



SPORTS AFIELD

THE PREMIER HUNTING ADVENTURE MAGAZINE

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NATURE'S NATION

How American hunters can regain the prestige and cultural influence we used to enjoy.



VIC SCHEDEL

Hunters who share their knowledge of natural history and work for wildlife conservation are on the forefront of restoring hunters' respected place in American culture.

One of the most striking things about modern hunting is not the controversy it engenders, but the enduring, strong support it receives from the wider American public. While most organizations and individual hunters appear to accept this as a matter of course, I have always wondered why this support exists. After all, when only 6 percent of us in the U.S. and Canada actually hunt, doesn't it appear a little perplexing as to why some 80 percent of society continues to support our activity and right to do so? In a society that is highly sensitive to issues of animal welfare (if not animal rights), and where the issues of firearms ownership and use are

highly controversial, why does the unengaged and uninitiated majority fall to our side?

Some in the hunting public might argue, of course, to just let sleeping deer lie. Why not just take the good news that seems to come every time a major public opinion poll is completed and quietly move ahead, comforted by the notion that whatever we are doing, it must be right? I see this as a mistake, and one that derives from what I term the "fallacy of linear expectation." Most of us seem to believe that any major change that will come, whether it surrounds hunting or any other social enterprise, will be forecast by some gradual and perceptible shift in public opinion—that there will always be early warning signs to alert us in time to avoid negative outcomes. Yet, this is clearly often not the case. Sometimes change, even revolutionary change, can come quite unexpectedly. Might I just

mention the fall of the Berlin Wall or the Arab Spring as two small examples?

Therefore, I believe we should try to understand why the general public so strongly supports legal hunting. By doing so, we may prepare ourselves for any change in such support and develop means by which to forecast such a turning of the tide, as well as develop practical ways to deal with such a circumstance. After all, without strong public support, hunting will certainly find itself in a precarious position.

Where do we begin in such a search? Like most stories, I believe the story of hunting in America begins at the beginning, that extraordinary period when Europeans landed on the shores of a new and vibrant world and decided it was theirs.

From the very first colonizing efforts at Jamestown, the wilderness lands, abundant wildlife, and exceptional hunting opportunities of America were extolled. Indeed, the reality of hunting as a means of providing food and, to a lesser extent, recreation for early colonists was of such importance that by the late nineteenth century, it was clear that Americans had come to view themselves as a hunting culture. This seems natural enough given the role American proficiency in hunting wildlife had played in provisioning the nation's early life, and in the firearms skill that proved so useful during the War of Independence.

There were many other forces, however—especially those associated with the American identity of self-reliance, independence, and hardiness—that helped to vault hunting in America to its heyday of social prominence and leadership in the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As we struggle to maintain hunting's relevance to-

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day, we might clearly benefit from understanding just how this rise to social prominence occurred, for it was neither intentional nor preordained.

Indeed, the late nineteenth century appears to have been an unlikely time for the rise of hunting. Social elites in northeastern American cities were pushing hard to domesticate their societies: advancing the arts, reforming prisons, and launching movements for animal welfare and even animal rights. Yet it was among these same elites that sport hunting emerged as a valued, even iconic, American pastime that preserved the best of the nation's bloodline.

Hunters and their traditions became emblematic of what had made the nation great and, for an increasingly urbanized and serviced society, was the one tonic that might preserve the mettle that had driven the defeat of Britain's great war-machine and the frenzied push to the Pacific. Never since has there been such an outpouring of popular literature on hunting, and certainly there is nothing today that even remotely approaches the intense mixture of adventure, politics, and nationalism that roared through the printing presses of that time. Unlike today, hunting was at the center of social discourse, not on the outside, an orphan peering in. How, one wonders, do we get it back to this privileged position?

Of the many forces that helped advance hunting during this period, two emerge as especially important.

About DSC


An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

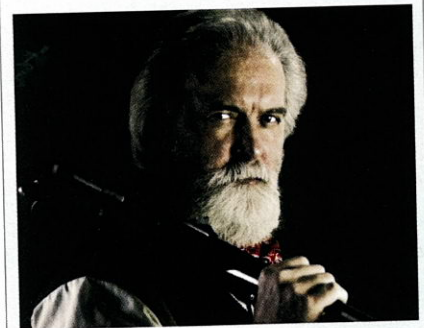
The first was the drive, post-Revolution, to actually define the American character. After all, before the Revolution, most Americans still turned to England for their identity and had struggled mightily to transform the New World landscape to that ideal, as well as to attain, preserve, and celebrate the social etiquette and values of the "Mother Country." With independence all that changed, and a great celebration of the new nation, its landscapes and resources, including wildlife, ensued.

This was fueled, in no small measure, by the growing realization that America was itself changing, and that many aspects of it were already vanishing. Hunting images helped recall the vast wilderness that first colonists encountered, and the time, fast disappearing, when a man could make his own way alone and unencumbered. Thus, while the small-scale American farmer was still to be admired for his hard work and determination, the American hunter was to be the one concrete artifact of America's beginnings, a frontier adventurer and living assurance of something that resonates still in the American mind—that frontiers and the conquering of them are forever possible and remain a manifest destiny for the nation. Lifted by such social currents, the hunter-citizen vaulted to star status, an indelible link to his nation's past and future potential.

The second great force that helped establish hunting's pedigree in the nineteenth century was the rise of natural history, a blend of sciences devoted to understanding the natural world. The vast knowledge of this field held by established European institutions was part and parcel of their nations' professed superiority in worldly matters. It was an easy shuffle for the North American hunter, already knowledgeable of the ways and haunts of his quarry, to become a purveyor of knowledge about

the natural world and thereby to help elevate his own nation to the stage of this discourse. In this sense, the hunter, with his knowledge of natural history, became a soldier for his nation's future, helping it to rise beyond its rough beginnings and to walk with the great nations of the world. This hunter-naturalist was to rise to great prominence in American society, and men like John James Audubon and Theodore Roosevelt have rightfully taken their place in this pantheon, one that has given hunting a credibility that simple knowledge of the gun or the skill of shooting never could.

What might this short history review say to modern hunters? If we wish to regain hunting's early status and high level of respect, then let's get serious about the two legitimate and honorable faces of our identity: the hunter-citizen who speaks for protection and wise use of our nation's resources, and the hunter-naturalist who acquires, out of admiration and respect, a deep knowledge of the wildlife we pursue. Then, and only then, will we return to our rightful place in the American mind, a place of prestige and influence where our past is honored and our future secured. 



Shane Mahoney

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