

# The Hunter's Ethic

THE PAST, THE PERIL, AND THE FUTURE

By Jim Posewitz



Credit: Elize Wiley, Helena Independent Record

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The ethics of hunting may be more complex than we think. In simplest terms, an ethical hunter is “a person who knows and respects the animals hunted, follows the law, and behaves in a way that will satisfy what society expects of him or her as a hunter” (Posewitz 1994). Yet ethical hunting is considerably more complicated than how a person behaves at the moment a trigger is squeezed or an arrow released. Though it's relevant to consider the individual afield making decisions—such as deciding whether to shoot a duck on the water or wait until it takes flight—such questions need to be contemplated in the context of *why* that duck is there at all, and the hunter's understanding of and commitment to that reality.

## Past: The Path toward a Hunting Ethic

When Europeans settled North America there was little sign of a conservation ethic. Early in the 19th century while studying democracy in America, the French nobleman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote: “In Europe, people talk a great deal of the wilds of America but the Americans...are insensible to the wonders of...nature. Their eyes are filled with another sight; they march across these wilds, clearing swamps, turning the courses of rivers” (Wild 1986).

This history of unrestrained exploitation of natural resources was most tragically apparent on the northern Great Plains. When Theodore Roosevelt was a rancher in North Dakota in 1885, he described the plight of wildlife in a culture absent a conservation ethic: “A ranchman who...had made a journey of a thousand miles across Northern Montana, along the Milk River, told me that...during the whole distance he was never out of sight of a dead buffalo, and never in sight of a live one” (Roosevelt 1885).

In 1887, Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and other patrician hunters tried to forge a new relationship with wild resources based on the sporting code, the concept of fair chase, and accepting responsibility for the welfare of the hunted (Mitchell 1987). Perhaps even more important, they promoted the

idea of wild resources for everyone. In Roosevelt's words: “[T]he effort toward this end is essentially a democratic movement. It is...in our power...to preserve large tracts of wilderness...and to preserve game [for] all lovers of nature, and to give reasonable opportunities for the exercise of the skill of the hunter, whether he is or is not a man of means” (Shullery 1986).

The development a national conservation ethic also felt the hand of fate. After Roosevelt won the presidency, he used that bully pulpit to convene seven national conferences on conservation. He also set aside 230 million acres for wildlife and forest conservation—about 10 percent of America (Eliot 1982). Most of that acreage was in forest reserves, and Roosevelt believed that protection of forest lands gave birth to the broader conservation movement. Without protection of “one of the great natural resources,” he wrote, “the conservation movement would have been impossible” (Roosevelt 1913).

Today, 11 decades after Theodore Roosevelt, on the very landscape once littered with bones, we are managing restored populations of wolves and other previously depleted predators while carving out space for buffalo. The continental pyramid of hunted wildlife is now essentially restored. In 2001, wildlife biologists Val Geist, Shane Mahoney, and John Organ described this path toward restoration as “The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation”—an affirmation that the hunting community has a conservation ethic and that management agencies have a public trust responsibility to manage natural resources for all (Jacobsen *et al.* 2010).

In 2006, a July issue of *Time* magazine commemorated Theodore Roosevelt's contribution to American culture. To introduce the issue, Managing Editor Richard Stengle wrote: “Being an American is not based on a common ancestry, a common religion, even a common culture—it's based on accepting an uncommon set of ideas. And if we don't understand those ideas, we don't



value them; and if we don't value them, we don't protect them." Wildlife as a public resource, access of hunting for everyone, and a hunter's acceptance of the responsibility for the welfare of the hunted are all uncommon ideas that form the foundation of ethical hunting.

### Present: An Ethic in Peril?

That ethical base faces modern challenges. In the 1980s, for example, the state of Montana and the federal government enlisted recreational hunters in an effort to liquidate every bison leaving Yellowstone National Park to prevent the spread of brucellosis to domestic livestock. In 1988 the kill exceeded 500 bison. Because the park's bison were habituated to humans, the "chase" was little more than government-backed slaughter of iconic animals in the nation's first national park. Public protest against the hunt escalated, and the hunting ethic found itself in the crosshairs of public opinion. Hunters found themselves engaged in an activity alien to the identity they had created for themselves through a century. The bison killing failed to meet society's ethical expectation, and within a year, Montana removed recreational hunting from Yellowstone's bison management. Yet the program had damaged the image of the American hunter.

In 1992, wildlife professionals concerned with preserving the "uncommon idea" of public hunting convened the first "Governor's Symposia on North America's Hunting Heritage" to address hunting and the public's perception of hunters. Two themes emerged and were repeated in subsequent symposia: 1) hunting needed to clean up its act, and 2) as conservationists, hunters needed to either lead or become irrelevant.

**Cleaning Up the Act.** Questionable hunter behavior and lack of respect for the hunted are part of reality. Unethical acts such as motorized pursuit, marginal marksmanship, and killing animals at game farms or constrained by high fences do occur. Yet hunters themselves have lobbied against such practices. In Montana, hunters brought a ballot initiative banning the shooting of captive wildlife, one example of hunters cleaning up the act by ending captive shooting. Along the protracted litigious trail that followed, they collected an ethical trophy when the court ruled: "The state has a legitimate interest in promoting fair chase hunting ethics and Montana's hunting

heritage and legacy when mandated by popular vote or otherwise" (*Kafka v. Hagener* 2001).

Likewise, the [International Hunter Education Association](#) directs attention to hunter ethics. Founded in 1949, IHEA includes 67 state and provincial agencies that reach 750,000 students each year. Through the program, entry-level hunters learn about an individual's ethical relationship with the hunted. The program's hunter safety record attests to its teaching effectiveness and offers reason to believe that its 70,000 grassroots volunteer educators are having a positive effect on the challenge to clean up the act at an individual level.

Can the conservation ethic, born of depletion, survive the commerce born of restored abundance?

**Lead or Become Irrelevant.** There is little doubt about the ethical leadership demonstrated by Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and the early conservationists of the "Dirty Thirties" of the 1930s, when an economic depression and the dust bowl darkened both our expectations and our environment. The question is, are America's hunters and anglers willing and able to tackle the leadership challenges of today? Ample evidence suggests that they are. Hunters provide the bulk of support to non-profit conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited, which to date has protected some 13 million acres of wetlands that benefit game birds and myriad other species. Likewise, when thousands of elk were starving on Yellowstone's northern border during the bison-slaughter years of the 1980s, hunters of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation took action. They facilitated the protection of 35,300 acres of critical Yellowstone ecosystem winter ranges through acquisition and easements on eight critical properties (RMEF 2000). Through such grassroots conservation activism, hunters continue to meet the ethical standards of restoring game animals and preserving the democracy of the wild.

### Future: Far From Certain

Today, hunter numbers decline while the challenges to things wild escalate. The economic and environmental distress experienced in the



20th century now has become global in the 21st. Economies teeter, the planet heats, wildlife habitats change, human populations swell, children stare at electronic screens, and some people push to privatize game. A new hunting aristocracy stands eager to replace the democracy of the wild, and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, born of the hunter's ethic, remains a mystery to most hunters and many in the wildlife profession it generated.

Although hunters have long embraced a conservation ethic and led with distinction, today they form less than 10 percent of the population. In places that are tolerant of privatizing wildlife, hunter participation is fading dramatically. "Texas has but half the deer hunters of Wisconsin, yet almost five times the number of deer and three times the human population," writes conservation scholar Val Geist. "Paid hunting reduces participation rates, the most important factor supporting our system of wildlife conservation" (Geist 1988).

It's time to ask hard questions. Can we stop privatization of wild resources? Can the conservation

ethic, born of depletion, survive the commerce born of restored abundance? Can we offer our children a wild place to be young in? As we search for answers it is well to heed the words of writer Emerson Hough, who described America's emerging relationship with wildlife in *Defender of America's Out-of-Doors*: "When one unclean hand touches the management of this experiment, then it fails. When one commercialized motive comes into its thought, then it fails. When it becomes the organ of any man's vanity, the tool of any man's selfishness, then it fails" (Hough 1922).

I've spent very few words on the ethical question facing the lone hunter afield who must decide whether and when to shoot a duck. But all of us who hunt can find ethical answers in learning how a "sport of kings" evolved into a democratic pursuit based on a system of fair chase, or "the balance between the hunter and the hunted [that] allows hunters to occasionally succeed while animals generally avoid being taken" (Posewitz 1994). Perhaps by understanding how hunting ethics evolved from the past, we can find our way forward. ■

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