campaigns against what they called the “slob hunting” of litterers, trespassers and game gluttons demonstrated the honor and respectability of fair-chase hunting.

Now think of modern hunting today: Our founders, mainly men, are gone. But where those great fathers pioneered, we now have great families—all of you—carrying on the work. There are fewer of us, but more kinds of us. And there are more kinds of conservation-curious people to hear us.

Hunting itself looks a lot different. The great fathers did it with wool, canvas and leather. We do it in the phenomenal kits of synthetic materials made by people in this room. The guns and other gear, even the science of fitness, all are now more diverse, precise and effective. Also made by people in this room.

These innovations, and the commitment of their makers to conservation, are part of why wildlife restoration has worked and continues to work.

But to the uninformed we do not look like the great fathers, and meanwhile, conservation challenges have grown. Some game species are overabundant, and others are threatened by overabundant predators. Virtually all non-game species are declining.

The larger public doesn't know what hunting has to offer to these problems. Hunting itself is not part of every solution for these challenges, of course—but hunters can be. For example, we can explain predator control. We understand the importance of all species and the need to sustain them. We know the policies and programs that are in place, and we can help develop the new ones that are needed.

We can hold the conservation movement to a steady direction, so the Wilderness Act and the Endangered Species Act don't circle back on us and get in the way of the conservation they are supposed to advance.

If we make this connection with non-hunters, they will see and understand us as the modern hunters who carry on the legacy of the originals.

by Simon Roosevelt

This is how our language of today can blaze through the ignorance and nonsense: Today, the uninformed public hears about “sport hunting,” “trophy hunting,” “canned” shoots masquerading as hunting and other terms. They don’t know what these things mean, and they can’t distinguish between them. We do, and we can.

The term “sport hunting” has got to go. It sounds like we’re in it only for the fun and the kill. We’ve got to do something with “trophy hunting,” too. It should mean going deeper, farther and longer—working harder to find an animal that shows what conservation can produce. (Sheep hunters may understand this the most.)

We talk of “hog hunts” and other “varmint hunts” that differ in purpose and practice from what we usually mean by hunting. “Culling” is a better word for that, and it has a conservation meaning.

There is an industry of “canned shooting” that calls itself hunting. We should outlaw this as false advertising.

Our own media industry, which publishes for and broadcasts to hunters, is visible to non-hunters too. Our media must recognize this and show the conservation at the root of the skills, experiences and equipment on display.

We already have examples of what such change can bring about.

We have coalitions on wilderness policy in the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and access to the Castle Mountains National Monument. These partners are with us because they are coming to appreciate the need for management and our help in getting it.

We have coalitions even on predator control—which is, along with wilderness, one of our most challenging issues. By explaining “control” as necessary management, not “hunting,” we have made it about ecology.

A bipartisan vote in Congress approved predator control of sea lions in the Columbia River estuary, where they were over-killing salmon. In California, the Audubon Society worked with duck hunters to control skunks and other predators that destroy ground nests of ducks and of plovers.

You are already part of the most powerful communication system that hunting has ever had. Let’s use it to better explain, to build broad support for what we do and to advance the conservation of what we care most about.

I hope we’ll work together so that your story, and the stories of your corporate sponsors and their professional communicators, is continually refining the words we use and expanding the audiences we reach.

We must use a new language for modern hunting that restates as brightly today what the Fair Chase Ethic said a century ago. Our new language must be more specific. It must keep conservation foremost. Fair chase is still the vital force of our passion. It must become our identity again.

by Simon Roosevelt

Thank you for helping keep the Fair Chase Ethic foremost. The Wild Sheep Foundation is and can be a powerful partner in defining modern hunting.

You—all of us—should be equally recognized as conservationists when we walk into a meeting room as when we show up in the field to move sheep or improve habitat. Our language—spoken, written, filmed—can explain exactly, consistently that hunting is an honorable ethic, an expert skillset and an indispensable part of conservation.

Thank you.

*Based in Bozeman, Montana, the Wild Sheep Foundation works in North America and Central Asia for the conservation and management of wild mountain ungulates and the habitats these magnificent creatures share with other wildlife and rural communities.*

*Simon Roosevelt is the great-great-grandson of Theodore Roosevelt. Educated as a lawyer, he is a principal of Olimpia Fund Management, Ltd., a multi-family investment group, and an avid hunter and conservationist involved in a wide variety of conservation and environmental projects in North America, South America and Africa. Simon Roosevelt serves as a commissioner of the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation and Historic Preservation and belongs to the Boone & Crockett Club and the Camp Fire Club of America. He is also a trustee of the Scenic Hudson Land Trust and Scenic Hudson, Inc. and a member of the President's Advisory Council of the National Wildlife Federation.*