



ABOUT SHANE

Shane Mahoney is considered one of the leading international authorities on wildlife conservation. A rare combination of historian, scientist and philosopher he brings a unique perspective to wildlife issues that has motivated and inspired audiences around the world. Named one of the 10 Most Influential Canadian Conservationists by *Outdoor Canada Magazine* and nominated for Person of the Year by *Outdoor Life Magazine*, he has received numerous awards including the Public Service Award of Excellence from the government of Newfoundland and Labrador and International Conservationist of the Year by *Safari Club International*. Born and raised in Newfoundland he brings to his writings and lectures a profound commitment to rural societies and the sustainable use of natural resources, including wildlife and fish.

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The desire to understand our place in nature is an ages old preoccupation of the human animal, arising long before our earliest civilizations. Indeed the emphasis given to this by hunter gatherer societies, our longest and most successful social enterprise by far, gave rise to the extraordinary world of myth and ritual that are among the great hallmarks of our humanity. In this sense it can be argued that modern religion and art were born in a womb of uncertainty, an intense and shadowed place where man's sense of uniqueness conflicted with his inescapable dependence upon the wild others he pursued and killed. It would appear little has changed, and modern debates over our dual citizenship, as nature's consumers and custodians all, are unlikely to go away any time soon.

Hunting, of course, has emerged as one of the most contentious issues of all. Why in the modern world, it is asked, should the wilful pursuit and taking of wild creatures be allowed? Obviously, for many people, experiences with wildlife can include the stalking and voyeuristic capture of the animal, visually or with camera, but not extend to predatory engagement. Many individuals thus condemn hunting as an anachronism and unnecessary cruelty. By focusing on the animal's death they come to condemn the

CONSERVATION MATTERS

with Shane Mahoney

THE WHY AND RELEVANCE OF HUNTING

hunting process that leads to it. While it may be convenient for hunters to condemn such ideas outright, or ascribe them to a fringe “animal rights crowd”, the reality is that many people who hold such oppositional views towards hunting are neither fringe nor animal rights activists. They simply don’t see any societal value in hunting, and therefore see the pain and death of wild creatures that result as unnecessary and unacceptable.

Many of these individuals care deeply about conservation and about wildlife. In this sense they rightfully deserve both our respect and willingness to explain. If they are led to honestly ask us “Why do you hunt?” and “What relevance does hunting have today?”, then I believe, as hunters, we

have a responsibility to answer truthfully. But this, it appears, is not such an easy task. Most often hunters respond to the question of “why” by explaining some of the benefits they personally derive from hunting, rather than the deeply personal motivations that lead them to pursue it. Thus they will cite time out of doors, or the exercise benefits, or the opportunity to spend time with friends and family as the reasons for their hunting activities; to which the opponents of hunting will respond, but why do these things need to end in the death of a beautiful creature? Can you not derive these pleasantries without killing things?

These perspectives obviously frustrate hunters, believing as we do that our

engagements with wild animals lead us to become elite advocates for their conservation and protection. We see the economic and political support that hunters have for so long provided as critical to wildlife and note that under many circumstances hunting can help reduce negative wildlife impacts that can undermine public support for this resource. We point to animal diseases, threats to human property and safety, and habitat alterations as just some of the negative impacts that unrestrained wildlife populations can inflict on society. Hunting, we argue, can help deal with these issues, at no cost to the taxpayer. So, doesn’t everybody win? We then often

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The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) wants to start a fundamental shift among hunters from caring about hunting to caring about all wildlife. Ranchers care about cattle and anglers care about fish, but hunters seem to only care about their sport. Hunters must be committed to the responsible use of wildlife resources and passionate about preserving a diversity of wildlife species. The GOABC is a strong supporter of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which stipulates that law and science should be managed by hunters and anglers who are dedicated to conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter conservationist.

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add, if hunters don't do this, who will? Unfortunately for hunting, many of these arguments are also easily deflected, at least in part. In fact, we hunt only a tiny percentage of the wildlife species in North America. Most animal populations rise and fall with no influence from hunting whatsoever, and relatively few examples of hunting effectively regulating animal populations can actually be found. Furthermore, many hunted species have reached incredible numbers, far beyond what hunting can reasonably control. Certainly it is true that hunters, through license sales and tax levies, do

fund an incredible array of conservation programs, supporting game and non-game species management and research, and purchasing extensive amounts of habitat for biodiversity in general. However, considerable public funding from general revenues are also applied to wildlife conservation in North America, often far more than hunters are aware of or will acknowledge. Yet, there can be no doubt, that, per capita, hunters pay the greatest freight, and this fact we emphasize too little. So where does this leave us? It leaves us exactly where we are; in desperate need of a

more fundamental debate and dialogue on the issues of why we hunt and its relevance in modern times. It may be fashionable or convenient to reduce arguments in favour of hunting to simplistic categories or half-truths, but in the end these arguments will fail us where it matters most; in the fight for the hearts of the public majority who still support us, for the support of those who may be opposed but are truly open minded, and for our own life long commitments to our greatest engagement with nature. What organization will rise to lead this charge, I wonder?