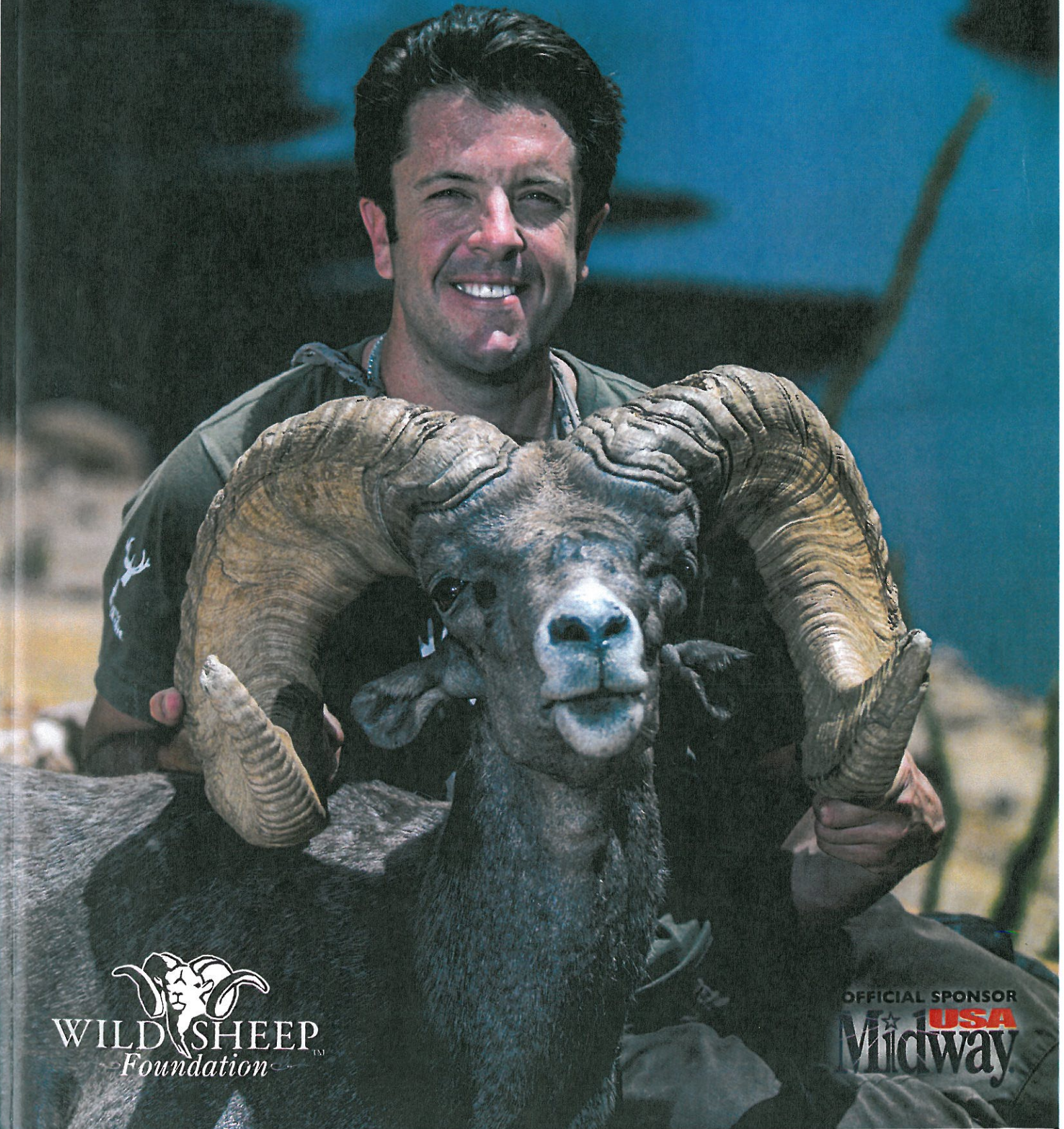


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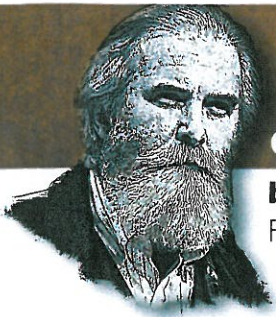
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CONSERVATION MATTERS

by Shane Mahoney

Field Editor

Wildlife and Private Land

Private land issues and the privatization of wildlife have become major debates within conservation circles. This is the first in a series of articles where Shane Mahoney examines this controversy.

While the return of wolves to an expanding range of American states is fueling an intense debate, tensions over citizens' rights and responsibilities to land, and the wildlife that can or may occupy it, are also rising with volcano-like power. These tensions are nothing new, of course, but have been with us since governments in both the USA and Canada began giving land to citizens in the name of nation building, and then trying to manage the remaining public acreages for appropriate use. In the debate over land use, and the dichotomy of private versus public, we have often set aside the great truth that both categories are part of a larger whole, an ecological landscape still comprising, for better or worse, the watersheds and ecosystems that are the only resort for North America's great wildlife resource.

While we can make many decisions about land, there is one thing we simply cannot do. We cannot make any more of it. What we have, we have—and wildlife's future depends very much on how we use the lands, both public and private, now resting within the powers and authority of private citizens and governments. The land debates, including the private property issues of ownership and management of residing wildlife, cannot realistically be divided into separate public and private sector discussions. All land is intertwined economically and ecologically. Fire, invasive species, flooding, wildlife

movement and damage, the range and implications of predators—these considerations all form important parts of public policy. So too do the issues of property values, which themselves are often influenced by the patchwork and adjacencies of public and private lands. Public policy simply cannot ignore these realities, and must address the legitimate needs of the nation and the individual. I suggest it also needs to address, fundamentally, the needs of wildlife.

Ultimately, therefore, and regardless of the many administrations (federal, state/provincial, municipal, etc.) that poke their noses in the messy land issue, we are forced to recognize both citizen *rights* and *responsibilities* towards land and its use. These rights and responsibilities apply to all lands, public and private. Within democratic nations, this surely implies a collective effort to strike the right balance between nationally constituted private property privileges and the public trust responsibility that government holds towards public resources, and critically in this instance, toward the wildlife resources of Canada and the USA. These are resources that have been successfully managed for over a century under the policies, laws, and institutions of the acclaimed North American Model.

However, it requires far more than this. For while we may well find legal and political frameworks that will draw boundaries for and invoke clearly defined privileges around

public and private land uses, this will not in itself solve the land use challenges for wildlife. What we desperately need is an integrated land management approach that places the conservation of wildlife at its fore, recognizing that what we do for the land that benefits wildlife is inevitably in the long term best interest of citizens and society. In this regard, we need to take a very objective view of our collective failure to address this issue, and to evaluate the efforts we have made to circumvent dealing with it directly. While visitors may stare in awe at the grandeur of a Yosemite, Jasper or Yellowstone—and while well-intentioned organizations and individuals will doggedly pursue the purchase of land for wildlife restoration and refuge—we must ask ourselves, who will be the stewards of those great acreages that lie *between* those protected spaces and the black pavement and glass towers of our cities?

Who indeed will shepherd and restore, who will manage wisely for wildlife, the private lands of this continent? *And what will it take to encourage them to do so?* This is a question of deep significance and one central to conservation, hunting, and wildlife in the twenty-first century. On the private lands of America and Canada, those very lands that represent the citizen heartlands of these great nations, a dizzying array of practices and personal policies are being enacted. While biodiversity

protection, wildlife restoration, and ecological considerations are commonplace on many publicly managed lands, this is far from true on most private lands, although, of course, there are exceptions. Instead, what we often see are practices that not only impact wildlife negatively, but which reduce natural diversity and form barriers to the normal movement of wildlife, and, of course, people.

The social divisions surrounding such personal usages are becoming increasingly complex. Hunters claim they are often excluded from private lands where wildlife is abundant, and private landowners often do (legally) exclude trespassers of all kinds. Landowners may also lay claim to the wildlife that resides on their land and erect fences to either keep wildlife inside their property, or exclude it from entering. In other cases, landowners make strong efforts to attract wildlife and to manipulate,

genetically and physically, the wildlife that exists on their property. They may or may not offer hunting opportunities for such wildlife. They may and often do, however, sell the wildlife they raise or manipulate, much like any domestic stock they might have. These attitudes and practices collide fundamentally with the enshrined notion of wildlife as an exclusively public resource.

In other instances, private property owners look to discourage various wildlife species that can damage their gardens, orchards, and lawns, often looking to public officials to solve the problems for them. In many cases, they want predators eliminated; in some extreme cases, however, they feed dangerous wildlife, such as black bears, altering their natural behaviour and signing their death warrants inevitably. Indeed, there seems no end to the number and variety of attitudes private landowners

take toward the wildlife on their properties. What is clear, however, is that no coherent policy for wildlife exists with respect to private land, as it does, generally, with respect to wildlife in the public domain. What is also clear, is that any such policy would require landowner consent and some form of public acceptance or support. And this is where the debate gets messy and often bitter. How do we find the balance between landowner rights, wildlife conservation, and the discharge of public responsibility for natural resource protection, into the future? Where will the leadership on this issue come from? *WS*

Editor's Note: Balancing the rights of private landowners with good management of wildlife that lives on private property is a thorny issue that often pits hunters against other hunters. Reprinted from *Sports Afield*. Used by permission.



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The advertisement features a blue button-down shirt with a "WILD SHEEP Foundation" logo on the chest and a graphic of four ram heads on the lower left. A black baseball cap with the same logo is positioned in the foreground. To the right, a leather sheath, a diamond core & stone tool, and a knife are displayed on a wooden surface. The background is a textured orange and red.