Ensuring Our Hunting Heritage

A COMMUNITY-BASED APPROACH

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This is the second of a three-part series addressing the importance of ensuring our hunting heritage. Part I (August issue of Texas Wildlife) reviewed the history of the wildlife conservation movement in North America and also examined the North American Wildlife Conservation Model.

“YOU HAPPEN TO KNOW OF ANY AFFORDABLE HUNTING LEASES AVAILABLE IN THIS AREA?” the young man asked me as he was loading some feed in the back of my truck at a local feed store. “Some rich guys from Dallas came in and offered our landowner a pile of money for the hunting, and we got shot out of the saddle,” he expounded.

I queried him, “How’s the feed business?” He leaned against the truck, pushed back his hat and responded, “I’ll tell you this, our livestock feed business is stale, but our wildlife feed sales have been crazy. Don’t know that I’d even have a full time job here if it were not for the guys willing to spend all this money on deer.”

He then paused, smiled, and concluded with, “Heck, maybe I should send them rich guys in Dallas a thank you note for giving me a job.”

As I headed down the road, I continued to digest what I just witnessed. There were some similarities in this guy’s revelation to a Community-Based Wildlife Conservation (CBWC) program I observed in Zambia the previous year, and I’ll expand on that later.

Cultures, Values, and Societal Disconnect

Not to trivialize the complex nature of psychology or sociology, but people respond to value based perceptions in a predictable fashion. If we perceive something as being good, we often try to protect it, and we may actually go out of our way to do so. If we perceive something as being bad, we often try to do away with it, and may go out of our way to do so. If we perceive something as being neutral or indifferent, we normally ignore it, or do nothing.

So, what does this perception stuff have to do with our hunting heritage, or wildlife conservation? Consider this: Approximately 93 percent of our population in the United States is non-hunters, of which almost 10 percent of that non hunting population has an anti-hunting disposition. When polled, almost 3/4 of our population indicate that they are favorable to hunting in some respects, but largely, the majority of these people do not actively express their opinions about hunting. They are not advocates for hunting, but they are not antagonistic in their view points toward hunting, and for sake of this discussion, we’ll refer...
to these folks as the neutral majority.

Popular opinion of the majority of our society often dictates direction that our society moves, and this manifests itself through such outputs as peer influence, cash economies and incentives, and voting. And, in a country led by democracy, majority is often the ruling arm. These societal pressures, over time, create cultural traits which represent the psychological and motivational compass of society, and once these characteristics are ingrained, they are difficult to change, but cultural paradigm shifts can and do occur. Acceptance of tobacco smoking in public settings, for example, largely diminished in a matter of one generation of time.

In his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv claims that today’s young generation is the first American generation to grow up with no meaningful relationship with outdoor settings. Louv refers to the physiological and psychological consequences of this disconnect as Nature Deficit Disorder (NDD). In addition to health maladies associated with NDD, this disconnect also creates erosion of these people’s values and understandings of such things as ecological relationships between people and natural resources, not to mention a growing lack of appreciation for rural lifestyles, including basic agricultural demands. Our hunting community must focus on educating society on the vital role that wildlife plays in the genuine health of our society, and must influence the neutral majority so that they have an appreciation of the integral relationship between hunting and wildlife. We must identify effective processes that help shape cultural paradigms.

**Community-Based Wildlife Conservation (CBWC)**

While on safari in Zambia several years ago, we stumbled onto two boys, probably 10-12 years of age, who were “poaching” small birds on the government owned safari concession we were hunting. After a fast chase through the bush, the game scout and tracker returned with one of the boys. Further inspection revealed that they were using monofilament to snare birds, including the two broken winged, live birds that were stuffed in the boy’s pocket.

My Professional Hunter pretended as though he was going to cut off the boy’s ears, and after a few minutes of emotional discussion with the crying boy, he was let go, unscathed, and raced off into the bush. “Come on,” I quipped, “they were only trying to make a meal off a few small birds. You didn’t have to be so harsh on the boy.”

My PH rebutted, “You don’t know what you are talking about. Let them get away with this, next thing you know, they are snaring impala, and then poaching ivory for black market trade. You’ll get a better understanding tomorrow.”

The next day at lunch, four indigenous men representing the Community Resource Board from a local communal village showed up at our camp for a meeting with my PH. The communal area was involved with a CBWC program where they shared in the safari proceeds, and these men were there to deliver a proposal on how their funds would be allocated for communal use. In order of priority were anti-poaching, education, medical, and soccer jerseys. Mind you, their school was a mud-walled building with no tables and chairs, their medical supplies were less than you likely have in your home, and the soccer field was nothing more than a spot in the pasture with elephant tracks and buffalo dung littered from one side to the other.

Despite their impoverished lifestyle, these “uneducated” people, living in very primitive conditions, were perceptive enough to recognize the importance of anti-poaching funding to protect their wildlife resources from themselves. In this case, fee-based hunting created relevance for wildlife populations which in turn created localized wildlife stewardship.

This community-based ecological relationship that these people have with their wildlife environment is symbiotic. They recognize the real cash value of the safari business, they understand the integral role that their wildlife populations play in the sustainability of that industry. They are consequently motivated to take care of these resources, and poaching is a serious offense to them, often leading to bloodshed. There are many other CBWC programs that exist in various third world countries, where this symbiotic relationship between indigenous people and their wildlife resources is driven through fee based hunting programs, which are great examples of hunting equaling conservation of natural resources, or as is said at Texas Wildlife Association, hunting equals habitat.

It is my contention that we must learn
from these basic CBWC programs, and we must apply variant concepts to our own American societal uniquities. We must cultivate these community perceptions where the neutral majority develops an enhanced appreciation for wildlife, including recognition of the integral role of hunter/conservationists. This is not a complex concept, but it will require paradigm shifts in our American cultural traits.

Creating Value Through Education

Most community-based programs across the country tend to have an inherent feature that is central to their success; fruits of their efforts benefit themselves and their community. Philanthropist and hunting industry leader, Larry Potterfield of Midway USA, pointed out in a recent interview with Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, “As the Elk Foundation has proven, the local banquet model is second to none. So many great organizations – The Red Cross, The Boy Scouts – they all succeed because of what happens at the local level.”

Potterfield's observation is consistent with the, “If it’s good for me, my family, or my friends, then I’m for it,” mentality. It’s how we are wired.

So, how do we create broad-based value for hunting, using community-based philosophies as the leveraging tool? The answer is simple – education. The process is infinitely more complex than the answer.

Value in Wildlife

Through education, we must convincingly illustrate to society that there is real value, whether it is intrinsic or esoteric, in our society’s relationship with wildlife. This perceived value can be derived through various portals including recreational, aesthetic, spiritual, cultural, emotional, and health.

When we help society identify and appreciate these wildlife related values, we then create an important nexus in the integral relationship that hunting plays in the wildlife conservation model. Education continues to be the tool as we then segue into articulating how hunting has largely capitalized our ability to manage and conserve wildlife resources in North America for over a century, and still does today.

Value in Hunting

Shaping this cultural paradigm through deployed education does not end with establishing value for wildlife. We must also educate society, including the neutral majority, on the values of hunting for them and their community, directly and indirectly. We should initially focus on financial derivates associated with hunting, illustrating the scale of dollars involved here, and how these dollars often permeate through all levels of local economies, building stability and tangible benefits for all individuals within that local community. The young man working at the feed store was antagonistic toward the hunters who displaced him from his lease until his epiphany that perhaps these same hunters were subsidizing his salary – this is second order thinking, and these enlightened perspectives are what we must strive to achieve.

Our educational slant should not simply focus on financial values, but should also include esoteric type values, such as the familial and kindred values that are developed for, and between, those folks who share in hunting experiences. Likewise, it should not be overlooked that society deserves to understand that hunting is part of our human genetic fabric. As a species that largely evolved through successful hunting practices, we would be remiss to not advocate that hunting is an inextricable part of who we are today, even though the majority of our population chooses not to actively express this innate trait.

Recipes for Success

Though implementation and integration of these educational concepts into our societal framework is no easy matter, there are some exciting programs that have been emerging in recent years, which suggests that we are on the right track.

Programs sanctioned through various sportsman’s and conservation organizations are yielding positive results. Texas Wildlife Association’s involvement with Texas Youth Hunting Program has served as a model for increasing hunting opportunities for youth. TWA’s Texas Big Game Awards program, in addition to recognizing quality big game species taken around the state, recognizes first harvest achievement, not to mention promoting its motto of “hunting = habitat.”

National Wild Turkey Federation’s Women in the Outdoors actively pursues ways to engage females in hunting and outdoor activities. Safari Club International’s Disabled Hunters’ Program is designed to foster and promote opportunities for disabled hunters. Through its Wounded Warrior Program, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation facilitates opportunities to show appreciation for our war veterans through these sponsored hunts. Examples of these hunter-driven programs go on and on.

There are some exemplary programs emerging that are non-hunting in orientation, but represent great examples of encouraging children of all colors, as well as their parents, teachers, and communities, to carve time out of schedules to spend outdoors. No Child Left Inside Coalition is a national campaign to alert Congress and
the public to the need for our schools to devote more resources and attention to environmental education.

TWA’s Conservation Legacy programs have been making great strides in adult and youth education regarding wildlife and natural resource literacy matters, as well as the importance of preserving our hunting heritage. Other excellent examples include Outward Bound, National Wildlife Federation’s Be Out There campaign, and the National Environmental Education Week, to name a few.

Bottom line is we must continue to develop programs, both educational and facilitative, which bridge the literacy and opportunity gap that has been created through NDD. We must break through cultural barriers, creating paradigm shifts that reshape our society’s perception about wild things and about hunting. We must attack these challenges on the local level, no different than I described in the Zambian scenario, and no different than operational concepts of Boy Scouts of America, March of Dimes, Meals on Wheels Association of America, Farm Aid, athletic booster clubs, 4H, FFA, little league baseball, blood drives, civic fundraisers, and the list goes on. Why are these “community” events so successful? “If it’s good for me, my family, or my friends, then I’m for it,” and we will often go out of our way to support it and/or protect it. When we create a symbiotic triad relationship between community, wildlife, and hunting, we then develop relevance which can help manifest a cultural paradigm that ensures the health of wild things and wild places for the benefit of future generations.

In Part III of this three-part series, I will look at the fragile nature of our hunting markets or hunting economies and how this is impacted by the style and flavor of our modern day wildlife management and hunting practices. Are we sometimes our own worst enemy?