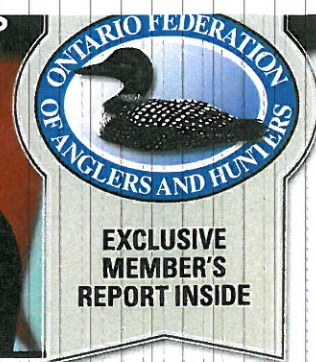


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REPORT INSIDE



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THE ROAD AHEAD

Conservationists, scientists, and politicians converge at the National Fish and Wildlife Conservation Congress.

BY ASSISTANT EDITOR STEVE GALEA



Shane Mahoney steps up to the podium. He looks like Moses and, as we soon find out, has the oratorical skills of a fine Shakespearian actor. His message, delivered with impeccable cadence, poetic prose, and evangelical fervour, is simple, yet profound. "Somehow," he says, "we have to convince people at all levels of society that conservation matters."

Then, for the next 45 minutes, he proceeds to make a very convincing case. He begins by telling us about the history of the North American model of conservation that has successfully

protected wildlife throughout the U.S. and Canada. Then, he reminds us how it's founded on the principles of sustainable use – and how that principle is under attack.

He follows with a few irrefutable truths: conservation is irrevocably linked to public health; the peace and prosperity of the world depend on ensuring the basic components of the natural world are maintained; all ecosystems are intertwined; and wildlife knows no borders and can no longer exist without human stewardship.

He pauses. Then, he looks us collectively in the eye and asks an uncomfortable, but vital, question.

"How can it be that the very thing that all humanity relies upon, the natural world – and conservation as the best mechanism we have devised to secure it, to keep it, to maintain it – how can it be that this is allowed to become a sideshow in the political, social, and economic debates of this country and others?"

He urges us to change this. "We have to position this," he proclaims, "at the same levels as the ideas of democracy, freedom under the law, at the same status as the notions of justice and human rights. Because, those issues of freedom under the law, human rights, independence of the individual to achieve freedom, happiness and security can only be realized when conservation matters and those natural resources are maintained and used wisely for this generation and generations to come."

PHOTOS: RAY BLADES AND LEZLIE GOODWIN



Snapshots:

From top left, author chats with Rosie Cooney. Dan Ashe and Terry French deliver their messages. Attendees at one of the many workshops. Ontario Minister of Natural Resources Michael Gravelle, Angelo Lombardo, and Greg Farrant. Many conference presenters and partners offered a chance to network.

"Conservation matters," he says again, not just to wildlife professionals, hunters, anglers, and other conservationists, but also to the broader public. And, if they don't know that, then he says we need to do a better job conveying the crucial message that the North American model of wildlife conservation has worked for all, not just those of us who make use of fish and wildlife. With that, the first NFWCC is off to an auspicious start.

As Mahoney takes it all in, on that first Monday morning of the 3½-day event, he must feel something akin to relief. For this historical congress, held in late May at the Westin Ottawa hotel, in the shadow of Parliament Hill, is the culmination of an idea he's nurtured for 20 years.

Build It and They Will Come

Nearly 450 were in attendance. They came from every province and territory in Canada, from 17 U.S. states, and from as far away as Australia. They came to talk about regional issues and

to voice common concerns. They came to share successes and research and see how others approach the complex issues of conservation. They came to show support for an idea that was long overdue and to network with peers and colleagues. And, they left with a better understanding of what it will take for conservation to prevail.

Only four years ago, this incredible event was merely a dream. Then, something fortuitous happened. The Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters (OFAH) invited Mahoney to be the keynote speaker at its Annual General Meeting and Fish and Wildlife Conference.

Recognizing that the federation was one of the few organizations that possessed the capacity, expertise, and ability to host such an undertaking, Mahoney requested a meeting with (then) Executive-Director Mike Reader and Manager of Government Affairs and Policy Greg Farrant. In that informal chat, he shared his vision of a conference that would bring together

major fish and wildlife conservation stakeholders and attract scientists, governments, NGOs, academics, and key policy makers.

The idea was born out of reading conservation history. And, Mahoney says, it took form after he recognized that while the Americans, under the guidance of Theodore Roosevelt, had launched their conservation movement through a series of extraordinary meetings in the early 1900s, we in Canada had never held a meeting of this kind. It was just an idea, he said, until Reader decided to make it happen.

An All-Star Cast

Mahoney was appointed the Congress Committee's Honourary Chair. But, he's quick to credit Farrant, congress general manager. In fact, he calls Farrant the competent general that took it forward. "It couldn't have happened without Greg Farrant," he said matter-of-factly.

Farrant, however, prefers to call it a team effort. "A congress of this nature does not come together by the efforts of any one person," he said. "The OFAH team was fortunate to have help from key conservation groups across North

America. They offered their expertise, time, and contacts. It was a continental team."

In any case, an astounding amount of work was done. Executive, steering, and organizing committees were formed. Partnerships were made: among them were the governments of Canada, Ontario, and Nova Scotia; as well as Ducks Unlimited Canada, the Nature Conservancy, the Wild Sheep Foundation, Conservation Force, the Boone and Crockett Club, Safari Club International, Dallas Safari Club, and 17 other keen partners and sponsors. (See Partners sidebar, pg. 54, for full listing.)

More than 100 presenters were booked. These included leaders of conservation NGOs, world-renowned biologists, pollsters, falconers, trappers, and scientists, Director General of the Canadian Wildlife Service Beverly Potter, and Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Dan Ashe.

The farthest visitor, from Australia, was Dr. Rosie Cooney, a renowned conservationist and the Global Chair of the World Conservation Union's Sustainable Use and Livelihoods

of life, and disenfranchises and alienates local populations. Moreover, she said that only so much land can be set aside for this.

Cooney said sustainable use as practised in North America provides incentives for conservation. She said that allowing local populations in poorer parts of the world to manage wildlife for tourism, hunting, and other sustainable uses typically results in economic boons and enormous benefits for wildlife.

And so it went. With each speaker, new perspectives were revealed.

The first three mornings were spent in plenary sessions where the entire congress heard speakers address broad issues. On the first morning, the topic was "Why conservation matters." The second morning addressed conservation challenges, the third the opportunities to move forward. During the first two afternoons, participants were free to choose the presentations they attended. Workshops, in which the delegates were divided into five groups to address five different issues, occupied the third afternoon. The last

protection and preservation, public perceptions, the role of science, climate change, invasive species, and wildlife and fisheries management, to name a few. You could gain new insight about everything from polar bears and migratory birds to Atlantic salmon and anti-hunting campaigns. The scope of conservation issues brought forward was impressive.

Outside of the presentation rooms was a poster session, in which studies were posted on boards and the researchers who wrote them were there to explain and answer questions.

Politicians, too

Ontario's Natural Resources Minister Michael Gravelle delivered the welcoming remarks. On the third morning, Newfoundland and Labrador's Minister of Environment and Conservation Terry French provided insights on how his government invested in science to stem the decline of their caribou herds.

Federally, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Keith Ashfield and Minister of Environment Peter Kent both spoke of the challenges and opportunities for the sustainable use of fish and wildlife, respectively. Conservative MPs Gray Breitkreutz, Candice Hooppner, Ryan Leef, and Robert Sopuck also spent time at the event.

Politically, the highlight occurred at Wednesday evening's banquet, when Prime Minister Stephen Harper provided the keynote address. In it, he congratulated the congress organizers and attendees and announced the formation of a new National Hunting and Angling Advisory Panel.

Somewhere along the way, every political leader challenged the congress to bring forward ideas that would further the cause of conservation. By

"The Prime Minister honoured us with his presence and made good on yet another campaign promise."



Specialist Group. She provided a perspective from places where sustainable use is not the norm. She explained that, in most parts of the world, the conservation strategy is to separate and preserve threatened wildlife in state-protected areas. This, she said, restricts human contact, but also hurts impoverished people, indigenous ways

morning was spent, in part, reviewing those recommendations.

To the credit of the organizers, it wasn't easy to choose which afternoon presentation to attend. An impressive array of local and international experts presented a host of diverse topics. These included regional, national, and international perspectives on habitat

THE SEVEN SISTERS OF THE NORTH AMERICAN MODEL OF CONSERVATION

1. The Public Trust: It is the government's responsibility to hold wildlife in trust for all its citizens.

2. Prohibition on Commerce: The elimination of the

commercialization of fish and wildlife.

3. Democratic Rule of Law: This keeps wildlife management regulated under law and accessible to all citizens.

4. Hunting Opportunity for All.

5. Non-frivolous Use: This was eventually defined to mean killing for food and fur, self-defence, and property protection.

6. International Resources: Wildlife knows no borders, so laws should take this into account.

7. Scientific Management.

the time it was over, it was evident that the NFWCC had already made an impression on government.

"The event was well noticed on Parliament Hill," Farrant confirmed. "I was particularly pleased that the Prime Minister honoured us with his presence and made good on yet another campaign promise."

Comparing Notes

In gatherings like this, what goes on over coffee or dinner is almost as important as the formal proceedings. The NFWCC was no different. During breaks, business cards were traded and people compared notes. You didn't have to go far to hear common concerns: habitat loss, the threat of climate change, invasive species, and fundraising issues were high on the list of hallway discussions.

Mike Sullivan, director of fish and wildlife for the province of New Brunswick, voiced the concern of many when he said that one of his main challenges was keeping youth engaged in the outdoors. "I'm not just talking about hunting and angling, but canoeing and hiking and all that..." he said. "Getting them involved is going to be fundamental for conservation going down the road."

Steve Mealey, vice-president of the Boone and Crockett Club, was one of several American delegates who expressed frustration with the growing trend by anti-hunting groups to use legal action to interfere with conservation initiatives and sustainable use.

All these shared concerns circulated in the halls, creating a common bond. In fact, Mealey put it nicely when he said one of the things he'd take away from the congress was a sense of brotherhood and a reassurance that people in both countries shared the same passion and commitment to conservation.

Walking Away

One of the great hopes of the organizers is that this NFWCC will be the first of many. Each, they hope, will further entrench and advance the conservation ethic in North America. Furthermore, they intend

to place the recommendations that emerged from the workshops into the hands of politicians and government policy-makers.

The event went off so smoothly that veterans of such gatherings seemed astonished by the lack of glitches, especially considering the ambitious scope. It proved highly informative, provided great opportunities for partnerships and networking and ready access to government and natural resources departments.

For many, the sense of unity the NFWCC highlighted was equally important.

"It was comforting to know that we're all united," said OFAH Executive-Director Angelo Lombardo. "We have different approaches, but at the end of the day it's about getting to the finish line... It's not an individual agenda, but a collective one... We brought 450 of some of the most brilliant conservation minds together to address the issues."

Early on Mahoney said, "I thought that it would be important to Canadian conservation and to the advancement of the continental framework of the North American model of conservation. I saw this as a way of advancing and sending Canada on a road of recognizing that conservation really does matter."

As I write this, Farrant and others are still analyzing the impact. But, he says, based on initial responses, the event was a great success.

"We see it as a good thing for the future of fish and wildlife conservation across North America," said Farrant. "Obviously, this is a huge undertaking in terms of cost, effort, and organization. We're now hoping that another organization will step forward to host the next one sometime in the next three to five years. If so, we're quite willing to provide support and what we learned to ensure that this important initiative continues."

The inaugural NFWCC spanned less than four short days. With any luck at all, the process of raising the profile of conservation will continue far into the future. Let's hope the road ahead is smooth. ●

Breaking Details

For more information, visit the congress website (nfwcc.com), where abstracts and selected presentations from the event will be posted as they're made available. Workshop recommendations will also be posted on the site as soon as the congress organizing committee compiles and disseminates the results.

Farrant says that, eventually, congress partners will use these recommendations for policy, programme, and funding proposals. He also invites the public to view and utilize the recommendations.

NFWCC Partners

The Government of Ontario
The Government of Canada
The Province of Nova Scotia
Ducks Unlimited Canada
Canadian National Sportsmen's Shows
Wildlife Habitat Canada
The Great Lakes Fisheries Commission
Dallas Safari Club
Wild Sheep Foundation
Boone and Crockett Club
Cabela's
Canadian Wildlife Federation
Conservation Force
Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies
The Wildlife Society
Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation
Safari Club International
American Income Life
Shimano
Manitoba Wildlife Federation
Sustainable Forestry Initiative
Fur Institute of Canada
Atlantic Salmon Federation
Nature Conservancy of Canada
Federation Quebecoise des chasseurs et pecheurs
Canadian Sportfishing Industry Association
The Pope and Young Club

