

by Todd Wilkinson and Tom Sadler

A 'Dark Ages' of wildlife management descends on the West



In part 2 of their dialogue, Wilkinson and Sadler discuss how state legislators [in the United States] are setting back wildlife conservation for grizzlies, wolves and other iconic animals.

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 to have a reasonable conversation about hunting as a tradition, its role in advancing wildlife conservation and 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, is it failing to recognize the valid positions of animal rights and holding reverence for non-human animals as sentient beings. The second of a two-part conversation (part one Hunters and Wildlife Conservation in America-Will wildlife conservation survive the evolution of outdoor recreation?).

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TODD WILKINSON: When we started this discussion in part one, we reminded readers that we were both raised in hunting cultures. Today, on a number of fronts, there is healthy disagreement about what “hunting” is and isn’t. In several states, legislatures are advancing bills that would ostensibly enlist “hunters”—which includes trappers—to help carry out predator annihilation.

TOM SADLER: Yes, it’s making news even back here in Washington, DC.

WILKINSON: Dr. Christopher Servheen, who served as national head of grizzly recovery for the US Fish and Wildlife Service and lives in Montana, wrote in an op ed piece for Mountain Journal. Now, as a hunter and vice president of the Montana Wildlife Federation, he asserted that states are regenerating in their attitudes toward grizzlies, wolves, black bears and mountain lions. He noted how one bill, among several controversial pieces of legislation in Montana, would prohibit grizzlies from being captured and relocated back to safety if they wander outside a designated conservation zone. He also called attention to another bill that would allow any person, if they claim their livestock or the safety of themselves or their pets is threatened, could shoot a grizzly on sight. Servheen wrote that what’s happening is undermining 40 years of conservation efforts, positive gains in public attitudes and co-existence.

SADLER: You’ve also mentioned to me legislation in Montana and Idaho pertaining to wolves as well as the recent “hunt” of wolves in Wisconsin that, some say, has brought a black eye to hunters.

WILKINSON: In Wisconsin, 216 wolves were killed by hunters and trappers in less than 60 hours—82 percent above the state’s quota. Many hunters chased down wolves using dogs. State wildlife officials there admitted they didn’t manage the hunt very well.

SADLER: What’s happening out West?

WILKINSON: There is legislation in Montana that would allow citizens to catch wolves in leghold traps and snares without limit, and it would bring heightened risk for killing other “non-target” species such as grizzlies and black bears, wolverines, lynx and even people’s pets. Same thing in Idaho. Wolves are being targeted for local eradication not based on any science or any factual proof they pose a serious threat to livestock or game populations. No other species ever recovered under the Endangered Species Act has ever been treated this way and it’s what led to the species being listed in 1975. States still seem to resent the fact they were compelled to bring species like wolves and grizzlies back from the brink.



A fair question about “fair chase hunting.” The two paintings above by French artist Alexandre-Francois Desportes are titled “The Stag Hunt” (left) and “The Wolf Hunt” (right).

Question: why is it considered unethical in the US for deer and elk to be chased down by hounds but not wolves, bears and mountain lions? In Wisconsin’s recent controversial wolf hunt many lobos were run down by dogs and in Montana there is a new bill that would legalize black bear hunting with dogs, which until this year has been banned. In Montana and Wyoming, it is also legal to chase down and kill coyotes using snowmobiles.

SADLER: I think Mr. Servheen has also referenced hound hunting, which has not been legal for chasing bears in Montana.

WILKINSON: That’s right. I just had another interview with Chris and what he said will appear in a new MoJo story. The basic gist is this: Using hounds to chase and kill black bears has long been viewed as violating fair chase guidelines in Montana and problematic for a number of reasons. For one, as Servheen noted, it’s a really, really bad idea in places where grizzlies exist, especially mothers with cubs. Grizzlies don’t tree and they will respond very aggressively to feeling cornered. What happens if a houndsman decides that his life or property—i.e. his dogs—are threatened by a grizzly that is only defending itself from an attack provoked by dogs? Will the bear then be shot and would it be legally defensible? Servheen says several different pieces of legislation runs counter to science, wildlife conservation and common sense.

SADLER: What’s going on in Wyoming?

WILKINSON: It’s timely you should mention Wyoming. Wyoming for years has been plotting a strategy to knock down wolf populations to the absolute minimum to comply with low numeric federal delisting thresholds that have little to do with the spirit of recovering a species. By its own rhetoric which I’ve been following as a journalist since the mid-1980s, Wyoming claims that it is a proud collaborator in recovering imperiled species yet the moment that the hand off from the federal government into state hands occurs, its politicians advocate for ways to reduce populations. I know some biologists with

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Wyoming Game and Fish, the US Fish and Wildlife Service and Montana Fish Wildlife and Parks who are frustrated. With state employees in Wyoming and Montana, they know that if they say anything, it will negatively affect their careers. They are embarrassed and appalled.

SADLER: Can you give me an example of how Wyoming's position toward wolves is playing out on the ground?

WILKINSON: Already in Wyoming, in more than 80 percent of the state beyond the tiny northwest corner where Yellowstone and Grand Teton reside, a person can kill a wolf, again a species recently recovered via the Endangered Species Act, every day of the year, 24 hours a day, by any means including lethal techniques that would otherwise arguably violate fair chase and humane treatment of animals—such as poisoning animals with ultra-toxic chemicals, burning animals in dens and gunning them from the sky. Wolves are treated like rats. Objectively, that doesn't seem to be managing an iconic animal, which draws tourists from around the world to parks like Yellowstone and Grand Teton, with reverence nor be in accordance with ethics touted by the hunting organization Boone & Crockett.

SADLER: I seem to remember an in-depth report in Mountain Journal about ethics. It was a story that got circulated nationally.

WILKINSON: Yes, we took a deep dive the fact that in Rocky Mountain states it is legal to chase down coyotes with snowmobiles and actually run them over to kill them. It happens every winter and it, like predator-killing contests, are touted as great sport that brings hunters together and teaches young people how to hunt. After our report, there was national outrage and five different bills that would outlaw running down coyotes with snowmobiles were advanced in both the Montana and Wyoming legislatures. Lawmakers rejected those bills and, in some cases, wouldn't even give them a fair airing in subcommittees and committees. The message sent to the public is that such things are part of local culture and perfectly acceptable.

SADLER: I read the story.

WILKINSON: The vast majority of people I interviewed were lifelong hunters, not anti-hunters. Three of them had been chairs of their state fish and game commissions as well as a spokesperson for Boone & Crockett, another was the late legendary hunter-conservationist Jim Posewitz, another was former Montana state senator and wolf biologist Mike Phillips and another was a rancher outside Pinedale, Wyoming who publicly condemned both running down coyotes with snowmobiles and predator-killing derbies.

SADLER: Wow. It sounds like this year, there are plenty of bills involving predators in the Northern Rockies.

WILKINSON: More broadly, wildlife conservationists and policy people say these maneuverings raise a lot of questions about "rural cultural attitudes" toward predators being carried forward by lawmakers that aren't based on facts. And they reflect poorly on the "traditions" of hunting, and even the purpose of the Endangered Species Act. Do we recover species so that states can turn immediately around and

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try to re-eradicate them? States have claimed they want to be partners in promoting permanent species recovery but these bills arguably call not only that into question but they make the case, Servheen says, why states cannot be trusted after delisting occurs. He says “the Dark Ages” of wildlife management have returned. Let me pose a rhetorical inquiry to you, Tom, a guy who regularly mixes with some of the most respected sportsmen and sportswomen in the country:

If elk and mule deer are supposed to be treated with utmost respect, why not wolves, coyotes and even prairie dogs —the latter that, as native species, support prairie ecosystems and the survival of dozens of other species, including critically imperiled black-footed ferrets? Is what’s happening in the West and in Wisconsin, especially with predators, sound like ethical engagement and treatment of species beloved by a large percentage of the American public?

SADLER: Nope. What you describe is not “hunting” in my book. Here is my problem with stuff like that when it is called hunting. It tarnishes the word “hunt” and detracts from the notion of fair chase. I also think the things like you describe, when couched as hunting, gives ammunition to folks who want to see hunting in all forms done away with. That is not an outcome those of us who hunt, should want to see happen. For me it is respect for the animal.

WILKINSON: You say it’s “not hunting” yet many who partake in those practices identify as hunters; they believe that what they are doing is hunting and people in their community believe it’s hunting, too.

SADLER: And that’s a problem.

WILKINSON: What does respect for the animal look like?

SADLER: I’ve always been guided by this part of the Boone and Crockett Clubs statement on fair chase, “Ethical decisions in hunting, however, ultimately rest with the individual in what feels right or wrong, and what technologies or methods are acceptable or unacceptable for them to be successful.”

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There is a lot of information in this poster—confirmed by simple fact-checking—that is grossly misleading. In fact, it would take a long article explaining them all.

The poster announces bounties paid to kill wolves in Idaho. Now the Montana legislature is proposing to bring back a de-facto bounty on wolves in that state, too.

WILKINSON: Okay, but to play Devil's advocate, arguing that ethics comes down to "what feels right or wrong" for individual hunters in the moment seems to be ambiguous and dodgy. I could claim that it's perfectly acceptable to aerial gun predators from airplanes and you might not. Most people, for instance, don't poach wildlife but anti-poaching laws are in place to punish those who have no respect for ethics or the reputation of hunting. Just because something is legal doesn't make it ethically or morally defensible, does it?

SADLER: Your point is well taken. What is critical in the "legal" vs "defensible" construct you mention is personal responsibility. I hope we as humans are better than carrying out and celebrating cruel or inhumane treatment of animals, any animal, and yes I know that is wishful thinking on my part. There may be situations to kill animals for legitimate reasons, but when respect for the animal is lost there is going to be blowback.

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WILKINSON: I hear you when you say it gives hunting a bad name. Why, then, I ask, won't both legislators who hunt, and leaders of state fish and game agencies, who claim they are protecting the reputation and integrity of hunting, come out and publicly condemn running down wildlife with snowmobiles and legislation that allows essentially vigilante removal of grizzlies and wolves to happen?

SADLER: Tough question to answer because I don't know the situation on the ground or what kinds of conversations are happening among legislators. That said, I hope they recognize that public blowback on unethical, inhumane and cruel treatment of any animal is going to happen and things can get unpleasant. I've been around long enough to know that political realities likely come into play. But most hunters I know bend their knee to fair chase and find unethical, inhumane and cruel an anathema. At some point hunters and the public will become vocal enough to demand changes and the political calculus may change.

WILKINSON: You've noted that Boone & Crockett in its guidelines, which are considered the holy grail for hunters, explicitly suggests that wildlife deserves to be hunted in a way that does not result in the infliction of excessive pain, suffering and cruelty yet when we look on social media, we can find plenty of videos in which blood sport is glorified and there are commercial sponsors of those videos. Essentially, manufacturers of hunting products are using bloodsport to generate eyeballs and sales. Social media has been a game changer. It has created not only a culture of exhibitionists but voyeurs. It's not like the hunting culture we grew up in.

SADLER: We should have another discussion about social media but you raise a critical point. The new culture of exhibitionists and voyeurs is especially troubling. When I think of respect for the animal, I'm reminded of Aldo Leopold's "fierce green fire." It's about killing the last wild wolf and my reading it changed me years ago. Leopold wrote: "We reached the old wolf in time to watch a fierce green fire dying in her eyes. I realized then, and have known ever since, that there was something new to me in those eyes - something known only to her and to the mountain. I was young then, and full of trigger-itch; I thought that because fewer wolves meant more deer, that no wolves would mean hunters' paradise. But after seeing the green fire die, I sensed that neither the wolf nor the mountain agreed with such a view." Hunters, legislators and game commissions would be well advised to think like a mountain.

WILKINSON: What about target shooting of prairie dogs or just killing coyotes for fun, or wildlife killing contests that offer prizes for those who kill the most? A growing number of states have banned coyote killing contests, with biologists in those states saying they serve no noble purpose. What's your take?

SADLER: Mark me down as against those practices. It's hard to see respect for the animal in those situations. There is nothing sporting about it and it's a perversion to call it hunting. It goes against the very nature of what I said before about respect for the animals and ethical, fair chase hunting.

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Origin of “the teddy bear”: one is that some friends of Roosevelt clubbed a semi-tame black bear, tied it to a tree and encouraged TR to shoot it. He refused, saying he would not partake in such pathetic conduct. Cartoon done by Clifford Berryman in *The Washington Post* in 1902.

WILKINSON: Do you think Teddy Roosevelt, the President and patron saint sportsman who had an anti-predator mindset, would have, had he lived longer, embraced the ecological thinking of Aldo Leopold in recognizing the value of all species, including predators such as wolves, grizzlies, and mountain lions, etc?

SADLER: Oh man, anything I say is pure speculation. That said, I want to believe so, based on my reading of their writings and speeches. Here is one example to buttress my contention and we’ll let readers guess who wrote it: “We are, as a whole, still in that low state of civilization where we do not understand that it is also vandalism wantonly to destroy or to permit the destruction of what is beautiful in nature, whether it be a cliff, a forest, or a species of mammal or bird. Here in the United States we turn our rivers and streams into sewers and dumping-grounds, we pollute the air, we destroy forests, and exterminate fishes, birds and mammals—not to speak of vulgarizing charming landscapes with hideous advertisements. But at last it looks as if our people were awakening.”

WILKINSON: I don’t know. Who wrote it?

SADLER: It was TR making the observation more than a century ago. It appeared in the book *Our*

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Vanishing Wildlife In 1913. Leopold was then 26 and Roosevelt was 55. Leopold had an impressive grasp of the natural world.

WILKINSON: Who would you consider a modern exemplar of someone who was a hunter and angler and really embraced the same kind of Leopoldian thinking and wasn't afraid to tout it?

SADLER: This may be a leap here, but I've always considered my late friend Jim Range as a latter-day TR who also appreciated Leopold and encouraged folks to read *A Sand County Almanac*. I'm sure I'm not the only one who thinks of Jim that way either. He was a unique individual who could talk across boundaries. He influenced lawmakers and many others. No one can question his dedication to ethical hunting and fishing. It defined him. But when people talk about Range in action in Washington, DC it is his dedication to conservation of game and non-game species that people talk about. I don't think anyone else comes close. My favorite memory of Jim, bar none, and he was the best-man in my wedding, he said to me at dinner, "Tommy we have to protect the wild things. If we don't do it, it won't get done."

WILKINSON: For those who have never heard of Jim Range, why does he matter?

SADLER: Because anyone who hunts and fishes can emulate Jim Range. Folks like the late Jim Posewitz was in Montana. There's Range's contemporaries like Rollie Sparrowe in Wyoming, and Craig Mathews in Montana. There are some slightly younger people like Randy Newberg and Land Tawney who see themselves as connectors trying to unite people around values and a common love for wildlife. And they are trying to help diversify the appeal of hunting among People of Color and those who see eating game meat as a healthy, locally-grown alternative to other meat products. I know that MoJo has interviewed them and others like former Yellowstone superintendent Mike Finley who headed the Turner Foundation and Mike Sutton who has had a number of high-ranking positions in wildlife conservation.

WILKINSON: What made Range affective?

SADLER: He was a skilled bipartisan policy and political genius with an extraordinary network of friends and contacts. His fingerprints are all over the nation's conservation laws, including the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act. His championing of conservation tax incentives earned him a profile in Time magazine. He ably chaired the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership's board of directors pouring his enormous energy into its resurrection. He served with distinction and candor on the boards of Trout Unlimited, the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, the American Sportfishing Association, Ducks Unlimited, the American Bird Conservancy, the Pacific Forest Trust, the Valles Caldera Trust and the Yellowstone Park Foundation, now Yellowstone Forever.



A gathering at Tom Sadler's wedding party in the Madison Valley of Montana at Three Dollar Bridge. Left to right: son of the bride Matt Henderson, best man the late Jim Range, Sadler and angler-conservationist Craig Mathews who officiated the ceremony. Along with the late Alex Diekmann of Trust for Public Land, they also were major players involved with the Three Dollar Bridge fishing access and riparian corridor protection project. Photo courtesy Tom Sadler

WILKINSON: We opened this conversation with a reference to the fact that people, because of their own attitudes, are unable to talk respectfully with each other and can't get to the place where they agree to disagree yet still be united in a larger common cause like land protection. Range spent a lot of time in Montana bringing people together and sitting around a fire with a libation in hand.

SADLER: Jim Range could and was willing to talk with anyone, from animal rights activists to trophy hunters. He was disarming by being charming and respectful of different points of view. Range's attitude could be distilled down succinctly. He believed that wildlife, all wildlife, is deserving of compassionate stewardship, and that what's best for the natural world in the face of human development is also best for us. Well-intentioned efforts that did that he was pretty much in favor of and things that ran counter he was pretty much opposed.

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WILKINSON: Okay, we've covered a lot of ground. Final question: Why is this stuff so difficult to talk about? Why aren't conversations being led by our elected officials and even conservation leaders? Why are people so timid to discuss respect for life, ethics and morals when it comes to something we all care about—wildlife?

SADLER: This is why I think MoJo is important, in tackling subjects for a larger general readership where most media and conservation organizations are hesitant or not skilled enough to go. I look at it this way: Everything we do as adults is a teaching moment for young people and where hunting is concerned the future of hunting lies in the balance with the public perception of hunting we are creating. I would encourage those who are openly promoting hatred toward this country has invested a lot of time and effort to recover to reconsider what the consequences of their actions will be in the court of public opinion. Because it won't be good.

I would ask today's hunters to honestly reflect and ask themselves, "what are we teaching our kids?" If they don't see reverence and respect, but instead blood lust, trigger-itch and wanton waste then that is what they will learn. That is no way to guarantee a future for hunting and fishing.

Todd Wilkinson's note: For further reading, you can click here for the story about Aldo Leopold; and here for an investigative story about hunting ethics.

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Banner Image: Grizzly bears. Thomas D. Mangelsen (www.mangelsen.com) photo.

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