

IS HUNTING REALLY NECESSARY?

By Jim Heffelfinger

In today's mainstream media, hunters are rarely portrayed accurately. It is altogether too easy to slip into derogatory stereotypes that are continually perpetuated by those who have had no exposure to the hunting tradition or knowledge of how the world's most successful system of wildlife conservation works. We are living under the curse of Elmer Fudd, our unwelcome poster child. Like it or not, most of the public sees inept and bumbling Elmer as a typical representative "Hunter."

Much of this portrayal is rooted in a misunderstanding of what hunting is and how it is regulated. It is all too common to read that a particular species almost went extinct because of "over-hunting." The reader (and indeed the writer in many cases) does not understand that this was not hunting as currently practiced. Statements like this cause the misconception that hunters are bad for wildlife. There is a very important distinction between the historic market/subsistence hunting and the highly-regulated hunting that occurs today. As game populations dwindled 100 years ago, it was hunters who first realized that the rate of kill was not sustainable.

Game meat was sold on the open market and almost everyone with any shooting skill was hunting big and small game and selling the meat to the local butcher. Americans were starting to realize that the only way to save wildlife was to build a constituency that would fight against unregulated destruction in favor of conservation through regulated use. Sportsmen of the day campaigned for regulations to stop the completely unregulated killing of wildlife. These early laws were a good start, but without effective enforcement, they were nothing more than words. Soon every state developed hunting licenses that were sold to raise money for wildlife management and law enforcement. Laws became more and more restrictive and their enforcement became more

effective. These early actions slowly evolved into the most successful model of wildlife conservation in the world.

Hunting is usually justified as a management action that is necessary to keep wildlife populations in balance with their habitat. This reason is used when explaining hunting to non-hunters because it is straightforward, easy to convey and sounds logical. After all, nobody likes to think of deer dying a slow painful death of starvation. The only problem with this reasoning is that it is not true for many kinds of hunting.

Hunters primarily hunt bucks because many of them can be removed without affecting the number of fawns that are born the next year. If that's true, are hunters controlling the deer population or not? If hunters "need" to hunt deer, why do they "need" to hunt mountain lions that kill deer? In reality, many wildlife populations in this country do not "need" to be hunted to protect the habitat from overuse. Biologists and hunter-conservationists need to move past this simplistic approach and highlight the real benefits of hunting in Texas and the United States.

Hunting is simply the use of a renewable natural resource much like forestry or agriculture. Moreover, hunting is the cornerstone of the most successful model of wildlife conservation in the world. Hunters pursue their pastime for many reasons. The personal reasons for hunting are the most important for motivating people to hunt, but also the most difficult to articulate to the non-hunter. Hunting provides a means to escape the stresses of an increasingly urban and sedentary society leading to a healthier life, both physically and mentally. It allows people to learn about and observe nature. Hunters take part in an age-old ritual that is ingrained in the genetic makeup of human beings. There are few settings more satisfying than sitting down to a meal of venison roast that you and your father or son worked so hard that day to

provide for your family.

When questioned about the reasons they hunt, hunters most often provide answers related to getting out in nature, learning about it, and being with family and friends. Non-hunters sometimes question why a hike or camping trip would not satisfy these same desires. Herein lies the crux of the difficulty in explaining personal reasons for hunting. One cannot explain something as visceral as the predatory instinct. Humans have been hunting for meat for three million years; it is thought that this activity accelerated the development of the human brain, leading to our present evolutionary success. Early humans needed to plan coordinated hunts and ambushes with cooperating members of the clan. This necessity, along with the high-protein diet that meat provided, may have been the very turning point of the human race.

While these personal reasons are difficult to explain to a non-hunter, they are greatly overshadowed by the benefits that the North American model of wildlife conservation provides to all citizens. Hunting is simply the use of a renewable resource much like forestry or agriculture. Properly regulated, hunting provides families with outdoor recreation that is beneficial to wildlife populations. These benefits are real and substantial. Taxpayers are not paying for wildlife management—hunters, anglers, and shooters are. Every time someone purchases hunting, fishing, or shooting-related equipment, 10 to 12 percent of the purchase price goes to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

That money is kept separate and distributed to the state wildlife agencies like Texas Parks and Wildlife using a complicated formula that takes into account the number of hunters in each state and other things. These funds are called the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds, or "Pittman-Robertson" Funds after the legislators who pushed the Act through way

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Banning hunting will not stop hunting; it will only stop the legal regulation of the harvest.

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back in 1937. In the last 65 years, this tax on sporting equipment has generated over \$3.7 billion nationwide for wildlife conservation. These funds, along with money from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses, provide states with their operating capital. In the past, much of this money was spent on game species, but agencies are spending an increasing amount today on non-game species. Keep in mind, all those years of habitat protection and enhancement for game species also helped uncountable non-game species. Forests preserved for deer, wetlands preserved for ducks and grasslands preserved for quail benefited all native species in those ecosystems.

According to the last survey done in 1996, there were 911,000 hunters in Texas, of which 752,000 hunted deer. Texas big game hunters spent a total of \$1.4 billion (yes, that's a "b") on hunting equipment and travel-related expenses that year

(including \$25,842 on magazines). Not only was much of this taxed for conservation, but this money then circulates over and over in small communities throughout the state. Over \$499 million was spent on "travel-related" expenses; this represents motels, gas stations, grocery stores and lease fees to ranchers. All this money boosts the rural economies all over the state.

One of the most important benefits of hunting is the grassroots base of wildlife advocates it fosters. Hunting organizations and clubs throughout the state work on local projects that help various wildlife species. These groups not only collectively provide valuable funds for wildlife management, but also supply the volunteer labor to get projects done. Most importantly, they serve as invaluable watchdogs to make sure the interests of wildlife are protected.

Much of the important wildlife funding goes to enforcing the wildlife laws that are the foundation of modern wildlife conservation. Game wardens enforce laws ranging from illegal harvest of wildlife, environmental quality, illegal sale of protected species, pollution, vandalism, to habitat destruction, and more; all these law enforcement activities are funded by hunters and anglers. Banning hunting will not stop hunting; it will only stop the legal regulation of the harvest. Not to mention shut down much of the work on state wildlife areas, habitat acquisition and protection, landowner cooperation in wildlife management plans, and the myriad of other work that benefits all species whether hunted or not.

Since the very beginning of regulated hunting, the expressed purpose of hunting licenses was to generate money to manage wildlife and their habitat. This system has worked beautifully since its inception and grew stronger with the addition of the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937. Together these two sources of income for wildlife have resulted in the best system of managing wildlife in the world.

Most Americans understand the importance of hunting; research shows that about 75 percent support legal hunting.

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While North Americans enjoy a great abundance and diversity of native wildlife, other countries struggle with conserving what they have left, which is mostly threatened or endangered. Conservation is an expensive business and without funding and incentives generated through hunting it is doomed to failure. Is hunting necessary? The answer is undeniable.

The importance of hunting means we all must strive to keep it alive and going strong. It is up to us to break the Elmer Fudd curse. We can do this by constantly policing ourselves to make sure we are representing hunting in an accurate light. This may mean doing things differently than our fathers did. When driving my hunting truck, with its back window wallpapered with hunting stickers, I always drive courteously. I realize my truck is a huge billboard for hunting and I am representing all hunters when I drive it. I take tasteful pictures of my harvested game without bloody tongues hanging out or open chest cavities because I know there will be some non-hunters who will see them. When talking about my hunting in the presence of non-hunters I choose my words (and stories) carefully, because not everyone shares my excitement for harvesting my own meat. Wounding is an inevitable part of hunting, but it is not the part I talk about when with non-hunters. I love ice-cold beer, but only an idiot would have one before the hunting day is over (and I avoid buying it at the grocery store in full camo).

Anti-hunters are fond of saying that only seven percent of Americans hunt. They are correct, but I am a proud member of this seven percent that pays for over 80 percent of the wildlife conservation in this country! My love of hunting and its importance in the larger scheme of North American wildlife conservation makes me very protective of it. We must all band together to preserve the hunting heritage—not only for ourselves and our children, but, more importantly, for the wildlife that depends on our stewardship. ♀

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