

# WE ARE FAIR CHASE

**In a speech to attendees at the 2001 SHOT (Shooting Hunting Outdoor Trade) Show, former Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson wrapped up his comments with a succinct reminder to everyone in the hunting and shooting sports industry that, “In politics you have a choice: take part, or get taken apart.”**

Two decades ago it, indeed, looked like the U.S. firearms industry was on the brink of being “taken apart.” Companies faced some two dozen municipal and state lawsuits that sought to hold manufacturers financially responsible for the criminal and accidental misuse of their lawfully sold, non-defective products. Stacked up against us was an array of powerful trial lawyers, anti-gun groups and activists along with a media that was generally quick to denounce firearms and the companies that made them.

It was time for the industry to get together and develop a unified plan of action. A critical first step was the creation of the Hunting and Shooting Sports Heritage Fund in December of 1998. The Heritage Fund was designed to support legal and legislative efforts and to

support communications and educational efforts. Within a year, more than 70 companies had signed on, and in the next several years membership more than doubled, generating millions of dollars in support of a coordinated legal defense and outreach efforts.

I bring up the Heritage Fund because I just finished reading Dan Pedrotti’s excellent article on the history of the formation of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP), which appears on page 34 of this issue. The AWCP and the Heritage Fund are of the same vintage—founded only a year apart—and one could easily substitute “public policy” instead of “politics” in Senator Simpson’s advice to well understand the impetus that brought the AWCP into being.

Long before the AWCP was formed, visionary leaders in the hunter-conservationist community clearly saw the threat posed by increasingly well-funded and aggressive anti-hunting organizations. To successfully meet this challenge head-on, the various species-oriented wildlife organizations needed to get together and form a united coalition. It was well understood that no one

organization in our community was big enough to take on this fight alone.

It took a while to get things sorted out, but in August of 2000, the Boone and Crockett Club organized a historic summit that spearheaded the creation of the AWCP that year. Initially a coalition of 35 wildlife organizations, the AWCP has grown today to include 50 member organizations that represent “the interests of America’s millions of hunter-conservationists, professional wildlife and resource managers, outdoor recreation users, conservation educators, and wildlife scientists.”

*Wildlife for the 21st Century: Volume V*, is the fifth in a series of recommendations from the AWCP developed to inform incoming administrations in Washington about “pressing issues facing wildlife conservation and our sporting heritage.” This series has become a key guidebook in helping to shape the future of science-based wildlife management and natural resource policy in the United States.

The Heritage Fund and the AWCP are great examples of groups that not only were successful in building coalitions, but that also harnessed



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the collective voice of their members to drive their respective missions forward.

None of us, of course, know exactly what challenges will lie ahead over the next 20 years. Whatever issues arise, however, will be viewed and debated by a population in our country that, on the whole, will be more urban, more “removed from the land,” as well as being less familiar with traditional outdoor pastimes and those who participate in them.

No doubt, we have our work cut out for us. As we continue to “take part,” to build and utilize our collective strength, we should also “take heed” that helping a changing America better understand the values we endorse may well be our greatest challenge of all.

Hope to see you down the trail. ■

In 2007, at its annual meeting, the National Shooting Sports Foundation (NSSF) Board of Governors decided that the industry’s government relations and legal initiatives should be supported by every member of the NSSF, rather than by the Hunting and Shooting Sports Heritage Fund (HSSH) participants only. As a result, the boards of NSSF and HSSH voted to dissolve HSSH as a separate company by merging it into NSSF and to make the Heritage Fund a program of NSSF whose activities are funded by all NSSF members through a portion of their membership dues.

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