



The Role of Hunters in the Conservation of Wildlife

Shane Patrick Mahoney, Chief, Wildlife Research, Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Division

Introduction

Hunting traditions are perceived to be highly threatened by a number of factors including the animal rights movement, general cultural change, increased urbanization, and habitat and wildlife depletion. Surprisingly, relatively few studies have, even with this imminent threat, investigated the cultural importance and conservation achievements of hunting. As a result even wildlife agencies and professionals are rarely able to articulately describe the value, merits and overall importance of hunting to present societies. We may therefore have little reasonable expectation that the majority of our population who do not participate in hunting will have any appreciation for or give any support to the continuance of hunting traditions. For although hunting still enjoys a widespread popularity, a growing body of evidence indicates that it is declining as a recreational activity and as a significant component of North American culture. Presently only about 7.4% of Americans and Canadians over the age of sixteen years directly participate in hunting (Swan 1995).

Various studies have established a clear association between urbanization and declines in hunting (Swan 1995), evolving presumably from a life style which separates the individual physically and psychologically from the land and therefore from his historical and evolutionary past. It is entirely possible that increasing urbanization will exacerbate this trend while at the same time being linked to a host of other societal patterns which also touch deep roots in the human psyche. It may be instructive therefore to view this decline in hunting activity within a broader cultural milieu which has also been associated with manifest anti-social

activities such as increasing violence and other refractive behaviors. This is not to suggest that these patterns are themselves consequentially linked but rather that the separation of man from nature must, whether we like it or not, lead to behavioral experimentation which is natural to the adaptability and intelligence of the human animal. Perhaps nothing has prepared man for his divorce from nature and his disquieting immersion within a vulgar hoard of his own kind. I suggest that an understanding of these changing societal patterns is required to properly evaluate changes in our hunting traditions and certainly to understand the significance of these changes to society of the future.

To simplistically suggest that we no longer need to hunt to eat is neither accurate nor conceptually compelling. After all, the world fisheries are hunted, all living organisms including plants are capable of death, and if the magnificent palaeolithic cave art suggests anything to us in the desired sterility of today it is to identify the hunt as much more than a pursuit of flesh. It was the most compelling spiritual preoccupation of man.

Yet it is apparent that a "coincidence of momentum" has emerged, with a rising political strength in the anti-hunting and animal right's movement at the same time that hunting and its political influence are declining. This "persuasion shift" is itself ripe with significance and will, through the complex and unwieldy functioning of modern bureaucracies, place greater and greater demands upon wildlife educators and administrators as they seek to meet the expectations and value spectra of a changing, and ever more provocative and vocal "wildlife community", only a small and declining number of whose members are hunters. It will also exert increasing influence upon wildlife management and

research programs as species profiles change and non-game (i.e. non-hunted) species become more equitably positioned within the funding priorities of agencies and governments. This process has obvious implications as well for the entire structure of wildlife organizations, including what they really mean by such founding doctrines as "wildlife management", and "hunter education". For all of these reasons, and for many more, it is of great importance that all individuals concerned for the issue of hunting understand its significance to both our identity and to important achievements in the conservation of wildlife and the habitats it requires.

Hunting As a Founding Tradition

The greatest of all American mythologists, Joseph Campbell, devoted his intellect and compassionate humanity to an understanding of the traditions and religiosity of human kind. His quest for an underlying symbolism for human devotion to forces greater than themselves found expression in brilliant expositions of the cross-cultural associations of mythologies, those ancient devotions of soul and intellect so fundamentally important to the expression and unification of cultures and societies. Campbell (1959) succinctly expressed the most basic principal of life as this: flesh eats flesh! He was able, like all good hunters, whether of some truth or more animate prize, to appraise the complex landscape and find the track of that which he sought. Within the dazzling array of human ceremony and ritual (see Frazer 1922) he did not lose sight of the true nature of man but trailed it faithfully and captured its very life in his writings and lectures.

Campbell's own insight was also expressed by the prominent anthropologist Robert Ardrey (1976), whose studies of less technological (primitive) hunter societies have taught us so much about our past and ourselves. He too saw the thread of human existence extending backwards ultimately to a virtual relationship with animate nature and cautioned against

interpreting our existence now, with its reliance on technology and its creeping disdain for a life of natural dependence, as some edification of human kind. "For millions of years", Ardrey wrote, "we survived as hunters. In the few short millennia since our divorce from that necessity there has been no time for significant biological change - anatomical, physiological or behavioral. Today we have small hope of comprehending ourselves and our world unless we understand that man still, in his inmost being, is a hunter."

In these powerfully similar summarizations of the essential animalistic nature of man, delivered from vastly different intellectual perspectives and formulated after consideration and first hand experience of the wide array of human cultural diversity, we may take one essential fact. Man evolved as a hunter and carries with him many intricately interwoven qualities, drives and expressions that emanate directly from this powerful, predatory association with the natural world. However, whether such a role has any longer a place in the modern cultures of technological societies cannot be understood simply from the point of view of vulgar necessity. The great symbolic importance of the hunt to so many human cultures signifies much more than the economy of food procurement; it reflects the intimate conversion of the human spirit to its original and most natural form. To relegate hunting to the simple act of killing is therefore no different than to describe all of the wondrous complex beauty of human love as but the act of intromission.

Human evolution is not an academic chimera and we cannot ignore the biological foundations of our humanness. Approximately 5 million years ago the *Australopithecus* "group" of nearly or bipedal apes diverged and the *Paranthropus* type emerged, living primarily as vegetarians in the moist productive forests where nuts, roots and berries were abundant. The *Australopithecus* line however moved onto the drier uplands and developed truly

omnivorous habits, killing, gathering and scavenging what they could. The prominent anthropologist S.L. Washburn (1968) also noted the great significance of this diet shift and remarked the behavioral patterns associated with the pursuit of animal food. "Hunting not only necessitated new activities and new kinds of cooperation, but changed the role of the adult male in the group. Among vegetarian primates, adult males do not share food. They take the best places for feeding and may even take food from less dominant animals. However, since sharing the kill is normal behavior for many carnivores, economic responsibility of the adult males and the practice of sharing food in the group probably resulted from being carnivorous. The very same actions that caused man to be feared by other animals led to food sharing, more cooperation, and economic independence".

Regardless whether we accept Washburn's interpretation of the cause and effect relationship between these behavioral expressions, it appears unreasonable to deny at least the fact that hunting is an ancient human endeavor that has associated with it a current and rhythm differing meaningfully from non-hunting activities. Still today some of our closest ape relatives such as chimpanzees and baboons frequently hunt, an activity involving behaviors quite different from those prevailing during vegetarian foraging. Furthermore, as noted earlier, the history of man shows that cultures which depend upon nature for their survival also make it the centre of their spirituality, leading to deep emotional paradoxes including the seemingly incongruous reverence for the animals they kill. In this sense it is to be expected that hunters will express a deep respect and love for the animals they seek to kill and indeed a reverence for the very act of hunting. They will also seek to preserve that which they seek to stalk, kill and consume. Later we will see how this has been manifest by an entire system of wildlife preservation, the North American system, which has been enormously successful, was initiated by and has been

primarily maintained politically, financially and philosophically by hunter groups and organizations.

Interestingly, research into human and animal aggression has indicated that while hunting is an aggressive act, it is not a malevolent form of aggression. In fact the psychologist Erick Fromm (1975) in his exhaustive study "The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness" has concluded: "The behavioral patterns and neurological processes in predatory aggression are not analogous to the other types of animal aggression", but rather are closer to the biochemistry of pleasure and joy! Thus we also find psychological and neuro-physiological support for the expectation of an intimate relationship, with all its attendant passions, engagements and irrationalities, between the hunter, the hunted and hunting.

Hunting also of course, at least for those who engage in it, represents an important identity, encompassing highly regarded personal and group attributes. These attributes in fact are considered desirable cultural traditions to be preserved and developed in younger generations as a means of preserving specific (e.g. rural) lifestyles and as a process of personal ethical development and self-actualization. Hunting may be viewed in this context as a stabilizing commonality that integrates people with their cultural past and present as well as with wildlife and nature. Increasingly, especially if the economic value of hunting declines, these values must become part of the non-hunting public's understanding of what hunting means. Otherwise we can only expect support for hunting to decline further.

It is crucial therefore that we ourselves understand the importance of hunting, appreciating its role within society past and present, and how its influence has enhanced personal and societal development while also acting to preserve both the natural and cultural milieus in which it can exist. Especially important in this context is the role that hunters have played in the conservation and protection

of natural resources. It is, I suggest, a role neither fully appreciated nor well known, not even by wildlife professionals nor hunting groups and hunters themselves.

The North American Wildlife Management and Conservation System

Few would argue, especially today when "sustainable use", "biodiversity" and "ecosystem management" are the newest, crisp currencies of the jargon dealers, that wildlife populations, if they are utilized, should be utilized in a manner that preserves options for further human generations and the resiliency and biotic capacity of natural systems. Presently the wildness of this world is being crushed by the sheer munificence of human sexuality and how to utilize and sustain wildlife becomes an ever more complex challenge. Hunting and its role in conservation ought to be discussed in light of this world view. The following is a brief conspectus of how wildlife management and conservation as we presently know it emerged in North America and the role that hunters played in its conception and establishment.

The decimation and in some cases extinction of wildlife species due to market hunting near the turn of this century are well known, and undisputed in their authenticity. The trend towards wholesale slaughter of wildlife whenever and wherever profit was to be gained, clearly necessitated and ultimately gave rise to a remarkably different view of how best to preserve wildlife here in North America than was the long established approach of Europe and elsewhere. Instead of allocating access to wildlife based upon inherited title or position, it was rather to be based in law, democratized, and specifically proscribed to prevent marketing of dead wildlife and their products (Lavigne and Geist 1993)

The principal tenets of this approach to wildlife conservation predated the writings of Aldo Leopold (1933) by many years and have since their inception been

expressed by virtually all regulations passed by legislatures throughout North America. These policies were very much the work of North America's intellectual, and social and political establishments, well informed respecting entrepreneurial initiative and market behavior and with privileged access to wildlife. Leading figures in the United States such as Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinchot and in Canada like Wilfrid Laurier and Clifford Sifton exemplified this pattern. However American sportsmen, those who hunted and fished for pleasure rather than commerce, were the real spearhead of conservation and had initiated a real environmental movement long before the direct actions of the politically positioned (Reiger 1986).

By the 1870s national publications like American Sportsman, Forest and Stream, and Field and Stream were already established giving these individuals a means of meaningful and influential communication among them. The fraternity developed an aesthetic appreciation for the entire context of hunting and recognized what the disappearance of game, in region after region, portended for them, their families and society. Their influence was substantial both with legislatures and the public, engendering the laws limiting and regulating the harvest of wildlife.

Geist (1988) has identified the 3 principal policies of North American wildlife conservation as :

- 1) the absence of a market for wildlife meat and parts,
- 2) the allocation of access to wildlife and its benefits by law to all citizens, regardless of social circumstance and
- 3) the prohibition of frivolous killing of wildlife.

It will be noted that these principals "personalize" access to wildlife and permit and encourage the individual hunter who pursues, under legal restriction of course, wildlife for primarily his or her personal use. It will further be noted that both

hunting for the market place, or the perception that hunting involves a "sporting" kill of wildlife will serve to undermine these principals. The latter view has been expressed by many recent groups who actively promote elimination of hunting on the grounds that it is needless destruction, and a cruel and degrading expression of either male dominance - seeking behavior or misplaced sadism and aggression (Amory 1974; Swan, 1995).

What is crucial to our purpose here however is to identify how this approach, so integrally linked to hunting as we know it today, has assisted in the conservation of wildlife. The evidence is abundant and compelling, for not only did the policies noted above lead to a recovery of wildlife but arguably created the most economically and ecologically successful system of wildlife conservation in the world. This system brought about the return of game animals that had been decimated by market hunting throughout the southern and central portions of the continent (Hornaday 1913) bringing some like the bison and wood duck back from the brink of extinction. This abundance in turn generated a large, labor intensive service and manufacturing industry serving principally the hunters who legally pursued these resources, including such industrial sectors as the outfitting and guiding business but also the more general tourist trades.

The system itself required, by virtue of its importance and effectiveness, caretakers and organizers to protect and preserve both wildlife and the very "system-of-protection". Thus we have the well recognized state and provincial wildlife organizations employing managers and protection officers and further the institutions of teaching and research and the development of a science and profession of wildlife management. Additionally there arose both a system of public conservation societies, often comprised largely of hunters but sometimes not, which raised money and lobbied governments for legislation to

protect wildlife and their habitats, and a system of extensive protected areas including national parks (Harpton 1971), wildlife refuges and ecological reserves where wildlife and wilderness are held in trust for future generations. Some of these areas are off limits to hunters but nevertheless hunters are strongly in favor of their existence.

North America also developed early the policy of international treaties to protect migratory populations such as the 1911 Fur Seal Treaty (Weber 1985) and the 1916 Migratory Birds Protection Act (Chandler 1985). Remarkably also we have preserved viable populations of large predators, notable competitors of hunters!

While clearly these achievements are not exclusively associated with hunting it is undeniably true that hunters have influenced and in some cases been the principal cause or justification for many of these programs, for by virtue both of their willingness to spend money freely on their passion for hunting and their willingness to lobby governments to protect the wildlife they seek to pursue and have the opportunity to kill, they have coerced, cajoled and convinced decision makers and entrepreneurs both that hunting is a social and economic reality of importance. They have also demonstrated that killing of wildlife is not at odds with conservation - a remarkable achievement considering the deep psychological association otherwise exemplified by market hunting.

In this connection genuine hunters have also supported and enabled enforcement officers to operate in the protection of wildlife, although this has clearly meant that their own activities are more closely scrutinized and curtailed. Yet it remains true that at public meetings on wildlife hunters often lobby the hardest for increased enforcement patrols. Their behavior in this regard exemplifies their own commitment both to the credos of hunting and its ethics as well as to their desire for conservation, sometimes tinged of course with a desire to "keep the other fellow in line". Here we touch upon a

salient point: hunters are not saints but without the support of sinners like them wildlife management and conservation would be an impossible task.

Consider just how unselfish the contributions of hunters really are - for although they pursue only a small fraction of wildlife species their contributions assist in the management and conservation of all species and their habitats. Hunting and fishing fees are the primary source of funding for most wildlife management programs in the United States and a growing percentage in Canada. Furthermore these monies are often used for endangered species preservation, environmental education and game laws enforcement, the latter often dealing with illegal activists who would kill animals even if "hunting" were not legal.

Given these accomplishments it is not easy to envisage how, in the absence of hunting, we are to effectively protect and manage wildlife. This task is as expensive as it is complex and while it is clear that many people wish hunting and killing of animals to end, it is not at all clear that they are prepared to assume financial responsibility for the many tasks associated with wildlife conservation.

Furthermore, while hunting today may not be presented altogether as a necessity, undoubtedly it does in some cases help reduce negative interactions between people and wildlife that if let go might increase pressure to otherwise reduce animal populations. I refer here to such interactions as roadkill crashes, crop predation and disease outbreaks. It is important to acknowledge in this context also that often non-hunting persons are desirous of large wildlife populations until some direct wildlife threat or inconvenience presents itself. Although I cannot quote statistics in this regard I think it a reasoned assessment of my experience that hunters are prepared to tolerate greater personal inconvenience from wildlife than are non-hunters. This has positive implications for wildlife species and their

habitats, even if it stems from a selfish desire to have animals to kill and eat.

Hunters also recognize that you cannot maintain healthy numbers of preferred (i.e. game) species unless you protect many other species of prey and their habitats which in themselves may not be of otherwise direct or significant interest to the hunter. In this sense then the hunter must be, to some extent, an ecologist, recognizing the compulsory interdependence of all life. Furthermore we need remember that since market hunting was abolished hunting has not been responsible for the extinction of a single bird or mammal species in North America. Many other human activities, including agricultural and forestry practices, are responsible for depleting biodiversity however, and on an ongoing basis.

The Modern Hunter

The modern hunter faces many challenges, not the least of which is the animal rights protestor - today he must keep in touch with hunting and continue its tradition in a world of ever increasing personal and public constraints. Indeed a small but growing number of hunters are leaving the activity because of the plethora of regulations and restrictions necessitated by these modern exigencies.

As modern game science and management become increasingly complex so do the restrictions and demands on hunters. They must be aware of differences in species and sex of individuals, in addition to having a detailed knowledge of these species' habitats if they are to stand any chance of securing this game and of doing so under full privilege of law. And hunting is becoming an expensive business! Despite these factors however people continue to hunt and for those who are committed to the activity it remains a very important part of their lives. Nevertheless hunters are only too well aware that there are growing numbers of people who do not hunt and a growing number who are opposed to hunting. Thus

to maintain this part of our culture hunters and non-hunters alike must recognize and articulate the true nature and value of this ages old undertaking of man.

It is particularly important therefore that hunters today, and their societies and clubs, take even greater responsibility for manifesting and preserving all that is good and profound about hunting. This includes the conservation of wildlife, the education of hunters and non-hunters, and of new hunters especially, respecting hunting ethics, traditions and behavior, and of sharing the success of their hunt with other members of their community. The "charity of the hunt" is an important means of realizing broad public recognition of the importance and value of wildlife in the preservation of significant human interaction and conversely another means of encouraging as wide a group of persons as possible, including non-hunting relatives and friends, to support the conservation and sustainable use of wildlife.

Conclusions

Hunters, at their best can represent the best in humanity. They are not attempting to grandstand or gain personal advantage, but yet throughout North America and elsewhere they hold meetings, auctions, fairs and events of all kinds to raise millions of dollars for wildlife education, research, management programs and wildlife habitat preservation and improvement. As a fraternity hunters have no gripe with the world except that wildlife be conserved and sustainably utilized, a long standing ethos now championed by nation states and world leaders for the totality of this planet's resources. It is essentially true, particularly where funds from hunting privileges go directly to support wildlife programs, that there would not be as much wildlife if hunters had not been so earnest in their support of these conservation programs. I pose the question - "Who else, what other group, will replace the hunting fraternity should it disappear?"

In this context we should also acknowledge that a declining hunter community will have significant implications for resource conflict resolution. Traditionally such conflicts have inevitably engaged the question of "the greater economic good" and hunting, as a billion dollar industry, has been a respectable if not always successful counterpoint to competing resource extraction interests. This will change as hunting participation and revenues decline and it is not at all clear that non-consumptive lobbies, including animal rights organizations, will be as effective or demonstrative when direct mortality of wildlife is not at issue.

We must remember too that the identity of man and the relevance of his cultural processes, icons and beliefs is forever emergent and tethered to the evolved capacities of his genome; and indeed beyond this to the epigenotype we recognize as humanity. The importance of hunting has like all fundamental characteristics of our evolution ceased to be unidimensional, but rather has itself infiltrated, coerced and conjoined with a galaxy of other human attributes so that its rootings and influence are no longer precisely defined nor available to direct or simple amputation. It is therefore arguable that a loss of hunting in all its real and symbolic manifestations will have consequences that are not restricted to eliminating the direct economy of supplying meat or the derisively expounded opportunity to "play male". It seems to me, therefore, that we in this profession of wildlife conservation and management ought to improve our own understanding of the enormous contribution hunters have made in the preservation and protection of wildlife. We ought to further develop a more detailed and comprehensive appreciation for the complex humanity that is portrayed in the act of hunting. If we as professionals cannot invest our time in this regard, who will? If we cannot explain to the public at large the truth and value of legitimate hunting, who can? Do we not believe in what we do?

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