

Today's Sportsmen And Sports-women Are A Powerful Force For Conservation

By Hal Herring

When a hunter dreams of a trophy elk, thoughts run to frozen mornings deep in the Rocky Mountains. Minnesota seldom comes to mind, and there's little reason why it should, since the state issued only five permits to hunt elk last year. Nonetheless, when The Nature Conservancy needed help acquiring a critical 800-acre piece of Minnesota grassland, it was the hunters of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, based in faraway Montana, who stepped up.

Like a large percentage of the other 37.8 million hunters and anglers in the United States, the 150,000 members of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation are a powerful force for conservation, albeit one that is often misunderstood by nonhunters.

To be sure, many members of the self-described hook-and-bullet community don't look like stereotypical environmentalists. It's no secret, and no wonder, that hunters and non-hunting environmentalists often make each other nervous.

But what may come as a surprise is that sporting and conservation groups, including the Conservancy, frequently turn to each other as partners. And while they may not see eye-to-eye on every issue, what connects them is an understanding that healthy ecosystems mean healthy habitats for game animals.

"Different groups come to the same landscapes for different reasons and at times with different motivations," says Tom Cassidy, the Conservancy's director of federal programs, but "we have a common objective of conserving habitat." He adds: "I can't imagine not working with hunters and anglers—our shared values are too great."

"People who don't hunt should recognize that the motive of the hunters we work with is not simply to increase the numbers of animals for hunting, or even to have more places to hunt," says Matt Miller, a lifelong hunter who works for the Conservancy in Idaho. "It is a much bigger view of the land and the wildlife. I think of [late Sierra Club leader] David Brower. He loved to climb mountains, but he didn't work to preserve the mountains just so he'd have a nice place to climb."

Bart Semcer, a longtime hunter who works on fish and wildlife policy for the Sierra Club, emphasizes the importance of such partnerships: "Sportsmen are the original conservationists. You cannot do it without them."

The Original Conservationists

The idea that hunters are responsible for providing habitat for the game they hunt, and for the ecosystems that support game and other wildlife, is one of the oldest forms of environmental advocacy in North America, owing its existence to men like Theodore Roosevelt. Born in 1858, Roosevelt grew up steeped in the lore of Western hunting and adventure. But by the time he went west to hunt big game in 1883, he rode on horseback for 10 days across the grasslands of North Dakota before finding a bison to shoot. Roosevelt felt keenly the loss of a legacy that he believed had belonged to all Americans. He also saw, in the ruin of wildlife, the potential ruin of the nation.

When Roosevelt became president, he enacted the most sweeping environmental legislation the world had ever seen. "When he entered the White House in 1901, the idea of conservation had not yet found its way into the public mind," writes Jim Posewitz, author of *Rifle in Hand: How Wild America Was Saved*. "When he left office in 1909, he had implanted the idea of conservation into our culture and enriched our future prospects with 230 million acres of designated public forests, wildlife refuges, bird preserves, parks, national monuments, and game ranges."

Roosevelt's mentor, the naturalist and hunter George Bird Grinnell, had traveled through the West when the great herds of elk and pronghorn and bison still flowed over the Plains. Grinnell founded the prototypical sporting magazine *Forest and Stream* (later *Field & Stream*), and argued for the preservation of the wildlife and wild country that was left. He later founded the first Audubon Society and was instrumental in creating Glacier and Yellowstone national parks.

Together, Roosevelt, Grinnell and nine others founded the Boone and Crockett Club, which called for an end to market hunting, the protection of American bison and the establishment of game laws—radical changes in the way Americans viewed wildlife. (The Boone and Crockett Club is still around; it owns a sprawling ranch on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front dedicated to wildlife habitat, research and education. The Conservancy holds a conservation easement on the property.)

The low point for North American wildlife is considered to be 1910. By the 1930s, "There was still not much game to hunt anywhere, but there was a lot of hope among Ameri-

can hunters,” writes Posewitz. In that decade, hunters and gun companies sponsored two laws that have funded the most far-reaching restoration of wildlife and habitat in history.

The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, popularly known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, created an 11 percent tax on sporting firearms and ammunition and a 10 percent tax on handguns to support wildlife conservation and to promote hunter safety. In the 75 years since it was enacted, Pittman-Robertson has raised more than \$5 billion for conservation. Those funds will contribute more than \$233 million this year, mainly to support wildlife management areas that provide habitat and public access for everything from hiking and fishing to bird-watching and hunting.

The other law, the Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamp Act, requires waterfowl hunters aged 16 and older to possess a valid federal hunting stamp, commonly known as a duck stamp. Sales of the stamps have brought in nearly \$700 million since the program’s inception in 1934 and have helped to purchase and establish 5.2 million acres of the National Wildlife Refuge system (see *The Stamp of Conservation*). During the 2002–2003 hunting season, duck-stamp sales brought in almost \$26 million, and 98 cents of every dollar went to purchase habitat for waterfowl—habitat that also serves every other creature that walks, swims, crawls or flies there. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimates that one-third of the nation’s threatened and endangered species live on one or more of the refuges.

Opening Doors

According to the National Shooting Sports Foundation, between the Pittman-Robertson Act, the sale of duck stamps, and the sale of state game and fish licenses, hunters and anglers currently contribute about \$4.7 million a day to wildlife conservation and protection. But in addition to spending power, what the sporting community has in abundance is political clout.

“The people that buy hunting and fishing licenses in this country have one thing in common: They vote,” says Dave Nomsen, vice president of Pheasants Forever, which has worked closely with the Conservancy on wetlands and prairie conservation projects.

“In the past few years, we’ve had unprecedented access to the administration in Washington. We’ve been very vocal about our concerns, especially in protecting the funding for programs like Conservation Reserve and Wetlands Reserve.” (Pheasants Forever, the Conservancy and 20 other sporting and conservation organizations worked this year to urge Congress to restore funding to the Wetlands Reserve

Program.) Nomsen adds, “I think we are looking at a day where that door will always be open to the fishing and hunting groups, no matter [which party is] in the White House.”

Nomsen attributes that open door to the formation of large umbrella groups like the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP) and American Wildlife Conservation Partners that unite dozens of sportsmen’s groups under one banner. “TRCP is doing a lot of new things,” he says, “like engaging union members, who may not belong to any conservation organizations now, but they are sportsmen, and they share a lot of our common concerns.”

From the sporting groups’ perspective, the Conservancy opens a lot of doors as well. “The Conservancy has great green credentials,” says Steve Moyer, a vice president at Trout Unlimited. Furthermore, smaller organizations like Trout (with approximately 150,000 members) can’t begin to tap into the kinds of money the Conservancy brings to projects. Moyer notes, for example, that in a joint \$50 million effort to remove dams from Maine’s Penobscot River—an important spawning and nursery ground for endangered Atlantic salmon—Trout Unlimited is largely relying on the Conservancy’s expertise in raising money from state and federal agencies.

For Keith Lenard—who worked for the Conservancy before going to the Elk Foundation—the two groups started in different parts of the conservation world, and traveled paths that inevitably converged. “I look at the creation of the Conservancy in the 1950s, when hunters were still the driving force of conservation—really the only force,” he says. “Then land trusts like the Conservancy created a whole new model, and started to lead the hunters along to where we are now.”

The potential of the convergence, Lenard believes, is only beginning to be realized. “The hook-and-bullet crowd ... [is] still not a mainstream conservation movement. But we bring a whole new group of people into the room, with the same goals. There’s a whole lot of cross-pollination going on now.”

Nationwide, the Conservancy has worked with sporting groups to advocate for policies that favor conservation, to raise public funds for conservation, to restore rivers, to preserve working forests and to maintain public access to industrial forests that otherwise would have been sold to private developers.

The Conservancy has worked with hunting and fishing organizations on projects large and small. In South Carolina, the Conservancy is working with the 600,000-member Ducks Unlimited to protect large parts of the 1.6-million

acre ACE Basin—the coastal region where the Ashepoo, Combahee and Edisto rivers converge. More than 160,000 acres have been protected so far. Meanwhile, in Clinton County, Pennsylvania, the Conservancy works with the 20-member West Branch Hunt Club, which is aiding the restoration efforts of forest ecologists by helping to control the white-tailed deer population.

In one especially complex partnership, the Conservancy joined forces in 2003 with the Conservation Fund, the Elk Foundation and the Wild Turkey Federation in Tennessee to protect more than 75,000 acres and prevent the fragmentation of huge blocks of forest. Together, they and other groups helped unite a patchwork of state wildlife management areas with forestlands in Tennessee's Cumberland Mountains. The forestlands were being sold by coal and timber companies and would surely have been developed.

The deal drew public support largely because the groups' work ensured that hunting and fishing would be allowed to continue.

“That connection to hunting and fishing groups is where we're headed in Tennessee,” says Scott Davis, who directs the Conservancy's work in the state. “The Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency knows that it's not about a single species. What's good for a golden-winged warbler is good for a wild turkey. What's good for a freshwater mussel is good for a smallmouth bass...It's about an intact forest and clean water, which is good for everybody.”

For Bruce Kidman, director of government relations for the Conservancy in Maine, maintaining public access for hunting is critical to the organization's work: “Public access, on the face of it, has very little to do with the mission of the Conservancy...But if you are going to live in a community, you have to find the common ground, and in Maine, that is access for hunting and fishing.”

Hunting helps foster a relationship to the land that is crucial to future conservation efforts, adds Brian van Eerden, who manages more than 15,000 acres of Conservancy lands in southeastern Virginia, almost all of it leased to hunting clubs.

“Aldo Leopold told us that everything is connected to everything else in nature,” says van Eerden, “and we can see how sportsmen share this idea on such an intimate level with their children, passing these powerful experiences on from generation to generation. As we become more urbanized, we see things as more compartmentalized, and ecosystems do not function that way.”

Stakes are High

To be sure, there will always be issues on which some conservationists and hunters disagree—such as the protection of big carnivores and regulations such as the Endangered Species Act.

But it's possible to bridge the divide, says Gary Kania, who until recently was the Conservancy's liaison with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and now works with the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. “There are enough goals that are the same,” says Kania, who has also worked for the National Rifle Association. “The NRA is not the Conservancy, but the NRA represents a lot of hunters, and what do hunters want, primarily? They want habitat for wildlife. We may disagree about other things, but we can argue about that later. First, we can use our common goals to leverage resources and get things done now.”

Matt Miller of the Conservancy in Idaho says such partnerships are urgently needed: “I have been a hunter my whole life, growing up in Pennsylvania, and you see all the places that you've hunted and fished—the place that I ran my traplines when I was young—get swallowed up by sprawl. Sometime, even in high school, I realized that if we didn't do something, it would all be gone. It's why I became a conservationist in the first place.”

The Sierra Club's Semcer knows there are differences in how environmentalists and hunters view the world, but says, “I'd ask people on either side, ‘Do we have the luxury of questioning people's motives who want to preserve the natural world?’”

“We are at a point in history where the stakes are way high,” says Semcer, “and if we don't trust each other, we all lose.”

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Sidebar: The Stamp of Conservation

Dave Mehlman has been buying duck stamps for 20 years. He keeps the collection in a box and keeps the current year's stamp handy for when he goes to the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, 90 minutes south of his home near Albuquerque, New Mexico. His stamp gains him free admission.

But Mehlman, who directs the Conservancy's migratory-bird program, isn't a duck hunter. When he goes to the refuge, he's carrying binoculars, not a shotgun.

So why the duck stamp? "Because the funds go directly to acquiring new National Wildlife Refuges or adding to existing ones, and some of those are the top birding places in the country," he says. (Only some charge admission.) In fact, money from the duck-stamp program helped pay for the creation of Bosque del Apache, an internationally famous birding destination.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which oversees the National Wildlife Refuge system, many of the country's most popular birding spots are refuges, such as Blackwater in Maryland and Cat Island in Louisiana, funded in part by federal duck-stamp dollars. Fish and Wildlife estimates that refuges annually receive more than 40 million visitors, almost 80 percent of them birders. "If you're a birder, you need birds, and you need access, and this program provides both," says Paul Schmidt, an assistant director for migratory birds at Fish and Wildlife.

Duck stamps, now officially known as Federal Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation Stamps, were created in 1934 in an effort to boost waterfowl populations, which had been decimated by overharvesting and habitat destruction. The stamps have paid off, with growth in the refuge system and in waterfowl populations. But over the years, duck-stamp sales have slumped, and the price of bird habitat has skyrocketed. Meanwhile, the cost of duck stamps has remained steady at \$15. Says Schmidt: "Our buying power has gone down. We're buying less and less and preserving less and less."

The Conservancy and others, including Ducks Unlimited and Pheasants Forever, are supporting legislation to turn that situation around. The legislation essentially replicates an earlier law under which Congress gave Fish and Wildlife a \$200 million loan to protect wetlands, with the understanding that the loan would be repaid with future sales of duck stamps. (Congress ultimately forgave the loan.) Under the proposed law, Congress would advance \$400 million over 10 years—to be repaid by duck-stamp revenue.

Part of the strategy is to get nonhunters to buy the stamps. Says Scott Sutherland of Ducks Unlimited, "Anyone who cares about wild places and spaces should care about this program."

—Courtney Leatherman