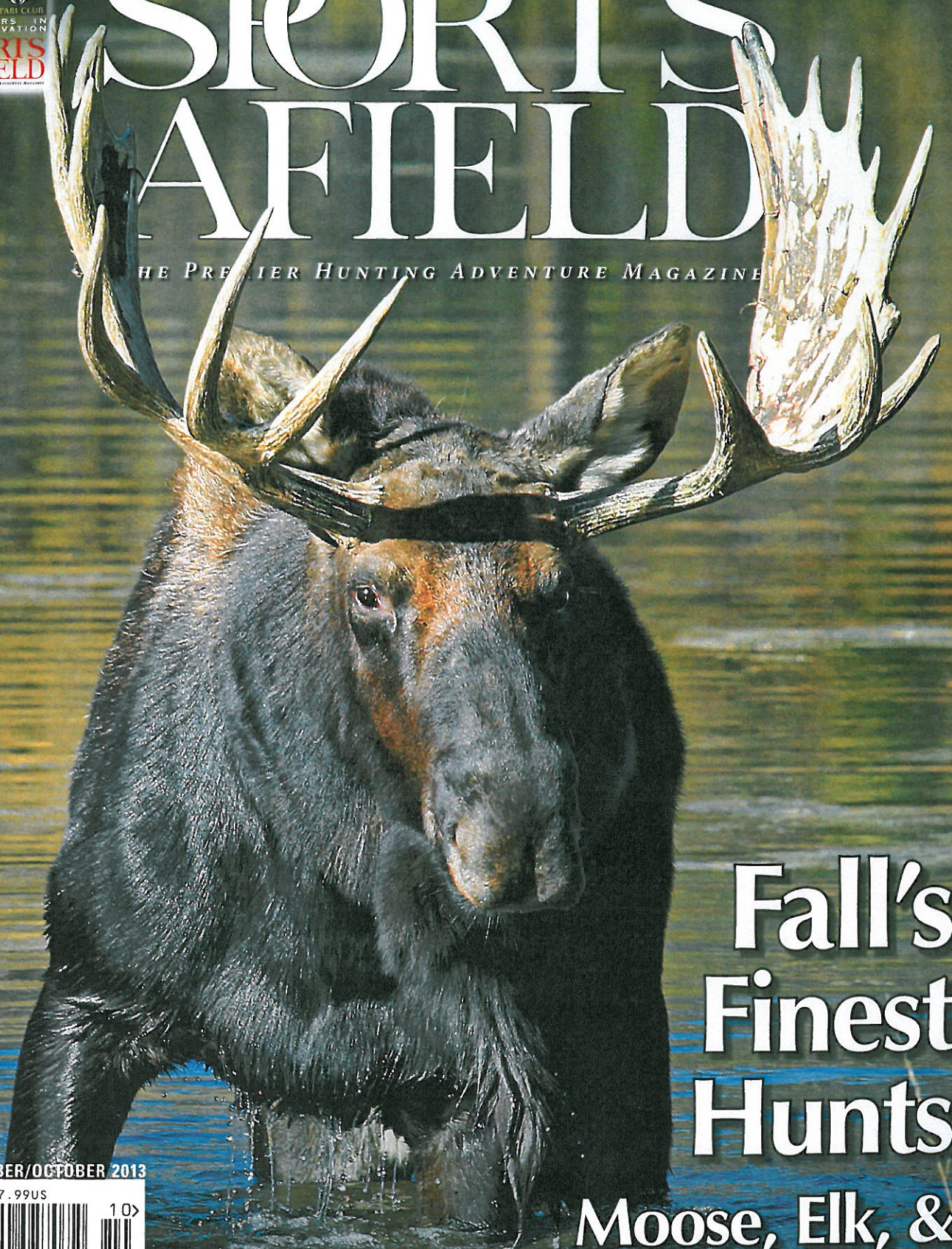


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WHY WILDLIFE MATTERS

Henry David Thoreau said it best: "In wildness is the preservation of the world."



VIC SCHEDEL

Watching the interactions of wild animals can give us valuable insights into the scale and complexity of the human condition.

I have a growing concern for the future of wild animals, for the lands and waters that sustain them, and for the future of hunting itself. Indeed, I am concerned for the future of all human experience with wild nature.

We stand on a ragged precipice of change—not a clean line, certainly, but nevertheless at a point in history where fundamental redirection is inevitable. Along this fault line, the relevance of hunting—a question that far exceeds its mere economic importance or contribution to wildlife management—will be resolved, and the fate of hunting decided. Don't we

all feel this shadow lurking, vague yet perceptible to our hunter senses?

Yet, as hunters, what capacity do we hold to influence this discussion? What can we say that will affect the public mind, that will help ensure the future of wildlife and our traditions of engagement with it? We are hunters—men and women who have pursued wild creatures, not vicariously through film or story, but in the reality of wind and rain, of fatigue and discomfort, of excitement and fear, with elation or disappointment. Can hunters offer insights that are unique to our deep experience, that are more profound than those of others? Can we explain why the wild animals matter so much?

In posing this question, I assume that wild creatures matter greatly to all hunters. I am assuming that each of us must at some point marvel at the sheer beauty of wild things, of the extraordinary resilience and physical capacities they possess and the dazzling complexity of their behaviors. Only wild animals show us an existence open to every risk, every possibility. They exist in the terrible beauty of the now, with no guarantees of the next moment.

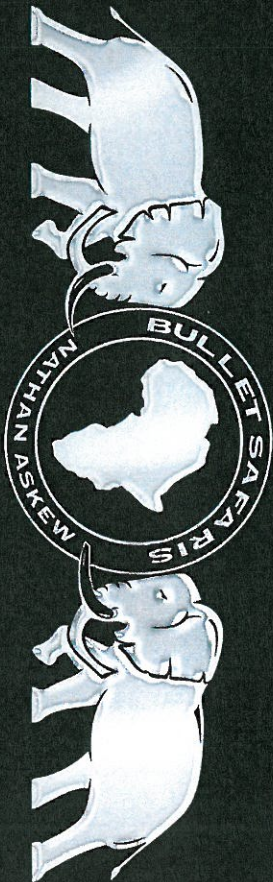
It is in pursuit of these wild creatures that we experience frontier—that great, imagined boundary, the horizon of our everyday lives that we seek to cross, to leave behind, if only for those short, intense periods of the hunt. It is this transcendence that ensures we never forget or let go of the reality of our original lives as hunters that enables us to put modernity—with all its petty tensions and ridiculous opulence—in perspective. It is this experience that strips us down to the vibrant core of our being and awakens that bittersweet hunger for what is always slightly beyond our reach. It is in seeking those others, in striving to take possession of their wild freedom, and in confronting the ultimate realities of life and

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death, the enduring uncertainty, the undeniable beauty, that we come to understand how absolutely precious our own lives are. Who but the wild others can give us this?


Who but they can remind us so directly of our shared inheritance, our relatedness, our mutual dependence upon one another and the natural world? When we watch in late evening the great rams resting on sunlit slopes, their heavy curls bejeweled with embers of light, and their eyes half closed and jaws scissoring in easy, effortless motion, do we not understand that life at that precious moment is good for them—and us, equally? When we stare transfixed as the grizzly mother stands to identify threats to young cubs that jostle and roll in the late spring snow, are we not taught that all young lives are precious and must be defended? When we sit with our back to some venerable old tree, listening for that first wild turkey to gobble and see the deer floating through the early morning mist, kissed by a young sun and the first breath of wind—are we not at these moments closer to understanding the reality of existence, the power of beauty, and the grace of creation?

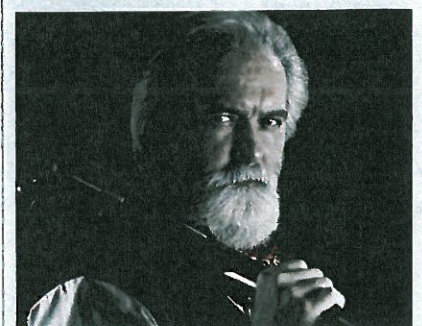
Indeed, are not even the most difficult of concepts entertained and illuminated in the actions and lives of wild creatures? For, like us, does it not seem that they too must explore the transition between worlds? Is it not when witnessing the great fishes rise to air from the depths of dark blue seas, or the silver-sided torpedoes vault above the river's froth, or ducks alight bemused on the first frail ice of fall, that we remind ourselves how all things must work in unison for the world to make any sense to us at all? That all lives, taken in isolation, are vulnerable and unexplained, but together make up the wondrous and enduring tapestry of existence? Who but the wild others can offer such wisdom and teach us to be human?

About DSC

An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

We would do well as hunters to reflect more on such things, and less upon the kills we make, the technology we use, the records we attain. It is not in the carcass or the horns that the hunt finds its true purpose. Rather, it is in extracting a clarity of view, a humility to expose our own frailties and a willingness to be diminished by the scale and complexity of wild places and wild lives. This is the priceless cargo that hunting freights to the human condition. Surely, then, the hunt must bring a new perspective to the human mind. Otherwise, we must admit its failure to influence and penetrate us deeply, and therefore, the willful death of wild things is merely an indulgence.

But surely the hunt must teach us something about the inherent worth of the wild others and our responsibility to them. We must come to understand that in watching them, in pursuing them, in striking out onto paths that enter their world and leave ours behind, we are afforded the greatest and most profound experiences of our lives. It is true that wild country, in and of itself, is a remarkable tonic for the soul, but like the stained glass of a cathedral, it is the wild creatures that inhabit such places that catch and refract the light of existence. They are the portals through which we glimpse the enduring value of life and the universal inevitability of death. It is only in their midst that we can experience the full spectrum of our humanness. 



Shane Mahoney

Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.