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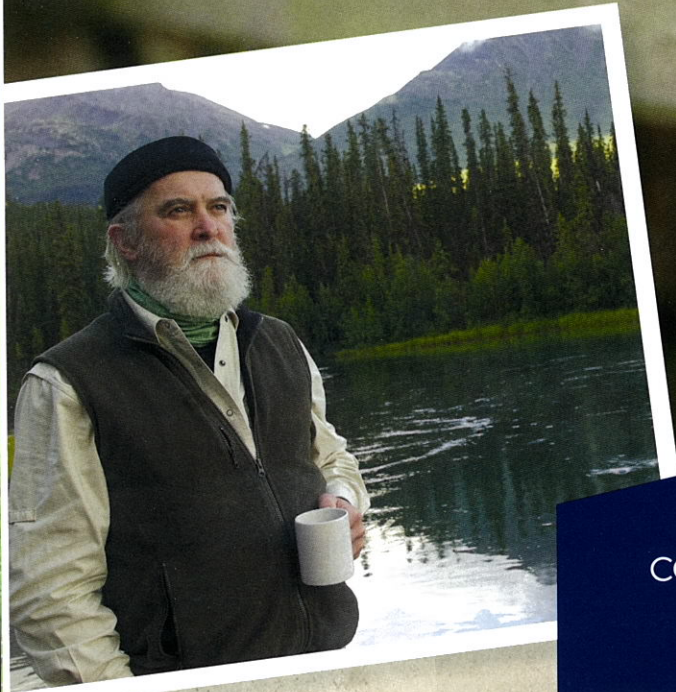


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# CONSERVATION MATTERS™

with Shane Mahoney



## WILDLIFE & PRIVATE LAND: CONSERVATION'S ENDURING CONTROVERSY PART 3: THE PRIVATE CUSTODIAN OF THE PUBLIC GOOD

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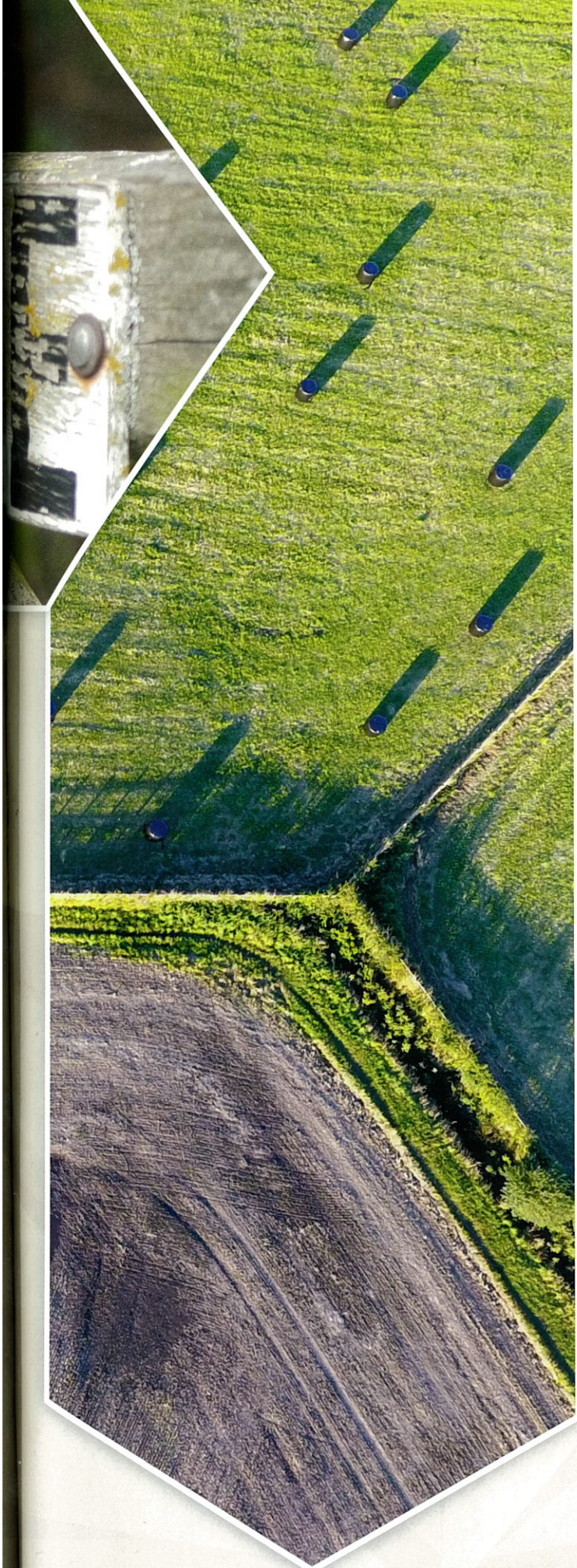
Shane Mahoney is considered to be one of the leading international authorities on wildlife conservation. A rare combination of historian, scientist, and philosopher, he brings a unique perspective to wildlife issues that has motivated and inspired audiences around the world. Named one of the 10 Most Influential Canadian Conservationists by Outdoor Canada Magazine and nominated for Person of the Year by Outdoor Life Magazine, he has received numerous awards including the Public Service Award of Excellence from the government of Newfoundland and Labrador and International Conservationist of the Year by Safari Club International. Born and raised in Newfoundland, he brings to his writings and lectures a profound commitment to rural societies and the sustainable use of natural resources, including fish and wildlife.

*Editor's Note: Private land issues and the privatization of wildlife have become major debates within conservation circles. In a series of articles, Shane Mahoney examines this controversy and comments on what has become a divisive issue not only between hunters and non-hunters, but among hunters themselves.*

*In his first article the author laid out the general issue of wildlife conservation on private land and called for a comprehensive wildlife policy for all lands, public and private. The second article examined one of the most polarizing issues, the confinement and commercial use of wildlife on lands legally owned by private individuals. In this concluding article Shane Mahoney calls for recognition that society and land are organically entwined, and that our solutions to wildlife conservation must recognize the land owner as a custodian of the public good.*

In the final analysis, conservation is about one thing; and one thing only: preventing the destruction of land. We may struggle with any number of other vexing problems but in the end it is the capacity of the earth to sustain nature that will determine the well being of humanity, the future of nations and the opportunity for civilization and progress. Yet society, in the main, cares little about this issue; the majority of citizens being preoccupied with what seem like more urgent matters. Furthermore, while owning land may be a quest or dream of many, what to do with it once it is owned is seldom a subject of public debate. Each land owner decides, to a large extent, what purpose the land will serve, despite the fact that land use affects all of us as well as the wildlife resource that belongs to us all. The reason for this is that within the womb of European settlement of Canada and the United States was born an ideal that is considered, even today, inviolate. The private property of individuals is theirs to transform, to set aside or to squander. This is not the state's business.





However, within the conservation movement there is much debate around this issue of private land and its use. While more recently this discussion has centered upon the ownership and commercial use of wildlife on private lands, more generally the conflict arises between the utilitarian and the aesthetic view of landscape, leading to a dichotomy of purpose for all land that wildlife requires, including private holdings. This unholy division often portrayed in the pejorative as a war between the “greenies” and “true conservationists” has crusaders aligned on each side, a conservation civil war that has no vision beyond bloodletting, and no hope beyond victory. Like most civil wars it is fuelled by a shared history, irrational suspicions and a failure to think inclusively. In this instance it is a failure to understand that every portion of land has some capacity to fulfill the diverse dreams of everyone, to satisfy the goals of both combatants who might otherwise be allies in some future and better time. It is also fair to say that there is often a failure by both sides to understand the plight of the landowner who is implored to do the right thing for wildlife and country.....and bear the costs for doing so.

Thus we see the clear problem for wildlife and for us who would fight for it: the landscapes of North America are being dismantled and disfigured while a majority of citizens remain disinterested, and those who care, remain divided. Private landowners are a varied community which encompasses all these persuasions, fomenting an imponderable mix of attitudes among this critical component of society who actually own land where wildlife exists. This confusing reality flourishes because we have failed as citizens, and as nations, to understand that the people and the land are one. The ideal that we exist as a great organism of society and nature combined still eludes our evolving ethics, our political and economic leadership and our religious institutions. We fail to conceive that our society rests upon the soil and the materials that either lie below or upon it. We are members of a citizen forest whether we wish to think in those terms or not.

Indeed, like our forefathers, we still appear to labour under the illusion that excess land exists and that it is easier and cheaper to exploit new landscapes than conserve what we are already using. Like those stepping ashore in Newfoundland, Massachusetts and Virginia we still somehow, in our minds eye, perceive the continent as expanding rather than fixed. But who can fly across this expanse today without being struck by how little undeveloped land still exists? Everywhere there are roads and fence lines, crops and expanding suburbs. Does this not beg the question “where can wildlife thrive?” The most fundamental answer rests with who owns the land. In this regard both public and private lands policy are in desperate need of reconsideration, but in my view, the greater challenge

CONTINUED ON PAGE 20



and opportunity rests with private land and, more particularly, with the private land owner. But the private land owner must be encouraged and supported to do what is right for wildlife.

More than sixty percent of land in the United States is in private ownership stitched like a patchwork quilt across the length and breadth of the nation. It represents some 1.4 billion acres and encompasses the fulsome natural diversity of the country. It contains virtually all the nation's cropland and a large majority of grassland pastures and forest lands. By sheer preponderance it harbours a huge proportion of the nation's biodiversity. It is also the land that is worked, capable of creating increased wildlife abundance through applied science and management principles while at the same time affording lifestyle and economic opportunities for people and their communities. Furthermore, it is land that can be managed at the personal and/or local level, making decisions that are required for wildlife conservation potentially easier to achieve, and often more practical in conception and application.

Private land is thus important, for the nations' wildlife and for the nation itself. It was this notion that John Locke articulated when he entwined the "rights of life, liberty and property" and then linked those with the notion of governance through consent. In the United States, in particular, the private citizen and the land he or she owns is both the sinew of the nation and the great hope for wildlife conservation. It lies structurally at the very foundations of the American economy and forms a constant communication mechanism between the citizen, the private sector and the government. And if we have learned anything from the twentieth century experiment with conservation we know that without this three legged stool wildlife conservation ultimately falters. Some economic basis must exist for conservation to work. Either the public

pays for it through taxation or the private citizen earns from it in a direct sense and thus pursues it with good intentions and good sense. Eden is no more. We keep wildlife through our collective sweat, blood and tears. If we cease to labour, wildlife will perish.

If someone asked you to do your best to protect wildlife, at least in the United States, where would you start? I believe we should start with private land and that means addressing, head on, the question of how to incentivize the private landowner. We have only a few general options available to us. Either the private land owner makes money from the wildlife on the land and/or the public decides to financially support the landowner for those efforts that conserve the values of that landscape, aesthetic and utilitarian, that the public wants; expecting the landowner to do so at his or her own expense is a utopian dream with dire implications for wildlife in the medium and long term. It simply will not work. Even the wealthiest of private land owners with strong commitments to conservation recognize that some balance between philanthropy and capitalism is required to conserve wildlife and other ecological values of the landscape for the long term.

The private landowner can and must be a custodian of the public good; but a good and enlightened public is also required. We need a public that will economically and morally support private landowners in their efforts. We need a conservation movement that will set aside petty quarrels and divisions and that will also set aside ideologies. We need to focus on the great question of how to keep the wild things with us. Along the way we will have to swallow hard and accept that wildlife on private land is a special case in need of special treatment. Dismissing this reality is a perilous ignorance.

*The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) wishes to create a fundamental shift among hunters from caring about hunting to caring about all wildlife. Ranchers care about cattle and anglers care about fish, but hunters are concerned for all animals and their well-being. Hunters must be committed to the responsible use of wildlife resources and passionate about preserving a diversity of wildlife species. The GOABC is a strong supporter of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, which stipulates that law and science should manage wildlife. This model is the result of hunters and anglers who were dedicated to conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter-conservationist.*