

B&C PROFESSORS' CORNER

Confronting Illegal Hunting to Improve Political Legitimacy



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One of the most profound sociological challenges of modern society is how to open public debate to the full spectrum of citizens without marginalizing the concerns, values, and hopes of any individuals or groups.

From the point of view

of public institutions, the problem is often redefined as a matter of maintaining democratic legitimacy.

In response to political pressure on their legitimacy, natural resource management authorities continually develop strategies to maintain and strengthen their ability to perform political roles. Natural resource managers in democracies throughout Europe and North America as well as in so-called “new” democracies are turning to community-based conservation processes to maximize their legitimacy. Over the past fifty years, the natural resource management sector has experienced severe pressure on its public legitimacy.

Conservation officers have increasingly incorporated communication strategies designed to allow community input. These communication efforts indicate an increased awareness that effective natural resources management necessarily includes the management of symbolic resources.

The rationale for focusing on communication is that, although it may temporarily escalate conflict, the inclusion of diverse interests will result in more

efficient policy implementation and greater public support over time. These advantages are expected to be achieved by leveraging existing social capital, with the resulting programs generating additional capital for continued improvement.

This sort of natural resource management requires localized knowledge; managers can better meet the needs of each setting by leveraging local expertise and site-specific social dynamics. Broadly characterized as decentralization, community-based conservation, collaborative planning, place-based, and resource-specific

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management, these management approaches have proliferated as means to achieve conservation objectives.

This modification in planning scale recognizes the importance of allying with local publics because natural resource problems are social problems embedded within local terminologies, histories of land use practices, past management relations, and local behavioral norms and values. As such, natural resource policy targets human behavior as well as natural resources.

Nowhere else has the problem of public legitimacy in natural resource management become more obvious than the political pressure on the legitimacy of hunting that we have seen increase during the last two decades. An especially thorny legitimacy problem swirls around the phenomenon of illegal hunting of large carnivores. Yet, the move to develop localized knowledge has not been incorporated into management of illegal hunting.

Illegal hunting covers a broad spectrum of diverse practices as well as a continuum of activities that conflict with existing rules and norms of society in general and with hunting regulations in particular. Despite denigration by law-abiding hunters and the cost of potential fines and/or loss of hunting privileges, illegal hunting, especially for large carnivores, persists.

To what extent illegal hunting is increasing or decreasing is difficult to conclude. One reason contemporary media focus on hunting may be that urbanization of society has led to changing norms and values that marginalize hunting—illegal hunting provides a sensation that helps sell media. Norms and values of hunters have also changed following the recruitment of new and more urbanized hunters. Altogether, the changes in the norms and values of society and the hunting community are likely to have contributed to an increased attention toward illegal hunting. Whether illegal hunting is increasing or decreasing, its occurrence is widely reported.

Although hunting once made a significant contribution to human nutrition, hunting in industrialized regions of the world has shifted over the past century from a life-supporting activity of rural communities to a leisure activity of increasingly urbanized populations. For this, and other reasons, the motivations for illegal hunting, especially in the United States and Western Europe, remain elusive.

The potential sensation produced by a story on poaching ensures that there is broad public and institutional awareness that illegal hunting occurs, but very little research has so far been done on illegal hunting as a localized, cultural, and social phenomenon. A more carefully structured understanding of the drivers behind this practice is required in order for hunting to continue as a central component of wildlife management.

Historically, illegal hunting has been a problem associated with legitimacy. Numerous historical descriptions and popular legends chronicle political conflicts associated with illegal hunting. The accounts differ, according to who is describing the phenomenon and how contemporary society views the practice of hunting.

Authorities and property owners typically label illegal hunting as poaching,



stigmatizing individuals practicing illegal hunting as violators of the public safety, property rights, and other norms of social order. Hunting clubs and other associations also decry illegal hunting, and expressly call upon their members to report any illegal activities they may observe. Concerns about the acceptance of hunting as a leisure activity in modern society may relate to how the hunting community as a whole deals with illegal hunting.

Another historical perspective on illegal hunting, popularized in the Robin Hood tales, describes illegal hunting as a struggle against social injustice. Contemporary conservation officers have been understandably hesitant to explore social justice issues related to hunting. However, this avoidance may come at a cost.

Natural resource managers need to understand the cultural character of the practice. Illegal hunting should be understood within its social and cultural contexts, rather than limiting our approach to stigmatizing the phenomenon and those who engage in it. Rather than simply scapegoating those who engage in the practice, wildlife managers can achieve increased effectiveness by responding to illegal hunting as a social phenomenon constituted and reproduced within particular demographic and cultural frames.

Media reports on illegal hunting portray illegal hunting activities as violent law-breaking acts. They rarely consider that law-breaking activities practiced by individual or by groups are produced and reproduced within a social context. The driving forces behind law-breaking activities that do not result in economic benefit to law breakers tend to be associated with hostility toward central authorities and feelings of exclusion or marginalization from society. When any public policy fails to account for the perspectives of the people most directly influenced by the policy, political legitimacy suffers. Perhaps existing natural resources policy, including hunting regulations, fails to account for the social needs of hunters and other conservationists.

This argument is not meant to condone illegal hunting or any other law-breaking activity.

We need wildlife managers and other law enforcement authorities to fulfill their responsibilities. Rather, I'm arguing that

understanding the motivations for illegal hunting in modern society may provide guidance toward more effective conservation through development and implementation of wildlife policy that is more sensitive to contemporary social and political needs.

Natural resource managers rely on hunting as a fundamental conservation tool, but this tool is endangered by the persistence of illegal hunting. It would behoove managers and conservationists to gain a more complete understanding of the driving factors behind

illegal hunting. Potential benefits of that understanding are direct, as in minimizing the loss of animals and negative publicity due to illegal hunting. Even greater indirect benefits are possible, as this understanding may suggest alternative wildlife management policies that contribute to the political legitimacy of natural resource management in general. ■



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