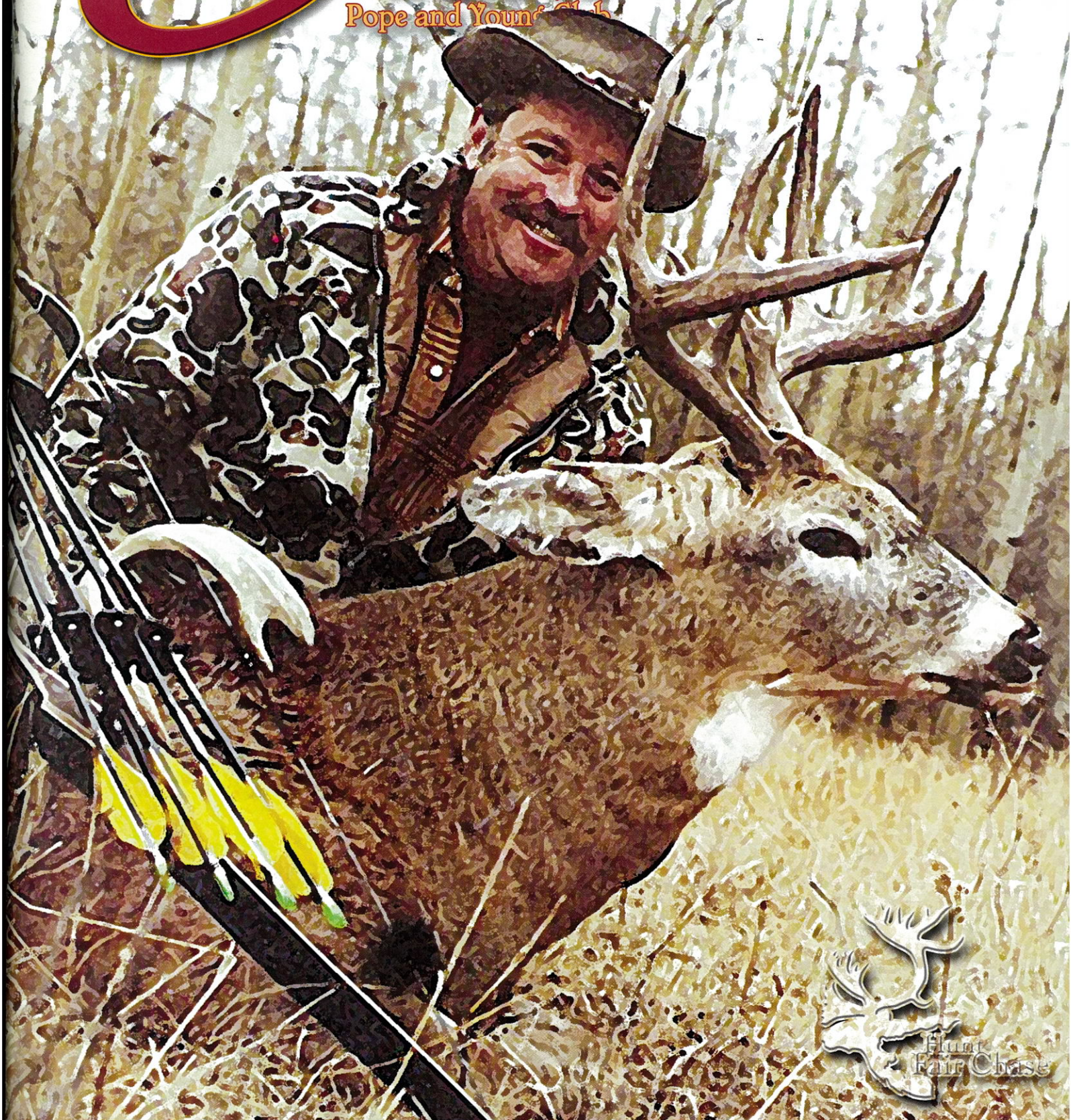
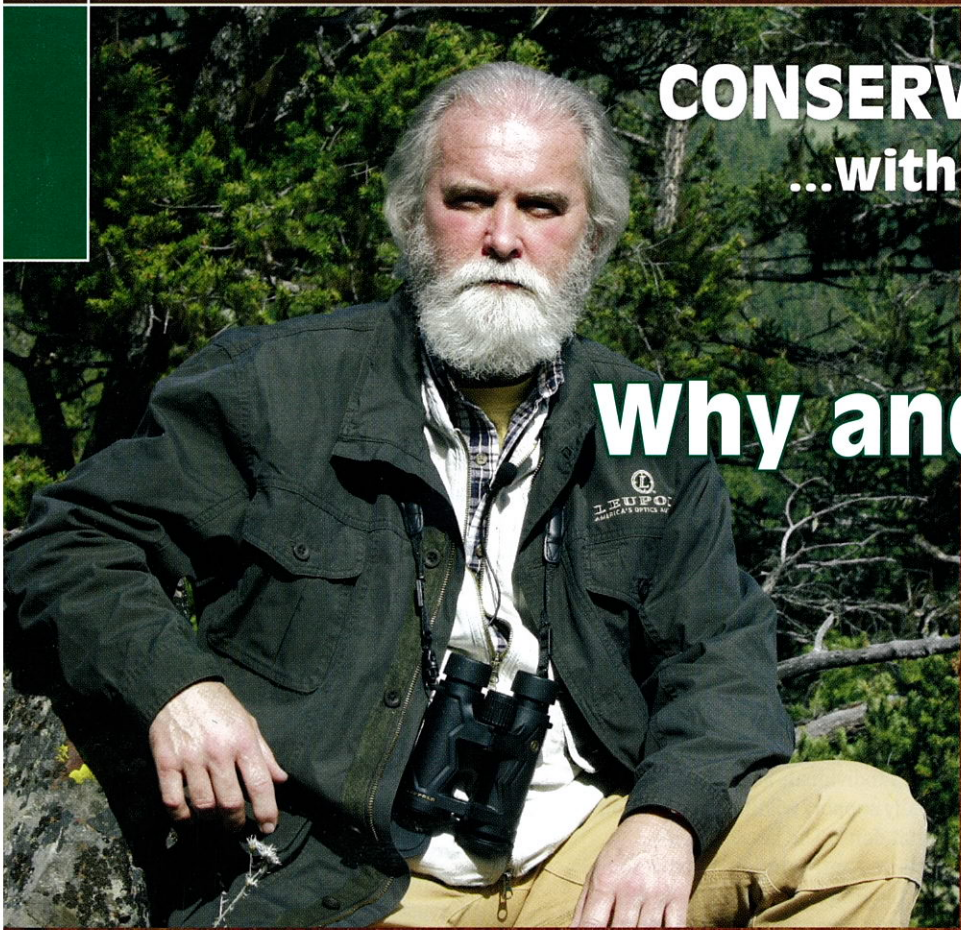


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CONSERVATION MATTERS ...with **Shane Mahoney**

The Why and Relevance of Hunting

About Shane.....Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is one of the most recognized and respected leaders in wildlife conservation today. Considered by many to be hunting's most eloquent spokesman, his lectures and writings have inspired audiences around the world.

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 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 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?

