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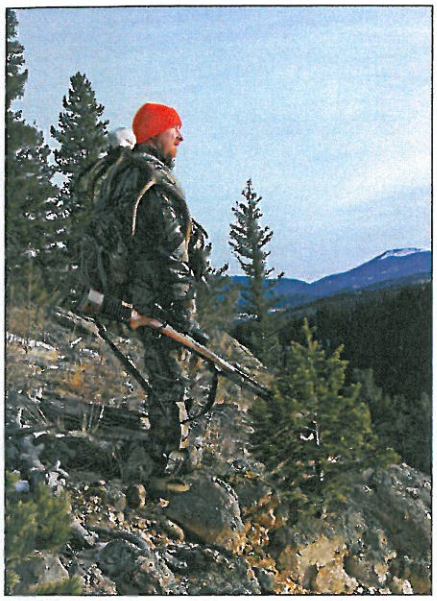
A QUESTION OF COMMITMENT

There's an important question every hunter must answer: Are you really a conservationist?



VIC SCHENDEL

A true hunter accepts a lifelong commitment to working for the best interests of wild creatures and the places they roam.

In the mid-1990s during an address delivered to a major hunting audience, I recommended we bring into common usage the practice of referring to ourselves as "hunter-conservationists." I thought that doing so would help establish in the minds of both hunters and the general public the notion that hunting was so tightly engaged with the issue of wildlife conservation that it was impractical to speak of one without the other. By constantly pointing to this relationship, I also hoped that as hunters we would come to emphasize the conservation side of our movement, even more than the hunting side. I fervently believed then, as I do now, that it is the conservation of wildlife that matters most.

Some fifteen years later and more than a hundred years after the rise of the conservation movement in North America, perhaps we need to reflect on whether this term really does apply to us, as individuals and as a collective. For while it does seem that the term "hunter-conservationist" is being used with considerable frequency in our public events and written communications, I remain convinced that talk is cheap. And while I can certainly point to strong evidence of the great conservation work some hunters and some hunting-based organizations do, I often wonder if the reference to conservation is merely a convenient argument for many hunters and that deep down they are mostly concerned with their opportunity to hunt, rather than with the fate of wildlife.

Some might argue that this is how it should be, pointing out that without hunting there would be no wildlife because hunters pay for conservation and without hunters' support, wildlife would simply wither and disappear, right? Well, that is true to an extent, but perhaps not to the extent that hunters might like to think. First of all, in the larger scheme of things, much public money is also invested in wildlife conservation, both in the USA and in Canada. Certainly, the excise taxes paid on such things as hunting permits, arms and ammunition, and boating supplies put enormous amounts of money into conservation programs, at the state level certainly, and at the provincial level in some cases. However, there are a great many programs and significant human resources devoted to national parks and wilderness areas, wildlife refuges, and many other institutions of the national governments of both countries that are largely, if not entirely, supported by public dollars.

Furthermore, even the great Pittman-Robertson Fund that has for so long helped support wildlife in the USA derives a considerable amount of its tax revenue from firearm purchases by individuals who are not in any way associated with hunting. Thus, while hunters may rightfully refer to the considerable funds they help derive for conservation, we simply cannot continue to suggest that we pay all that freight. It is just not true. By overstating our case, we undermine our position, and that, I would argue, has a very real cost for hunting.

But this question of who pays is not the main point for consideration. Even if all the money for wildlife conservation came from taxes on hunting equipment exclusively, would this necessarily mean that all hunters are dedicated to conservation? Or might it simply be that most hunters don't even think about this when they purchase their hunting rifles? They simply pay a tax, and that's that. Indeed, let us ask another telling question. What percentage of hunters even knows that the taxes they pay go, in part, to support wildlife conservation? It is probably not nearly as high as we would like to think and lower than we would like to know. In my view, paying a tax established in 1937

About DSC

An independent organization since 1982, DSC has become an international leader in conserving wildlife and wilderness lands, educating youth and the general public, and promoting and protecting the rights and interests of hunters worldwide. Get involved at www.biggame.org.

on a rifle or ammunition today does not make anyone a conservationist, regardless of whether they hunt or not.

So what does make somebody a conservationist and how would you know one if you met one? Now, there's a question worth pondering. Be forewarned: Pursuing it may prove an uncomfortable exercise and open up a landscape of difficult personal challenges. Still, if we want to be known as conservationists, shouldn't we be able to articulate what we mean by the term? What if, as hunters, we are ever asked? What will we say? What would you, as a hunter or outdoorsman, say?

Will we respond that the term refers to someone who pays an excise tax or books a safari in Africa? Would we include individuals who shoot retired circus animals in tiny enclosures or who use living creatures (think gophers and prairie dogs) for target practice? Would we include young people who before their late teens have shot dozens of species about which they know absolutely nothing? Would we include hunters who pursue awards and who make their decisions on which animals to hunt based solely upon the checklist of which animals qualify them for the award? Is this what a conservationist does?

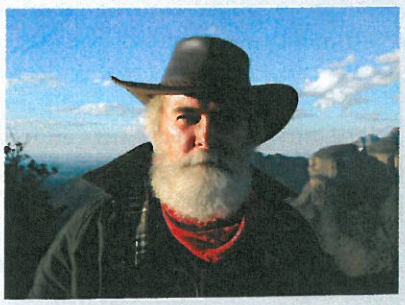
Indeed, let us go farther with this line of questioning and jump the hunting chasm altogether. What about the person who hikes, watches birds, helps clean up polluted streams, works on behalf of wilderness, and fights for humane treatment of animals, but is not a hunter? Is this person a conservationist? Is the elderly gentleman who has never hunted but who subscribes to many outdoor publications and who contributes modest sums of money to his local environment improvement committee and has helped launch recycling in his neighborhood a conservationist? Is the conscientious anti-hunter who works to purchase and preserve habitat or protest the polluting of a great trout stream a conservationist?

The answers to such questions may be troubling but the importance of deciding is critical to all of us, and I would argue, is especially critical to those of us who hunt. Despite the fact that I may not agree with some of the personal positions or actions of the fictitious individuals above, I cannot easily determine who is a conservationist and who is not. The problem is that most people in society don't see conservation, in any sense, as something sufficiently relevant that they would become engaged in the debate *in any way.* In this sense, all the individuals above are more aware of and interested in wildlife and conservation issues than the majority of society. Furthermore, regardless of the positions they take on hunting generally, or on particular hunting practices specifically, any or all of the individuals we are discussing might care deeply about wildlife and may well give some portion of their time and money to causes that help protect wildlife and wildlife habitat into the future.

In my view, the act of purposefully engaging in programs or institutions that help ensure the future prospects for wildlife is one clear criterion by which to determine a person's conservation identity. It is not the only one, nor is it a foolproof one. It becomes far more credible where such engagement is aligned with a personal philosophy that holds wildlife and the natural environment as significant social values, and personal valuations indicate these issues matter significantly with respect to the quality of our lives. Most critical, I think, is whether we recommend to others, by our thoughts and actions, that working to help conserve wildlife is a noble act, one that contributes to our status as citizens, that enlightens our children to the truly important things in life, and that makes our nations better, stronger, and more progressive.

As hunters, we need to decide whether our movement is serving foremost our interests or the interests of wildlife. While I do contend that anyone can be a real conservationist, whether they hunt or not, I remain convinced that hunters must lead society in the fight to keep wildlife with us. I cannot escape the responsibility I owe to wild animals, not only for the inspiration and beauty they have so often and so freely given to me, but because on occasion, I have taken their full and sentient existence onto my own. Beyond all others who engage nature, hunters do it most deliberately and with the greatest consequence. If in seeing an animal fall we do not sense the gravity of our decision nor accept the debt we have honorably incurred, then we must never argue any special role or tradition for ourselves.

What must set the hunter apart is a lifelong commitment to wild creatures and the places they roam in freedom. The ties that bind our movement must be the lives of wild things, not their deaths. In this crusade, all citizens can engage and all can become conservationists. While I regret but see no shame in the actions of non-hunters who ignore the conservation crusade, it is for hunters that I see the shame most clearly. No individual who takes the lives of wild things can stand outside the struggle for their existence. To do so signals our commitment to ourselves, a selfish and cruel standard of indefensible proportion.



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Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.