

by Paul McCarney



The Companies We Keep: Politics and Inclusion in Hunting

The need to make conservation more inclusive while strengthening the field sports through activism—a conservation scientist's viewpoint.

Hunting is wonderfully complex. It is a social activity that brings us together with friends and family. Hunting is also deeply embedded in conservation politics. Regulated hunting is an important tool of wildlife managers and hunting organizations play an important role in lobbying for conservation outcomes.

Hunting and fishing exist in a complicated social-political fabric. The choices we make as hunters and anglers shape our individual expression of the social-political act we engage in when we go into the field. It is worth reflecting on how we express our ethics through hunting and the people we surround ourselves with and the companies we support.

Shifting the tide

During a recent chat with a friend, we discussed watching the hunting and fishing world come face-to-face with issues around racism, sexism and homophobia. I commented that, paradoxically, we are active

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on important conservation issues while allowing passivity around social issues. In addition, we have allowed outdoor companies to remain largely indifferent to and silent on social issues.

“Not anymore,” he replied.

One way we can actively engage with critical social-political issues is to support organizations and companies that reflect our ethics and address issues we care about. We can encourage those organizations to speak out and support important issues. We can also support companies who actively work to build a progressive, positive and inclusive hunting community.

Do our consumer choices make statements about our ethics and politics? Should we consider those statements in our purchasing decisions?

Conservation politics

The history of conservation in North America is full of complexities and contradictions. As hunter-conservationists, we often celebrate the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, hanging some of our identity as progressive conservationists on its seven foundational principles.

The North American Model is complicated. It celebrates democratic access to wildlife yet it is rooted in the disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples' access to their lands. It establishes shared public ownership of wildlife regardless of social status or identity and therefore subverts Indigenous concepts of relationships with wildlife.

The historical conservationists we celebrate took chances; they put themselves in the public eye and took stands that often positioned them in opposition to powerful political and industrial interests.

Rachel Carson, the marine biologist, conservationist and author of the ground-breaking book *Silent Spring*, alerted the world to the dangers of pesticides and their devastating impacts on habitat and wildlife. In 1962, Carson took a stand against the chemical industry and is credited with initiating the grassroots environmental movement.

Theodore Roosevelt, big-game hunter, conservationist and President of the United States from 1901-1909, used his time in political office to create “150 national forests, 51 federal bird reserves, four national game preserves, five national parks and 18 national monuments on over 230 million acres of public land.” Roosevelt, along with others, sounded the public alarm over the drastic decline of large mammals across North America. Certainly, TR ruffled the feathers of more than a few political interests.

Winona LaDuke, an Indigenous environmental activist, speaker and author, has spent decades supporting movements around Indigenous food sovereignty, sustainable development, women's rights and ecological restoration. She has run for Vice-President with the Green Party of the United States. LaDuke's conservation and political activism have always been deeply intertwined. In 2016, she supported protests against the Dakota Access Pipeline.

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Indigenous environmental activist Winona LaDuke, speaking about the return of the Pawnee people to their native Nebraska for the Sacred Land Film project.

We might not all agree with everything Carson, Roosevelt, LaDuke and countless others stood for in their efforts. We might find ourselves benefitting from the outcomes of their work while disagreeing with some of their individual politics. But that's really the point, isn't it? Throughout the history of the conservation movement, people have recognized the need to take personal chances, make strong political statements and tirelessly work to improve the circumstances of the natural world.

The political history of the conservation movement is inescapable and inarguable. It is also a history we should be proud of and eager to engage in.

Building an inclusive community

In spring 2020, wider political events such as Black Lives Matter brought up a range of complex issues that permeate all subcultures and communities, including hunting and fishing. The outdoors community, including hunters, anglers, bird watchers and environmentalists of all kinds, became acutely aware of the need to look inward and examine ourselves.

Introspection and critical self-reflection are the foundations on which we build self-improvement. To strengthen and enrich the outdoors community, we need to be able to examine ourselves with humility,

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honesty, and a commitment to self-improvement.

One of the lessons we learned from the social and political events of this year is that our community is not as inclusive as it should be. We heard a groundswell of voices express that many folks do not feel included or represented in the outdoors community. In some cases, people were explicitly excluded from outdoor activities. On May 25, a video of a woman calling the police on a Black birdwatcher in Central Park went viral. The man did not commit a crime, gave no reason for anyone to call the police and in the end, the woman was charged with filing a false report.



In response, initiatives such as Black Birders Week worked to increase the representation of Black scientists and bird watchers in the outdoors community. Organizations such as The Wildlife Society and the Society for Conservation Biology released statements in support of diversity and inclusion.

It is on all of us to ensure that the outdoors community is welcoming and inclusive. We must ensure that Black, Indigenous and people of color, women, the LGBTQ+ community and all communities feel safe, welcome and represented in the hunting world.

“Intersectional environmentalism [is] the type of environmentalism where both people and the planet are considered, so both social and environmental justice are considered, and [they’re] talked about in the same conversation.” —Leah Thomas

There are many things we can do to strengthen our community. There are many powerful voices out there telling us what we can do to support marginalized and underrepresented groups. Find them on social media and follow their blogs. Listen to those voices and take their suggestions.

One of the pieces of action I think we can all take is to reflect on the companies we give our money to and hold them to a high standard.

Companies as community members

We often talk about hunters and anglers as a somewhat unified—if highly diverse—community with shared interests and values. Companies across the outdoors world tell us that they are more than simply

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a business transaction. They tell us they are part of our community and share our motivations and values.

“Our values reflect those of a business started by a band of climbers and surfers, and the minimalist style they promoted in their lives and their sports.” —Patagonia

Hunting, fishing and outdoors companies present themselves as active members of the outdoors community and they build teams of staff and ambassadors who represent their company personality. If hunting companies are part of a hunting community, do they have any specific roles and responsibilities to contribute to that community?

“First Lite is about more than simply producing awesome gear. Supporting the people and groups who protect our sporting heritage is an equally important part of who we are as an organization and a group of folks who love to hunt.” —Founders Kenton Carruth & Scott Robinson

In my view, it is not enough for companies to state on their websites that they are committed to the values of hunting or to representing hunters. If conservation is political and dependent on action by dedicated individuals who are part of a community, I want to see outdoors companies demonstrate this commitment with action.

Challenge exclusion in hunting

I would like to see more companies take an active stand to support a fully inclusive hunting community. We need to challenge the culture of passivity in which hunters and hunting companies sit comfortably amid difficult and important social-political issues. We need to push companies to take positions and express their values publicly.

“The roots and tradition of hunting have always been important to me. I want KUIU to continue to contribute to the tradition through storytelling. I want KUIU to be a source of inspiration by living and breathing Mountain Hunting.” —Founder Jason Hairston

In a 2018 article on GearJunkie.com, hunter and conservationist Nicole Qualtieri reviewed Kuiu’s then-new women’s line. She quotes from Kuiu founder Jason Hairston’s 2016 interview in *Men’s Journal*: “I won’t make clothes for women, and I won’t make clothes for fat guys, because then the skinny guys won’t look good in them. I want Kuiu to be an aspirational brand.”

It is troubling to me that *Men’s Journal* even printed this statement. It is troubling that Hairston found it acceptable to explicitly exclude women from his company and culture. Kuiu deliberately positioned itself as a company that values women less than men. This is not a commitment to the values on which the hunting community says it is built.

After reviewing the company’s new women’s clothing, Qualtieri concluded, “If KUIU is attempting to keep women out of its line of vision, there’s no better way to do it than by creating a line with no true outerwear. And outerwear is what KUIU does best. Unfortunately, there’s not a single piece in the collection that would keep me hunting in the hills in any sort of weather.”

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Support Companies that build community

Consumer choices matter. As consumers of hunting or angling products, we impact the companies we choose to support or not support. We can reach out to hunting companies and let them know why we buy their products or why we choose not to buy them.

I hope that Kuiu has put in the effort over the past two years to include a wider diversity of outdoors people. I hope other companies have paid attention to the response to Kuiu's comments.

On the other hand, consider T-shirt maker Hunt To Eat. The company says it is built on three pillars: community, real food and conservation. Its community includes all folks who go outdoors. It "is not defined by race, politics, education, wealth, or gender; it's simply a human community." Instead of creating binaries and dividing, Hunt To Eat is "excited to find modern, progressive, inclusive ways" to support the outdoors community.

The company's roster of ambassadors and contributors is diverse and represents many socio-cultural communities. Its products make direct statements to ensure that everyone knows the company is inclusive and supports a positive outdoors community.

We can learn about the companies we support through their activities, images and media presence. Who do you see on their websites? Do they amplify the voices of diverse groups of people? When critical social issues arise, how do outdoors companies respond? Do they express support for equality and inclusiveness or do they remain silent? What are outdoors companies doing to contribute to conservation? Do they enrol in programs to give back to communities of people or support important conservation initiatives such as 2% for Conservation?

Incremental change

In the late 19th Century, dozens of species of birds were being pushed to extinction as fashion designers wanted their feathers for hats. In response, a group of women formed what became the Audubon Society and "boycotted hatmakers and shopkeepers to put feathers out of style, and lobbied for protections against poaching." These actions contributed to the creation of the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918.

Conservation has never been a man's game. We just need to amplify the voices and stories of a much more diverse community.

We will not address racism, sexism and other forms of inequality by purchasing one company's gear over another. We will not address these issues through any one action. It will take consistent actions and changes on many fronts over time. However, can we move the dial by demanding that companies demonstrate a commitment to progressive values and positive action.

My point here is that we should all find the things we can do to make our communities more inclusive. It's about holding our communities accountable and to a higher standard of positivity and inclusivity. As far as outdoors companies are part of the outdoors community, we should also expect them to

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contribute to improving our community.

I am proud to be part of the hunting community. The history of conservation in North America is complex and intertwined with colonialism. At the same time, there are conservationists who throughout history stuck their necks out and worked to create a legacy we can be proud of. It's now up to us to apply those lessons in our own social-political context.

Conclusions

I started hunting in my 20s. I was looking for an activity, an ethic and a group of people that encapsulated an outlook on life that I was shaping and struggling to express. I've written about how my involvement in politics and music really brought me to the world of hunting and conservation. For me, hunting has always been political and I have always seen the potential in hunting to improve social conditions. I believe the hunting community has a moral obligation to take account of its own identity and history.

I also see numerous historical examples of the hunting community demonstrating its potential to engage with issues to improve society. Hunters deal every day with the morally and emotionally charged issues of life and death. We address them head-on, with honesty. I think that predisposes us to accept personally and politically challenging issues. So we should put that potential to good use by applying it to wider social issues.

Finally, we often talk about the value of hunting to conservation, the development of personal ethics and a wide range of hunting's other benefits. If true, we need to continue to demonstrate this. We can show those who want to restrict hunting that we are a positive community of people working to make the world a better place. The companies we support should also reflect the values we want for our community.

Paul McCarney holds a PhD in Environmental Studies and lives in Labrador. He has been involved with many social- and natural-science research projects across Canada. He wrote "Motivation vs. Justification" in the April issue and "The Value of Hunting Stories" in January. This article first appeared in his blog Landscapes & Letters.

Banner image: Savoring a natural vista—or a social-political act? Conservation and community are inextricably linked. Author's photo

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