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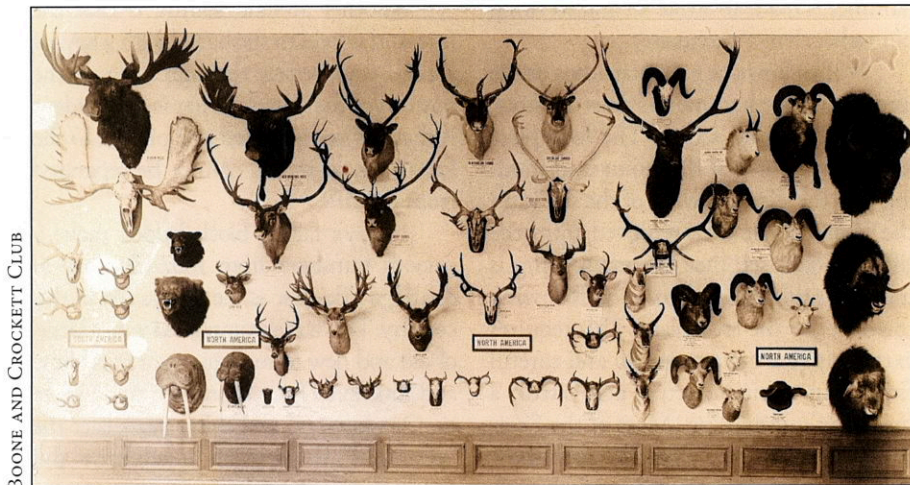


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TROPHY HUNTING AND CONSERVATION

Trophy hunting has been an important facet of wildlife recovery in North America since the early years of the conservation movement.



BOONE AND CROCKETT CLUB

The Boone and Crockett Club helped popularize the idea of hunting older animals as a way to limit the harvest of declining big-game species in the early twentieth century. The selective harvest approach was a great success in helping bring back wildlife populations.

The most intense controversies over trophy hunting focus on African experiences. In 2015, the death of a lion known as Cecil shone a glaring light on big-game trophy hunting and, generally speaking, the public did not like what it saw. It was as though every negative stereotype about the wealthy, African-trekking sportsman had been brought to life. One has only to Google the term “trophy hunting” to understand that this perception remains strong.

Yet selective hunting of mature male animals, which is the very foundation of trophy hunting, occurs in many parts of the world and is applied to many different wildlife species. Furthermore, the conservation benefits of such practices have been recognized globally, in places as different as Namibia and Pakistan. Somehow, though, trophy hunting in North America has received little attention. This seems rather strange given the important role North American conservationists played in advocating for this approach to wildlife harvesting and the undeniable benefits this delivered for wildlife on this continent. Given the global recognition of North America’s conservation successes, it is something the trophy-hunting world

ought to consider as it argues for relevancy in a modern world.

Trophy hunting has played an important role in North American conservation since the end of the nineteenth century. Early European settlers mistakenly believed that North America’s wildlife resources were limitless and therefore inexhaustible. By the mid-to late-1800s, however, many common and iconic wildlife species teetered on the brink of extinction. The regrettable fates of the passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and sea mink were sealed, while numerous other species including the American bison, bighorn sheep, elk, wild turkey, and even white-tailed deer were extirpated from all or most of their traditional ranges. For many such species, extinction was not only considered possible, it was thought highly likely. Turning the tide in wildlife’s favor seemed an impossible task.

The situation was so critical, in fact, that many knowledgeable conservationists rushed to gather and protect the last museum specimens, determined that such species should be remembered at least but sure they would never again be encountered alive. Others worked to find solutions to North America’s wildlife crisis, trying to establish new social norms and approaches to wildlife use that would rescue populations and which would eventually mature into what we know as the North American Model. Illustrious members of both groups were part of an emerging conservation dynasty, the Boone and Crockett Club, one of North America’s oldest and most influential wildlife organizations.

The Boone and Crockett Club was founded in 1887 by conservation greats Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell. Alarmed by America’s wildlife depletions, they sought to promote the conservation and management of wildlife, especially big-game species, and the habi-

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tats these animals required. Enlightened by centuries-old European experiences and newly emerging insights from natural history studies, this new leadership recognized that to facilitate species recovery and prevent future wildlife depletions, the core of wild breeding populations had to be protected.

At the same time, they looked for a mechanism that would permit continued harvesting, even as wildlife populations were perilously low. This preservation of the hunting tradition in the face of an extinction crisis was the true genius of the new approach. It required focusing the harvest on older male animals that had already contributed their genes to the population and would soon die of natural causes. In this sense the hunting deaths would not be additive mortality but would simply replace the inevitable losses of aging individuals.

Thus it was in this context of crisis and concern that the selective harvest of mature, male animals emerged as a critical component of North American wildlife conservation. The approach was not designed to cater to hunters' egos at all, but rather, to encourage their conservation conscience. To help measure and validate this policy, the Boone and Crockett Club established its Big Game Records program, and subsequently published its first manual on measuring big-game heads, horns, and antlers in 1906. The manual referred to these record book animals as "trophies," indicating that a successful hunter had achieved something honorable and worthy of recognition, and so "trophy hunting" and the "trophy hunter" were born.

To sportsmen and women, then and now, a mature male with large antlers or horns is considered a fine and coveted specimen. Any human observer, in fact, is drawn to the large and often ornate configuration of male animals. One does not have to be a hunter for this to be true. Typically, these older animals are also more wary and elusive. Hunting such animals requires greater skill and also reduces the hunter's likelihood of success. Being suc-

cessful in harvesting such an animal therefore came to represent a greater personal achievement. Furthermore, the records kept of such trophy specimens offered proof that the continent's newly emergent wildlife management policies were working and provided evidence of hunters' personal commitments to conservation. These motivations help explain why trophy hunting became popular in North America in the twentieth century and why it remains so widely practiced today.

In concert with this selective harvest approach, the Boone and Crockett Club also promoted the principle of responsible, ethical hunting known as fair chase, which defined how game should be hunted in support of conservation efforts. This overarching principle emphasized that hunting should be more about the effort involved and the quality of the experience and of the game taken, rather than the number of animals harvested, an idea which was in complete opposition to the commercial market hunting that had decimated North American wildlife populations. Hunters were then required to verify that they had employed fair chase practices in order for their "trophy" to be recognized in the Club's Big Game Records book. This was designed to ensure that trophy animal records represented the best of both conservation practice and hunting ethics.

It was through these and other related efforts in the early twentieth century that North American wildlife populations began their recovery to the abundance and variety we see today. Tremendous examples of wildlife rescue and recovery supported and implemented by hunters and their conservation organizations can be found in North America's aforementioned bighorn sheep, elk, white-tailed deer and wild turkey populations. In each instance, the policy of selective harvest of mature males has significantly assisted in the species' recovery.

Hunting is still practiced by millions of people worldwide, including more than 15 million citizens in the USA and Canada. What particular animal one

chooses to hunt often varies according to one's age and experience, and the abundance and availability of the hunted species. Furthermore, many of us consider the animals we harvest to be "trophies" regardless of sex or size. Keeping antlers, horns, and mounted specimens is part of the tradition of hunting worldwide. For the hunter, these mementos are a reminder of a memorable outdoor experience, and a lasting tribute to a wild animal of special significance to them.

The term "trophy hunter" is certainly ambiguous and open to interpretation but those who call for blanket bans on trophy hunting not only threaten a significant, proven mechanism for wildlife conservation in Africa, but also in North America, a continent where wildlife thrives and conservation has realized so many extraordinary successes. While everyone rushes to make the world a better place, let's not forget about the good we've already done, and how it was accomplished. Conservation is, above all else, a practical enterprise requiring real, on-the-ground applications. We learned this well over a century ago in North America. Let us not forget that trophy hunting, while controversial to many, has a pedigree of conservation achievement on a continent deservedly proud of its conservation success.



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