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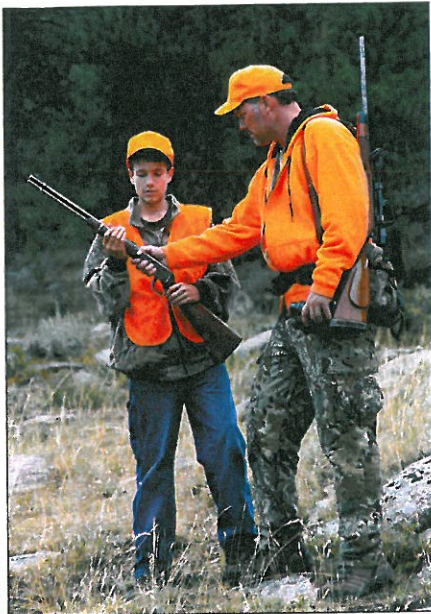
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## THE GUNS OF CONSERVATION

*The right to keep and bear arms is not only a foundation of liberty, it's crucial to the North American conservation model.*



VIC SCHEDEL

*Hunting is critical to wildlife conservation, and gun ownership is critical to hunting. Anyone who thinks that efforts to limit Second Amendment rights won't affect hunting doesn't understand this reality.*

### 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](http://www.biggame.org).

Much has been written about the gun in the USA, and who would wonder why? Persuasive, provocative, and protective, the gun is akin to a religion in America and few can stand outside its trajectory of influence. Indeed the gun has had a profound impact upon the historical and modern American mind. At times explosive in its power to incite reflection upon the true nature of American society, the gun is perhaps more powerful as an idea than as an instrument of lethality. Like a watchful ancestor, its imagery is everywhere in America, calling to mind remembrances of things past and the value of identity and historical narrative in forging the nation's sense of purpose.

Far beyond its own symbolism, the gun rests within the evocative mix of myth and truth that defines the incredibly complex national identity of the USA, and to a lesser extent that of its northern neighbor, Canada. Like it or not, fear its symbolism or extol its practicality, worry about the gun as symbol of erratic violence or trust it as protector of self and home, none of us can dismiss the near-mythology of the gun in America. Consider, for example, that we cannot envision the move to the frontier without imagining the bold adventurer cradling his firearm, the iconic symbol of his self-reliance and capacity to forge certainty in a world of unpredictable challenge but certain peril.

Indeed, the gun is a remarkable instrument. Since its earliest invention in fourteenth-century China, it has been of immeasurable influence upon the march of world history. It has decided the fate of rulers, nations, and empires. From local rebellion to world war, the gun has been the predominant instrument of engagement, the decision-maker for the reality on the ground. Within this wider context, the

gun in America may be seen as an idiom for the nation's relentless march to influence, its delivery vehicle for the inevitable reality that the nation's reach would extend far beyond its borders.

Indeed, can we not draw a direct line to the very independence and ascendancy of the USA, the greatest global force of change and influence history has yet offered us, from the entirely improbable defeat of the world's greatest army by backwoods marksmen—men who learned their shooting skill in the hunting of wild food, the defense of person and property from predatory beasts, and the terrible clash with the American Indian? Surely the gun has had influence—that much we must accept in defining America, past and present.

In discussing the right of the citizenry to bear arms in this country, we must realize that this right underlines a relationship between government and people that does not exist everywhere. Indeed, the first evidence of a dictatorship is the effort to remove from the citizen the right to legally own a firearm—a certain indication that the trust between a state and citizenry has been lost.

As important as I believe this aspect of the gun issue is, my purpose in this article is to emphasize that gun ownership (as guaranteed by the Second Amendment of the U.S. Constitution) has had enormous influence, indeed a founding influence, upon the conservation movement in North America, and that without a citizenry knowledgeable about, capable with, and legally supported in the right to own and use firearms, the great and enormously successful wildlife conservation movement we recognize as the North American Model would never, could never, have come into existence. Nor can the Model persevere without an armed citizenry.

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Wildlife species were everywhere depleted in North America in the late nineteenth century, and it was indisputably the hunter-conservationist movement that rescued them, many from certain extinction. This reality has largely been ignored in the debate over gun ownership, but from my perspective is one of the most important issues of all. To trace the great North American Wildlife Conservation Model with all its social and environmental benefits to the notions of freedom and liberty essential to American society is to understand why this unique approach to conservation evolved where it did, and to appreciate why gun ownership, so symbolic of freedom everywhere,

is so central to the conservation debate in the USA and Canada.

At the same time, it ought to make it clear why the conservation and harvest of wildlife is such a critical force to ensure gun ownership is protected and maintained. It is impossible to know the history of North American conservation and fail to appreciate this truth. Hunting is critical to conservation, gun ownership to hunting, and all three things to one another.

The legal harvest of publicly owned wildlife, guaranteed to be equitably governed for and by all citizens, is intrinsic to both the rescue and preservation of wildlife abundance in North America. Only with a citizenry comfortable with

the use of firearms could a broad-based participation in wildlife use and conservation have evolved. It is precisely because of gun ownership that sustainable wildlife harvest by the public could have been instituted and it is precisely because of this that the American citizen expects to have a say in how wildlife is managed.

Legal gun ownership and conservation go hand-in-hand. Despite there being almost as many guns in America as people, wildlife thrives. It does so because the armed citizenry agrees to abide by the laws of conservation, seeing themselves as both architects and mechanics of the process of conservation itself.

Debates over gun ownership and hunting may rage, yet far too few citizens realize the complex histories of these founding institutions, and even fewer have any notion of how both have been and remain essential to North American conservation. Leadership in defense of Second Amendment rights and in defense of hunting should not be viewed as entirely independent efforts, at least not where wildlife conservation is concerned.

Rather, they both represent a striving to remind our citizenries of our past, of how we came to achieve such extraordinary conservation success, and of how the guns of liberty and the guns of conservation are often one and the same. Eliminating either would limit the other and irrevocably limit both our freedoms and our conservation achievements. 🐾

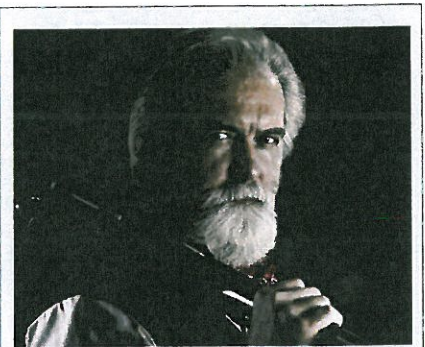
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Born and raised in Newfoundland, Shane Mahoney is a biologist, writer, hunter, angler, internationally known lecturer on environmental and resource conservation issues, and an expert on the North American Conservation Model.