



## **Motivation vs. Justification: Hunting from the Heart**

*The hunting conservationist's perspectives can be presented in ways that touch emotions and make change imaginable.*

As conservationists, communication is one of our most important tools. In many ways, the future health of wildlife depends on our ability to tell compelling stories from the heart that move the public and politicians. But as hunters, we sometimes allow ourselves to be baited into reactionary justifications for hunting, and we forget to focus on our personal motivations. Yet speaking of our motivations from the heart creates opportunities for genuine communication.

Hunters and non-hunters will need to engage in thoughtful and productive dialogue about conservation into the foreseeable future. If we accept this certainty, it is valuable to consider the most effective ways to present our perspectives. Why is justification often the wrong approach? Why is focusing on personal motivations often more effective? How can this help advance conservation objectives?

by Paul McCarney

### ***The justification trap***

Divisiveness and defensiveness define far too much of public discourse these days, and conversations about hunting are not exempt from this. On the contrary, hunting often become a focal point for polarization. To move beyond and, we hope, avoid these clashes of opinion, we should avoid defensiveness and be aware of how we frame our stories.

Our ability to tell stories is a uniquely human characteristic. Story-telling has been a profoundly important part of our collective history for many thousands of years. Stories are effective through connection and emotion. Compelling stories have never relied on defending and justifying our actions. When we try to justify hunting, we lose much of the nuance and specificity that make our motivations to hunt so rich and personally meaningful. We also risk overextending ourselves by searching for a universally applicable explanation for why hunting is right.

Both people and hunting are complex, so looking for a universally objective answer to a morally subjective question seldom works. Further, we often end up speaking defensively, trying to forcibly create in our audience the intellectual ability to accept hunting. Instead, this approach often shuts down discourse and debate rather than enabling people to embrace multiple perspectives.

Most of us hunt because we are secure in the understanding that hunting is morally right. So, in contrast to justifying hunting on a generic level, the real power of our argument comes in connecting more personally.

### ***Psychic numbing***

In his fantastic book about the current state of public discourse, *I'm Right and You're an Idiot*, James Hoggan interviews Paul Slovic, a professor of psychology at the University of Oregon. Slovic describes a phenomenon he refers to as "psychic numbing." This helps explain "the difficulty we have with emotionally connecting to problems that are large in scale"—an under-reaction to large problems because they seem removed from our immediate lives. We see evidence of psychic numbing in the conservation world every day. It helps explain why we have allowed the decline or extirpation of caribou herds across North America, the leveling of the Amazon rainforest and so many other ecological tragedies.

Slovic explains that while there is no single reason for psychic numbing, statistics and sterile facts are ineffective in communicating the true meaning of large-scale problems. In particular, dry facts "don't spark emotion or feeling and thus fail to motivate action." In some cases, a barrage of facts that an audience perceives as a challenge to their value system can actually end up strengthening their original perspectives. This can be true even in cases where someone's beliefs are factually incorrect. This is known as the Backfire Effect—too many facts can, paradoxically, entrench the misconceptions we want to change. As illogical as this sounds, it is simply human nature.

In terms of conservation, what is a more effective way to spark action and how do we communicate the meaning and role of hunting in conservation actions?

by Paul McCarney

### ***Moving from logic to emotion***

People are more committed to their values than to facts. A common mistake in hunting advocacy is to over-saturate our audience with facts to convince them we are right. We proudly talk about the funds raised through hunting revenues and the ways that hunting has contributed to conservation over the previous century. The problem with this approach is that it often fails to engage with the public's values and emotions.

When we talk about conservation issues on the scale of entire species and landscapes, the conversation often becomes so large that it lacks an emotional attachment for someone to grasp. And without that anchor, it is difficult for someone else to identify with our perspective, particularly in an ethically charged issue such as hunting.



People engage in conservation actions because they care deeply about wildlife and habitats. These volunteers, under the direction of biologists, are carefully preparing wild sheep for translocation, somewhere in North America. Wild Sheep Foundation

by Paul McCarney

Part of the reason for the difficulty in attaching ourselves to dry facts goes back to our early days as a species. Humans have evolved to balance logic and emotion when evaluating risk and making decisions. When we decide how to act, we rely on a careful but often subconscious balance of gut feelings and analytical evaluation. When discussing conservation issues, we should be aware of how we appeal to this balance of gut versus analysis. As Paul Slovic explains, dealing with enormous issues such as species extinction requires slow, analytical thinking and science. However, there is a time and place to engage with the human instinct for fast thinking and emotive reactions.

To the extent that the public will continue to rely on gut feelings (and they will), Slovic suggests that in order to make people care about global issues, we need to make the issues more emotionally gripping. We shouldn't ignore the facts or numbers, but "if a number doesn't carry feeling, we don't really understand it, and we won't act on it."

### ***Motivations connect to emotion***

Slovic offers lessons for how we talk about both hunting and conservation issues. When we discuss hunting in the public sphere, we often encounter reactions rooted in the fast-thinking, gut reactions I mentioned above. Therefore, we should not shy away from engaging emotionally in conversations and expressing our deep care and passion for conservation.

I believe that thinking about our conversations in terms of motivations can be helpful. Where justifications tend to rely on large-scale context and objective statistics, motivations are rooted in emotion and personal meaning. Rather than justifying the righteousness of hunting, we can ground our discussions in the reasons we feel hunting is meaningful. When we highlight our own personal motivations, we are more likely to provide the needed emotional anchors for our audience.

One of the ways we can create emotional engagement in conversations is to tell our stories. Rather than reciting facts and statistics, tell a story about a meaningful experience while hunting. Frame the story sensitively, in a way that lets a non-hunter identify with our experiences.

### ***Motivation vs. justification***

It may seem like a subtle distinction on the surface, but consider the difference between two scenarios that both attempt to convey why I value hunting and my identity as a hunter:

I can explain that I value hunting because it has historically supported revenue-generation systems such as the Pittman-Robertson Act and because, in 2017 alone, donors—many of whom are hunters—contributed more than \$86 million to Ducks Unlimited for wetlands conservation.

On the other hand, I can frame this discussion in terms of motivations. I can say that I hunt because I want to personally contribute to conservation programs. I also want to participate first-hand in the great habitat restoration projects of organizations like DU. Being part of a community of people who care about wildlife is powerful and gives me a sense of meaning.

by Paul McCarney



The emotive beauty of the Alaskan wilderness. Gerhard Damm photo

Both of these scenarios are true. But when we frame our positions in our personal motivations, it becomes more difficult for someone to dismiss or dispute our perspectives. How can anyone argue that it doesn't give me deep personal joy to be part of a community that cares about wildlife?

### ***The take-away***

Overly objective and coldly detached discourse can too easily fall into defensive justifications for hunting; and impersonal and defensive discourse can often close off genuine listening. At worst, this approach contributes to animosity in what are already emotionally charged issues.

It is important to remember why we talk about hunting and our goals for these conversations. If we are trying to convey why hunting is so meaningful to us, we need to give our audience something to identify with, so they understand our perspective. People rarely identify with statistics and numbers; they identify with emotion and personal meaning.

When we talk about hunting in order to explain our relationship with conservation, we should try to resist the urge to justify hunting itself. We should focus instead on what motivates us personally to hunt, why it brings us joy and what we truly hope to contribute to wildlife as hunters.

*Paul McCarney wrote The Value of Hunting Stories for Conservation in the January 2020 issue. In his*

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*Banner image: A string of pack horses moving through Alberta's Wilmore Wilderness. Gerhard Damm photo*

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