

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER

Are We Alone in the Universe?



Tarla Rai Peterson
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club
Chair of Wildlife and
Conservation
Texas A&M

Which is the more shocking proposition: (a) Supporters of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model provide a solitary beacon of conservation in a world bent on destruction of wildlife habitat; or, (b) scores of effective conservationists who have

never heard of the North American Model? Although the first proposition provides great material for motivational speeches, it lacks substantiation. Further, this perspective discourages us from seeking alliances with other conservationists. And those alliances are crucial to our ability to influence the future of wildlife conservation policy.

The fact is, many approaches to conservation exist, and have existed, throughout the Earth's history. The North American Model is grounded in the public trust doctrine, a principle which governments across

the world have long relied on as authority for protecting and managing certain classes of natural resources for public benefit. The doctrine was already well-established by the time of Roman Emperor Justinian (482-565). His Institutes, which were a sort of legal textbook, held that air, rivers, the sea, and its shores were common to all people. Further, wildlife existed in a state of "natural liberty." These beings became the property of the hunter when captured. This approach to protecting natural resources for public benefit spread through Europe, into English Common Law, and thence into the legal traditions of many nations, including the United States.

Today, Nordic countries still rely on *Allemansrätten* (every man's right), or freedom to roam across both public and private land. This freedom, which has been widely practiced for hundreds of years, has gradually morphed from common practice to legal right and comes with an obligation to avoid damaging the landscape, including wildlife and crops. In practice, access rights today are most often limited to travel on foot. And

hunting and fishing rights are further constrained by laws that bear strong similarities to hunting regulations in the U.S. For example, the Swedish agency *Naturvårdsverket*, which is responsible for nature conservation, manages hunting in Sweden. To accomplish its conservation goals, it cooperates with hunting associations, landowner organizations, and other groups with an interest in conservation to determine seasons for various species, administer a hunting examination, and grant hunting permits.

There are multiple effective models of wildlife conservation, all of which evolved in response to particular needs. But, just as there are important differences between cultural and political contexts, so are there important similarities. *Naturvårdsverket* is currently embroiled in controversy over wolves. Some are angry with the agency's decision to open a wolf hunting season in response to research indicating the population has rebounded sufficiently to support a controlled hunt; others are angry with the agency's decision to translocate wolves from Finland to Sweden in response to research indicating the need for increased genetic diversity to maintain a wolf population that can handle sustained hunting. At the Nordic Symposium on Hunting and Society held in Uppsala, Sweden, in February 2010, I had an opportunity to talk with hunters, landowners, and agency personnel about learning opportunities associated with conflicts over wolf management in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Despite awareness of important differences, there was a strong sense that we are all in this together.

We are not alone in the universe. I take it as a positive sign that celebration of the North American Model at Boone and Crockett Club's 2009 meeting in Napa, California included critical voices. Indeed, some of the Club's leaders encouraged development of formal connections between Boone and Crockett Club and the International Council for Game and Wildlife Conservation headquartered in Hungary. Simultaneous confidence about what we have to offer, and curiosity about what potential allies can offer us, is essential as we seek to maintain and strengthen the position of hunting as an important conservation practice in modern society. ■

Native reindeer crossing a road in its natural environment in Scandinavia.