

The North American Wildlife Conservation Model: Triumph For Man and Nature

by Shane Mahoney

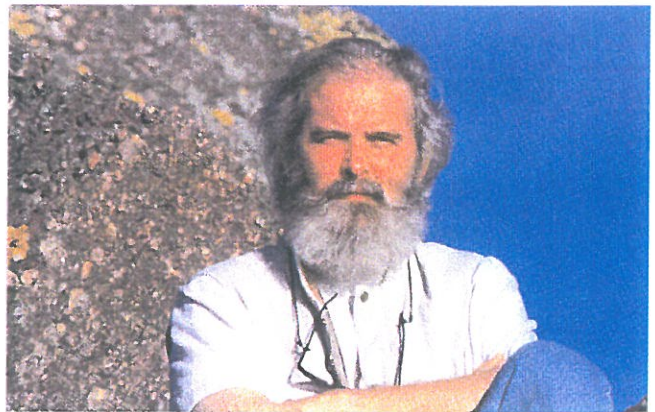
Henry David Thoreau once said, "If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put foundations under them."

Nothing could better describe the pattern and process of creating the most successful wildlife conservation program in the world, the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Begun well over a century ago, this guiding philosophical framework rescued wildlife from slaughter and restored to this continent an astounding natural abundance. Its achievements can only be understood against the backdrop of the destruction that took 40 million buffalo to the brink of doom and 5 billion passenger pigeons beyond it.

Without the revolution in values and the entirely new approach to wildlife use that first emerged in the 1830s, we would today face a continent without white-tailed deer, pronghorn antelope, elk, wild turkeys, wood ducks and hundreds of other cherished life forms. This history is entirely lost to the great majority, not well known by many, and well understood by far too few. What is most regrettable is that modern society, energized as it is for the conservation of nature, has no understanding that hunters and anglers led the revolution to save wildlife on the North American continent and remain today the most stalwart legion of support.

This series of essays is dedicated to bringing a better understanding of this history and of the North American model of wildlife conservation to Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation members. In turn, I hope you will help your fellow hunters and anglers better appreciate our history of achievement, and encourage all of us to the level of commitment delivered by our earliest leaders. The model, and the rescue and recovery of wildlife it engendered, succeeded against

all odds. In so doing it preserved the cherished traditions of hunting and angling that remain the spur to our passion for conservation. May it always be so.



The Formative Years

As human kind wanders beyond the frontier of the 20th century, we look ahead to a time of uncertainty and enormous challenge. On diverse fronts—economic, political and social—there is an arresting escarpment of deep-set realities that collectively threaten the future of us all. At the same time those challenges call upon the unshakable flow of human creativity and our nearly perverse capacity to rise beyond defeat and turn aside what appear to be the inevitable outcomes of history. These truths collide with clarion force at the edge of humanity's greatest challenge; namely, how to sustain ourselves in a natural world that only we can protect. Nature and wildness, we know, must be maintained if civilized society, indeed our very humanness, is to survive. Yet it is our humanness—embodied in successful reproduction and a constant

demand for finite resources—that imperils all of wild nature. We dance on the head of a pin. Yet we have faced such challenge before, and out of our deliberations created the most successful conservation strategy of all time.

In 1871 a new monthly newspaper appeared in the United States. It was called the *American Sportsman*. In hindsight, what may have seemed just another example of American entrepreneurial effort represented, in fact, an amazing shift in social and civic conscience that would ordain the rescue and support of wildlife for generations to come. Although clearly not consistent with the prevailing notions of conquering wild nature in the name of civilized progress, there was emerging in the United States (and to a lesser degree in Canada) a minority who considered the aristocratic “hunter

nobility” of Europe an alluring model in the new post-Civil War society. In the New World everyone could be an achieving capitalist, after all, but someone had to take responsibility for establishing and preserving traditions.

Emerging simultaneously was a powerful and growing recognition that animal populations once considered limitless were, in fact, exhaustible, and that the commercial exploitation of these resources was rapidly leading to local depletions and even national extinctions. Bison, elk and pronghorn were tumbling to scarcity for their meat, bone, hides and teeth; egrets and other shorebirds for their plumage. Beaver were moving toward extirpation east of the Rocky Mountains and wild turkeys and white-tailed deer were clinging perilously to the swamps and cane brakes of the



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SHOW	DATE	LOCATION
Sportsman's Warehouse	Apr. 16 - 18	Boise, ID
Cabela's	Apr. 23 - June 6	Kansas City, KS
American Outdoor Experience	June 11 - 13	Bristol, TN
Sportsman's Warehouse Screamin' In the Rockies	June 18 - 20	Grand Junction, CO
Sportsman's Warehouse	June 25 - 27	Salt Lake City, UT
Sportsman's Warehouse	July 9 - 10	Spokane, WA
Sportsman's Warehouse	July 16 - 17	Salem, OR
Sportsman's Warehouse	July 23 - 25	Missoula, MT
Galyan's	July 30 - Aug. 1	Broomfield, CO
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 6 - 8	Dallas, TX
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 13 - 15	Springfield, MO
Bass Pro Shops Fall Classic	Aug. 20 - 22	Oklahoma City, OK

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South. The concerns of sportsmen grew in scale and scope as their favored haunts were laid bare of wild nature and their passionate experience with it was forfeited to those who viewed the financial value of the dead animal as the only goal worth pursuing. In the glazed eyes of fallen nature was foreshadowed the end of a way of life, of something precious and irreplaceable. The personal relevance of both man and wild nature were now at issue.

Suddenly there was both a cause and a concern. Sportsmen's voices echoed across the continent, engendering new publications such as *Forest and Stream* (1873), *Field and Stream* (1874), and *American Angler* (1881), and demanding that a codified approach to the taking of wildlife be established, a prescription for both human conduct and motivation. Wild beasts and fishes were to be taken only in the measure of what a man could use, and not by what he could sell. The rhetoric may have been better than the practice of course, but there can be no doubt that this fledgling philosophy was just that, a new way of seeing wildlife in the New World. Indeed it was a new way of seeing it even by world standards, for while the European gentleman hunter was an elite by right, the North American democracies of Canada and the United States demanded that he be one by conviction. North American hunters and anglers thus began a crusade for wildlife and hunting both, not just as a means of preserving their own access to wild nature in the manner they chose, but also as a means of preserving wild nature in such abundance that permitted future generations their own prerogatives and positions.

Thus did the hunter-naturalists of mid-19th century America launch both an intellectual and social revolution. Their concerns for preserving traditions and for embellishing their physical undertakings in the field with an awareness that they stood for something greater than themselves represented a classic incarnation. Suddenly wildlife, for a growing number of people, was becoming tied to their personal identity, their sense of nationhood and civic responsibility. Conserving nature was becoming a matter of national importance. Hunters and anglers were not yet certain of how they would make it so, but their unrelenting passion for

recreation afield and for the new conservation ethic meant that inevitably it would infiltrate the ranks of the political elites. Through their magazines and hunting clubs, they spread the gospel of personal restraint and thoughtful consideration in the taking of wildlife. They were more than just meat hunters and far more than the despised market hunters—they were the protectors of the resource. Yes, they clearly had a vested interest, but one that was in the best interest of all. Hunters and anglers could, and would, do right by doing what they loved. It really was a New World, and the frontier of citizen leadership was to be nowhere more decisively delivered than in the arena of wildlife conservation.

By the 1860s, and for the three decades that followed, the efforts of hunters and anglers in the United States were not only pervasive, they were well organized. The passionate commitment to resource conservation was matched by an enduring pragmatism that saw grassroots political establishments as a key to long-term success. Given the time and conditions for communication and coalition building, we can only marvel at what sportsmen achieved in this period. It seems incongruous, but by the time of Custer's defeat at Little Bighorn, hunters and anglers had already established nearly 500 associations of various kinds dedicated to resisting further loss of wildlife populations and restoring those that had been depleted.

And hunters and anglers did not intend to wait for the perfect circumstances. True, it would have been advantageous for infrastructures to have been in place at federal or state levels, where the responsibility for wildlife resided; but the reality was that no such framework existed. It was up to the individual—organized in groups of diverse persons but of common purpose—to force social awareness in the right direction. And sportsmen led this charge by what Mark Twain called the “hardest thing in life to put up with,” namely, the setting of a good example. Sportsmen's groups lobbied everywhere for new legislation and for enforcement of existing laws. They urged restraint, not only upon others but upon themselves. The significance of such efforts can hardly be overestimated and remains the most striking evidence for something truly new

and revolutionary in the emerging hunter-conservationist code.

Consider the irony, the sheer contrariness of this agenda of “measured take.” In the absence of any social mores or local, regional or national laws to the contrary—and yet in the presence of nationalistic doctrines espousing personal freedom, entrepreneurism and the moral imperative of subduing nature—hunters and anglers, out of passion for nature and their engagements with it, hounded legislators to enact and enforce laws that restricted the very activities hunters and anglers were so passionate about! No more precise exemplar exists of how the common good could be served by conscientious individualism. Equally profound is that this doctrine relied on the taking of nature, not on simply viewing it. Somehow the freewheeling utilitarianism of America found deep expression in a model of near religious empathy for nature that was no ephemeral fashion. Well over a century later, this phenomenal revolution rolls on, and many of its diverse doctrines can be traced to the founding years of mid-19th century America.

Hunters also initiated early perspectives on landscape diversity, valuing systems for their wildlife production and not just their aesthetics. Hunters understood the importance of wetlands long before it became hip to preserve swamps, bogs and potholes. To these practicing naturalists, an ecological perspective came . . . naturally. They appreciated the “seasonality” of wildlife and fish production, and were thus led to acknowledge the connectedness of landscapes and the importance of life history sequences. It made little sense to protect winter habitat of an animal but suffer the loss of its birthing or rearing sites. Furthermore, the limits of nature were understood in terms any wildlife manager of today would immediately grasp. Those who spent time pursuing wild things learned the challenge of doing so and, along the way, observed their competitors in action. The forces of weather, food and predation were not abstract or foreign to the hunter and angler; rather they were the everyday realities encountered by living creatures. Man’s access to wild nature had to be prescribed within this framework and had

to be calibrated by an ever-changing formula of production and decline. Change was constant and only by careful study could the measured, sustainable use of wildlife be undertaken. Around this conceptual corner lay the field of wildlife science, the forerunner of ecology and conservation biology.

Hunters were also the first to draw attention to the escalating effects of industrialization. These effects were particularly evident in the continent’s waterways, where dams and pollutants of all sorts were drastically degrading water quality and where fish populations were declining at a calamitous pace due to commercial netters. The response of sportsmen to this crisis was direct and practical. They launched a restoration blitzkrieg that saw fish hatcheries emerge across the country in a seemingly contagious spasm. They poured letters and articles to the various sporting journals, forcing an awareness onto the public and political consciousness that for the first time in North America would translate into a coordinated national effort to deal with an environmental concern. The program and debate were so intense that in 1871, the same year that Henry M. Stanley found Dr. Livingstone, and a year before Yellowstone National Park was set aside, the United States Fish Commission was established.

This federal initiative was designed to evaluate the status of fish populations across the United States and along its coasts, as well as to assist in coordinating restoration efforts. Working with state commissions and private hatcheries, the new federal agency declared that restoring wild nature was a mandate of national government, and, just as important, that it could be effectively undertaken. While it is true that many releases of exotic fish species injured native stocks, it is also true that, once more, American hunters and anglers had moved beyond complaint to action and had, in fact, done something of greater significance. They had jarred the country’s very notion of itself, launching an engagement with a future that few could imagine. Somewhere between arriving and becoming, American society was moving—at least in its understanding of wild nature’s value—from conqueror toward custodian.

Hunters and anglers for conservation! The

movement was underway. Having discovered how the long limb of passionate opinion works leverage in the halls of power, sportsmen nurtured their coalition of clubs, hatcheries, journals and gatherings into a movement with political force. While protecting their clubs' streams and hunting lands were regional undertakings designed to ensure hunters access to naturally abundant fish and game, their progress in securing wildlife legislation, in drawing attention to the trail of unfettered industrial progress, and in spurring the nation to responsible action over declining fish and wildlife populations identified hunters and anglers as champions of a wider, less selfish cause.

Hunters of wild nature had linked their notions of personal achievement to a sense of duty to the land and set forth an embryonic philosophy bursting with potential. Sportsmen, even if they are sometimes reluctant to admit it, were the very first environmentalists in North America. By the last decades of the 19th century, they were already a force to be reckoned with. All that was required to drive their fervor for

nature into the nation's marrow was that essential ingredient without which no revolution can succeed: the hunter conservationists needed leaders larger than life. Essentially they required a move to power.



A conservation biologist and leading authority for the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, Shane Patrick Mahoney has lectured extensively in North America and Europe on hunting's relevance in modern times and is a riveting orator and passionate Newfoundlander. His ideas focus on humanity's motivations for preserving the natural world and reflect a special concern for cultures that rely directly on wildlife for their survival.

This is the first in an ongoing series by Shane Mahoney on the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, both as a touchstone to our past and guidepost to our future. Watch for the next chapter in our July-August 2004 issue.

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