

# COVEY RISE®



# Bringing Home the Message

Sportsmen must be advocates for the viable use and conservation of nature.

BY SHANE MAHONEY

Hunting and fishing have been integral to human existence since mankind's earliest beginnings. Today, as recreational pursuits, their heartland lies in North America. Not only do we have tens of millions of hunters and anglers pursuing their passions each year on this continent, but North Americans are also major participants in international hunting and angling, helping to support the conservation of fish and wildlife and the livelihoods of those engaged in the sustainable use of wild species around the world. If hunting and angling were to cease in the United States and Canada, a shockwave would impact not only the economies, conservation programs, and cultures of these two nations, but those of many foreign destinations as well.

Presently, we face a growing assembly of threats to wildlife and fish populations, and to our hunting and angling traditions as well. An increasing loss of wildlife habitat worldwide, problems caused by invasive species and wildlife-transmitted diseases, the escalating overharvest of marine fisheries, and the ever-increasing demands for resources and energy development are just some of the challenges that must be dealt with on a global scale.

Last year, the World Wildlife Fund's 2016 *Living Planet Report* revealed that Earth's population of wild vertebrates declined 58 percent from 1970 to 2012, meaning the total number of wild animals with backbones fell by more than half within one human lifetime. The number one cause of this decline has been identified as habitat loss and degradation. These issues affect wildlife everywhere, including here in North America. Take the Florida panther, for instance, which once ranged throughout the southeastern United States. Perceived as a threat to humans, livestock, and game animals, it was nearly exterminated before being listed as an endangered species by the US Fish and Wildlife Service in 1967. Today, a full half-century later, fewer than 100 animals remain in the wild and, despite great efforts on its behalf, the panther's recovery has been slow,

thwarted significantly by habitat destruction and fragmentation due to urban sprawl.

Current estimates indicate there are approximately 50,000 nonnative species of plants and animals in the United States, of which about 4,300 are considered invasive. Invasive species disrupt natural communities and ecological processes, harming and sometimes eliminating native species that must compete for the same resources. Invasive species often cause a loss of diversity and result in ecosystems that are more vulnerable to other menaces, including disease. The round goby, for example, a small, bottom-dwelling fish native to Europe, arrived in North America in the ballast water of ships. It took less than a decade for it to spread through all five Great Lakes. In some areas, the species has reached densities of 100 fish per square meter and has had serious impacts on native species, including infecting Great Lakes fish and fish-eating birds with botulism type E.

Indeed, wildlife-transmitted diseases present more of a hazard to animals today than ever before. Severe infectious diseases of wildlife are on the increase mainly due to enhanced mobility of wildlife pathogens resulting from increasing globalization of trade and the incursion of human activity into previously isolated wildlife habitats. The transmitted pathogens and their associated epidemics are serious threats to biodiversity worldwide and result in population declines as well as degraded ecosystem function. Some of these diseases first arose here in North America. For example, chronic wasting disease (CWD) is a prion infection affecting the brains and nervous systems of cervids, including mule deer, white-tailed deer, elk, and moose. The disease, which causes neurodegeneration and is always fatal, has been reported in multiple instances and in several US states. In Wisconsin, CWD first appeared in 2002 and has now spread to 43 counties. The state remains uncertain about the full extent of its impact on wildlife populations, human and domestic animal health, and local economies.

Marine fish provide 15 percent of all animal protein consumed by human beings globally. However, the increasing overharvest of

marine fishes has created widespread unsustainability. A 2009 assessment found that 80 percent of global fish stocks are either overly or fully exploited, or have collapsed. A striking example is the case of the endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna, formerly the foundation of one of the world's most profitable commercial fisheries. Since 1970, its population has declined by more than 80 percent due to growing consumer demand and overfishing, and this decline affects more than menu availability and cost. Atlantic bluefin tuna are a top predator in the marine food chain and help maintain the food web structure in the ocean environment, a process which is essential to the health and resilience of many interacting species.

As the demand for Atlantic bluefin tuna and other fish species has increased, so have worldwide demands for natural resources and energy in general. There are now more than 7 billion people on Earth, and the United Nations predicts the global population will exceed 9 billion by 2050. It is estimated that in order to meet the needs of our growing global population, food production will need to increase by 70 percent worldwide. However, increased demand for resources and energy development typically mean increased industrialization, increased land conversion, and subsequent loss of habitat and associated natural diversity, the very things we cannot afford to lose if humanity's ecological requirements are to be met.

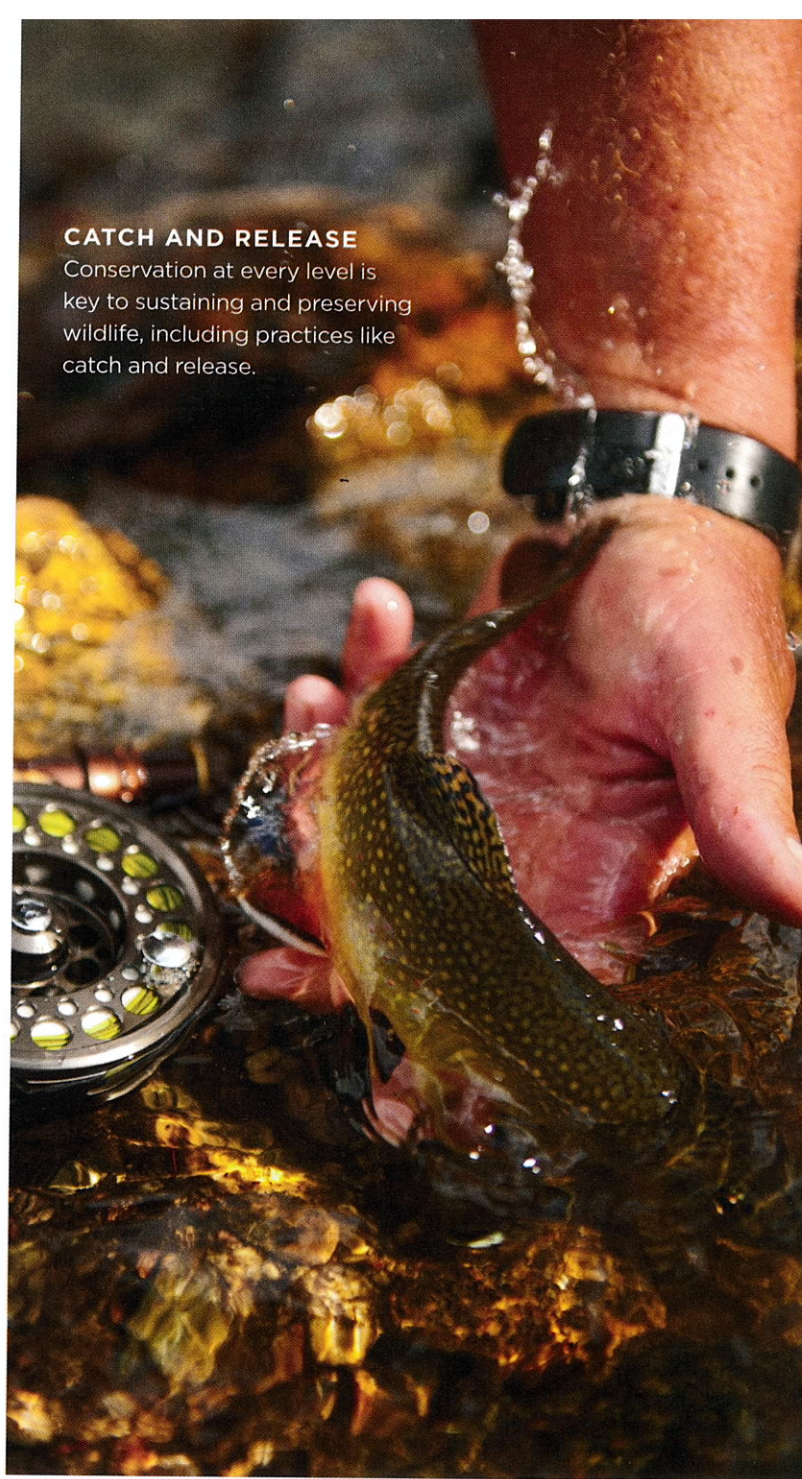
These environmental realities and the concerns they generate have implications for hunting and fishing opportunities, here and worldwide. As society becomes more focused on the problem of wildlife loss, some people come to view activities such as hunting as potentially harmful, irrelevant, or unnecessary. This trend has already led to considerable confusion among the general public and even respected journalists over terms such as hunting and poaching, which are often treated as synonymous and used interchangeably. Similarly, all trade in wildlife products is coming to be understood by the public and policy makers alike as illegal, despite the overwhelming evidence that much of it has been beneficial and sustainable for a very long period of time.

We cannot simply ignore these clear and influential realities or wish them away. Those who oppose hunting are well organized and determined in their views, and they are having impacts at home and abroad, especially where the wider and non-opposed public is becoming increasingly concerned for wildlife's fate and confused over whether hunting really has a conservation role to play. Opposition to hunting grizzly bears here in North America or elephants in Africa resonates with the general public and thereby widely influences political decisions beyond those issues.

As individual sportsmen and women, we might not be aware of how much is happening on this oppositional front—but we need to be. Distant rumblings warn of approaching storms. Today it might not be our bird hunting or fishing under threat, but tomorrow it very well could be. And, if these possibilities seem far-fetched, let's remember that until fairly recently the hunting of carnivores in North America was not only accepted but widely

### CATCH AND RELEASE

Conservation at every level is key to sustaining and preserving wildlife, including practices like catch and release.



encouraged and approved. Today, the hunting of mountain lions, black and brown bears, and wolves is a highly contentious and deeply divisive issue in our society. This has all changed in little more than a generation.

So, in wishing to protect our wildlife heritage traditions, how do we proceed? It's not enough to simply say we are conservationists, concerned for wildlife's future; rather, we must demonstrate this, over and over again. Only by doing so can we convince society of our concern for the wild others we both pursue and protect. Wildlife exists and thrives where we take action on its behalf. We can't preserve wild resources if we don't take deliberate steps to protect them and, as individuals and nations, make some

sacrifices on their behalf. We must support wildlife management activities, even and perhaps especially when it means restricting our own activities.

We must be true stewards of all wildlife and nature, supporting conservation efforts for game animals and nonhunted/nonfished species alike, not just financially, but also through our actions and our words. We should openly demonstrate our concerns for wildlife and for the proper treatment of all animals. Volunteer at a wildlife refuge; join a conservation organization; organize a litter cleanup in your neighborhood; don't leave water running; keep your cat indoors; remove invasive weeds from your yard; recycle your engine oil; buy a duck stamp; plant a pollinator garden; if you see evidence of poaching, contact your state fish and game office; talk to your kids about the value of wildlife and teach them, by example, to hunt and fish responsibly and respectfully. There is a lot of us can do.

Activism is the key. Implicit support for conservation is fine, but not enough; we must be protagonists for wildlife and for our hunting and angling traditions. We must recognize our responsibility to educate others about the realities of wildlife conservation. If we do not explain the relevance of hunting to others, who

these traditions in modern society. And one thing is for certain. The argument that will resonate is not that we wish to kill, or even that we wish to kill and consume, but rather, that we wish to conserve. We must choose to join this activist movement or choose the end of our passions. For me, the choice is clear.

I have been engaged in the conservation of wildlife my entire life. As a research biologist, I've worked to ensure our approaches to conservation are based on reason and science—on real knowledge, not on emotion alone. As a wildlife manager, I have worked to regulate the harvest of species and know well the diversity of views and challenges surrounding this practice. As a writer, lecturer, radio and television host, and filmmaker, I've worked to ensure that the fate of wildlife and our responsibilities to wild creatures and wild places remain critical parts of our social debates. As a hunter and angler, I've endeavored to share with the wider public and political elites how and why these ancient traditions remain relevant in a modern society, why they matter, and why they must be preserved.

Perhaps most important, I've tried to convince hunters and anglers to live as conservationists first, to safeguard our sacred responsibility to be the first and greatest voice for the wild crea-

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will? Furthermore, if we want our children and grandchildren to enjoy the riches of a full natural world, one where we can pass onto them the great traditions of hunting and angling, then we need to carefully consider how we are perceived, not by our hunting friends, but by the public at large. We must engage in the conservation debate and become activists for wildlife and fish as treasured resources, not just as creatures to be pursued. If, as hunters and anglers, all we are known for is a desire to sustain wild creatures so we can have an opportunity to catch or kill them, then we can be assured that society will make some painful decisions for us. We can either shape this debate now, or allow others to shape it for us. Hunters and anglers need to decide whether they want to lead, follow, or get out of the way.

We live in a time when more and more people are developing lifestyles completely divorced from nature, when participation is declining in many outdoor activities, when kids are often surprised or even disgusted to learn that meat in the grocery store comes from living animals. The problem is, as hunters we are a minority in modern society. We who see and participate fully in nature as it really is—wild, fierce, and beautiful, all at the same time—account for less than 5 percent of the citizenry. For the majority of people, hunting experiences are foreign, and as a consequence, so too are their views. The result is we can no longer expect that society will simply “get it.” It now falls directly on us to explain hunting and angling and to defend the relevance of

tures we pursue and cherish. I know that many of us share this view. The time has come to raise our voices in concert for our traditions, our passions, and for those wild others at the center of both. It is time to bring the message home. ✦

**WILD HARVEST** *In 2015, I launched a landmark project, the Wild Harvest Initiative®, designed to evaluate the economic and social benefits of recreational wild animal harvests in American and Canadian societies. Founded upon and driven by a diverse partnership of individuals, business interests, conservation NGOs, and government agencies, the project's mission is to provide a first-ever evaluation of the biomass and economic value of wild food harvested by recreational hunters and anglers in Canada and the United States and to assess the wider community of consumers who share in this harvest. Its outcomes will contribute to conversations about the relevance of such wild animal harvest in modern North American society, exploring its connections to the conservation of wild lands and waters, the environment, and our own food security. By conjoining these insights with existing economic assessments of recreational hunting and angling, and by evaluating the costs and mechanisms that might be considered necessary to replace this wild food harvest, the Initiative will also help focus a broader question facing conservation policy institutions in both countries: namely, if hunting and angling were to cease tomorrow, what would be the consequences?*