



Hunting as Sustainable Use

A Conservation Success Ignored by the World

BY SHANE P. MAHONEY



The North American model of wildlife conservation is arguably one of the most successful programs of sustainable resource use ever devised. Yet it has been virtually ignored by world leaders and private and public organizations alike. However, the challenge of how to maintain human economies and traditions while continuing to utilize the world's natural gifts has been a focus of international agencies for decades.

Hunting has been achieving this conservation objective for well over a century in North America. Only in the last few years, however, is there indication of even a tentative willingness to consider it as a model for the world. This admittedly frustrating history contains the seeds of hope for a great renaissance in hunting's acceptance by the world. We, as hunters, must capitalize on this opportunity now.

Our Common Future

In 1980, the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) published its World Conservation Strategy and argued for a stronger integration of social, economic, cultural and resource conservation ideas within a single policy framework. Its objective was to find the best means for conserving the planet's wildlife diversity. This was followed in 1983 by the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations General Assembly and headed by the former prime minister of Norway, Gro Harlem Brundtland.

The commission's focus was to examine environmental challenges around the world and formulate realistic options for conserving natural resources – while at the same time enabling human cultures to continue

their traditional uses. This intent so closely parallels that of North America's hunting-based (and hunter-led) conservation model that it seems inconceivable no one on the commission stumbled over the elephant in their living room!

After all, this was no fly-by-night affair. The commission had membership from 21 nations and included high-ranking officials from the U.S. and Canada. In addition, it had the capacity to engage the best minds in conservation from everywhere in the world and had powerful advisory panels that provided insight on matters ranging from energy and economics to wildlife conservation.

The commission's public hearings were held in the capitals of 15 nations, and its discussion groups launched an avalanche of position papers and regional perspectives that covered the full range of cultural and economic realities around the world. Furthermore, it concerned itself with all manner of human takings from the environment. In 1987, after three full years of discussion and debate, the World Commission on Environment and Development published its seminal report, *Our Common Future*.

This was unquestionably the best-funded study of its kind ever undertaken. It had the greatest scope, the greatest reservoir of talent at its disposal, and the greatest potential to bring meaningful change to how the world's natural resources are conserved. It talked a good deal about natural diversity, forestry and fisheries, food production, energy consumption, and sustaining human traditions and cultures, along with an enormous range of other ecological, social and economic issues. True to its mission of formulating realistic policies for global conservation, the

study did recognize the importance of bringing traditional uses of natural resources into the decision-making process.

Lost Opportunity

Nevertheless, it hardly mentioned hunting at all and remained obviously ignorant of the North American model. For hunters everywhere, this was an incredible opportunity lost.

Our Common Future clearly had a significant impact on conservation policy initiatives around the globe and was responsible for launching the notion of “sustainable development” onto the world stage. It led to the two largest conservation congresses of all time – the Earth Summits in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1992) and Johannesburg, South Africa (2002).

How unfortunate that no one pointed out to the world governments attending this process that here, in North America, we had conceived of such things over a century ago. Indeed, we had enacted a program known as “wise use” that was achieving the very things the Brundtland Commission decided were required to safeguard natural resources and the cultural and biological diversity of the planet.

And how incredible that even our own governments in Canada and the U.S. – the founding nations of the world’s most successful conservation paradigm – did not point out to the United Nations that we had a conservation model from which they could learn. Obviously, the role hunters have played in restoring and maintaining wildlife on this continent was not explained to the world. Hunting was never presented as the rescuer of wildlife and wild places. Instead, it was left unannounced (or maligned) by the very nations striving to develop policies that would eventually emulate what hunter conservationists had already achieved for wildlife around the world. Indeed, it is a surreal history.

What We Must Do

However, as hunters, we can, and must, learn from this history. The lessons are clear. Regardless of what we think, most of our civic leaders and the public do not have one iota of appreciation for the role hunters have played in wildlife conservation.

And they *cannot* have any appreciation, for they have no knowledge. We have not reached out to them effectively enough.

This reality extends everywhere. Indeed, it is so prevalent that throughout an intensive three-year review of global conservation challenges and achievements, no one found means or inclination to explain to a captive audience that hunters were, and have remained, the most stalwart conservationists in the world.

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This failure obviously extends to the diverse array of government agencies and NGOs involved with, and/or dedicated to, hunting itself. What can explain this? Is the answer simply that we did not recognize in this international process the opportunity to promote hunting? In some strange way, did we ourselves see our hunting model as detached from the United Nations environmental review?

Regardless of the answer, it is clear that many agencies and individuals did contribute to the process and that others concerned with the world’s natural resources and mankind’s future did participate. In so doing, it was inevitable that some philosophies incompatible with our hunting-based conservation model would have been brought forward. Fair enough. This was a United Nations search for best practices, and all should have their say. But our voice, the hunter’s voice, needed to be there. We needed to be in the fray.

Our conservation approach of wise use, along with the hunting tradition upon which it is based, would have

received a lot of attention and prestige through the Brundtland Commission review. By being at the table, we could have affected changes in international conservation policies. These would have greatly benefited hunting, both here at home and around the world. Instead, hunting was ignored, and hunters became irrelevant to the search for conservation ideas.

Sustainable Use

At a time when our participation rates are declining and we seek ways of promoting hunting to new generations, we cannot afford to miss such opportunities. Fortunately, we have been presented with a second chance to perform on the world stage and present our hunter’s perspective to the international community.

While the Brundtland Commission was focusing on the broad agenda of “sustainable development” and ways of enhancing world economies while protecting the environment, the IUCN was continuing its efforts to find realistic means for conserving biological diversity. This somewhat parallel effort to integrate human activity with wildlife conservation led to a new doctrine known widely today as “sustainable use.” This framework (and title) is even more closely aligned with our North American concept of “wise use” than the United Nation’s “sustainable development” program. Thus, incredibly, two international efforts are now coalescing toward the very heart of an approach to natural resource use that North American hunter’s have spearheaded and maintained for over a century.

The IUCN “sustainable use” program has already begun to recognize that hunting can represent a legitimate means of sustainable resource utilization. This recognition, as well as the principles espoused in the “sustainable use” doctrine, offers another great opportunity to advance hunting’s legitimate cause.

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