SPORTS AFIELD

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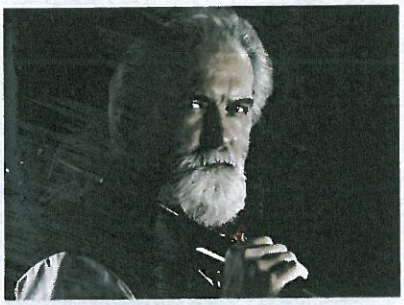
BUILDING A COALITION

Should hunters fear a conservation coalition that includes nonhunters?

Theodore Roosevelt was a tireless advocate of wildlife conservation, and not just for huntable animals. He also worked with nonhunters to conserve songbirds and other species.



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Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.

The sad and often perverse slaughter of wildlife that marked the European colonization of North America remains one of the great examples of how selfish purpose has the capacity to impoverish both nature and society. Fortunately, the great innovation we term conservation was itself an outcome of this unfettered onslaught and exemplifies how the spur of crisis can raise both a nation's conscious and its resolve to progress. Indeed, the fading thunder of the once innumerable bison still echoes in our consciousness. It persists as a shadowed reality that settles upon our debates surrounding the future of wildlife on this continent today.

The great transformation that marked the rise of conservationist thinking in North America was fashioned by individuals who cared deeply about the natural resources of Canada and the USA. Their efforts, launched against improbable odds, led to the system of laws, policies, conventions, and institutions we recognize today as the North American System (Model) of Wildlife Conservation. This is the only fully integrated continental system of conservation in the world and its spectacular and sustained recovery of wildlife is unsurpassed. Its success bears witness to the power of a citizenry whose motivations to protect wildlife and their cherished hunting and wilderness traditions would not be denied.

There can be no doubt that this system has been convincingly led and significantly maintained by individuals and organizations in support of sustainable wildlife use, but it was from the beginning joined by a much wider coalition of interests that included legions of nonhunters as well. The early commitments of women's organizations to halt the slaughter of shorebirds and the legendary wilderness advocacy of John Muir can never be dismissed nor denied. Nor must we ever forget the tireless devotion of dedicated hunters like Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell to the conservation of songbirds and a wide range of other nongame species. In their love of all nature, these advocates were united, though certainly many differences of opinion existed and intense debates and disagreements over specific issues were inevitable.

Over time, this original coalition has become fractured, leading, in my opinion, to a weakening of the conservation movement. It has become almost fashionable to align oneself with a narrower view of what matters in conservation, a narrower view of what is worth fighting for. Far too often this decision has been considered and encouraged along the fault line of hunting, as though it is somehow inevitable that we must disagree over this founding tradition and that no inclusive coalition for wildlife is possible because of hunting. This is ridiculous on so many fronts that it boggles the mind to even take it seriously.

For it is incontrovertible that the vast majority of North American citizens support fair chase, legal hunting, thus offering no social majority context for conservationists of any stripe to regard hunting as the celebrated and unavoidable cause of dissent. On the contrary, this support for hunting shows that there is every reason to believe and accept a broad social agreement on the legitimacy of hunting, and to use this as a basis for coalition building, not as an excuse for inevitable dissent. Furthermore, the efforts of the hunter-naturalists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in providing both the philosophical and legislative foundations for the recovery of diverse wildlife is beyond challenge, and has a deep and vibrant literature in its support. And, beyond question, it was the hunter-naturalist ilk of Leopold and company in the 1930s who laid the

scientific foundation for wildlife management and conservation policy.

If all this weren't enough, there is the irrefutable truth that hunter dollars directly and indirectly pay for the majority of state-run wildlife conservation programs and have consistently done so for over half a century. So why is this divide over hunting presented as a barrier to building a broader coalition? Is there real validity to this much-discussed chasm? Is it only one side of the divide that promotes this? Or do both sides promote the idea and encourage it as a barrier to cooperative engagement on the larger conservation issues of our time?

I know from personal experience that some would point to a (contrived) historical narrative, suggesting that this divide was a deliberate construct decreed by the wilderness advocate John Muir of Sierra Club fame and the sustainable use/hunting advocates like Boone and Crockett Club (best represented by Theodore Roosevelt), and is thus a longstanding reality. The truth of the matter, however, is that history does not support this narrative. Muir and Roosevelt had differences of opinion, certainly, but they were also very much admirers and supporters of one another in many regards. (The real division that came between Muir and the sustainable use community is well documented. It was over domestic livestock grazing on federal lands, not hunting.)

So why do we find it so difficult to form a broader coalition on conservation? Is hunting really the barrier it is portrayed to be? Or is it just a distraction, designed to take the eyes and minds of people off the real issue? Is it possible that on both sides of the aisle we are afraid of a broad coalition? Is it just remotely possible that many players in the conservation arena find it both convenient and advantageous to force an artificial divide upon the broad mass of potential recruits and membership by offering them a choice that will confer a sense of allegiance and fraternity? Are we afraid of a broad coalition because we fear our individual influence may then be diminished?

Well, who can really say? But just in case the hunting public and our hunting organizations are afraid of this, I would offer the following personal observations.

We have nothing to fear. We are strong and can become even stronger. The coalition will be formed; the movement in its direction is already underway. Hunters will lead, follow, or become irrelevant. So we need to take the lead, become the tip of the conservation spear and once again welcome all those who care for wildlife, helping them to understand hunting or to accept its contribution, even while they remain less than totally comfortable with it. We must be the leaders, the conveners, the broad-minded, the confident, the welcoming, the statesmen and women of conservation. We must lead the next conservation revolution. To do less will be to choose the narrow view and the self-righteous and self-congratulatory path that has never been the way or motivation of the true hunter.

We began the conservation revolution over a century ago by being inclusive. Let us not abandon this great history nor diminish the hopeful path we have forged. Let us recover our idealism, for the sake of wildlife, our nations, and ourselves.

DSC and DEF

Organizations such as Dallas Safari Club and Dallas Ecological Foundation are actively engaged in restoring and protecting wild places and wildlife through various conservation, education, and advocacy programs. Dallas Ecological Foundation has developed and administers the Outdoor Adventures education program, reaching more than 12,500 students annually. Outdoor Adventures makes outdoor skills an integral part of physical education curricula. Learn more about both organizations at www.biggame.org and www.dallasecologicalfoundation.org.