



MATT LINDLER

BY KAREN LEE
INSIDE THE

MIND

OF A NONHUNTER



IF YOU DON'T CARE WHAT THEY THINK OF US,
YOU SHOULD.

Robin worked in the camping section of the sporting goods store where I earned minimum wage during a summer home from college. She had a kind smile, one that made customers feel as if she simply lived to help them choose the right hydration pack.

Robin was the first hunter I ever remember meeting. And to my surprise, I really liked her.

I didn't grow up in a hunting family. My exposure to the activity and those who took part in it was practically nonexistent, save for Elmer Fudd cartoons and the shadowy figures in "Bambi." It's no wonder I concluded at a young age that all hunters were dumb or menacing men who got their kicks from choking fuzzy bunnies.

I wasn't a radical, stomp-through-picket-lines PETA member, mind you. I guess you could call me an emphatic nonhunter, one that ate meat but didn't want to think about its path to my plate.

Robin made me realize hunters came in all ages, genders and dispositions. She was the first person to tell me why she hunted, and I was willing to listen to her.

I had a lot to learn.

A ROAD PAVED IN SHOTSHELLS

My journey from young, misdirected nonhunter to the editor of a hunting magazine is nearly 15 years in the making. It has included a few roadblocks: four years at a liberal arts university, with professors who weren't sure of my intended career path; some not-so-savory hunting companions; taking a few nonhunters on their first hunts with mixed results, and shedding a few of my own tears in the field.

However, I've built a career in the hunting industry. It's more than just a livelihood; it's a way of life for my family. I married an avid hunter and have two white-tailed deer, a few doves and quail, a couple of sea ducks and a dozen or so wild turkeys in the bag myself. But more importantly, I carry an understanding of how hunting is intertwined with conservation and animal welfare.

I haven't forgotten where it started, and what might have been had I not met Robin.

I believe every hunter should turn his or her back to the choir, even if only for a

few minutes, and consider how others view our pastimes and us. We know PETA and the Humane Society don't care much for us, but what about nonhunters, the majority of Americans?

THE NONHUNTING PUBLIC

In an effort to go beyond my personal past and perceptions in understanding the nonhunting community, I sought the facts in the form of surveys, polls and focus groups performed by Responsive Management, one of the top research firms in the wildlife and sports industries. Under the leadership of Mark Damian Duda, they have picked the brains of the public on behalf of groups such as the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, National Shooting Sports Foundation, dozens of state agencies and even the NWTFF.

My search landed on a 2008 report titled "The Future of Hunting and the Shooting Sports," the only comprehensive report I could find on the

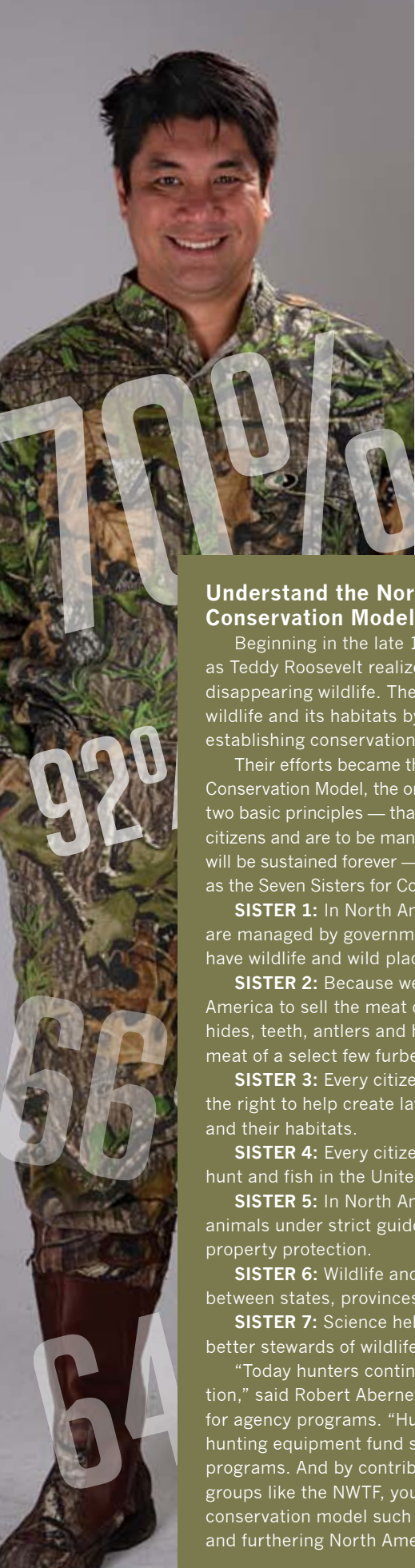
subject, where I discovered that the large majority of adult Americans — 73 percent — support legal hunting. Only 16 percent disapprove.

Not to dismiss the often-vocal minority of anti-hunters as a threat to our traditions, but we have a somewhat receptive audience when it comes to telling the truth about hunting. Nearly three-quarters of Americans teeter somewhere between yea and nay, and they're in line when the polls open just like the rest of us. They are a force to not only reckon with, but to educate and nurture on behalf of conservation and consumptive recreation.

The public's general acceptance of hunting comes with various caveats. A 2006 survey by Responsive Management revealed that 80 percent of Americans approve of hunting for meat, to protect humans from harm, for animal population control and to manage wildlife populations. Not as many, or what Responsive Management calls a bare majority, approve of hunting for sport, and even less say it's OK to hunt for the challenge, to supplement income or for a trophy. And when various methods of hunting (with a dog, over bait, etc.) come into play, even more differing opinions surface, and approval rates drop.

All of this isn't to say that hunters should apologize for why they hunt or by the means in which they take an animal, as long as it's legal. Consider, however, that support or approval of hunting is affected more than anything else by exposure to the hunting culture.

"Research has shown consistently for years that people who know hunters are much more likely to approve of hunting than those who do not know hunters," said Duda. "One study found that one of the strongest correla-



tions to having positive attitudes toward hunting was having a family member who hunts.”

But according to surveys conducted every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Census Bureau, hunters make up only 5 percent of our country’s population. That leaves a couple billion folks who live in hunting ambiguity.

Just like Robin was to me, you may be the only hunter someone meets.

Our reach to nonhunters has to extend beyond the family circle, and according to Duda, we have our work cut out for us.

WHAT THEY THINK OF US

“Most Americans support hunting in general, but they are concerned about the behavior of hunters,” Duda said. His research says hunter behavior and safety issues are concerns

among nonhunters, and there is a distinction between public opinion on hunting and public opinion of hunters themselves.

Even though three-quarters of Americans approve of hunting, here’s what a series of surveys conducted from 2006 to 2008 say about the people pulling the trigger:

- 64 percent of Americans feel a lot of hunters violate hunting laws or practice unsafe behavior while hunting.
- Half feel hunters drink alcohol while hunting.

Researchers found the top problems perceived by the public had little to do with hunting itself (at least ethical, legal hunting) but more so with the poor behavior of individual hunters. Some examples given included sloppy kills, failing to track wounded animals, trespassing, shooting at animals they aren’t allowed to shoot and shooting too close to highways.

But all is not lost:

- Roughly 70 percent say most hunters safely handle firearms.
- 66 percent agree hunters respect living things.

And before it becomes an us against them scenario, the same research found 74 percent of hunters say when a hunter violates a hunting law, he or she knows the law but intentionally violates it.

“Hunters believe they knowingly break the laws, it’s not out of ignorance,” Duda said. “State agencies are doing a good job at teaching us how to do the right thing, but some people aren’t taking their advice.”

It’s no wonder an overwhelming majority of Americans (92 percent) think all new hunters should be required to pass a hunter education course before being allowed to get a license. It seems if we can’t even trust ourselves.

“All states require young hunters to complete hunter education,” said Robert Abernethy. As the NWTf’s assistant vice president of agency programs, Abernethy oversees the conservation projects of its chapters, as well as projects performed on our country’s national forests. He’s also a certified hunter education instructor. “Hunters new to the sport learn things like proper shot placement, marksmanship, wildlife conservation and ethics. Add to that the hunting community’s push for apprentice licenses and mentored hunts and you can’t deny our commitment to make sure new hunters know the difference between right and wrong. It’s a story that needs to be told more often.”

MIND OVER MEDIA

Responsive Management, in its 2008 report on the future of hunting and shooting sports, said Americans are exposed equally to

Understand the North American Wildlife Conservation Model

Beginning in the late 1800s, notable hunters and anglers such as Teddy Roosevelt realized a need to set limits to protect rapidly disappearing wildlife. They assumed responsibility for managing wildlife and its habitats by pushing for hunting regulations and establishing conservation groups.

Their efforts became the backbone of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model, the only one of its kind in the world. The model’s two basic principles — that wildlife belong to all North American citizens and are to be managed in such a way that their populations will be sustained forever — are upheld with a set of guidelines known as the Seven Sisters for Conservation.

SISTER 1: In North America, natural resources on public lands are managed by government agencies to ensure that we always have wildlife and wild places to enjoy.

SISTER 2: Because we all own wildlife, it is illegal in North America to sell the meat of any wild animal. In some cases the hides, teeth, antlers and horns of game animals and the hides and meat of a select few furbearers may be sold.

SISTER 3: Every citizen of the United States and Canada has the right to help create laws to conserve and manage wild animals and their habitats.

SISTER 4: Every citizen has an opportunity, under the law, to hunt and fish in the United States and Canada.

SISTER 5: In North America, we can legally kill certain wild animals under strict guidelines for food and fur, self-defense and property protection.

SISTER 6: Wildlife and fish migrate freely across boundaries between states, provinces and countries.

SISTER 7: Science helps us make good decisions and become better stewards of wildlife.

“Today hunters continue to sustain wildlife through conservation,” said Robert Abernethy, NWTf’s assistant vice president for agency programs. “Hunting license fees and special taxes on hunting equipment fund state game and nongame management programs. And by contributing to and volunteering for conservation groups like the NWTf, you’re supporting important elements of the conservation model such as habitat enhancement, land protection and furthering North America’s hunting traditions.”

the good and bad of hunting/hunters — 33 percent of nonhunters heard good things about hunting, 38 percent heard bad things in the last two years. Their source for the bad stuff? Mass media.

The media gets a bad rap for a lot of stuff, and telling the story of hunting and hunters is one of the ways in which they've earned that distinction. Bad news is interesting and draws in viewers and readers. But we know it's only a fragment of the real story.

"It's like a plane crash," Duda said. "People form negative opinions about flying by hearing about plane crashes. The same goes for hunting. If you're not in the woods, not hunting yourself or even know hunters, the negative stories in the media are all you have to form an opinion. There's a definite misperception about what's happening in the field."

According to Duda, the number one variable as to whether someone supports hunting is if they know a hunter.

"Those who know hunters draw their opinions from those hunters," he said, "and they are more likely to support hunting."

Hunters shouldn't rely on the media to tell the truth. The responsibility falls on the individual.

THE TRUTH

We know ourselves. Our favorite game animal. Our choice caliber. Why we love to hunt.

So how do you stack against the consensus of other hunters as your top motivations for taking to the field?

A 2006 Responsive Management study found that:

- 33 percent of American hunters said the main reason they hunt was for sport.
- 27 percent hunt to be with family or friends.
- 22 percent hunt for the meat.
- 16 percent hunt to be close to nature.

It's interesting to note that even though only 22 percent of hunters say going after the meat is the primary reason they hunt, which is one of the more acceptable reasons given by nonhunters, more than 95 percent of hunters say they eat what they kill.

"To me, that 5 percent that doesn't eat the game they kill has divorced themselves from a fundamental part of hunting — taking an animal's life to feed your family," said Abernethy. "But we don't always take to the field with meat in mind. So what if we're gunning for a trophy buck, or for the challenge? It's still food for the table. However, when we save our shots for a more mature deer, we're allowing his genes to benefit the deer population."

Although the reasons hunters enjoy what they do don't always gee-haw with what nonhunters feel is acceptable, we can rest easy at night knowing no matter why we hunt, our ac-

tions, if done within the confines of state game laws, do more for the betterment of wildlife than if we left them to manage themselves around shopping malls, minivans and suburbia.

Four out of 5 Americans highly support hunting for ecological benefits — to protect habitat from being damaged from overpopulation and for the benefit of wildlife populations. Hunters are already on that wagon. We have to let them know we hitched to that horse a long time ago. We know that science determines game laws, and that's why we follow them.

"No species in the United States ever became threatened, endangered or extinct from legal, regulated hunting," said Duda. "The North American Wildlife Conservation Model ensures it. That model includes hunting. And few nonhunters even know it exists, and that it is funded primarily by hunters."

MOVE PAST MISCONCEPTIONS, GAIN ACCEPTANCE

According to Duda, American hunters, not anti-hunters, hold the key to public opinion on hunting. And good behavior by hunters counts.

"Overall, the American public supports hunting and that support appears to be increasing," he said. "However, there's still that discrepancy between the public's opinion on hunting and their opinion of the hunter."

It's up to us to be better hunting ambassadors.

"You can present the facts, but it's just as important to not forget the heart," he said. "Nonhunters may not perceive hunters as caring because, simply put, they shoot game."

If everyone only knew the barrage of emotions that fill a hunter's soul when he or she aims a firearm at an animal. We playfully call it buck fever or something like that, perhaps to glaze over what it really is: pent up nervousness of the task at hand, the gravity of our actions and the responsibility to the animal (and ourselves) to do it right. And you can't explain that to someone who hasn't felt it himself. That's why we rely on explaining our motivations, what we do with the animals we kill and how hunting benefits wildlife as a whole.

"Hunters care about wildlife, habitat and the environment," said Duda. "To me, that's the greatest challenge we have, explaining how we love wildlife even though we kill it. It goes beyond a love for the individual animal, but caring for the entire population. Doing what we can to have those animals around years from now."

And that's something everyone can get behind. 🐾

Learn the important difference between animal rights and animal welfare at www.turkeycountrymagazine.com.



The Sportsmen's Voice, Responsive Management's comprehensive look at hunting and fishing in America, is available at www.venturepublish.com.