



Montana Wildlife Federation

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Nimrod's Trace

The Future of Hunting - How to Bet on the Winning Horse by Ron Moody

Getting your story on the front page when all you have to report is good news is a famously hard thing to do.

Perhaps because we Nimrods are preoccupied with all the dark clouds looming on the horizon of the hunters' path, we still haven't figured out how to celebrate our successes. More to the point – we grassroots hook 'n bullet types haven't learned the lessons of conservation success very well in order to sustain and repeat them in the future.

If hunting and wildlife conservation could fly on autopilot this would not be an issue – but decision-making in democratic societies doesn't happen automatically. Forget your conservation skill, take your hand off the political joystick, and our wildlife management success can become a crash site within a generation.

Probably more important in the long run, is the need for the vast non-hunting majority of our society to know and trust the hunter-driven conservation system that has made Today the best of times for North American wildlife since the dark decades of the 19th Century.

What am I talking about?

In a nutshell – North America in the first decade of the 21st Century is a continent where large natural landscapes continue to support expanding populations of free-roaming wild game animals that are largely accessible to all who would hunt or merely observe. This remains true at the same time that numbers of people are multiplying exponentially, becoming more alienated from nature, and consuming more and more of wildlife habitat for human use. No other continent in the modern world can make this claim. This achievement rises far above moon rockets and skyscrapers as a living monument of national treasure for the people of the USA and of Canada, in my opinion.

We're doing something right in North America and it's vital that we know what that something is and how it works.

Every hunter and angler is familiar with some aspect of how conservation works. Our obsession with habitat is one example. Our pride in passage of game laws and our financial support via taxes and licenses are two more. But there is a whole lot more going on than can be seen at street level. And this passes us unnoticed because the big picture, how the parts of the whole thing work together to make a miracle, has always been obscure to the grassroots citizen.

Today however, thanks to the work of a number of hunter scholars, the system of success now has a name and an understandable form. It's called the NORTH AMERICAN MODEL OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION. The form is organized around a list of seven principles that lead to conservation success when ALL SEVEN are employed. The list is:

- Wildlife as Public Trust Resources
- Elimination of markets for Wildlife
- Allocation of Wildlife by Law
- Wildlife Can Only be killed for Legitimate Purpose
- Wildlife are Considered an International Resource
- Science is the Proper Tool for Discharge of Wildlife Policy
- Democracy of Hunting *

(* from a 2002 paper by Joanna Prukop Lackey & Ron Regan presented to the International Association of Fish And Wildlife Agencies)

The 'Model' actually is old news for hunters active in leadership oriented conservation organizations such as the Montana Wildlife Federation or the National Wildlife Federation. I personally first encountered the concept in 1994 when Dr. Valerius Geist from the University of Calgary addressed the MWF annual meeting. Since that time, you can pretty much trace the Federation's position on any issue back to a root principle within the Model. Much credit for this continuity goes to Jim Posewitz of Orion – The Hunters' Institute for his efforts to refine the hunters' story and to remind us of what we have wrought.

We in the USA have been actively engaged in inventing and operating the Model – at least since Teddy Roosevelt started the Boone & Crockett Club in 1887 – but the Canadians seem to be the ones to draw the Big Picture and how to explain it.

Most recently, Shane Mahoney, Newfoundland biologist and conservation scholar, has partnered with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation to produce a DVD program that clearly introduces and explains the Model.

Titled *OPPORTUNITY FOR ALL* this 35-minute video is must viewing for everybody who cares about wildlife and wild places. Copies can be ordered from the Elk Foundation website – www.rmef.org. Also read Mahoney's related articles posted on the website.

Hunters and Anglers certainly cannot explain their conservation success to anybody else until we understand it ourselves. But do not mistake that the person whose knowledge of the Model is of ultimate importance is your non-hunting neighbor.

The success of anti-hunting advocates in passing state ballot initiatives to ban cougar hunting in California and some types of bear hunting in Oregon and Arizona opened the eyes of many hunters to the reality that if hunters don't shape public perception somebody else will.

The irony was that such democratic initiatives broke the Conservation Model in states where wildlife managers (operating within the Model) were successfully maintaining healthy populations of cougars and bears at or near carrying capacity. A substantial voting majority of the public, however, honestly believed that those game species actually were threatened with extinction by over-hunting or abusive hunting.

More chilling by far is that subsequent efforts to overturn the bans failed by even larger vote margins than the original vote, and this came after extensive public education by conservationists. An eternal truth in conservation is that all your victories are temporary while your defeats are permanent and cumulative.

And hunters are not the only ones to pay the price of misguided democracy. The states where bans were passed have since had to kill more cougars and bears as nuisance cases than were taken by hunters before the ban.

If there is one true difference between the modern hunter and his ancestors it is that skills of citizenship - diplomacy and communication - are as important to hunting success today as have ever been the skills of spoor and stalk.

Returning to the aircraft flying analogy, modern hunters, as a group, have to be social pilots during the week if they are to be natural hunters on the weekend. Piloting implies skill. An untutored hand on the conservation joystick can crash whole traditions and species.

The fact that former game animals such as grizzly bears and gray wolves were ever put on the endangered species list is a stark reminder that hunters sometimes have failed to execute their conservation responsibility. True enough, 'following the Model' is easy to say in the abstract but real hard to do when face-to-face with powerful political opponents, or there are other legitimate interests, such as livestock growers, who must be accommodated.

The point of these lessons is in the present and the future, not the past. Hunter-Conservationists face a myriad of challenges – the current debacle unfolding on wildlife habitats in the Rocky Mountain West caused by unbridled energy development is a prime example. Only our citizenship skill, knowledge and fraternal allegiance to our Conservation tradition will keep the miracle of the Model alive.

Mahoney, Geist, Lackey, Regan and others have done hunters a great service by articulating the Model – but they haven't yet written "*CONSERVATION FOR DUMMIES*."

Still and All, even as we gird for the stark challenges in our future, we hunters now wield the strong sword and shield of a Model of successful conservation that can be advance for the benefit of hunter and hunted alike. When your horse is winning keep betting on it.

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