

Predator Hunters For The Environment

Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife has protected a lot of Western land and species. It's also killed a lot of coyotes (and can't wait to go after some wolves).

By Hal Herring

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MARSING, IDAHO

“The drawing for the wolf hunt will be at the very end, so nobody can go sneaking out early,” says Nate Helm, addressing a crowd of about 30 men and women at Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife’s first annual Predator Derby, held in January at the new American

Legion Hall. Helm is SFW-Idaho’s executive director, a trim, youthful and redheaded man in his early 30s, the former natural resources coordinator for Idaho U.S. Sen. Larry Craig. Helm’s wife is busy signing up the entrants to the derby with three of the six Helm children in close attendance, camo-clad and well-behaved.

The line of contenders includes a local taxidermist and his contest partner, a plumber from Boise who is originally from Russia and is new to coyote hunting but a devoted waterfowler; they are discussing the glories of the oxbows of the Snake River near Marsing. The taxidermist tells me that he’s in the derby to save a fawn or two by killing coyotes, and if he can do that, it doesn’t matter if he wins. Former government trapper Layne Rio Bangerter and his partner Mike Svedin are at the back of the line. Someone remarks that Bangerter has just been appointed as a natural resources advisor to Idaho’s new governor, Butch Otter, which is no surprise, since Bangerter held the same post for U.S. Sen. Mike Crapo for more than two years. In a brief conversation, Bangerter will tell me, “We are normal Idahoans here, and we want animals to hunt, fish and trap. And we want to keep Idaho the way it is.”

Everybody’s kids are running the place hard, marveling at the raffle booty spread out on the long tables: the bags and buckets of calls and scents, headlamps and camo-gear and hats and copies of the glossy magazine Predator Xtreme. (Lead story: “In-Your-Face Bears: Could You Survive?”) On a table near the door is an old Mauser-action rifle with one of the original Unertl sniper scopes mounted on it; most visitors, including me, study it with fascination. In general, though, the talk tonight is of wolves, hunting and politics, three subjects that, for SFW, and for so many people around the West, are like three pieces of clay, worked and kneaded together into a single smooth entity.

After a barbecue supper, the presentations and calling contests begin. Larry Lansdowne, a sales rep for Quaker Boy, a call and hunting-gear maker, is here to demonstrate some calling techniques and offer up his advice on how to kill coyotes, foxes and bobcats in tomorrow’s derby. Lansdowne is a fan of cowboy-action shooting — hand-gunners who use period-piece weapons from the 1800s in fast-paced competitions — and he looks the part, heavy-set, with long graying hair and a black cowboy hat that has a hatband made of dozens of elk ivories. He tests a few different calls. “You got a dog (coyote) out there at a mile, you can challenge ...” he says, making the call howl. “You can go to a ki-yi,” he barks fast, “or you can go to a hurt pup,” and then he whines.

“A female coyote will get real mama-ish if she thinks somebody’s hurting her pup,” he says. “People ask what this call is, or that one, and really, it’s either something barking or something dying.” He makes a long dying rabbit squeal. “Follow that with a quick bark. Make ’em think there’s food, and somebody else is getting it.”

Once the predators are called in, Lansdowne notes, shot placement isn’t particularly important. “You are going for a straight harvest here. It’s about the numbers, and the more you take out of here, the better it will be,” he says. “Don’t be tentative, don’t get discouraged. Even if you fail all day long, it still was better than going to work. It’s about being able to enjoy Mother Earth and the things she’s putting out there for us to use.”

As promised, the picking of the ticket for the grand prize comes at the end of the evening. SFW member Richard Scott holds the winning ticket. He and a partner will be headed to hunt wolves with BOSS Outfitters in Alberta, where, as one unsuccessful contestant remarked, “There are plenty of ’em, and you can shoot as many as you want.”

The group disperses into the cold night

air of the parking lot, in a whirl of conversation and the rattling start-up of big diesel pickups, running lights glowing orange. Everyone would be back near Marsing in 24 hours, to meet at the Homedale Rod and Gun Club and see who had been most successful at the business of killing all the predators that were legal to hunt.

In 1993, when Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife first appeared, Utah wildlife and wildlife habitat were in trouble.

“Wildlife was going down,” says SFW founder Don Peay of Bountiful, Utah, who has been called “the Don of Wildlife” by the Salt Lake City Tribune. “Our fish and game department was totally out of touch with the Legislature, with sportsmen, even with the governor. There was a failure to address habitat restoration on our public lands, a failure to address predator control. There were so many challenges, and our game and fish director actually made the decision to abandon hunting, and move toward watchable wildlife.”

Former Utah Fish and Game Director John Kimball, who was in the agency at the time, said a convergence of factors was working against wildlife. “Our deer numbers were way down, and we were looking at really having to reduce our big game licenses, which meant we were looking at losing all that license money,” he said. “Especially from our sales of nonresident deer licenses.” The low deer numbers were, in part, the fault of the agency’s management, Kimball said.

At the same time, a coalition of groups, including the Utah Division of Wildlife Resources, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation and The Nature Conservancy, was involved in an attempt to purchase two remote wildlife-rich ranches in the Book Cliffs area, near Vernal.

“A bunch of what I would call ultra-right-wing cattlemen went in and hammered the fish and game (department)

and said, ‘If you have the money to buy ranches for wildlife, you have too much money.’ Then they went to the Legislature and got fish and game’s budget cut even more,” Peay says.

It was a defining moment for Peay. He believed that Utah was giving up on something — not just the Book Cliffs purchase, or wildlife, but the state’s long hunting heritage — that most residents still valued but were not organized enough to defend. “We had cattlemen all over Utah who did not want to see larger deer and elk herds. At the same time, we were seeing successful moves by animal-rights groups to shut down predator control and a rising anti-hunting sentiment in the cities,” Peay says. “We needed a group that could restore the game and the hunting in Utah. We could let other groups worry about the spotted owls and the desert tortoises. “Not that those things are not important.”

Since its founding, Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife has calved into two entities that have a common board of directors — Sportsmen for Habitat, a nonprofit charity, and the original Sportsmen for Fish and Wildlife, a nonprofit recreational club. The Utah-based SFW looks forward to the day when there’s no need to travel to Canada to hunt wolves. SFW’s members, in fact, are ready to start the wolf hunt, right now, in Idaho. So are their counterparts at SFW-Wyoming. There is a new branch in New Mexico, and SFW hopes to start others.

With close to 10,000 members and a 2005 budget of over \$1.3 million, SFW is the largest and by far the most powerful wildlife group in Utah. Its two-part structure is also unique among wildlife groups. According to SFW Treasurer Byron Bateman, the split was “part of Don’s (Peay’s) original plan. It was set up so that if we needed to, we could do a lot of lobbying for our interests.” In the early days of SFW, Bateman explained, lobbying was a big part of

their work. “But not so much now,” he said. “We have our relationships built, and we can do the same thing with just a phone call.” The money from members’ dues and other sources can still be used for lobbying, but more of it is earmarked for the group’s magazine, Sportsmen’s Voice, and to pay a small number of staffers.

Sportsmen for Habitat has no dues-paying members, Bateman said. It is simply the tax-deductible arm of the group. In Utah, at least, it stays very busy. Last year, Sportsmen for Habitat was awarded the first-ever Kevin Conway Award (named in honor of the former Utah Division of Wildlife Resources director, who passed away in 2004) for its support of Utah’s Watershed Initiative, which included extensive (and ongoing) work restoring native sagebrush habitats across the state.

SFW has stirred controversy in all the states where it operates with its unapologetic demands for maximizing big game herds and hunting opportunities through transplanting species like bighorn sheep into new ranges; changing hunting regulations to favor trophy-sized deer and elk; and spending money on predator control, not just to protect livestock, as it has been traditionally done across the West, but to protect and increase wild game herds and game birds.

In Utah, Peay has been at the center of the storm, in no small part because he plays an unprecedented role in lobbying the Utah Legislature for policies that he and his followers say will foster a stronger hunting culture and more game animals in his state. Peay’s many political contributions go to candidates not generally associated with wildlife conservation, such as Republican congresswomen Barbara Cubin of Wyoming and Lisa Murkowski of Alaska and former Massachusetts governor and Republican presidential candidate Mitt Romney, among others. Peay is also a strong supporter of President

George W. Bush; he's visited with the president both at his ranch in Texas and in Washington, D.C., and penned articles for SFW's in-house magazine with headlines like "Conservation George W. Bush Style."

Peay's critics call him arrogant, "a bull," and many Utahns interviewed for this story asked me not to use their names, saying "people are afraid of him." And yet, almost everyone interviewed said that Peay and SFW had a powerful record of success in working on behalf of wildlife, wildlife habitat and hunting in Utah, a state where, less than 20 years ago, it seemed as though the citizenry and the Legislature were content to let their wildlife and heritage of hunting fade away forever.

From reading the newspapers, a visitor could be convinced that most Westerners spend their lives worrying about the fate of the land and its wild inhabitants. Almost nothing could be further from the truth. In the West, as in almost every other part of the U.S., the vast majority of the financial support for wildlife, wildlife habitat and the state fish and game agencies that work to protect and sustain them comes from hunting and fishing licenses, the purchase of special hunting permits, taxes on firearms and ammunition, and the sale of federal and state waterfowl hunting stamps.

Attempts to set up new sources of money for wildlife, especially for non-game species, have failed. Most spectacular among the failures is the U.S. Senate's refusal in 2000 to allow a vote on the hugely popular Conservation and Reinvestment Act (CARA), which would have provided \$3.1 billion annually for 15 years, drawn from taxes on outdoor gear such as backpacks and hiking boots as well as from revenues from oil and gas royalties. The funds would have been directed to help states with projects that ranged from restoring non-game wildlife to protecting coastal marshes and wetlands. CARA failed, attacked by private-property-rights ex-

tremists and their not-so-secret industrial backers, who claimed the money would be used to add to the federal estate or to compete with private interests for resources. The outdoor industry also is said to have opposed the act, unwilling to have the prices for its goods elevated, however slightly.

Year after year, a declining number of sportsmen have provided the funding to preserve wildlife and habitat. Hunting groups — the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the North American Foundation for Wild Sheep, and others — have brought money and carefully cultivated political will to partner with The Nature Conservancy and other land trusts to protect the critical big-game habitat that also serves as a redoubt for other wild creatures.

Anti-hunting groups cite studies by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service showing that "watchable wildlife" interests — non-hunting tourists drawn to parks and rural areas — spend more on their trips and are an increasing presence, while expenditures by hunters are declining. But this does not negate a simple reality: The majority of the wildlife being watched by non-hunters has been restored and sustained by hunter dollars, paid through the decades into a variety of revenue streams.

"The non-game wildlife people don't have an emotional or financial chip in this game. Don Peay has connected the dots between industry, outfitters and the sportsmen — including the very high-end sportsmen — and he's delivering that constituency to conservation, on the ground," says Amanda Smith of The Nature Conservancy in Utah, which has become a partner with SFW in habitat-protection projects. "It is all so much more tangible than anything that people who just say they love the wildlife are doing."

Peay, who has a background in chemical engineering and an MBA from Brigham Young University, describes

himself, variously, as a management and financial consultant, a real estate developer and a businessman. He holds no title at SFW, but works for the group as a consultant. It is obvious that he has a gift for connections. When reached for this interview, he was on the way to interior Alaska to hunt grizzly bears with his good friend Karl "The Mailman" Malone, the legendary former Utah Jazz power forward. Sources say that Peay is a friend of U.S. Sen. Orrin Hatch, who has represented Utah since 1977. Peay's political contributions to the 2004 George W. Bush campaign were sufficient to earn him a place on the list of Bush "Pioneers," a status reserved for those who raised \$100,000 or more.

John Gale, a regional representative for the National Wildlife Federation, has followed the work and expansion of SFW in New Mexico and in Utah. He offers one key to SFW's attraction for many Westerners: "It (SFW) is so conservative that the membership does not have to worry about the dreaded 'greenie' label, which is so terrible to be now, in the West."

Peay insists SFW is "neither an elephant or a donkey" when it comes to politics. "But our membership is probably 75 percent Republican. What would you expect in Utah?" he says. "I've seen these liberal groups that want to fight the Republicans, and they get nothing done. We are seeing this rise of the Democrats in the West, and they are courting the sportsmen's vote, and that's good."

Most of Peay's political contributions are targeted to Republican politicians, and sometimes it seems as though SFW toes the Republican line. When asked about the Clinton-era Roadless Rule, which would have prevented road development in what remains of the nation's public wilderness, Peay says only that SFW has not taken a stand on this perennial controversy, which has divided many hunting groups. "We

leave that up to our individual chapters to decide,” he said.

But on the issue of public lands in general and their value to the future of hunting and fishing, Peay and SFW have taken an unequivocal stand in opposition to some Republican policies. When the Bush administration presented a precedent-setting plan to sell off 300,000 acres of federal land, Peay and SFW were adamantly opposed. SFW has also bucked entrenched so-called “wise-use” groups and advocated for more controls over all-terrain vehicle use on isolated public lands.

John Kimball, the former Utah game and fish director, says that one of the first successes of SFW was to push through the requirement for a two-thirds “supermajority” vote in the Legislature before changes could be made in laws or regulations affecting wildlife management. Such a rule was necessary, Kimball and many other Utahns have said, to keep an increasing urban population from dominating rural interests by referendum. “We were looking at states like California, where citizen referendums had been used to shut down trapping or cougar hunting, and we didn’t want to see that in Utah,” Kimball said.

Along with the supermajority requirement, SFW pushed a substantial increase in funding for the Utah fish and wildlife agency. The new funds have been parlayed into, among other projects, range and watershed restoration on public lands, the replanting of native grasses, and the halting of saltcedar and piñon-juniper invasions.

SFW/SFH has pushed hard on federal and state land managers to reverse massive losses — from fire suppression, grazing and development, including energy drilling — in the sagebrush steppe ecosystem. That ecosystem sustains not only iconic Western game animals, such as mule deer, sage grouse and wintering elk, but also a host of

other native species. The group’s close ties with then Bureau of Land Management director Kathleen Clarke and other Bush administration appointees are credited with getting the critical restoration work under way, at a time when the sagebrush steppe was just becoming recognized as one of the most important and endangered ecosystems in the West.

Such projects, like the supermajority requirement, have the support of the ranching community, because they increase forage for cattle as well as wildlife. This has created another bridge between SFW and ranchers, who as a group have been traditionally hostile to efforts to increase wildlife. And the increase in state funding allocated to wildlife is now a permanent part of the budget.

“We made the conservative argument that the money was an investment in the game and the future,” Peay says. But Kimball soon learned that SFW’s support can come with strings attached. “We wanted to fund a cougar study in central Utah, and SFW and the stock-growers both seemed to think that if you had a cougar in hand, you didn’t put a radio collar on it, you killed it,” Kimball says. “We knew that if you had good habitat, that deer herds can weather some pretty adverse conditions, and we drew in a lot of different interests on the study. But SFW — which is a deer and elk group — still opposed it.”

The emphasis on — some would call it an obsession with — predator control sets SFW, and Peay, apart from almost every other sportsmen’s or conservation group in the West. “To think you can have a natural landscape with wolves and bears and other predators on it is romantic, but it’s not true,” Peay says. “As the West develops, predators will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back.” Peay notes that studies on Utah’s Strawberry Reservoir showed that it was red foxes and ravens, not cattle grazing, that were responsible

for low numbers of sage grouse in the area.

“They went in there and napalmed the red fox and the ravens,” and the sage grouse have rebounded, Peay says, without cutting cattle use.

It’s a model of management that Peay thinks can be applied far more widely, and he does not understand why it is so controversial. “How can anybody say they are an animal-rights advocate, and say they want grizzly bears or coyotes or wolves that eat all the production of the young, tearing these calves away from the elk?” he asks. “Where’s the animal rights in that?”

Peay believes that predator control will be one of the main tools needed to protect big game and other wildlife as oil and gas development expands on Western public lands, a process that he views as inevitable. “If you don’t think we need energy independence, you are wrong,” he says. “Wildlife is not as important as having 22-year-olds dying overseas for oil.

“They tell us that 20-acre well spacing is going to ruin wildlife in Wyoming, but we have mule deer right here in our neighborhood who live on less land than that,” Peay says. “Our bighorns that we re-introduced here in Utah were taken right off a strip mine in Alberta. They were walking around right next to the D-9 Cats (bulldozers).

“If you have to have wide-open spaces for wildlife, how come our biggest mule deer are right here in Salt Lake City?” Asked about largely undisputed government and energy-company studies showing a 46 percent decline in mule deer on the winter ranges of Wyoming where energy development was taking place, Peay replied, “How many of those were lost to predators? How many were lost because of rangeland deterioration? Our stand on oil and gas is that there has to be mitigation. I’ve spent a lot of time looking at this, and I look at data very hard.

“There are a lot of biologists that are full of bullshit. They make up a lot of convenient lies to support their own agenda.”

If SFW’s stand on predator control is controversial, it is the group’s model for raising money in Utah that has garnered the most attention from more traditional wildlife advocates, especially those in the hunting community.

Since 1981, Utah, like other Western states, has offered special “set-aside” hunting permits, or tags, for coveted trophy animals like bighorn sheep rams, mountain goats, cougars, buck mule deer, bears and bull elk. The tags allow hunting in areas that may be otherwise restricted to provide animals a better chance of surviving to old (and, in trophy terms, impressive) age.

In 1981, a Utah tag for a single trophy bighorn ram sold at bid for \$20,000. The money was used to reintroduce more bighorns to their traditional ranges. According to Alan Clark, wildlife section chief for Utah’s Division of Wildlife Resources, there are now 350 such special tags available each year for auction.

“We — fish and game — get back 30 percent of that money,” Clark said, with 60 percent going to whatever group holds the auction for use in conservation projects. (Ten percent is kept by the auctioning group to cover banquet costs and other overhead.) Clark says that the number of tags is kept to 5 percent of all tags issued to hunters in the state, so the money can be raised without the public feeling like its hunting rights are being sold to the highest bidder.

“We have to generate money for projects,” he said, “and we give the most tags to the groups that generate the most money with them.” The leading group in the past few years has been SFW, Clark said. The idea of raising money by selling what is a public re-

source is controversial, Clark acknowledges, and his agency has tried to find a balance. “SFW pressured us to make more tags available,” he explains, “but we think that what we have now, where we set aside a maximum of 5 percent of the tags for this kind of fund raising, is working.”

Even so, the program remains controversial in Utah, both because it represents the privatization of a public resource, and, more important to many average sportsmen, the set-aside tags come out of the finite pool of big game licenses.

The money raised by tag auctions has been impressive — more than \$10 million since 2001, most of it spent on hundreds of habitat projects that would not have been funded otherwise. And the numbers of game animals in Utah have been steadily increasing, at least in part because of those projects.

At the January 2007 Western Hunting and Conservation Expo held in Salt Lake City — which was sponsored by SFW, the Mule Deer Foundation and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep — the high bid for a single bighorn ram tag went for the record-breaking sum of \$80,000. The event may have been the single most successful wildlife fund-raiser ever held. According to SFW’s magazine, *Sportsmen’s Voice*, the event raised more than \$12 million for conservation projects in Utah and surrounding states.

The idea that SFW wants to corner the market on trophy big-game tags dogs the group as it expands into other states. Bob Wharff, who leads SFW-Wyoming, came to his job after working as a wildlife biologist at Utah’s sprawling Deseret Ranch. Wharff says that the set-aside tags and auctions are one of the first things that Wyoming hunters — especially game wardens — want to talk to him about.

“Where we’ve run into problems is

where people misunderstand the model created in Utah,” he explained. “I have wardens here in Wyoming kind of threaten me, telling me that if I wanted to try and use those set-aside licenses here, they would do everything to try and stop us. But I tell them I came to Wyoming because I wanted to live here, not because I wanted to change it.”

Actually, Wharff does not have to spend time defending fund-raising models to increase SFW’s presence in Wyoming. He just has to find a bunch of hunters or cattlemen and explain SFW’s position on the wolf issue.

“We’re not going to sit back and let hunting be replaced by predators, which is what we see happening now. I have maintained for a long time that Wyoming has the right to manage wolves in a different way than other states, because we have the lion’s share of Yellowstone National Park, and the park is called, in studies by the government, a ‘wolf nursery,’ ” Wharff says. “This is not a species (wolves) that ever really needed protection. I believe that wolf reintroduction had nothing to do with re-establishing the wolf to its native range. It was about eliminating public-lands grazing and hunting.”

The traditional environmental groups that oppose letting the states control wolf population levels have not generally acknowledged a powerful irony: It was the decades of hunter dollars flowing to state and federal game agencies that restored enough of the great North American game herds to provide the prey base supporting wolf re-introduction. Many such environmental groups — as many hunters have suspected and as Don Peay so often says — really are “anti-hunting groups cloaked in green.”

In Wyoming, the pro-wolf stance of most environmentalists has only strengthened SFW, which claims to have gathered between 2,000 and 2,500 members since it came to the state in

February of 2003. Those gains make it the second-largest wildlife group in the state, behind the venerable Wyoming Wildlife Federation, which claims 5,000 to 6,000 members.

“The Sierra Club, all those organizations, their contributions pale in comparison to what hunters have done for conservation,” Wharff said. “And those groups have gotten so extreme. The common man is no longer able to understand what these environmental organizations want. They never offer any solutions. They are so far removed from the mainstream. ...

“You can say what you want about us, like us, hate us, whatever; we have a can-do attitude. This is a group that is for people who hunt and fish, and who want to see their grandchildren hunt and fish.”

Critics respond that a healthy landscape is not just a farm producing more game and fish for sportsmen to take. Suzanne Stone, a Northern Rockies representative of Defenders of Wildlife, explained: “Most hunters that I know value the overall ecosystem, and how it maintains its health, and I don’t know how you can miss the basic fact that predators are part of that.” Stone says her contacts with SFW have been limited, but she knows the group is a political force. Like other wildlife advocates, she hopes that the force can be harnessed for good.

“The biggest concern I have with SFW is that there is no value associated with healthy ecosystems,” she says. “And their members are being offered actual misinformation about science and how these ecosystems function. And some of the most egregious effects on wildlife come from misinformation.”

Stone also worries that sportsmen are not really represented by some of the SFW’s more extreme anti-predator rhetoric. “The most extreme voices are being heard loudest now, and I know

so many hunters who do value wilderness and predators — we hear from them all the time,” she says. “But they are not heard in the media. They were not down at the anti-wolf rally at the Statehouse.”

To some extent, SFW has gained popularity by avoiding the most controversial conservation issues in Wyoming. The state is at the heart of the explosion in public-lands energy development in the West. There are a host of contentious issues: the loss of winter range and migration corridors in the famed Green River Valley; the largest energy project in U.S. history, now under way in the Powder River Basin; and the 20,000 oil and gas wells being developed in the Red Desert, the winter range for the nation’s largest pronghorn herd and the home of the only desert elk herd known. So far, however, SFW-Wyoming has issued no position statements regarding energy development.

Wharff says he has not felt the pressure to step in yet. “We had Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range (a group opposed to drilling in those mountains) come to us and ask us to sign on to say that there should be no oil and gas development in the Wyoming Range, and that line was too hard. You ban that, and then what would be next? Ban hunting?” Wharff says. “I told the outfitters who signed on that they were nuts. What if you push those guys off, and then the next user group that is banned is the outfitters?”

Wharff says he would like the development to slow down. “But most of our guys don’t think this is as big a threat as some other people do. Most people that hunt and fish are utilitarian,” he says. “They believe in using things, and the concept of renewable resources.”

But there are plenty of Wyoming sportsmen who disagree with Wharff on that point, given the energy development they have already witnessed and its impacts on big game and landscapes. The

powerful Wyoming Guides and Outfitters Association is a part of Sportsmen for the Wyoming Range, and association member Terry Pollard says his group is far more worried about energy development on these pristine lands than by the possibility that someone would try to ban hunters from using them. “I don’t think that’ll ever be a problem,” Pollard said. “But if they go up there with those oil and gas rigs, they’ll devastate the range. We’re about multiple use, as we’ve always said, but if industry goes in there and does what they’ve done elsewhere in Wyoming, it’ll just be a single use. All the others will be gone.”

Instead of contesting energy development, SFW-Wyoming has concentrated on an issue that first brought it to the state: the feed grounds maintained for Wyoming’s elk herds.

In an effort to maintain elk herds without having the animals devour the forage and hay needed for cattle, Wyoming created the first feeding ground for elk in 1912, the iconic National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole. The idea was expanded over the following decades, driven by a 1939 law that required the state wildlife agency to pay ranchers for damage to their lands caused by wild elk. There are currently 22 state-run feed grounds scattered in Sublette, Lincoln and Teton counties. About 20,000 wild elk winter on these feed grounds, sustained on a diet of hay (6,000 to 9,000 tons every year) and alfalfa pellets purchased from local ranches.

Feeding wildlife to maintain abnormally high numbers has always seemed questionable to some. But when revenues for wildlife management depend on the sale of big game licenses, as they do in Wyoming, there is an incentive to keep herds as large as possible. For many years, the trade-off seemed acceptable. But brucellosis, a disease probably brought into the Yellowstone region by cattle around 1900, spread easily among the closely gathered feed-

ground elk, reaching infection levels of more than 30 percent in one area. The rate of infection suggested that the feed grounds were time bombs, waiting for any number of diseases to arrive and, perhaps, spread to cattle herds.

“The wildlife professionals all felt that it was time to bite the bullet and phase out the feed grounds,” says Barry Reiswig, manager of the National Elk Refuge

SFW has come out strongly for maintaining the feed grounds. In 2006, Wharff and others claimed that the National Elk Refuge had underfed the wintering elk the year before and winter mortalities were unacceptably high. In December of that year, SFW and local ranchers and outfitters gathered to create “Hay Day,” a citizens’ solution to the alleged mismanagement of the Refuge.

The group gathered 60 tons of hay and delivered it to the refuge, where it was accepted by Reiswig and his boss, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Regional Director Mitch King. The rally included a police escort for the hay convoy, a group recital of the Pledge of Allegiance, and an appearance by Wyoming state Sen. Kit Jennings of Casper, who is credited with the “Hay Day” concept.

“We did have some added mortality last year,” Reiswig says, “not a lot, but some. And then SFW rushed forward and said we were trying to starve the elk, and they had the Hay Day. It was a publicity stunt for SFW, and it worked well for them. Meanwhile, of course, the rest of us are still here trying to deal with these real problems.

“I’m a big supporter of powerful sportsmen’s organizations, and I’m hoping that SFW can lead their members to a more conservationist view of the world, rather than just throwing out hay bales or whatever.”

But so far, Reiswig notes, SFW has not addressed very many wildlife concerns

in Wyoming. “They have shied away from habitat protection, for example, and with some of the company they keep, I sometimes wonder whether they actually represent the interests of sportsmen,” he says.

Then he offers an example: “Right now, we have millions of acres of public land with mule deer and antelope on it, but elk are barred from ever going there. Instead, they are kept on these postage stamps (the feed grounds), time bombs for disease. The stock growers are not economically powerful, but they have political power, and they have kept the fish and game from buying any more winter range.

“We definitely need a powerful sportsmen’s group here. Maybe someday SFW will become more sophisticated.”

A drive from Boise to Marsing shows a fantastic transition. The rich farmland of the Snake River Plain is disappearing under a tide of new subdivisions, from the very high-end, gated-and-landscaped developments with names like The Overlake, to a forest of close-set dwellings called Hubble Homes, purchased by the square foot. The stores sell phone cards, chilis, horchada, catering to the thousands of Hispanics who came here to work huge expanses of apple and apricot and pear orchards and sweet onions and melons, and stayed on to build the houses and start businesses. Few of these new immigrants hunt or fish.

It’s a world that strikes terror into the heart of many a sportsman. Idaho cities are full of New Westerners, mountain biking, climbing in gyms, indifferent to or respectful of predators, and disdainful of blood sports. Worst of all, they are probably open to referendums that would impose their progressive ideas on a dwindling population of people they regard as hayseeds.

As in 1993 Utah, the Idaho Legislature

seems to have little respect, and little money, for the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. State wildlife managers, not wanting to alienate their best friends, the hunters, have kept liberal seasons on mule deer, even as the herds decline and the kind of trophy bucks that inspire some hunters to vote for roadless areas and habitat protection disappear.

Chuck Middleton, a livestock-feed salesman and past president of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, says that southeast Idaho’s mule deer herds — once renowned for massive trophy bucks found in challenging and isolated terrain — are in trouble. “They left the mule deer season open so long they got the biggest kill in history, and ruined our best trophy area in the state,” he says.

The stage was set for SFW-Idaho, under the direction of the politically savvy and well-connected Nate Helm, to take the lead. And politically, the group has clout. Less brash than Don Peay, Helm has written measured statements supporting the delisting of the wolf as an endangered species. He has stopped short of the vehemence of Idaho Gov. Butch Otter, who declared that all but 100 of the state’s wolves should be killed and that he was prepared “to bid for that first ticket to shoot a wolf myself.”

Under Helm’s direction, SFW purchased a ranch near Arco that was slated to become a high-fenced shooting operation where clients could kill buffalo and elk. Already prime mule deer habitat, the ranch has been improved with plantings of native bitterbrush and the development of water sources for deer and other wildlife, including sage grouse. It’s the kind of project that should have brought the group wide acclaim, especially since Idaho sportsmen have recently been fighting for new laws restricting the high-fence trophy shooting industry (and have criticized SFW for not taking a stronger stand on

the issue).

But Idaho has been more challenging for SFW, in political terms, than Utah or Wyoming. For one thing, SFW's critics are more outspoken here. "Our hunting community is totally opposed to any increase in the number of tags for sale," said Kent Marlor of the Idaho Wildlife Federation. "Once you go down that road, you are headed for an elitist model of hunting that nobody here wants."

For Chuck Middleton of the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, a longtime partner of SFW, the group's record in Idaho has been disappointing. The Idaho Sportsmen's Caucus Advisory Council includes 31 wildlife and hunting groups, Middleton explains. "And SFW is the only sportsman's group in the state that is not on it. They were the only wildlife organization to vote no to a fee increase to support Idaho Fish and Game, because they want Fish and Game to have no power," he says. "They want the power like they have in Utah, where they can just go to the Legislature and demand what they want."

Other Idahoans — including Jerry Conley, who was director of Idaho Fish and Game from 1980 to 1996 — say that SFW poses a real danger to the kind of wildlife management that has been so successful over the past decades in restoring and maintaining big game and other species. "Their solutions are to take all the money and kill the coyotes, the wolverines, the mountain lions," Conley says. "They haven't had a positive thought in years. In the long run, I don't think you can sustain a group just on negativity. But in the short run, they are causing problems for our wildlife professionals, who are trying to do a good job, independent of politics."

It is an early dusk at the Homedale Rod and Gun Club shooting range, about 10 miles out of Marsing, along the highway that leads over a low sagebrush and

timber pass and onto the vastness of the Owyhee Basin. The predator derby entrants are slow to come in, and the cold settles down. Somebody unloads wood from the back of a pickup and starts a fire in the burn barrel, and pretty soon everyone is gathering closer to it, talking about a recent mountain lion attack in California and about elk hunting, from one side of Idaho to the other and up again to the timber country of the far north Idaho panhandle.

It's been an unsuccessful day out on the sagebrush steppes, and there are only two coyotes brought in, one very small. Someone says they saw a bobcat at daybreak but couldn't get a shot off. No one is drinking beer, nobody smoking a cigarette. Nobody mentions the cold, because most of them have been out in the weather since the night before, and most have been out in the weather, at work and at play, for their whole lives. They know how to dress for it, and mostly, they love it, men and women and children. They're almost a different species from the climate-controlled, screen-obsessed masses of American society.

A boy of about 14 tells me how he has a place near here that is his favorite, and he points to a ridge, just now in full darkness, to the southwest. "If I could, I'd just stay up there and live," he said, "go hunting every day. I don't like living in town." Later he will ask me what kind of rifle I shoot, and whether I think it would be fun to hunt coyotes with a machine gun. I think about that one for a second, and then answer, "Yeah, I think it would." Which is the truth. The group is getting restless and tired, beginning to talk of home and supper. The two-coyote team is talking about what they will win. "Course," somebody remarks from the burn barrel, "somebody might pull in here with a dozen before time's up." A coyote actually howls not too far away.

A big pickup, an ATV in the back, comes rumbling in, and people step out

to greet the team. It's Layne Bangerter and Mike Svedin, and they are loaded down with a harvest of coyotes.

One after another the dogs come out of the back of the truck, to mounting excitement from the other entrants. Nate Helm looks relieved; an absence of kills would have made the derby seem less than successful, especially in the photos taken for SFW and the sponsors of the contest. The coyotes hit the gravel, lined up, 13 of them, every shape and size, from yearlings to grizzled adults.

Some were clearly taken last night; they are as stiff as frozen roadkill. The Helm children and other youngsters gather to study them; one little boy jumps back and forth across the line of coyotes, overcome with excitement. The animals are shot up, bloody and matted and twisted, and they have been ruptured inside; a thick, vinegary death reek rises from them, even in the cold. The children note this. "They stink!" one little boy shouts. An adult explains, "They have been shot up some."

Bangerter is standing at the fiery barrel, windburned, relaxed in a heavy camouflage coat, happy. "You just have to know how to hunt them," he explains, without condescension, in response to a question of how they took so many when so few other hunters took any. He tells a quick story of bringing in four coyotes at once to the call, the animals spread out in the sagebrush at different ranges, and managing to take all four down, shooting a scoped AR-15 rifle.

"I felt pretty good about that," he says, downplaying the skill that it must have taken.

It's late, and everybody helps haul the coyotes over on the pavement in front of the shooting range, while Helm works to hang a sign for the Sportsman's Warehouse, one of the derby's sponsors, as a backdrop. The photos don't take long — a low wall of dead coyotes, blaring banners, a group of

outdoorsmen who look like they've had a good day.

Later, I will read something in the SFW magazine that will stay with me, in a story called "The Spirit of the Wild, explained by a common man," by Neal Christopher, SFW-New Mexico:

About halfway up the mountain for the second time, I stopped to take a break. With my heart pounding and out of breathe (sic) it hit me like a ton of elk meat. I didn't know what it was at first, but after I fell to my knees I realized, it's what Ted Nugent talks about. It was the Spirit of the Wild. It hit me so deep in my soul, I stopped and prayed to Lord All Mighty. I sat on the ground and talked to him like an old friend I hadn't seen in years.

I didn't ask him for strength to carry more meat off the mountain or thank him for the elk I had just killed. Instead, I gave him thanks for my family and friends. I thanked him for the opportunity to live in country where I was free to roam the woods as I choose... .

I asked him to make sure that sometime in their hunting career, every person that sets foot in the woods feels exactly what I felt in my heart at that moment. (At that moment in time my trophy was not the rack or the meat, it was merely existing in rough country.)

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