

by Todd Wilkinson & Tom Sadler

Hunters and Wildlife Conservation in America-Will wildlife conservation survive the evolution of outdoor recreation?



Wilkinson, founder of Mountain Journal, and Sadler, its Washington, DC, correspondent, talk about the links between hunting and conservation in America and the impact of declining hunter numbers on wildlife management. Conservation Frontlines echoes MoJo's sentiments in the introduction, below, about trophy hunting.

In our polemical society, some topics are treated either as taboo or approached with the certainty that any discussion about them will erupt on social media into an uncivil exchange of name-calling. Hunting is one of those. We find dualism most unfortunate because it leaves little room for a reasonable conversation about hunting as a tradition and its role in advancing wildlife conservation or examining such topics as predator control. By fostering a dialog about trophy hunting and hunting ethics, *Mountain Journal* is not staking out a position as being "anti-hunting," nor when giving hunters a voice

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is it failing to recognize the valid positions of animal rights and reverence for “non-human” animals as sentient beings.

TODD WILKINSON: People are products of the families, friendships and community traditions they grow up in. You and I were both raised in rural hunting cultures. You’ve spent time on Capitol Hill and engaged the interests of hunters and anglers in a variety of positions framed around promoting conservation. Tell us about one of them.

TOM SADLER: I’ve worked for several groups that specialize in habitat protection and access. One of the organizations I headed for a while was the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, which exists as an advisory group in support of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Caucus, comprised of members of Congress who identify as hunters and anglers.

TW: Let’s look at the history of hunting and its link to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, which, as a key tenet, asserts that wildlife belongs to the people—collectively, not individually—and that government agencies managing wildlife do so as part of a public trust, acting in the best interests of society now and for future generations. It’s recognition that wildlife makes our own lives richer.

TS: The North American Model has several key tenets. While it was invented by Easterners, it has origins with wildlife conservation efforts that happened in your part of the country, the Greater Yellowstone, and the larger American West.

TW: Where we’re going with this, Tom, is pointing out that revenues raised by the sale of hunting and fishing licenses and surtaxes assessed on the sale of outdoor gear, guns and ammo have been major funding source for state and federal wildlife agencies. It supports game wardens, biologists and professional managers.

TS: Yes, and there are discussions happening right now on Capitol Hill recognizing that, with fewer hunters each year, revenues are falling, creating difficult budgetary conditions for state wildlife management agencies. While the numbers of hunters may be holding their own in the interior West, in states like Montana and Idaho, that isn’t the case in most states.

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From 1886 to 1916, the US Army managed Yellowstone National Park; here cavalry officers show off bison confiscated from market hunters poaching in the park. Without federal intervention—and Yellowstone Park itself—the bison would have disappeared. US Park Service

TW: Let's return to history. The earliest manifestation of what we would call the professional wildlife conservation movement really began with people—let's be blunt, mostly white guys from the higher echelon of society in the late 19th Century—who had plenty of leisure time on their hands. They enjoyed hunting and fishing. Some of them had hunted species that were dramatically on the wane, such as bison, elk, deer and other “trophy” predators such as grizzlies and cougars. Which were turned into floor rugs.

Do you think there would have been a conservation movement, as we know it today, had it not been for their self-interest, i.e. pushing to recover animals and rescue them from potential extinction so that they could be hunted again? There didn't seem to be much alarm raised when the Carolina parakeet winked out. The last-known Carolina parakeet was housed in the same place, the Cincinnati Zoo, where Martha,

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the last passenger pigeon, died.

TS: The simple answer is probably not, sad to say. We would've followed the same course as Europe, which lost a lot of species, and the only huntable game would have been on estates owned by the wealthy. The folks at the Audubon Society might take issue with this, given their push to curtail the market hunting of birds for fancy hats and meat. A major catalyst for the modern conservation movement was the decimation and near extinction of bison. Hunters and anglers in Theodore Roosevelt's day, and for years after, were not only vocal in their support for wildlife conservation, but they took action and made it a political issue. They lobbied administrations and Congress, started groups like the Izaak Walton League of America, Trout Unlimited and the Outdoor Writers Association of America. They raised hell.

TW: The Boone & Crockett Club, headquartered in Missoula, was launched by Roosevelt and others, including George Bird Grinnell, who started the Audubon Society. They promoted rules for how wildlife should be ethically "engaged" when hunted, and that wildlife shouldn't be killed to supply commercial meat markets. And they promoted something that was initially rejected by anti-government locals, namely fish and game regulations. Why was that needed? I ask because there are a number of controversial bills moving through state legislatures in Montana, Wyoming and Idaho that seem to run counter to the ethics spelled out in the North American Model.

TS: Game regulations, fair chase principles and treating wildlife with respect was needed in the early days, and it's still needed today, because some people are jerks. It's that "tragedy of the commons" and lack of personal responsibility again. Left to their own devices, enough people get greedy, misbehave and ruin it for others.

When personal ethics and responsibility are insufficient to ensure that a "natural resource" is managed professionally, government must step in with laws and regulations. Yellowstone might have lost the bison if the military weren't called in to defend the park against poachers. Sometimes the federal government has to do that with threatened and endangered species because state management failed in protecting species. In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries, there was wanton killing of animals for commercial markets, sport and extermination. Roosevelt, Grinnell and others saw the writing on the wall and organized a movement to manage game so there would be some for future generations.

Then and now Boone & Crockett's Fair Chase statement has been the gold standard for hunting ethics and a hunter's role in conservation. And while it is focused on hunters, it is applicable to anglers and anyone spending time outdoors.

TW: Hunter numbers are in decline nationally, as you note, and have been for years. Few people, especially in the Lower 48, actually hunt for subsistence anymore. It's really about having an outdoor recreational experience. Meat from game animals is brought home to the table, but food could actually be purchased at grocery stores more cheaply, given the time and financial investment in going afield. What do you see as the paramount issues facing the hunting community today?

TS: There's a money issue, a how-to-fund professional wildlife management issue, and there's a public-

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relations issue with how hunting is perceived by a larger segment of the public that doesn't hunt.



Since 1934, the sale of federal duck stamps to hunters have generated nearly \$1 billion for wetlands conservation, including 6 million acres of habitat for many hundreds of species. As hunter numbers decline, other funding mechanisms may have to be created. NB: \$1 in 1935 equates to \$19 in 2021.

According to the US Fish and Wildlife Service, only 4.5% of our adult population hunted in 2016. That is the lowest rate in the 1955 to 2016 study period. Inadequate funding for state wildlife agencies is a big deal. A lot of state agency funding comes from hunting and fishing via the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program at the US Fish and Wildlife Service—often referred to as the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds. Without those dollars, state agencies would be in dire straits. I know first-hand, I'm on the board of the Department of Wildlife Resources here in Virginia. We are looking hard at way to diversify that funding stream.

TW: If the mechanism for generating sufficient revenue from hunting tags, fishing licenses and sales taxes on gear to fund wildlife management is broken, are there changes afoot in identifying alternative revenue sources? Do you think, for example, the attitude of the hunting community has kept pace with shifting values of society, with citizens increasingly willing to pay to watch animals live? People come

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from all over the world, for instance, to Jackson Hole and nearby communities, and generate millions of dollars for the local economy, just to catch a glimpse of Grizzly 399 and her cubs, live.

TS: This is going to piss off some of my hunting friends, but no, I don't think some in the hunting community have kept pace. I think they're whistling past the graveyard. There are elements in the hunting world who won't embrace the "others," the non-hunters who appreciate wildlife, so they want to blame them. Sound familiar? The hunting community and industry need to take a hard look at what image they are putting out there. I know good folks are working on changing that, but the focus has to go beyond their own parochial interests.



Grizzly 399 and a recent brood in Grand Teton National Park, near Yellowstone. Born in 1996, 399—"the most famous mother bear in the world"—is worth far more alive to the regional economy than as a hunter's trophy. Visitors to the Greater Yellowstone Area spend millions of dollars annually to see charismatic megafauna such as bears, moose, elk and mountain sheep. Syler Peralta-Ramos photo

TW: How can that growing wildlife constituency of non-hunters be brought into the discussion to help address the fiscal problems facing state wildlife management agencies?

TS: It's going to take a cultural shift to do that. Everyone should be welcome at the table. We

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need *proactive* conservation. Here is a maxim to consider: Access to healthy habitat creates recreational opportunity. Having that healthy habitat is an expensive proposition. If hunters and anglers want opportunity, then they need to be willing to invite other people to the table who can help fund the conservation that supports the healthy habitat.

TW: I'm not trying to grandstand here, but let's be clear: Wildlife doesn't hold value only if it can be monetized by humans. Equally important is recognizing the intrinsic non-economic value of species, their existence value as products of creation and their important role in healthy ecosystems. The thrill of hearing a wild wolf howl, and what it adds to the feeling of a place, is priceless and age-old.

Is there any legislation on the horizon that could raise money for funding state and federal wildlife agencies?

TS: There is the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, which should be reintroduced soon. Known as RAWA, it authorizes more than a billion dollars for state fish and game agencies and an additional \$97 million to tribal agencies. What makes this attractive to the other members of the wildlife constituency is the state agencies must spend 15% of the funds to help recover state or federally listed species. There is a two-fold benefit.

TW: Outdoor-gear manufacturers have steadfastly rejected an excise tax on the sale of all outdoor gear beyond hunting gear. Similarly, talking about spending money on non-game species in big hunting states has been a third rail in the hunting community.

TS: Both were true and, to a certain degree, still are. This is part of the cultural shift I'm talking about. Science and common sense tell us that good habitat for threatened and endangered species is good habitat for game species and good habitat for game species benefits all wildlife. They are not mutually exclusive.

It's a "rising tide lifts all boats proposition." And we are seeing a shift in the right direction by the hunting community. You can see it in who is supporting RAWA. We'll see if outdoor-gear manufacturers, whose customers recreate on public lands and enjoy seeing wildlife, are more amenable to funding mechanisms that could be extended to a tax on all outdoor gear—be downhill skis, backpacks or outdoor clothing.

TW: The outdoor-gear industry says that its companies already pay plenty, through tariffs on products made offshore and through personal contribution to conservation.

TS: If you recreate in the outdoors, you are a user no different from hunters and anglers. One benefit of having a special tax on outdoor gear for conservation is that it makes more outdoor recreationists stakeholders in conservation and would give them a greater voice with state fish and game departments. Right now, there may be employees in state fish and game departments who feel like the only way they can guarantee their employment is by selling more hunting and fishing licenses.

TW: Does this mean arguing that more predators should be killed, in order to make sure there are more

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game animals?

TS: I am uncomfortable equating hunting with the killing of predators. I understand the need to manage wildlife and the need to manage predators, but it has to be done thoughtfully, ethically and humanely.

Republished with permission from the March 8, 2021, edition of Mountain Journal. The conversation between Wilkinson and Sadler will continue in July with a discussion of controversial anti-predator bills moving through legislatures in Northern Rockies states.

Banner image: The young Theodore Roosevelt in his days as a rancher and hunter in the Dakota Territory, c. 1885. Wealthy Easterners like TR launched the modern US conservation movement.

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