



OPINION | LEILA PHILIP

# North American wildlife depends on gun sales for survival



LESLEY BECKER/GLOBE STAFF/ADOBE

**By Leila Philip**

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“Would you support a ban on assault rifles?” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wondered if I had gone too far. I was sitting with a group of fur trappers, waiting for the start of their spring meeting. What was I thinking? I was the only woman in the room, probably the only Democrat, and I’d just brought up the hotbed topic of gun regulation with a group of die-hard gun owners. I hadn’t planned to open my big mouth, and I was immediately

nervous, but ever since the Parkland school shooting, I'd been living in a state of outrage. Change couldn't happen unless we risked having conversations about gun control, not just with those with whom we knew we agreed, but with those we might not.

I tentatively looked around. For months I had been attending gatherings like this one to research contemporary trapping. Historically the fur trade, which helped found the early economies of this country, had devastated North American wildlife. By the early 1800s, the American beaver, whose pelts helped fund the first Puritan colonies, was gone from the East, and that was only the beginning.

But today's fur trappers play a more complex role, and trapping is being carried on for a variety of reasons, including, as I would discover, from a desire for a meaningful connection to nature. In Connecticut, fur trappers were helping the state manage beaver populations and contributing to studies run by wildlife biologists. I valued the generosity of the group I'd come to know, and I considered some of them friends, even though politically and culturally we were, on the face of it, on opposite sides. Had I just put my honorary citizenship at risk?

"Absolutely."

"Yes."

"You bet."

Their answers were immediate. In this crowd of woodsmen, a ban on assault rifles made sense. Then the trapper on my left began to speak, "As far as I'm concerned, no one needs an assault rifle, certainly not hunters. But the problem is any regulation that results in fewer gun and ammo sales will hurt wildlife . . . a lot. . . . It relies on that money."

"What?" I blurted out, trying to make sense of his answer. "Are you saying bullet sales actually help save wildlife?"

"Yup," he answered soberly. "It's called the Pittman-Robertson Act."

Signed into law in 1937, the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, popularly known as the [Pittman-Robertson Act](#), established a manufacturers excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition to generate revenue for wildlife conservation. This law represented a critical

shift in American conservation, away from a John Muir ideal of preserving wilderness in a state unaltered by man, toward a “managed-use” model that would allow for the extraction of natural resources like timber and wildlife. In this conservation plan, which put in place a “user-play, user-pay” model for hunters, wildlife preservation would be supported through an excise tax on guns, archery equipment, and ammunition at the rates of 10 percent and 11 percent. The program was deemed such a success that, in 1950, the [Dingell-Johnson Act](#) was established to collect a similar excise tax on fishing and boating equipment.

Since its inception in 1937, the Pittman Robertson Act, along with the additional funds from fishing, has funneled over \$20 billion into state conservation agencies for habitat purchase, restoration and maintenance, fish and wildlife studies, and, since 1970, for hunter education. State wildlife agencies throughout the 50 states own, manage, or administer 464 million acres of land as well as another 167 million acres of lakes, wetlands, and riparian areas. An impressive 47 to 75 percent of every state’s budget for maintenance of these areas, along with wildlife and fish conservation, is supported by these funds, with most of the balance coming from hunting and fishing license fees. In the first quarter of 2018 alone, the Pittman-Robertson Act [collected](#) close to \$159 million from the sale of pistols, revolvers, firearms, ammunition, and archery equipment.

Thus the difficult paradox: North American wildlife depends on gun sales for its survival. Scientists estimate that one-third of all US wildlife species are imperiled or vulnerable due to ongoing habitat loss, severe weather conditions, and the threat of invasive species. What does this mean? An estimated 8,000 species are in need of proactive conservation efforts. Wildlife biologists like Tom Decker, who oversees the distribution of Pittman-Robertson Act funds in the Northeast, is already worried about funding due to declines in hunting. According to a recent US Fish and Wildlife Service survey, only about 5 percent of Americans 16 years old and older hunt, half of what it was 50 years ago, and the decline is expected to continue.

“It’s a paradox that someone who pays to hunt wildlife makes such a positive contribution to wildlife,” said Decker. “It’s just hard for someone who doesn’t hunt to understand. I could go to the store and buy steak and tomatoes, but when someone gets meat from a deer they have killed or tomatoes they have raised, it has a different meaning.”

The fact is that for the past 80 years, the firearms industry, hunters, sport shooters, and anglers have been major contributors to wildlife conservation in the United States. And since 1937, North American wildlife has rebounded; the deer, wild turkey, moose, fisher, martin, beaver, fox, bobcat, bear, and coyote that we regularly encounter throughout the East are proof that wildlife conservation and management efforts have worked.

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We desperately need effective gun regulation, but any legislation has to find ways to replace funds for conservation or it will harm North American wildlife. On a practical level, it will also probably fail, since hunters and anglers will have a reason to work against it.

How much income for wildlife would be lost if assault rifles are banned? That is hard to answer, because the National Firearms Act forbids any system of registration of firearms, firearm owners, or firearm transactions. But estimates could be calculated based on the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms' yearly report on gun manufacturing, which lists the number of guns manufactured by category.

Alternative sources of funding wildlife conservation are being considered. Some states make use of Pittman Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds, but also dedicate one-eighth of 1 percent of every dollar from the general sales tax to wildlife. An estimated 70 percent of Americans engage wildlife through walking, hiking, bird watching, and photography. Certain types of outdoors equipment could be taxed.

All of us who want to see effective gun regulation must ensure that replacing funds for wildlife is part of the conversation. We may wish it were otherwise, but the simple fact is that, in our current system of conservation, bullets save wildlife.

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