

ABOUT SHANE

Shane Mahoney is considered 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 wildlife and fish.

Thank you to Sports Afield for permission to reprint this article.

For hunters, reaching the North American public with our shared accomplishments for wildlife conservation will not be an easy task. Nor will it be a short campaign. The complex machinery required to maintain wildlife is completely unknown to most North Americans, and as a consequence they often accept the argument that removing man from nature is the best means for improving wildlife fortunes. They have fallen prey to the myth that the wildlife abundance of North America exists by accident.

The hunting community has to realize that this notion is being communicated to the public in many subtle, and not so subtle, ways. It is also being provided on a near continuous basis. We in the hunting community, and indeed all those who believe in the sustainable use approach to natural resource management, have largely failed to provide evidence to the contrary. Our approach to conserving wildlife, based upon the principles and applications of the North American Model, was supposed to have been self evident, one must assume, given our lack of communication efforts. However, it is clear that the citizens of Canada and the United States have not been convinced. In the absence of information

CONSERVATION MATTERS

with Shane Mahoney

THE MYTH OF EDEN

they have remained either unaware of our achievements for wildlife or accepting of the information they have been given by those who do not accept sustainable use and may be opposed to hunting.

As a result, we should not be surprised, nor find fault with an uninformed public that accepts the only perspective they have been given on this, an issue of profound importance. The compass of responsibility must swing to us. We have failed to communicate our history. We have failed to communicate our achievements. We have failed to honor our heroes. As a result we have a serious and deeply embedded problem. For us to meaningfully address this we have to understand how and why it has arisen. No

amount of chest thumping and hysteric claims about our right to hunt will suffice to counter this powerful social reality. We might as well try to empty the ocean with a thimble. A much more thoughtful and professional response is required—whether we like it or not. Furthermore, hunting deserves a better response than this!

As concerns over global environmental issues increase, we may anticipate that philosophies opposed to hunting will gain more widespread acceptance, particularly within the broadening sector of humanity for whom nature is little more than a digital reality. Hunters must recognize that we have been privileged to engage with and understand nature on its own

terms, and not simply through the edited lens of television or the manufactured experiences of zoos and urban green spaces. But as hunters we represent only about six percent of the population. For many people who have not had our experiences, the notion that man should withdraw from nature (or only passively engage it as a voyeur) will resonate as a sort of return to Eden vision.

Driven by an understandable love and fascination for wild creatures, but life experiences that have no connection to the birth and death drama of the planet's natural systems, many in the public will simply wish that animals remain untouched. Without knowing

Continued on page 34



Continued from page 33

what it takes to conserve wildlife, they will inevitably fall prey to perspectives that appear motivated by wildlife's best interest, but which really offer no long term solution to the many challenges that wildlife face in a modern and increasingly overpopulated world. Their vision will be understandably important to them, for as they see it wildlife must be protected, and that protection may need to extend over all forms of human intrusion.

We need to understand that this vision may not always be an anti-hunting sentiment, per se, but simply a wish for an environmentally safe and harmonious world, a desire we all may share. Many people would like to believe that man can somehow prosper without taking from or manipulating nature, and that this was his ideal circumstance in some past and

perfect time. Hunters need to be very careful in separating such beliefs from those which are hunting focused, and which condemn the activity specifically. We need not mistake what is simply a different viewpoint for one which is deliberately opposed to what we do.

As hunters we also need to be careful in ascribing such views to fringe elements in our society, anti-hunting or otherwise; for this is not necessarily the case. After all, a distorted story line has also been presented by virtually every high school textbook when describing the lives and economies of the Native Peoples of this continent (and South America) at the time of European discovery. We need to reflect on the powerful influence this has had on the North American psyche, and how it has influenced public perceptions

towards hunting. It is certainly relevant that for generations our very institutions of public education have been engaged in providing subtle distortions of man's real place in nature, both historic and present. Those engaged in this enterprise were not fringe elements, "crack pots" or the uninformed, but amongst the most trusted and admired of our citizenry: our educators. Furthermore, they were not intending to adversely influence societal views on hunting. While that was not their motivation, I believe they may have done so by strongly influencing how society perceives man's rightful actions towards the natural world. In describing a fairy tale existence for early Americans our historians and educators not only created a caricature of diverse and noble races, but also led a public to desire an Eden that



PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO © DOMEN BLENKUS

The Guide Outfitters Association of British Columbia (GOABC) wants to start 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 seem to only care about their sport. 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 be used to manage wildlife. This model is the result of hunters and anglers who were dedicated conservation. As anti-hunting pressure becomes louder, it becomes increasingly important to continue and enhance the legacy of the hunter conservationist.

never existed, one where man and nature co-existed in some perfectly balanced and mutually understood existence. While the death of animals occurred it was somehow sanctified and blameless.

We all know this story. Five hundred years ago the North and South American continents stretched like an unbroken carpet of wilderness, amidst which wildlife ran free and abundant; and man lived in simplicity and took only what was necessary, never altering the great wilderness (read Eden) in which he lived. Added to this picture was the notion that relatively few humans lived here anyway, and thus man's impact was, inevitably, light. Living entirely within nature's cycles, North American natives did not manipulate their environment but softly tread along its natural pathways, taking only what they needed for the very

basics of life. As a result, the Europeans discovered was bountiful, perfect and full, an Eden ultimately defiled and reduced by their rapacious greed and failure to adopt the soft tread of the Native Americans. Oh(!), so the enticing passion tale runs, if we could only return to such a reality.

The power of this image should not be underestimated. It has had lasting impact on the public mind and value system, providing a presumably real life example of an ideal world that we should emulate, one where man can passively exist and where wildlife and wilderness abound. Combined with the increasing detachment of modern North American society from the realities of nature, this prevailing historical myth leads the uninformed public to the conclusion that the disruption and manipulation of nature

is a modern phenomenon that moves us away from the ideal world we discovered five centuries ago. The extension of this logic is that many of man's modern activities, such as hunting or logging or other uses of wild resources, are not only wrong in scale but they are also wrong in kind. In other words, such activities are morally and ethically wrong, and somehow unnatural.

What this view of history fails to convey, of course, is the reality of the New World when Europeans arrived. Instead of a region of few and primitive people it was inhabited by many tens of millions, with a mosaic of cultures equal to or greater than that of Europe. These peoples spoke some 350 different languages, practiced large scale agriculture and irrigation, cleared vast tracts of land through prescribed

Continued on page 36

PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO © PETER ZELEI



Continued from page 35

burning and built cities that were amongst the largest and most advanced in the world. While the cities of Spain, France and England ran rivers of sewage through their streets, various cultures in the New World lived in equally large metropolises but with water and sewage systems comparable to the great centers of Roman culture. They developed highly complex societies with elaborate rituals and religious institutions, architecture rivaling the Greeks, Romans and Egyptians, practiced aggressive warfare, and saw their cultures and fortunes rise and fall for many complex reasons that included both environmental and human elements. In short, they were very much like us.

These were the realities of North and South America at the time of “discovery”. To create and sustain such societies

required immense natural capital and it is certain that these peoples drew extensively from nature, and worked diligently to improve their livelihoods by manipulating it to a very considerable extent. They were neither few nor primitive, and they did not live an edenic existence. Rather they engaged the natural world just as humanity has since our emergence, and participated fully in the exchange of food and energy that has always required the death of wild creatures, not only for mankind but for every other living organism as well. Yet, despite the empirical evidence we have for this, the myth of our historical Eden continues to be promulgated, and new recruits to its position are continuously arising.

Carried along in the slipstream of this

historical fantasy is the notion that hunting is now an unnecessary and violent past time that has no place in a modern and progressive (read civilized) world. We should, rather, be able to return to an idyllic time, where somehow the death of animals was not part of the equation of man’s existence. Of course this is not the only myth being applied against hunting, for by virtue of our technological and especially agricultural advancement, it is said, we can find a way out of the laws of nature which have inevitably required the death of one component of nature for the life of another. While this interpretation may encompass all animals, even domestic livestock in the vegetarians’ point of view, the most virulent opposition to animal death seems to be in the arena of wild creatures. This probably suggests that seals and deer somehow experience death



PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO © MARJE

“Wildlife does not exist by accident. It thrives today in North America because of a wondrous network of policies, laws and financial support structures largely put in place and maintained by the small percentage of us who hunt and fish.”

differently from the chicken and pig, or that their lives are worth more. How this logic works I am not sure. Nor am I understanding of why shrimp, lobster, crab, oysters, and scallops escape this net, so to speak, as do redfish, cod, catfish and haddock. Aren't all fisheries hunts?

What I am certain about, however, is that the debate over hunting's relevance and legitimacy in modern time is a highly complex issue. It is the product of many recent and historical trends in society, including the understandings we have been given of how Native Americans related to the natural resources of this continent (and South America). Once we begin to carefully dissect the real reasons why our hunter led conservation movement is so frequently misunderstood and misrepresented we will find that no simple short term solution exists for

maintaining our successes for wildlife or for convincing the public of why hunting remains relevant in today's world. Instead we will come to realize that a determined and ongoing effort in education will be essential. We will embed our history of achievement in the public discourse or we will find ourselves increasingly marginalized.

Wildlife does not exist by accident. It thrives today in North America because of a wondrous network of policies, laws and financial support structures largely put in place and maintained by the small percentage of us who hunt and fish. Perhaps in some distant future society at large will pay for what we have carried for a century or more; but even if this were true would not the history of our achievement be worth telling? The reality is that no feasible alternative model for

wildlife conservation is yet within our reach, and may never be. The North American Model is an achievement of historic significance, and the only continental model of conservation in the world today. It is not a myth, nor a utopian dream. It is a shining and crystal reality.

Yet your friends and neighbors, most likely even your own children, have no idea of how the North American Model came about or why it matters. So I ask you, who will tell our story? Who will ensure that educators begin to explain how it is that wildlife thrives in our midst? Who will challenge the myths and replace them with truth?