

A BRIEF HISTORY OF Wildlife Conservation IN THE UNITED STATES

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You can't tell where you are going if you don't know where you have been. A little knowledge of the history of wildlife conservation in the United States provides us with insight about our modern attitudes toward conservation and the wildlife laws we now enforce.

Although the North American Model of Conservation is unique in the world, it can only be discussed in the context of European migration to our continent. Some explorers, such as the Spanish, came to the Americas looking for gold and silver. Others,

such as the French and English, came to escape an overcrowded Europe, looking for land and economic opportunity. Many came here looking for escape from religious and political persecution. In the countries they fled, wildlife was for the most part owned by the local king, and poaching the crown's assets was severely punished.

Although initial settlements in North America had very difficult times (about 90 percent of the Jamestown settlers perished), once established here, the emigrants saw unlimited land and wildlife, with little or no government or laws to restrict their ambitions. As a result, the attitude of Americans, from the first settlers to now, has been independence of the individual and the right to "life, liberty and the pursuit

of happiness." To this day, Americans bristle at attempts of local or federal government to restrict their personal freedoms and independence. Our attitude towards wildlife conservation is heavily influenced by this perspective.

Scientists differ about the abundance of wildlife on our continent prior to the arrival of Europeans. Earlier textbooks speak of vast numbers of deer, elk, moose, and beavers in Eastern forests; polar bears, musk oxen, moose, and caribou in the Northwest; and millions of buffalo and pronghorn, along with thousands of grizzly bears and elk, in the West. More recent historians note that English settlers had a difficult time finding game to hunt, and that early Spanish explorers do not even mention seeing the bison. Many Native Americans, including the Sioux, Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Cree, Kiowa, Mandan, Pawnee, and Shawnee were hunter-gatherers, living off meat from mostly small mammals and the nuts, berries, and fruits they gathered. Many, however, planted extensive crops, with vast terraced agricultural plantings.

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE BISON BECAME ONE OF THE RALLYING CRIES FOR THOSE CONCERNED ABOUT THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE IN THE UNITED STATES.





Prior to European exploration, it has been estimated that there were as many as 100 million “Indians” in both North and South America. Archeologists, examining animal and bird bones found in campfire sites, now believe that Native Americans may have had a significant impact on North American wildlife. It is thought that they hunted mammals for food, but that they decimated large game around their population centers and crops. Once European explorers arrived, however, the Native Americans perished quickly and by the millions due to diseases to which they had no immunity, and the wildlife rapidly rebounded. From the 1500s to the mid-1600s there were, it is believed, about 3 to 5 million Native Americans living in what is now the United States. The Spanish introduced the Native Americans to horses, which changed their lifestyle and improved their hunting success, but not to the extent that it had much impact on wildlife populations.

In some areas of the New World, the rebound of wildlife as a result of the loss of hunting pressure by Native Americans was

Just six years after founding the Boone and Crockett Club, Theodore Roosevelt was responsible for securing the Club’s exhibit at the 1893 World’s Fair held in Chicago, Illinois. Roosevelt hired William Hofer, a well-known guide, to take care of the exhibit.

quickly tempered by new pressures from the European immigrants. As settlers arrived in the East, they cleared land for farming and cut forests to build ships. Eastern tribes, such as the Sioux, migrated westward. At the same time, the land clearing reduced habitat for wildlife. That habitat loss, combined with hunting for food, market hunting, and trapping for furs had a marked effect on Eastern wildlife populations.

As early as 1607, Captain John Smith reported that the French were shipping 25,000 beaver pelts per year to Europe, and by 1650, much of the beaver had been eliminated from the entire East Coast. The exploitation of the fur bearers in the Northeast and Canada was by the French and by England’s Hudson’s Bay Company. In the Pacific Northwest, the Russian-American Fur Company took seals and sea otters, and by 1768 the Steller’s sea cow was extinct. Bird populations suffered from being taken both for meat and for plumage, which was used for ladies’ hats in Europe. Deer and turkey populations also declined, again largely due to market hunting. In 1748 alone, South Carolina shipped 160,000 deer pelts to England. In the Southwest and in Florida, Spaniards introduced thousands of domestic cattle, sheep, goats, and pigs, which competed with grazing wildlife and also carried human diseases.

So the wildlife populations rebounded as the Native Americans died off or dispersed, but then the wildlife populations again de-

clined, largely due to trapping and market hunting. But the settlers blamed the losses on predators. In 1630 the Massachusetts Bay Colony offered a bounty of one shilling for each wolf killed. When the deer did not rebound, the city of Portsmouth, Rhode Island, enacted the first closed season on deer hunting in 1646. This was only the beginning of America’s game-management efforts, as well as America’s never-ending conflict over our attitude towards predators.

As the nation expanded in the late 1700s and early 1800s, the new settlers moved westward, where land and wildlife seemed free and unlimited. It is estimated that there were as many as 25 million buffalo and 10 million pronghorn in the west at that time. The Louisiana Purchase, the War with Mexico, the Oregon Compromise, the Gadsden Purchase and the purchase of Alaska fulfilled the concept of “Manifest Destiny”—an America that spanned from coast to coast. President Thomas Jefferson sent the famed Lewis and Clark Expedition from St. Louis, Missouri, to the Pacific Northwest in 1804. Although they encountered isolated stretches with little game, they found abundant herds of buffalo and deer, as well as grizzly bears and prairie dog towns a mile square. By the early 1800s trading posts had been established across the west, encouraging the Native Americans to harvest game for their hides. In 1830 Congress passed the Indian Removal



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Act, removing all title to lands from Indian tribes and moving many Native Americans to reservations in Oklahoma. By then, most of the beaver were gone from the country, and silk had replaced beaver for the manufacture of men's hats.

The former trappers became buffalo hunters. In 1833 alone the American Fur Company shipped 43,000 buffalo hides, mostly traded for from the Native Americans. Buffalo meat was also used for camp towns and for crews building railroads to the west. There was wanton wastefulness, with many buffalo being killed solely for their tongues, which were considered a delicacy. By the mid-1840s a noticeable decline in buffalo numbers was already evident.

The California Gold Rush of 1848 brought thousands of settlers westward, as did the Mormon migration to Salt Lake City. The population of the U.S. nearly doubled from 17 million to 32 million between 1840 and 1860. The Civil War, which ran from 1861 to 1865, slowed the Western expansion and market hunting, and also any thoughts of conservation. The war also reduced the country's population by 600,000, more than all of our other wars combined.

But the Homestead Laws of 1862 allowed anyone to mark out 160 acres of land for private ownership at no cost, if they would live on it for five years. This, of course, led to the final Indian Wars, as settlers crowded Native Americans out of their traditional hunting grounds and onto reservations in Oklahoma and the Dakotas.

The 1870s saw the final destruction of the bison herds. The influx of railroads made shipment of hides, meat, and tongues to the East economical. The famous "Buffalo Bill" Cody, a hunter for the railroad, once killed 69 bison in a single day, and 4,240 in an 18-month period. Other market hunters were actually more successful than he. The annual kill in 1865 was 1 million; by 1871 the count was 5 million a year. Most bison were taken just for their hides, with the rest of the carcass being left to rot. In 1864 Idaho imposed the first closed season on bison hunting, and Colorado and Kansas followed in 1875. However, in 1876, the annihilation of Gen. George Armstrong Custer and 276 soldiers of the 7th Cavalry at the Battle of the Little Big Horn outraged the public and sealed the

fate of both the Native Americans and the bison. Congress passed a bill that would have stopped the slaughter of the bison, but President Grant vetoed it. The Army knew that extermination of the bison would lead to control of the Native Americans. A complete census in 1886 reported that there were only 540 bison left in the entire United States, mostly in the Yellowstone area of Montana.

The disappearance of the bison became one of the rallying cries for those concerned about the future of wildlife in the United States. Another was the demise of the passenger pigeon. Today it is hard to imagine the abundance of this bird. In 1806, Alexander Wilson, an ornithologist for whom the Wilson Society is named,

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recorded a flight a mile wide and 40 miles along, estimated to be over 2 billion birds. In 1813, James Audubon, famous artist and ornithologist, observed in one day a flight 55 miles long which held an estimated 1 billion birds—and the flight continued two more days! Market hunters, using cannon-like "punt guns," nets, and even clubs slaughtered these flocks, as well as populations of ducks, swans, and geese for the meat market in America and Europe. The last passenger pigeon died in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914.

The early settlers had little time for sport hunting, and they viewed wildlife as a source of sustenance and profit. Naturalists' publications, such as the essay *Nature* by Ralph Waldo Emerson or the book *Walden* by

Henry David Thoreau had little impact until generations later. Nonetheless, the concept of wildlife as a "public trust" became codified in law. In 1842 the U.S. Supreme Court, in the case of *Martin v. Waddell*, denied a landowner's effort to exclude others from taking oysters from some mudflats in New Jersey. The judge quoted England's Magna Carta of 1215 and codified the concept that in the United States, wildlife and fish belong to all the people, and stewardship of those fauna is entrusted to the individual states. This guaranteed the food supply at the time, although it continued to apply as wildlife

became valued for sport, aesthetics, spiritual and cultural reasons. This is the basis for what we now call the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

It was not until the nation became more prosperous that sport hunters would become the impetus for conservation efforts. Landowners and businessmen, who no longer had to hunt for subsistence, formed clubs of like-minded friends to promote comradeship, a kinship with the pioneer spirit, and ethical hunting practices. The first sportsmen's club was the Carroll's Island Club, formed in 1832 near Baltimore, Maryland, largely for waterfowl hunting. In 1844 the New York Sportsmen's Club was formed, and it

drafted model game laws recommending closed hunting seasons on woodcock, quail, and deer as well as on trout fishing. These laws were passed by Orange and Rockland Counties in New York in 1848. Many of the club members were attorneys, and they personally sued violators to encourage compliance with the law. Eventually, hundreds of local sportsmen's clubs were formed across the country, and similar game laws were passed. In addition to game limits and seasons, some states outlawed use of dogs for hunting and hunting at night with lights, and others banned the use of traps, snares and pitfalls, which were common at the time. Maine was the first state to employ a game warden, in 1852.

During the 1870s much of North America was still being explored and surveyed. In 1870, a group of explorers pleaded with the governor of Montana that the Yellowstone area was too beautiful to be exploited for profit, and it should be held in trust for the entire American public. In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant established the first national park, Yellowstone, encompassing 3,348 square miles. The law had little effect, however, and the U.S. Army was dispatched to guard the park from “squatters” and poachers for a period of more than 10 years. The Yellowstone Park effort was aided by a young, affluent politician named Theodore Roosevelt.

Roosevelt was a 23-year-old Harvard graduate and member of the New York Legislature when he went on his first buffalo hunting trip in North Dakota in 1883. He had been sickly and weak as a child, and he developed his strength through weight lifting and boxing. He became an avid and adventurous outdoorsman and hunter while in North Dakota. The following year he lost his wife and mother a few hours apart in the same house, and returned to North Dakota for three years to reflect on his life and then to purchase and establish the Elkhorn Ranch. Roosevelt was a cowboy and a hunter who loved trophies

but who detested the decline of the buffalo.

Roosevelt the conservationist was born in the Dakota badlands during those years, and he was to become the most active president in the history of American conservation. In 1887 he gathered a group of

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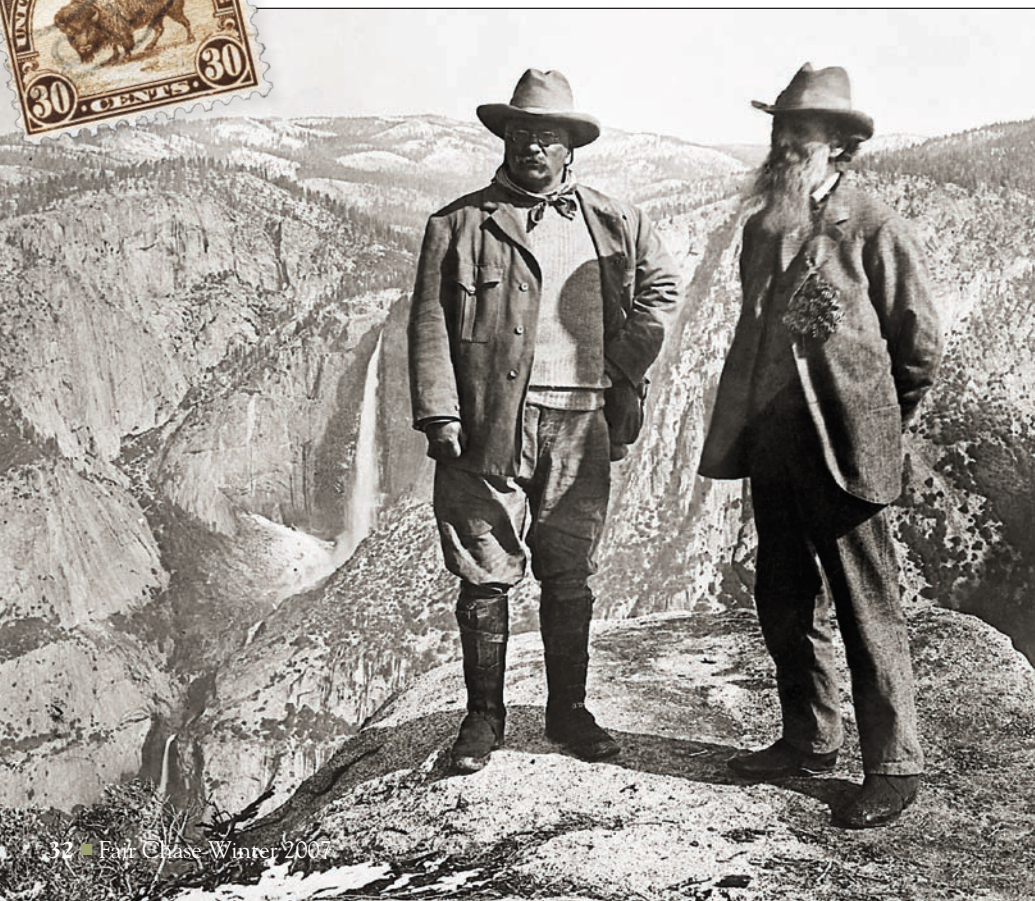
influential American hunters in New York to form the Boone and Crockett Club, whose mission was preserving big game in North America. One of the members, an outspoken editor named George Bird Grinnell, wrote numerous articles in his magazine, *Forest and Stream*, about the plight of Yellowstone. In 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed the Yellowstone Protection Act, thus protecting the park’s wildlife and guaranteeing funding and administration. Another early conservationist, John Muir, pushed for the establishment of Yosemite National Park and other parks in California. Muir was a “preservationist” who believed public lands should not be used for

timber harvesting or hunting. Roosevelt, the conservationist, believed public lands should be used for multiple purposes. Muir later formed the Sierra Club in 1892. The philosophical argument over “preservation,” or strictly limiting access of public lands, versus “conservation,” to include recreation, grazing, logging, and hunting on public lands, continues to this day in the United States.

One cannot understate the influence of the formation of sportsmen’s clubs, conservation organizations, scientific societies and the print media as part of the American conservation movement. Magazines such as the *American Sportsman* (1871), *Forest and Stream* (1873), *Field and Stream* (1874) and the *American Angler* (1881) informed readers of both the bounty and the plight of Western wildlife. Attitudes of the public changed, as they saw some species of wildlife disappear due to market hunting. They came to realize that natural resources in America were not unlimited, and that conservation efforts should be employed. The American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) in 1881 pressured the secretary of agriculture to form the Forestry Division, which was later to become the U.S. Forest Service. In 1891 the American Forestry Association and the AAAS convinced Congress to establish national forest reserves to secure the nation’s timber supply. By then the U.S. General Land Office and the U.S. Geological Survey had been formed to survey and keep track of federal lands.

Gifford Pinchot, another Boone and Crockett Club charter member, was named director of the Forestry Division. Pinchot was trained in Europe, as there were no forestry courses in American universities at that time, but he understood that forests could be both utilized for timber, wildlife and watershed, and conserved through “sustained yield” management. In fact, it was he and his staff that developed the word conservation, derived from the British word, “conservator.” He led a survey of American

Although the two represented different ends of the spectrum, Roosevelt and Muir met in May of 1903 at Yosemite National Park, California. After entering the park and seeing the magnificent splendor of the valley, Roosevelt asked Muir to show him the real Yosemite. Muir and Roosevelt set off largely by themselves and camped in the backcountry.



forests with the AAAS, and in 1896 President Grover Cleveland added more than 21 million acres to the forest reserves and established Grand Canyon and Mount Rainier as national parks. In 1904 Pinchot became the first director of the U.S. Forest Service, and became widely known as “the father of American forestry.”

During the 1870s and later, dozens of additional hunting, conservation, and scientific organizations were formed, many by Boone and Crockett Club members, including the League of American Sportsmen, the American Ornithologist’s Union, the Camp Fire Club, the New York Zoological Society, the Audubon Society, and the American Bison Society. These groups, along with local sportsmen’s clubs, lobbied for stricter laws to stop market hunting for meat and the millinery trade and to ban unethical sport hunting. They recognized that states had difficulty enforcing their game laws. In 1900 Congress passed the Lacey Game and Wild Birds Preservation and Disposition Act, the first national legislation for wildlife conservation — John Lacey, the author of the bill, was a Boone and Crockett Club member. This law made it a federal offense to transport wild game across state borders if the game was taken illegally. It also strictly controlled the importation of exotic species. This strengthened state game laws, and it helped stop the trade in plume and feathers as well as poaching and smuggling of wildlife meat products.

In addition, sportsmen’s clubs started wildlife restoration efforts. An interesting result was the importation into the U.S. of 28 ringneck pheasants, brought to Oregon in 1881 from Shanghai, China. Gamebird farms blossomed, raising birds in captivity and releasing them into the wild. Pheasant hunting became popular in much of the United States, and few Americans now recognize this bird as an exotic species.

Destructive logging techniques during that period actually led to better deer habitat as more diverse vegetation replaced the mature forests. In 1878 a sportsmen’s club in Vermont was the first to trap and restock deer. Other states followed.

In schools and universities, wildlife was not yet a scientific or management discipline of its own. In 1862, at the time of the Civil War, President Lincoln and Congress established the Land Grant agricultural and mechanical colleges. But most studies of wild biota were still of a taxonomic sort, found in botany and zoology programs. In 1898, Cornell University began offering courses in forestry, and in 1900 Yale University established the first School of Forestry. Within three years forestry schools opened at the

universities of Maine, Michigan, Minnesota, and Michigan State. These programs would eventually offer the first college courses in the science of wildlife management.

Thus, at the turn of the century, the American public’s view of wildlife, our timber supply, and our scenic treasures as unlimited had disappeared. We had codified into law the concept that these natural resources belonged to all of the people, and that access had to be regulated if these resources were to be conserved. Through their clubs and their media, hunters had begun to have a major impact on national

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conservation efforts. But there was much yet to be done. As our nation was fortunate to have intelligent men of goodwill when our Constitution was established, so too was the wildlife conservation movement fortunate to have an energetic new president named Theodore Roosevelt as we entered a new century. We’ll discuss that in part II of this article, which will run in the Spring 2008 issue of *Fair Chase*. ■

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