

# The Seven Sisters: Pillars of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model

by Shane Mahoney

*Editor's note: This is the third in a series of articles about The North American Wildlife Conservation Model. The series is dedicated to helping hunters and anglers throughout the United States and Canada appreciate their own history of achievement in wildlife conservation, and encouraging greater commitment to the cause.*

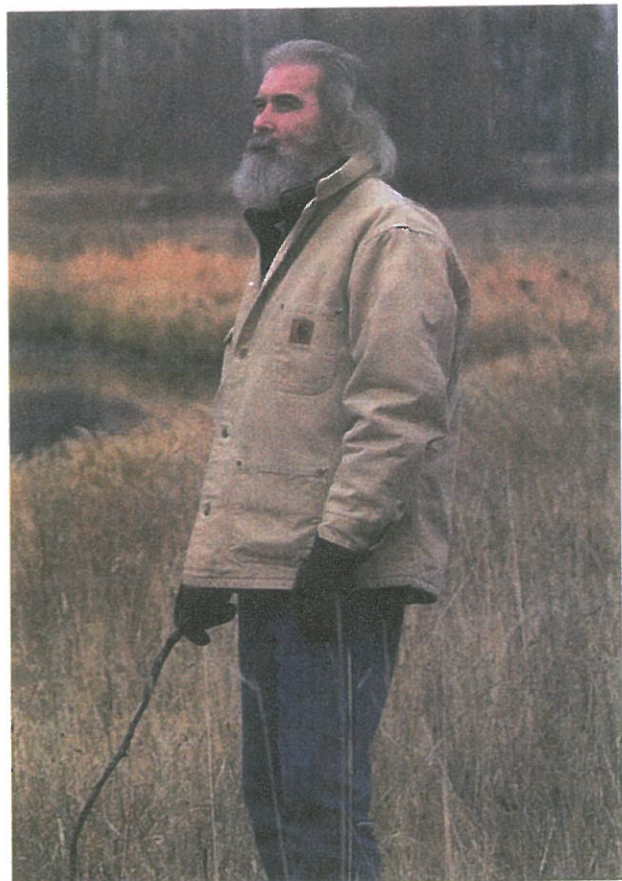
The North American Wildlife Conservation Model is markedly different from any system of conservation applied elsewhere in the world. It is properly referred to as a "model" because it consists of easily discernible components that are interrelated and transferable between regions. It is a New World phenomenon, founded by North Americans for North America. It had its beginnings in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, and was matured by the early 20<sup>th</sup>. It reached its full form by the 1950s and has continued to evolve since then.

Despite massive changes in our society, the North American Wildlife Conservation Model continues to sustain animal populations and the habitats upon which they depend. Enduring also is the leadership and support hunters and anglers give to this system; they were its founders and have remained its leading proponents.

Like us, our forefathers loved nature and felt most alive when engaged with it. With rod and gun they brought to hand more than their quarry; they also began to grasp the need for limiting their take, and taking responsibility for conserving wild nature. In the context of New World independence, innovation and democracy, they brought two profound conceptual changes to bear on management of North American wildlife: namely, that wild creatures were to be killed only for *individual* and not for *commercial* or "market"

purposes, and that personal access to wildlife would be restricted to methods, means and purposes that supported wise, sustainable use of the resource, in perpetuity.

To the commercial buffalo hunter hunched over his half-skinned carcass, this must have seemed ridiculous, improbable and destined to fade away. Instead it was his profession that would vanish.





The conservation model our forefathers advanced is a marvelous prescription for success, its founding principles the basis for a dizzying array of laws, regulations and policies enacted by state, provincial, national and non-governmental organizations. From the Kodiak bears of Alaska's coastal islands to the woodland caribou of Newfoundland, and on to the wild turkeys and white-tailed deer of the deepest South, one conceptual framework guides the conservation and management of wildlife. Without it North America would be a hodgepodge of conflicting programs that could only culminate in a patchwork of few successes and many failures. For the hunted species of North America, and many others that share their habitats, we have achieved the very opposite.

*The model perpetuates great human traditions in a natural world that is both sustaining and sustainable.*

The model's two basic tenets—that our fish and wildlife are reserved for the non-commercial use of individual hunters and anglers, and are to be managed in such a way that their populations will be sustained at optimal levels forever—are elaborated by seven concise stipulations first articulated in the mid-to-late 1800s. Refined and modified over time, these pillars of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model may best be remembered as the *Seven Sisters for Conservation*. Despite many adversities, the *Sisters* have remained resilient, proud and strong. We ought to know their names:

**The Public Trust.** Since Roman times wildlife has been the subject of legal debate, and the questions of ownership and access have been particularly intense. In colonial North America citizens considered unbridled access to the resources of their new Eden as a sacred right and one they held up in contrast to the European system where often only the wealthy had access to such treasures as wildlife. Their position was not, however, founded in law. A Supreme Court decision in 1842 finally established the legal precedent that it was the government's

responsibility to hold wild nature in trust for all citizenry. Since that time all legislation drafted around issues of wildlife ownership has reflected the "public trust doctrine," whether it is administered by federal or state/provincial governments. The next three "sisters" spring from this fundamental doctrine.

**Prohibitions on Commerce.** Commerce in dead wildlife was a huge business in the latter half of the 1800s, and market hunters and restaurateurs were keenly interested in having it remain so. The scale of this industry was such that all wildlife of any economic value was threatened, regardless of their numbers. Systematic commercial exploitation drove to extinction or severely depleted species as diverse as bison, egrets, passenger pigeons and elk. Because everyone owned wildlife, how could one stop this slaughter without infringing on the public trust? The answer lay in eliminating markets and commercial traffic in dead animal parts. Hunters and anglers led the effort to eliminate killing wildlife for profit.

**Democratic Rule of Law.** Despite the drive to eliminate wildlife markets, there was no intention to eliminate wildlife *use*. The question was, how best to allocate it? The clear and obvious answer was by law. This not only safeguarded against the rise of special elites who would appropriate wildlife to themselves (a return to a hated European tradition), it also democratized involvement with nature. Now, through the courts when necessary, all citizens could participate in developing systems of wildlife conservation and use. Every citizen had right of access by law, and by law every citizen had right of say. Wildlife was firmly in the cradle of democracy.

**Hunting Opportunity for All.** It is not surprising that the model should directly address the issue of hunting; after all it was hunters and anglers, more than any others, who led the crusade for wildlife and who openly articulated their interest in maintaining it for a variety of personal reasons, including the opportunity to hunt and fish. Today, in Canada and the United States, we take for granted that every man and woman has an equal opportunity, under the law, to participate in these



activities. But it need not have been so. Alternative models exist around the world where class and land ownership decide to a large extent who has the right or privilege to hunt. We can all be grateful for history's fateful turn. It is, after all, this democratic access to the taking of wildlife that has so powerfully engineered the broad-scale public participation in wildlife conservation and management that this continent is famous for. It is one of the great engines of the North American model.

**Non-Frivolous Use.** Although laws could govern access to wildlife and ensure that all citizens had a say in its protection, there had to be guidelines as to appropriate use. This was eventually defined to mean killing for food and fur, self-defense and property protection. Although these categories have been broadly interpreted, they are sufficiently restrictive to safeguard against the kind of wanton destruction that saw hundreds of thousands of birds slaughtered every year for feathers to festoon women's hats.

**International Resources.** The boundaries of states and nations are of little relevance to wildlife and fish, and policies and laws for wildlife conservation had to address this reality. The 1911 Fur Seal Treaty and the famous, and famously effective, Migratory Bird Protection Act of 1916 are excellent examples of international cooperation. In addition, of course, more regional agreements have been ubiquitous in the model, allowing states and provinces to coordinate and cooperate in their efforts for wildlife and for regulating hunting and angling activities.

**Scientific Management.** Interest in science and natural history was deeply ingrained in North American society, a fact reflected in the emphasis placed on recording wildlife habits and diversity by almost every major expedition charged with mapping the continent. Furthermore, hunters and anglers were by habit and inclination, naturalists. It was not surprising therefore that very early in the model's formulation science was identified as a crucial requirement. This leaning was pushed to reality by the emerging interest in scientific forestry (a European, specifically Prussian, import); the establishment of the Division of Forestry (1881); the emerging influence of the

American Fisheries Society (1870); and especially by the gentlemen-naturalists of the Boone and Crockett Club (1887).

The "Seven Sisters" not only restored decimated game populations and brought many of our best-known wildlife species back from the edge of annihilation, they also benefited a wide array of other species which shared the habitats and landscapes of hunted wildlife. Habitat protection was early identified as crucial to wildlife conservation, and hunters and anglers—sometimes inadvertently, sometimes intentionally—preserved ecosystems for *all* wild nature. This aspect of the model would lead to partnerships with private landowners, habitat stewardship prescriptions for public lands and visionary legislation, most notably, in recent years, the United States Department of Agriculture's massive Conservation Reserve Program.

This, then, is the conservation framework we share. It is important that every hunter understand that the wildlife diversity and abundance we enjoy are achievements of our own making. These historical tracings are important. They lead to understanding, understanding leads to commitment, and commitment leads to action.

Very quickly after the elimination of market hunting, diverse public and political sectors began to realize the enormous value—culturally, recreationally and economically—of a sustainable-use approach to wildlife and fish. As wildlife began to recover, increasing numbers of people were able to access and enjoy it, either through hunting and angling, or simply viewing. This in turn increased the demand for recovery and protection of wildlife. Over many decades, we developed the complex system of state and provincial agencies that employ wildlife managers and protection officers, and the institutions dedicated to research and the advancement of wildlife science.

The model engendered a magnificent collection of nonprofit public conservation societies—many supported by hunters and anglers—which engage in political action and raise money to preserve habitat and restore wildlife. Our impressive array of protected places—national parks and monuments,



preserves, reserves, refuges and wilderness areas and national forests—are also components of the model. Some of those places are off limits to hunting and angling, yet hunters and anglers often lobby in support of them.

The United States and Canada led the world in establishing international treaties for wildlife protection, best exemplified in the 1916 Migratory Birds Protection Act; and in establishing federal legislation, such as the United States Lacey Act of 1900, which forbade the transportation of wildlife killed in violation of local laws. North America's record of generating local regulations in support of wild nature is nothing short of magnificent.

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Worthy of consideration, also, are laws developed to ensure the financial stability of wildlife populations. The tasks of investigation, restoration and protection require significant investment, and some of the funding mechanisms devised in North America were both ingenious and long lasting. When Democratic Senator Key Pittman of Nevada introduced the Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration bill to Congress on June 17, 1937. He could never have imagined the impact that *Pittman-Robertson Act* appropriations from hunting equipment excise taxes would have on wildlife conservation programs almost 70 years later. The same is true of the angler-equipment-based *Dingell-Johnson Act* signed into law in 1950 and expanded as the *Wallup-Breaux Act* in 1984. These tax revenues, along with other hunter and angler contributions, today provide approximately 65 percent of all state fish and wildlife agency budgets.

These figures underline the pivotal position hunters and anglers have held in supporting wildlife and fish programs and give some insights into the enormous economy the model has engendered. Currently, in the United States there are nearly 34 million anglers and 13 million

hunters who between them disperse nearly \$70 billion annually into the economy. Since 1934, Duck Stamps alone have raised \$647 million, and since 1939, excise taxes on gun and ammunition sales have raised \$3.9 billion. Similar taxes on fishing equipment have provided \$3.6 billion since 1952. Anglers, believe it or not, spend nearly \$291 million annually on ice! Sportsmen contribute about \$1.7 billion per year to conservation, and their activities support nearly 1.5 million jobs.

In Canada, with its much smaller population, the numbers are still impressive. Between 1985 and 2000, 1.2 million Canadian hunters provided \$335 million for habitat conservation and spent another \$600 million on license fees, and the same amount on equipment and travel. The North American model may have been developed with wildlife foremost in mind, but it is doing a pretty good job of preserving lifestyles and communities as well. After all, most rural communities—where employment and business investment are hard to come by—directly benefit from this economic activity.

Today we are the inheritors of a system of wildlife conservation unequaled throughout the world. It not only rescued species from certain oblivion, it also created a supporting network of laws, industries and partnerships that give wildlife a fighting chance into the future. Founded on the principles of wise use of resources and democracy of access, the North American Wildlife Conservation Model has achieved for us what we would wish for all nations; namely, that human traditions might be perpetuated in a natural world that is both sustaining and sustainable.

For the past 150 years, hunters and anglers have led this crusade. We have come a long way indeed from bison carcasses with tongues and hides removed, rotting in the sun, and passenger pigeons dynamited from their roosting trees, falling by the thousands. We must continue the tradition with knowledge and with pride.



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