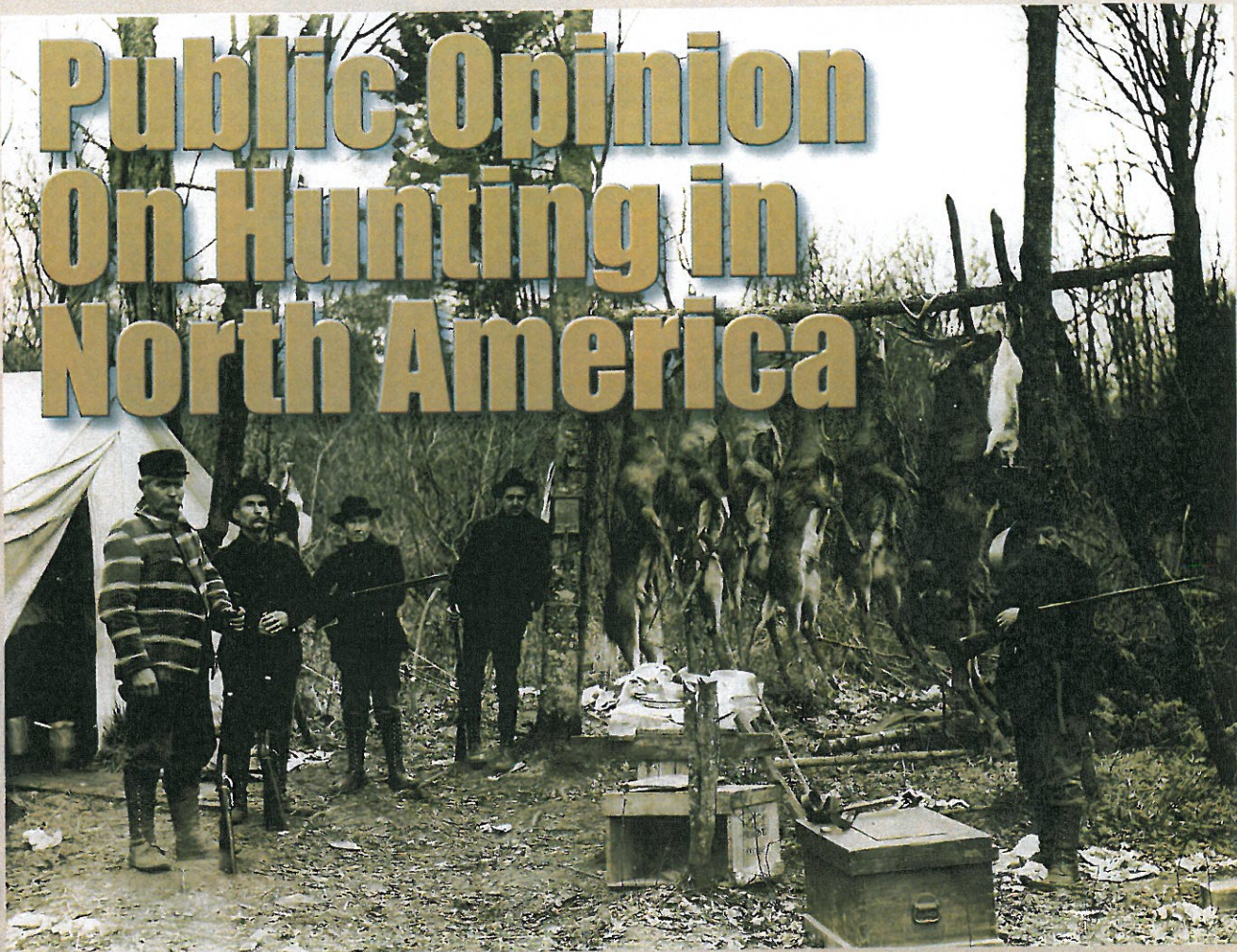


Public Opinion On Hunting in North America



BY SHANE P. MAHONEY

The most recent surveys of public attitudes towards regulated hunting in the U.S. indicate that over 75 percent of those responding support this activity. This is a phenomenal statistic, given the controversy that has surrounded hunting over the last 30 years and more.

As hunters, we may take solace in the fact that a very significant majority of people recognize the legitimacy of hunting, despite the fact that over 90 percent of the populace does not participate, and has no intention of ever participating, in the activity. Given that our tradition involves the conscious killing of wild creatures, understandably loved and idolized by the general public, this statistic seems to beg an explanation. Apparently, though, no one is searching for it.

Indeed, quite to the contrary; we as hunters seem to just accept this new information as one more inevitable and self-evident truth. It is this kind of reaction, however, that helps engender the great malaise in the hunting world: the

belief that we have no need to reach out to the broad public, can keep representing ourselves to ourselves, and thus be continuously reinforced in the notion that all is well.

Yet we know very well that not all is well. Participation in hunting is declining, state agency conservation programs are running out of money, privatization of wildlife and a host of other controversies are highly divisive in our own ranks, and getting more so. Additionally, the hunting community is aging rapidly. Perhaps it is time we develop a real strategy to deal with all of this, comprehensively, and with an eye to what really matters. And one thing that surely matters is public opinion.

Understanding why the general public remains so supportive of hunting is indeed a critical issue.

How do we relate the social trends that have seen fewer and fewer people having direct contact with the land and wildlife, the declining participating in hunting, the rise of animal rights activities and aggressive anti-hunting campaigns, and the incredibly low interest level among young people today in hunting, with a near 80 percent approval rating in the public mind? How is it that a large majority of persons for whom hunting has no immediate relevance still express support for an activity that includes firearms, the pursuit, death and dismemberment of beautiful wild creatures, and that has been the subject of highly charged and well-financed opposition campaigns? Do we really believe it is because the general public understands the value and relevance of hunting in modern times?

I don't. I cannot see how they could, given that we make no effort to explain this complicated and often counterintuitive reality; that by hunting wildlife we contribute enormously to its conservation, financially and politically. To expect that the general public would see the benefits of our vested interest pursuits seems just too much to conceive. Hunting, even for hunters, is not that easy to understand, nor communicate! So, what might possibly be behind this amazing public support, if we cannot reasonably expect that they understand what we do? Why would the public support us in ignorance? What have we done for them lately?

I believe their support may stem from the fondness of memory, and not from any real consideration of hunting itself. We can all remain personally engaged with events that form part of our family history and traditions, regardless of whether we have participated in them or not. War means more to those whose family members have served, fought and perhaps died, than to those whose family history does

not include this sacrifice. Is it not entirely possible that significant numbers of the public remain emotionally linked to hunting by the memories of childhood or family traditions that invoke the reality of hunting from times past?

Could it not simply be that the memories of time spent as children

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on a family farm, or with a father or grandfather who hunted and whom they loved, or the photos upon the mantle that show an uncle with his hunting dogs or with a deer that he has taken, or an old hunting rifle, long disused, could these collective memories and family heirlooms and traditions not be responsible for the support we still receive? In the absence of an informed opinion or intellectual position, must we not search for an emotional rationale for a supportive public that neither participates in our tradition nor understands that they may benefit from it?

So why does this matter? Why should we care to dissect the favorable review the public has pronounced? Why should we not just accept it and await the next survey a number of years from now and keep on doing what we've been doing, as this has

obviously worked so effectively? Because things change, and because strategic thinking suggests we should hope for the best, but prepare for the worst. If we really care about the future of hunting, I believe we should carefully examine this reality. We should seek an explanation in order to safeguard our public support, recognizing that if we ever lose it we will find our hunting traditions much further imperiled.

We should understand that if this support is generational, lurking still in the collective memory of a wave of citizens who have physically but not emotionally lost touch with an older way of life, it cannot be assumed to persist. Indeed, I suggest it is inevitable that in the near future, this fabric of memory and support will begin to dissolve, weaken and possibly disappear. If we are uninformed as to its true nature and rationale, we run the risk of squandering our best chance to preserve this public endorsement, and that will be a failure we must avoid. A significant drop in public support for hunting will be of major consequence regardless of which political party is in power in Canada or the U.S. In democracies, politics courts favor. We have seen it too many times to expect otherwise.

As hunters, we ought to realize that our public support is a precious commodity, and something to be both proud of and thankful for. Out of respect, we ought to reach out to the community of others who support us and honestly share with them our commitments to conservation and to our hunting tradition. We need to keep the public close and ensure that once this generation passes, there will be a new wave of citizens supportive of what we do. Talking to ourselves won't get the job done. *GT*

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