

THE ROLE OF THE MODERN SPORTSMAN IN MAINTAINING THE HUNTER'S IMAGE

CONSERVATION
POLICY COLUMN



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As you take to the field this fall, you're taking part in something bigger than yourself. In fact, you (and I) are just a few of the several million hunters in the United States who benefit from a century-old unwritten contract with the rest of society.

In the years preceding the Boone and Crockett Club, as many of us know, wildlife of all shape and size were more abundant than they were today. As were their habitats. However, unregulated shooting and commercial harvest led to the decline and extirpation of several species, big and small alike. Before this era of “big raids” (to borrow a phrase from Interior Secretary Stewart Udall), how and where we hunted mattered far less, and the pursuit of wild animals was for survival or profit. That was destined to change, especially at a time when some, not unreasonably, suggested that hunting be taken off the table entirely.

Our ability to hunt was nearly entirely dependent on how hunters behaved in the field. Thus, the concept of Fair Chase was born.

Hunters were the first to know that species were on the brink of extinction and were some of the first to take strides in government to stem the losses. However, much like other issues, no one cared how much our predecessors knew about wildlife—until they knew how much they cared for wildlife and wild places.

For our society to accept hunting as a part of our

system of conservation, hunters had to demonstrate the utmost respect for the wildlife they pursued, often going above and beyond what the contemporary game laws required of them.

Fair Chase ethics still call us to behave in a way that goes beyond the law—to hold ourselves to a higher standard of behavior. Ethics are about what one does when nobody is watching. That's still the case, but today, more people are watching, recording, and disseminating information than ever before.

Back then, Boone and Crockett Club members began to distinguish hunters from sportspeople, and they did so in several ways. In the first-ever issue of *Forest and Stream* magazine, editor Charles Hallock (who preceded George Bird Grinnell at the helm of that magazine) explained that the mere act of hunting or fishing did not qualify a person as a true sportsman. He wrote: “It is not sufficient that a man should be able to knock over his birds dexterously right and left, or cast an inimitable fly.” To be a true sportsman, according to Hallock, required familiarity with “the living intelligences that people the woods and the foundations.... [a] practical knowledge of natural history must of necessity underlie all attainments which combine to make a thorough sportsman.” Regulatory mechanisms based on the best available science from the budding fields of wildlife biology and forestry, as well as our own principles of Fair Chase,

began to emerge with the creation of state and provincial wildlife agencies. Today, our system of wildlife management is much the same in its principles and in its funding, but the ways that we relate to one another, the land, and wildlife have changed.

The Boone and Crockett Club has always been against the waste of wildlife resources, and has further still isolated ourselves from the ‘slob hunting’ that characterized the market-motivated pursuit of animals in the early 20th century. The same is largely true today. Ethical choices in hunting are perhaps more important today than at any previous time. Our values as hunters—including our motivations and our conduct—mold society's opinion of hunting. And society's opinion—for better or worse—defines our ability to hunt in the days, weeks, and decades to come.

Ethicists call this general, society-wide opinion a “social license,” defined by real and perceived legitimacy, credibility, and trust.

I would argue that it is incumbent on us as a hunting public to occasionally review our social license to ensure we can maintain both our position in society and our rights to pursue wild food. Much of this means that we, as individual hunters, have a responsibility to our community to treat wildlife with the utmost respect and to treat our experience afield with reverence.

We all know that just a few bad apples can ruin a bushel; the same is true of the

hunting community. We now live in a world where just a handful of distasteful pictures or video snippets can jeopardize the decades that sportsmen have spent building a robust community of conservation advocates. Our social license to hunt requires us to each be vigilant of our own behavior and that of those around us.

Hunters must continue leading on issues affecting all wildlife, even outside of hunting.

No example of this is more pointed than the recent alleged events of the inhumane handling of a live wolf in Daniel, Wyoming, which was made worse by the minimal legal ramifications of these actions. For those who didn't follow the news last spring, a snowmobiler ran over a wolf, taped its mouth shut, brought it to a bar where several photos were taken, and then killed the wolf behind the establishment—an inhumane and unethical series of events in my eyes and those of many others. However, despite this incident clearly being unrelated to hunting, it was often attributed that way in the press. As hunters, we had the opportunity to clarify the situation, represent ourselves, and show the world how much we care for these wild animals. Tony Schoonen, CEO of the Boone and Crockett Club, issued the following statement in response to this event:

“The alleged events cannot and should not be considered hunting or wildlife management. Respect for wildlife is at the heart of what we do as hunters and conservationists and it’s clear that respect was absent from this situation. The Club has long supported professional wildlife management by state fish and wildlife agencies—including the ethical, regulated hunting of game species—as the most effective way to ensure sustainable populations of wildlife. When we have these laws and regulations in place, it builds value for wildlife and those who violate the laws can be held accountable for their actions. Until wolves are managed within this system throughout their range, we will continue to have conflicts and loss of ethical behavior.”

Even though the perpetrator in this case was not hunting, hunters stepped forward to assume a position of leadership and responsibility for these acts. For the sake of maintaining our position in society, we must continue to take opportunities to lead on other wildlife conservation issues that are largely unrelated to hunting, much as we always have. These include issues of

endangered species, active habitat management, and wildlife migration, just to name a few. This collective behavior, along with ethical behavior of individuals afield, is the only way to maintain our social license.

None of this is to say we can’t enjoy hunting, or that we ought to be at all apologetic for our livelihoods, but we must be increasingly conscious of the way we represent ourselves and our community to the rest of the world. Nothing short of the future of hunting itself depends on it. ■

Clayton E. Lewis

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