FROM THE CENTER

The Future of Hunting

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I have been invited to address several groups on the future of hunting. As a result, I have spent significant time contemplating the subject.

Somehow, it seems more appropriate to ask "does hunting have a future in the United States?" While the answer is a most definite "yes" - at least for the foreseeable future, let us consult a somewhat foggy crystal ball and ponder the circumstances within which hunting will occur.

In my mind, the most critical aspect of the future of hunting is the availability and quality of habitat to support wildlife - and hunting. Diminished habitat equals less wildlife and declining hunting opportunities. Then, the existence of habitat must be coupled with the capability of hunters to access that habitat.

About one-third of our nation's lands are in public ownership — mostly in the West. The other two-thirds, and most of the prime lands for wildlife, are in private ownership. Where public and private lands are juxtaposed there are apt to be interactions as wildlife crosses boundaries on a seasonal basis. An example is the migratory big game herds in mountainous areas where the animals summer in the high lands in public ownership and winter on the lower elevation private lands.

Much of this private land is being lost as wildlife and hunting is being converted into smaller and smaller parcels of habitat, at an increasing rate, as the human population builds and affluence increases. And, many of these new habitat owners are either indifferent or opposed to hunting. This is a trend that will continue. This trend is accelerated when private landowners see no incentive to cultivate, or even tolerate, neither the presence of game nor hunting.

On a national basis, the image of hunting and hunters is under assault in the press, motion pictures, and television. Unfortunately, there are those (I would not call them hunters) that serve as prime examples of all who can be unsavory about hunting. As a mentor of mine told me years ago, "Remember it only takes one disgusting act by a slob to cancel out the gentlemanly behavior of a thousand ethical hunters." Unfortunately, the manifest sins of the few can paint the image of the hunter in the public's mind. That will become more true as the body politic becomes increasingly composed of people who have never hunted - and never will. In the end, we who hunt are responsible for our own image. We are well advised to be zealous in that responsibility. Yet, otherwise responsible hunters often turn a blind eye to the sins of irresponsible hunters - and, thereby, share in that irresponsibility. If we, who care the most about all that hunting has been and can be, shirk responsibility to maintain an appropriate, socially acceptable image of hunters and hunting we deserve the consequences. Appropriate image creation and maintenance will not be easy.

It takes nerve to report illegal hunter behavior and stand ready to testify against transgressors. It is much easier to look the other way. But, in doing so, not only are personal hunting ethics diminished. Overall ethical standards of the hunting fraternity are likewise eroded.

But, there is most excellent news. The great phenomena of the past two decades related to hunting has been the dramatic rise of national groups focused around interests in the welfare and hunting of individual game species. These groups include the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Wild Turkey Federation, Ducks Unlimited, Quail Unlimited, the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, the Ruffed Grouse Society and others. They have shown their mettle in volunteer work and in raising hundreds of millions of dollars for good works in the wildlife management arena. Coupled with the old line conservation groups such as the Boone and Crockett Club, the Issac Walton League, the Wildlife Management Institute, and others, they are, in my mind, the heroes of American conservation in the last quarter of the 20th century. They are the leaders that are in place as the 21st century begins.

Hunting involves the use of weapons - predominately firearms. Clearly, there is an increasing debate in the body politic over the appropriate ownership and use of firearms. Hunting, and the image of hunting, are bound up in that exacerbating debate. Hunters emphasize the solemn responsibilities and obligations involved in the possession and use of sporting weapons and zealously protect the "rights" of possession and use. Every hunter should take responsibility for insuring marksmanship, gun and hunter safety, and firearm security for themselves, their families, and their fellows.

Part of that image is what we in the Boone & Crockett Club have long referred to as the application of fair chase in hunting. Stripped of the fancy words and phrases, "Fair Chase" insists that there is some level of "fairness" owed to the pursued by the pursuer. A significant portion of the public, which is more and more composed of those who are not hunters, are sensitive to this issue of fairness.

When a significant part of the public perceive (rightly or wrongly) what they consider gross unfairness in a hunting practice they are increasingly prone to react. As an example, they are, when unable to attain redress of their grievances from State Fish and Wildlife Commissions, apt to speak out via referenda in States where such is

allowed. Note the several successful referenda opposing shooting bears over bait or running mountain lions with dogs.

I do not argue whether these hunting practices are right or wrong — ethically or technically. Yet, these practices were perceived by the general public as unfair - and they overrode the wishes, and long established traditions of hunters and the fish and game departments to right a perceived wrong. There is a lesson to be learned from these rumblings. In a democracy, hunting will be carried out at the sufferance of the people. And, debates are won by the majority of the minority that cares about a particular issue.

I marvel at the changes in the "technology" of hunting that has taken place over the 55 years that I have been a hunter. And, every single "advancement" has been aimed at making hunters more effective and efficient, i.e., to tilt the odds ever more in the hunter's favor. Even the skills and techniques that were once passed from older experienced hunters to neophytes, or learned from personal experience, are available on video tapes or in formal seminars.

At what point does the hunt become so much a technical exercise that the magic age-old contest between the hunter and the hunted becomes a parody?

Perhaps we, as hunters, are approaching a defining moment when we must say, collectively, "hold enough." I feel certain that, if hunters do not take some concept of fairness to heart and hold it high as a standard of behavior, such standards will be imposed by non-hunters. When such occurs, it is a sad day.

These matters of "fair chase" are neither technical nor scientific questions. Therefore, they are not questions that hunters can push off on professional wildlife management experts for solution. These are questions of the heart and soul and tradition and should be so debated. This is a crucial debate for hunters in the evolving circumstances of the 21st century. And, in my opinion, in the outcome of that debate, lies both the worthiness and the likelihood of the survival of hunting.

Those of us who hunt should recognize that the maintenance of wildlife habitat and the requisite game and hunting management will increase in costs as competition for other land uses increases. It will be impossible to ignore that, if hunting is to be maintained for a very distinct minority of the population, there must be incentives for landowners to provide habitat and accommodate hunters.

This particular debate, already a hot issue, will intensify. The code word that describes the issue seems to be "commercialization." The debate is, unfortunately, being formulated around a pejorative term. Some would prefer "incentives for landowners to maintain habitat for both wildlife and hunters." The problem has roots in the legal circumstance where the State (i.e., the people) owns the wildlife and the landowner controls access, and the circumstances of that access, for hunters to that wildlife. Further, the landowner controls, to a significant degree, habitat conditions.

Thus, there is an "iron triangle" involved and all three legs must be strong if wildlife and hunting are to be maintained. The hunter wants to see wildlife thrive and to be able to hunt. The landowner wants to see wildlife thrive and accommodate hunters to the extent that such is socially acceptable and economically feasible. The wildlife agencies' role is to assure viable wildlife populations, maintain wildlife and hunting habitat, and provide equitable hunting opportunities — which must be primarily accomplished through landowners. The debates are over just how that will be accomplished.

Each of the three parties have assets that forge the triangle. Hunters provide the money that supports the agencies and directly or indirectly provides whatever compensation landowners receive. And, they have political power. Landowners control habitat for wildlife and hunting and access to that habitat for hunters. And, they have political power. Agencies encourage creation and maintenance of habitat and facilitate hunting by regulating the hunting process and regulating harvests. And, they have political power. These three legs of the triangle must be forged together — or the triangle loses its inherent strength.

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The degree to which hunting exists will depend on the sturdiness of this triangle. There will be other issues involved, but the key one is how landowners are stimulated to maintain their arm of the triangle. And, this is where the crucial debate of the next several decades will focus. In some areas of the west, these problems are taking on aspects of "class warfare" pitting the welfare and "rights" of the landholding class against the wishes and "rights" of landless hunters.

This conflict has reverberated in western cultures since the middle ages and will not cease to be a source of contention. But, adequate compensation of landowners and simultaneous consideration of the "rights" of hunters must be worked out. Likely, a "one size fits all ap-

proach" will not be adequate. But, it is critical that these issues be resolved in some spirit of compromise as much of the future of hunters and their prey depends on solutions.

The one-third of the Nation's land that is public ownership provides a resource for hunters like none other in the world. But, even that resource should not be taken for granted. These were once the lands that nobody wanted. Now, they seem to be the lands that everybody wants. The past two-year period has been marked by attempts, beaten back on several fronts, to use these lands as trading stock in political deals or to transfer control outright to other ownership or management. The folks that want those lands will not give up. They will be back — again and again and again. Hunters should be in the forefront of those who resist the raids on these public hunting grounds.

But, at the same time, it appears inevitable (and probably desirable) that hunters will be asked to pay a greater share for the management and maintenance of these lands. For example, shifts in management of the National Forests, have lead to greater emphasis on recreation - of which hunting is a major component. This has occurred simultaneously with a decline in emphasis on timber harvesting, livestock grazing, and mineral extraction. That, coupled with a changing national attitude toward "user pay concepts" of public land use, will produce a situation where recreationists — and, most specifically, hunters and fishers — will be expected to pay for the costs associated with their activities. It is likely that these fees will be nominal and dedicated to use in the area where collected. There are advantages to paying such fees considering the effect of the "golden rule" - "he who has the gold rules." In other words, the influence of any interest group in competing for resource allocation is strengthened by a positive economic assessment.

As we enter the 21st century, it is well to contemplate how far we have come in restoring wildlife and hunting opportunities over the course of the 20th century. The outlook for hunting in the United States from the vantage point of the year 1898 was grim indeed. Certainly, there was not even the most optimistic of American hunters who would have predicted the situation that exists today for wildlife and hunting that exists across most of the United States one hundred years later. What exists today in terms of wildlife and hunting is so because hunters wished it so and made the efforts and sacrifices to make it so.

While it is inevitable over the next century that we will see erosion in wildlife habitat and hunting in many areas, it is possible that we can see much improvement in other areas. Certainly, there are threats to wildlife, and to hunting. And, just as certainly, there are obligations and significant opportunities for us to do as well by our sons and daughters who love wildlife and the hunt as our forefathers did by us. This is not a time for fear nor trepidation. It is a time to be appreciated for what it is and to be grasped accordingly.

As hunters, as the keepers of the trust, it is we who can control - to some great extent - the future of wildlife and hunting. Such is a solemn obligation. But, even more, it is a glorious opportunity to be embraced with fervor and hope and spirit. Our hunter forefathers, facing much greater odds, did not fail us. We will not fail ourselves or those who will come after us. We will not fail — but success will not come easy. ▲▲▲