

CULTURAL TRESPASS: HUNTING

There are few topics about which I feel simultaneously so enthralled and so vexed as hunting and conservation.

On one hand, we have an increasingly urban general population who could not find their way out of most forests and who seem to expect nature to be Disneyland, where the animals only die of old age or fairy dust. But, this is also a population inclined to be concerned about climate change and biodiversity, even as they romanticize the animal world. Their donations, however, tend to go to environmental advocacy groups; their money simply doesn't support the work of public wildlife and fishing agencies.

On the other hand, there is the increasingly small number of hunters among us. About six percent of the American people now hunt, as opposed to approximately 25 percent at the end of World War II. As hunting is also an activity largely passed down from parents to children, one generally needs to have

woods, fields, and fens in the immediate vicinity to learn it, so, it is generally rural Americans who participate. Our rural populations are often largely conservative—the natural constituency of the Republican Party.

Thanks to a host of provocations, rural people are also inclined to see climate-change-supporting environmentalists as gun-haters, liberals, and the enemy. They may also see our land agencies as the enemy. The cultural divide these days brooks no trespassers.

And while the fees that they pay to hunt and fish do fund our wildlife agencies, this funding is diminishing rapidly. What was once two percent of the national budget for conservation is now one percent. Yet we need conservation and good resource management more than ever.

Let me also make this assertion, which you may find startling: The climate-change-denying hunters—as opposed to benighted souls who ask forest rangers “when do you let the animals out?”—are, for me, far and away more

vital to the project of conservation.

As with Aldo Leopold, I believe strongly that conservation must rely on those people who understand the resource, at least in their own back-40—the farmers and ranchers, those who hunt and fish; those for whom nature is part of the fabric of their own selves and, for lack of a better word, their soul.

True. There are hunters who don't know what they don't know. Also true, that there are hunters who don't understand how much they do know and who may even resist their own skills of observation.

Hunters are unused to verbalizing their own stories, to seeing the field and stream in words that convey to the public what is essential in hunting—intimacy with what is wild. Not intimacy of the cuddly cooing sort, but intimacy with nature and wildness on its own terms. As the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote: “One does not hunt in order to kill; on the contrary, one kills in order to have hunted.” Telling those stories, following where a hunter's



Theodore Roosevelt IV (center) and Chris Saunders, Vermont Project Coordinator pose with look-alike Teddy Roosevelt impersonator Joe Wiegand, who portrayed a realistic rendition of our former beloved president throughout the course of the convention.

CONDENSED VERSION OF A SPEECH GIVEN AT THE INTERNATIONAL HUNTER EDUCATION ASSOCIATION CONFERENCE MAY 24, 2016

observation and experience leads, could be an enormous aid in bridging worlds.

Last year, I was pulled into a significant wildlife controversy: Cecil the Lion in Zimbabwe, ruled today by one of the world's most simultaneously preening and brutal dictators.

But the American public was totally oblivious to the difficult struggle to save wildlife in a country whose people are suffering still from starvation, homelessness, HIV, and the terror of a brutal dictator. Mindlessly, suburban America collectively engaged in one of the most truly counterproductive and ridiculous campaigns, offensive to many on the African continent, and detrimental to the cause that animal rights activists supposedly champion—the well-being of wildlife.

Before we knew it, PETA was calling for the dentist to be hanged (yes, hanged), and social media was filled with pictures of Cecil and sentiments like: “Your spirit will always be with us Cecil!” He was a lion, not Gandhi. Rural Africans often live in great fear of lions. This struck them as sheer insanity and offensive.

I have hunted in Africa and have several friends who are big game hunters and conservationists. I was once stationed in Africa when I served in the State Department. So, the calls came in.

Many were furious and talked about what they saw as an essentially racist stance

being taken by mostly white, middle-class, suburban Americans, largely ignorant of what Africans were up against.

As someone said to me: “What is it? Poor black people are too stupid, too greedy, too ignorant to protect our resources? Do the people in your country understand that African countries are sovereign nations, that we make our own game laws, that we voluntarily do so under the auspices of CITES (Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora)?” Now, I will grant you that in countries like Zimbabwe, there will always be questions.

So, I was asked again and again to raise my voice. I pissed and moaned. No one in that atmosphere wants to champion . . . trophy hunting. I braced for the hate mail and published an op-ed—a piece of paper thrown into the whirlwind.

There were several things that were instructive to me in the reactions, good and bad—mostly bad—to the piece. I'll list three of these:

1) Visceral reactions, which are based on cultural biases, are difficult to counter. Raising up arguments that include, for instance, the survival of lions in Africa as a species, produce



Theodore Roosevelt IV addressing the crowd at the International Hunter Education Association Conference in Vermont.

enormous cognitive dissonance and resistance in those who are defending what seems naturally abhorrent to them.

- 2) There is just a staggering amount of ignorance with regard to hunting in particular, but resource management more broadly.
- 3) Hunters have done a remarkably poor job as the champions of their own culture and of a vigorous, integrated relationship with the wild.

On the first and second points, I was absolutely stunned by the cognitive dissonance produced when you say hunting saves animals. They reply: “How can killing an animal save it?”

No species in modern times has been driven to extinction by sport hunting, and with an unsustainable population growth rate of 10 percent for most species in Africa, hunting reduces that number by just two percent. When I pointed this out,

someone said to me: “Well, then there are too many Africans. We have to look at population control.” I asked: “Tell me, which Africans should we get rid of?”

The entire lack of knowledge was staggering to me, as well as the bias that accompanied it. For many Africans, hunting is a valued tradition, even aside from its economic and conservation benefits. And, of course, all of us understand the toll that poaching takes on species. Trophy hunting funds anti-poaching patrols; it also brings people into areas that eco-tourists don't want to go. Additionally, when animals such as lions and elephants come into conflict with local farmers and ranchers—with no compensation for that conflict—they are often poisoned or caught in snares or killed with low-caliber weapons. More suffering, not less.

This is when we all take a collective breath, and a look back at history in order

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ASKS THAT YOU
PLEASE THANK OUR
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to also address my third point that hunters are doing a bad job of telling their story and talking about their culture—partly because we don't understand that we have a story and a culture. And it is of value to conservation!

When the founders of the Boone and Crockett Club held meetings, the world started to change. Grizzlies, elk, buffalo, and pronghorn were then all on the verge of extinction, and America's hunters fought game laws then as they might fight gun laws today. Game limits and hunting seasons were considered the oppression of the poor by the rich because this was the legacy of European aristocracy. We had left that behind us. As one writer, Daniel Justin Herman, calls it, "Americans had created what could be called a hunting democracy."

There was an uncomfortable divide between what some considered the elitism of the professional managerial class and the robust claims on autonomy of a frontier people. It was breached by men like Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell, because they also had an affiliation for people.

Grinnell had far more experience than TR in wilderness hunting when they met. He had ranged over much of the West. He was even invited by the Pawnee Indians to participate in a bison hunt from horseback with bow and arrow. He accepted! As I am sure you realize, this means riding at flank speed with bison, participating in a hunting event with what may have been the world's greatest light cavalry,

the plains Indians.

Boone and Crockett Club was established by a group of men who were tough, who had done it all, who had tramped everywhere, camped out in some of the harshest conditions imaginable, and knew the comradery of the hunt. They knew guns; they knew courage; they knew untrammelled places. They did not give up easily. In fact, I would venture to say that they did not give up at all.

In the Club's heyday, these men shaped opinions, established hunting ethics and the code of fair chase, helped pass game laws, formulated and achieved conservation goals. But they weren't just ensuring the future of a sport; they were ensuring the future of a culture, a way of life that was contact with life itself—the health and vigor of the nation's wildlife, lands, and water.

One of the concerns that the Club rightfully identified was the future of large, open tracts of public lands and the key role they play in conservation and the future of hunting. Today, we have a new problem: we are losing 330 family farms a week. As most of you undoubtedly know, 60 percent of threatened species habitat is found on private lands, our working farms, ranches, and timberlands.

However, you may not know the following about America's rangelands: That 100 million acres of prime private home range lands, key to fisheries health and biodiversity abundance, are tied to federal grazing leases and likely to be sold if the leases

are lost. You may not know that scientific studies comparing biodiversity on ranches, wildlife refuges, and subdivisions found that ranches match the species counts of wildlife refuges.

We have common cause with rural Americans, and this is something that may be lost on us. The only way that rural communities will feel that they can be on the side of conservationists is for us to begin to stand firmly on their side.

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Today, we face a host of challenges that are harder to see than those of the 19th century. There aren't mounds of bleaching bison bones acting as wind breaks for settlers; instead, there is habitat fragmentation, the introduction of exotic species, the suppression of fire, pressures on water resources from population growth and sprawl. And, this says nothing of climate change.

We have been—and can be again—the warriors of change, but we must know our story. We must know what we love; we must know who we are. We are those who stand astride worlds that seem far apart and we tell them that unifying, human story of which we are such an integral part. We speak for nature because we know it so well and love it so much. ■