

The CHALLENGE of NORTH AMERICAN CONSERVATION *TODAY*

Frights and opportunities in conservation today are well known to Club members, our closest partners, and the entire conservation community. Club members have, are, and should engage head-on. As before, it is time again for the Club to review the challenges, their moving parts, and our avenues through them.

Among the biggest challenges: hunters are now a minority in conservation; environmentalism has blurred its meaning; wolves and grizzly bears have changed ecosystems and distorted agency roles; and the horror of gun crimes threatens legitimate gun use.

Club members need some of our old magic and some new. Our founders inspired people to assemble a conservation movement. We must inspire and steer an existing movement. In 2000, a rallying speech by Jack Ward Thomas to our closest allies led to the formation of the American Wildlife Conservation Partnership (AWCP). He said, “We believe in magic!” and the magic worked. Today, forming a larger, more powerful coalition among allies will take bigger magic.

The agenda that we and our AWCP partners call “Wildlife for the 21st Century,” refined and executed over 23 years, is a solid reference for what must be done.

Other guideposts—all inspired and delivered by Club members—also inform us: The White House Conference on Hunting Heritage and Wildlife Conservation in 2008; the 2001 paper, “The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation” (Geist, Mahoney, Organ); the 1973 paper, “Report of the Committee on North American Wildlife Policy” (Allen); and the 1930 paper, “Report to the American Game Conference on an American Game Policy” (Leopold).

But we must face forward. We must complete the progression from “game” to “wildlife policy” to “wildlife conservation” and now to all conservation.



Read more about
AWCP

Jack Ward Thomas took on many challenges in his lifetime. Here he is in 1995 at the head of the Minam River in the Wallowa-Whitman National Forest, Oregon.



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THE CHALLENGES TODAY

We no longer own conservation, the meaning of the word has blurred, and the part that remains “ours” is struggling to grow and maintain its renown.

Hunting and hunters are no longer the biggest or most effective drivers of conservation. Conservation is confused with environmentalism. Accusers of state wildlife managers and commissions see them as captured by hunters and unwilling or unable to care for non-game species.

The size of conservation could be the success of Theodore Roosevelt’s 1908 speech “Conservation as a National Duty,” but it doesn’t feel that way. The first conservationists defined it with wildlife, forests, grazing, water supply, and mining. Environmentalists later activated the issues of wilderness, air quality, water quality, and chemicals. The broader agenda made sense and improved the country, but the new methods, politics, and philosophies have divided the movement.

Appearing different, environmentalism is only a different part of conservation. What sort of different determines how the divide is resolved. A competitor must be defeated, but dissension must be reconciled.

We face dissension. The present challenge to state wildlife management and its leadership is a difference of means within a consensus that state agencies should do more. Many, including the Club, are expanding state management beyond game species through the Recovering America’s Wildlife Act. Some oppose adding wolves and grizzly bears by releasing them from the Endangered Species Act.

We cannot meet these challenges—gun crime among them—with our history alone. We need new methods, respect for views and culture, and trust.

THE FUNDAMENTALS

Key obstacles to conservation progress are conflict, the rule of law, and funding.

Conflict

Democracy—the most reliable means of resolving conflicts—operates at a far reach from most conservation conflicts. After public comment is considered on a proposal, agencies evaluate options, predict outcomes, and debunk opinions posing as science. Then the agency decides. The only recourse is the details of process or consistency with law. There is no place for direct debate over preferences among legitimate options.

For decisions of little or no controversy, this is fine. Agency choices are accountable to the public distantly through the election of a president and the consent of Congress in appointees or their supervisors. State wildlife agencies are governed more directly, but still by reaching through a governor’s appointment of commissioners and sometimes the agency director.

Motivated people often seek direct consideration of collaborative recommendations on more controversial decisions. Agencies see clearer preferences, and courts can better identify litigants with personal, not public, complaints.

Collaboration better informs the agencies and the courts. More people would deliberate and resolve more conflicts if that consideration were required.

Rule of Law

Conservation policy prohibits harmful activities and permits others only after painstaking precautions. These policies emerged after the early decades of restoring game species, which were also the days of eliminating predators without restraint and grazing and timbering without regulation.

Active management and restoration are scrutinized as closely as riskier activities. The law directs more attention to predicting outcomes and minimizing consequences than to learning from actual outcomes and results.

Wind and solar energy have recently shifted these politics. Proponents of wind and solar have encountered the obstacles laid previously to slow forestry, grazing, irrigating, and road building.

We should rebalance the risks of consequences against those of inaction for the benefit of habitat restoration.

Funding

Active care and protection are funded mainly by public spending and philanthropy, while the use of

resources is funded more generously with private capital. We must attract more private capital to active care and protection.

We already know this. We have successfully connected the market for guns and ammunition to the active care and protection of wildlife through the Pittman-Robertson program.

More recently, a market in wetland mitigation began attracting billions in private investment into the restoration of wetlands. Currently, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is establishing a wildlife mitigation market to do likewise. These regulatory markets pay landowners to produce habitat.

We must build on and refine these innovations. Fee access for hunting and fishing helps pay for quality habitat, and carbon trading could make forest and range management pay. Both have flaws and yet each yields more money for conservation.



WHAT IT WILL TAKE

We must join the bigger arena with other conservationists. The ambition of Club members to engage in issues gets us there, but we cannot expect to be there forever because of what we've done before.

Leading With Why We Care

The conservation community—and the whole society—needs to know why we care. It's ultimately the same reason driving other conservationists and what society demands, but that doesn't matter unless they know.

Our focus on game species obscures our passion for a vast, diverse, and thriving natural world. This passion may be stronger or weaker from one hunter to another, but as organizations, we cover every game species and habitat type, which makes us vital to the entire conservation community.

This is more important than our money. We fund a lot of conservation, and this benefits more than just game. Yet there is a lot more money in conservation than ours. And though our funding proves we care, it does not say enough about what we care about.

We were more visionary in the early years. The National Collection of Heads and Horns inspired Americans with conservation. Fittingly, the Collection now resides at the Wonders of Wildlife Museum in Springfield, Missouri, in the largest single place in the country where visitors can see the same dream.

We can learn from environmentalists, who are generally very good at leading with "why."

An environmentalist partner of ours—the Pew Charitable Trusts—is more visionary than us on an issue we agree on: big game migration habitat. They say migration "sustains species, ecosystems, and economies," including the hunting economy. People need to hear about ecosystems from us too. Big game moving through an ecosystem provides the protein that sustains it.

A closer partner of ours, Safari Club International Foundation (SCIF), puts the "why" forward on grizzly bear conflicts in our neighborhood at the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial Ranch. SCIF members say they are preventing the heartbreak of losing grizzlies from wild country. That's the "why." Everything else is "how."

Entering the Arena

We do not agree with even our closest partners on everything. We won't agree with many other conservationists.

But differences are less of a problem than distance. Face to face, we can negotiate, agree where possible, and contend where necessary. Separately, we miss opportunities.

It was hard even in the small American Wildlife Conservation Partnership community to start working jointly. It will be harder for the far larger community to do it.

But we may not be trying hard enough. More than assembling other groups, we should engage the foundations and big donors whose objectives are better achieved by teamwork than scattered efforts.

Standing By Guns With Honor

Gun crime is a horrific blight on society and a looming risk for our association with guns. But as champions of ethics, we have a way to stand, advance our reputation, and help find solutions.

Our Fair Chase ethic secures hunting by affirming respect for law and "honor." Honor appears in several tenets of Fair Chase. There is honor in respecting local customs and behavior that reflects favorably on us as hunters, wildlife, and the environment. Honor is not required by law but by credibility.

We need the same benefit of honor in using, supporting, and promoting guns. They are valuable to us for many reasons that pale when guns become the symbols of vengeance and power that movies, video games, and some gun advertising make them.

Guns will remain tools of conservation and fun hobbies if we always use and talk about them that way. On a hunt or range or in a magazine, we model safety, marvel at technology, and promote conservation. But like a high-performance car in traffic, we have something that must be kept within limits to keep our credibility.

CONCLUSION

The challenge of conservation today is the purpose of the Club, the shared responsibility of our closest partners and all conservationists. There is always a way forward if we read the landscape, maneuver accordingly, and bring what it takes to complete the mission. ■



Read more about the National Collection of Heads and Horns.