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Conservation

Wild Harvest

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Is it possible for humans to feed themselves without damaging the environment? Of course—it's called hunting.

The consumption of wild meat has long been central to the human story, helping to drive not only our physical development but our intellectual capacities as well. As our earliest ancestors became more proficient at capture and killing of wild creatures, not only did our bodies and brains increase in size but our creative talents also expanded, ushering in a great ride of technological invention that was to break ecological barriers and transport our species around the globe.

Few who have studied the human story can doubt that it was our capacities as hunters that elevated us from the status of puny ape to a dominant competitor throughout the global landscape. Powered by the extravagant nutrition and abundance of wild meat, a new human ecology was founded, one that would see us walk around the world and successfully adapt to almost every environment and landscape.

Today, the harvest of wild protein remains critical to human nutrition and livelihoods. World fisheries, in particular, are essential to human food security, as well as to the economic well-being of hundreds of millions of human beings worldwide. While domesticated fisheries, what we term aquaculture, are growing in importance, they are a long way from replacing the huge biomass of wild fish harvested from the world's oceans. It remains for the great industrialized fleets of oceangoing vessels, combined with more localized commercial fisheries, to provide the vast majority of fish protein required by modern society.

Regardless, both aquaculture and commercial marine fisheries bring with them a host of significant environmental problems. The domesticated fisheries often lead to escapes of genetically modified and/or exotic species, as well as the diseases they carry. Once in the natural environment, these organisms, and their pathogens, can cause serious problems for wild fish populations and the ecosystems on which they depend. Perhaps most worrisome is that we really have little idea of what the long-term implications of such mixing of domesticated and wild species may be.

In the case of commercial wild fisheries, we have a much longer experience and know full well the major changes in natural diversity and abundance these mechanized enterprises can cause.



Photo | Jim Praff

Wild Harvest

Throughout the world, major depletions of once-abundant species have been reported, often leading to significant ecosystem changes and the loss of livelihoods for millions of people. Every scientific review of world fisheries reinforces our concerns for the state of the world's oceans and indicates that we are pushing these ecosystems to the very limits of their resilience.

But, of course, it is not only individual fish species or human livelihoods that are affected by the excesses of industrialized exploitation. We have now entered a depletion domain where entire oceans and unique human cultures are being effectively threatened, positioning us for losses in diversity that will be permanent and irreversible.

We observe many of the same issues and concerns playing out in the domestic livestock and industrial agriculture circles, and some new ones, as well. In the case of these industries, the use of antibiotics, fertilizers, hormones, insecticide, and herbicides are all of concern to the consuming public, as are the loss of wild land and natural diversity, and further, in the case of domestic animals, their quality of life and treatment. The complex interrelationships between such industries are also a concern as we take more and more land to grow food crops, not for human consumption directly, but for domestic animal feed. When you really think about it, it seems that as long as we desire any food harvest, protein or otherwise, animals and natural environments seem to suffer.

Such issues are common topics of discussion and regularly appear in the news. We are all aware of them, and most of the public shakes its head and just wishes it wasn't so. Surely, they think, the harvest of human food does not have to lead, inevitably, to depletions of biodiversity, environmental contamination, the loss of human livelihoods, or the diminishment of cultural diversity. Yet so often the response they are given is that such losses, though regrettable, are inevitable; a cost of "doing business" that, while we may work to reduce it, will always be there. It is just not possible in a modern world, industrial food proponents say, to provide high quality human food without incurring some degree of environmental contamination or sacrificing some loss of nature.

Obviously, such messengers have never heard of recreational hunting and angling! For well over a century and throughout a hurricane of social and economic change, as well as an enormous human population increase, individual citizens of Canada and the U.S. have been harvesting wild protein. They have been doing so on a colossal scale without any threat to the environment or to human livelihoods or cultural traditions. Indeed, it has been just the opposite. They have vastly increased support for and assisted directly in the preservation of wild natural environments and of wild species and natural diversity, overall. Their efforts have, further, contributed enormously to human economies and livelihoods, and helped

preserve the historic traditions and values of their countries. These individuals have been willing, all along, to pay a disproportionate share of the conservation costs of their societies.

Their efforts have helped build one of the great conservation success stories of the world, the rescue, recovery, and sustainable management of wildlife species once threatened with extinction and now roaming in extraordinary abundance across this vast continent. Known as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, it is the only near continental framework of shared institutions, funding mechanisms, policies, and legislation to have literally increased wildlife diversity, maintained great predators at viable population levels, and enabled democratic access to a common natural food resource – all without prioritizing or otherwise industrializing its production or access to it.

Furthermore, these citizens have provided countless volunteer

hours to help assist, restore, and provide habitat for wild creatures; and have founded and provided financial support to an extraordinary range of conservation-focused organizations that have undertaken wildlife conservation challenges of enormous complexity and realized successes that have benefited not only all natural environments, but all citizens, as well.

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Every year, more than 15 million people engage directly in the harvesting of wild, organically produced, hormone-free animal protein from the landscapes of Canada and the USA, and more than 35 million engage directly in the harvest of wild fish from both the inland lakes and waterways, as well as the marine environments of both countries. This renewable harvest provides hundreds of millions of pounds of highly nutritious food to these individuals, their families and friends, reaching an incredible number of people and thus connecting a significant percentage of our populations with this wild, natural food. Like the traditions of hunting and angling, this immense harvest is no sideshow, but a real societal benefit provided freely by healthy wild lands and waters to the citizens of our countries.

Most importantly, these are benefits open to all citizens. All that is required is that a person learns how to hunt or fish, or befriends someone who does. Hunters and anglers take great pride in sharing their harvest and are always willing to do so. So, instead of taking this harvest for granted, we need to promote it and explain how hunting and angling not only benefit us personally, but also benefit the natural world and all other citizens. If we are interested in engaging more people in these activities and in conservation, generally, then I propose we start explaining the many and enduring benefits of the hunter's harvest.

Food quality and security matter to us all. So should our hunting and angling traditions. Let's begin to show they do by reaching all citizens with the one thing they cannot refuse or disagree about – highly nutritious, organically grown, wild food. 🍷