

LEAP OF FAITH: PART TWO

It's high time hunters started telling our story, loudly and clearly, to the general public.

In the last issue, Shane Mahoney used the spectacular seagoing cliff-nesting birds in Newfoundland as an analogy for the courageous leap of faith now required of hunters to ensure their leadership role in the conservation community. In this article, he describes why reaching out to the general public is so critical to the future of hunting and the future of wildlife.

Ensuring the future of hunting requires more than passion; it requires courage. I am not referring here to the courage to pursue dangerous game or to endure hardship in high mountain excursions. Rather, I speak of a more subtle and sophisticated courage that takes hunters out of their preferred element and places them in the frustrating and challenging world of public debate. For more than two decades now, I have argued and pleaded for a direct engagement with the general public on the merits and relevance of hunting in modern times. I have also argued that public support for hunting is fragile, weakening and headed for collapse. I believe the vast majority of social and demographic trends support this unsettling prediction.

On this continent, educating hunters on the principles of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation was an essential first step, to articulate that hunting was far more than killing and that the hunting experience inspired them to become advocates for wildlife. The strategy is simple: provide the hunting community with a consistent, historically accurate message, along with sound evidence in order to tackle a public dialogue with confidence and pride.

There is increasing recognition of the need for broader dialogue, and we are making good efforts to build evidence-based arguments in support of hunting's conservation record. However, we are not taking the most important next step to se-

cure hunting's future—effectively engaging the public in this discussion. While outreach and communications are fairly common programs in agencies and organizations, very few are targeted specifically to the general public. We can whoop and holler all we like at conventions or hunting camps, but the ripple effect is minimal, dispersing like vapor after the booths are folded and the tents collapsed. Only by developing a clear, specific strategy, with measurable goals and deliberate objectives, can we maintain the public support vital to hunting's future.

Two hard realities are facing us. A significant percentage of the current 30 million hunters in North America will die over the next fifteen to twenty years. Recruitment processes currently developed have little, if any, chance of replacing them. Without some miracle, the percentage of the population that hunts and the percentage of the population that has friends and relatives who hunt will continue to decline. As this happens, the social relevance and political influence of the hunting community will also diminish, making the support of the general public ever more important. While this pattern will, initially, have less influence on hunters who can afford to travel and hunt, it will have a more immediate effect on the local hunter who represents the majority of the hunting public today.

I believe the consequences of this for wildlife will be many and far reaching. While hunters must accept that we have not been alone in advocating for wildlife, hunters have paved the way for conservation. Furthermore, the financial support of the hunting community has been crucial to wildlife conservation, in the USA in particular. From the translocation and recovery of game species to the protection of fish and wildlife habitat, the support of antipoaching laws and programs and the opposition to reckless land development,



VIC SCHEDEL

Taking kids afield is not enough to ensure the future of hunting. We must reach out to the nonhunting public with our story if we expect hunting to continue for generations to come.

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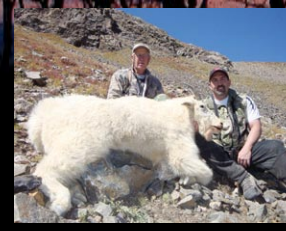
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hunters and anglers have been among the most engaged, the most effective, and the most enduring advocates. How can their loss not have negative implications for our cherished wildlife resources? And to take the argument further, how can the loss of support for hunting not also contribute to a more perilous condition for these same resources?

The reality is that conservation will be seriously weakened without hunters' advocacy, and hunters will not be effective without the broad public being supportive or at least tolerant of them. The fact is we are a tiny minority. Like all minorities, we require acceptance and understanding to flourish and freely advocate for our culture. Thus, it is crucial that we reach out, and do so strategically. The challenge is enormous and will require a good deal more than rhetoric, camps for small numbers of children, or political lobbying.

As hunters, we need to cease speaking only to ourselves and other predictably friendly audiences. We need to define what it is we bring to society, not what we bring to ourselves. We must develop the talents and sophistication and enter the public debate with confidence, knowing that we can explain the social value of hunting and the importance it holds for wildlife and landscape conservation. Economic development, the support for wildlife refuges and wilderness areas, the protection of a clean and productive environment—these are benefits of hunting that will resonate with the general public. In addition, our legacy of excise taxation on hunting and fishing gear has contributed billions of dollars to wildlife and fish restoration.

We hunters have an extraordinary story to tell, but we lack the political will to take it beyond our borders of comfort. We are failing our own narrative in history, failing our cultural identity and our personal beliefs. And all those businesses that make significant money from hunting on private and public

lands seem less than interested in helping with a large-scale outreach to those who will ultimately and certainly decide our fate. From their perspective, it is obviously better to wait and hope, rather than move to shape our hunting destiny and the future prosperity of their enterprises. Well, good luck!

We need an awakening! A real down-to-the-dirt uprising in the hunter ranks demanding that the organizations we support get on with this mission of saving the future of hunting! Forget the feel-good weekend photo-ops of one interested kid who took a hunting course. Let's break into the mainstream media, delivering radio and television messages on the benefits and social relevance of hunting today! Forget the cheering hundreds at our convention dinners and reach out through radio to the tens of thousands on their drive home from work every day. Buy billboard space, use trucking company fleets and open fields on our properties to broadcast the good news that hunting brought wildlife back and hunting can keep it with us. Let the message ring along our nations' highways and in the magazine stands at roadside restaurants and airport kiosks.

Let us fund lecture tours and public forums on hunting at our universities and colleges. Write articles for feature magazines, not just hunting ones, and work assiduously to get op-ed pieces into the mainstream media. Let us change the tenor and substance of our hunting magazines and meetings so that conservation is foremost. Let us find individuals who can represent hunting who are respected conservationists in their own right and choose them, not just people who have spent their lives hunting, as our representatives and "poster children." Like all movements seeking to market our message, we desperately need recognizable faces that can be met with respect in the broad world of media coverage, not just good old boys who have been part of our organizations forever. They

may comfort our members because they won't say anything new, but what hunting needs is just that—something new! The nonhunting public will not listen to these individuals and many will not believe them. They have no conservation achievements to mention beyond being part of a hunting organization.

"So what?" asks the nonhunting public. This will not cut it. The public will look for those who have written, lectured, and worked professionally for wildlife and who have reputations built on this. Those who come from such ranks, and who are hunters as well, have a powerful image to bring, that of professionals who care and have dedicated their lives to wildlife and yet can articulate the hunting contribution to conservation as an established fact, not just an eager opinion.

Do we collectively believe we are incapable of these simple efforts? If so, I suggest we fold our tents and retreat from the coming storm. If we do feel capable—and we surely are—then I think we should build the unstoppable coalition and together accomplish these things. This will be the topic of my next article in this Leap of Faith series. It will explain how courage is contagious. 🐾



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