

Hunter contributions in money, time and advocacy are the very foundation of successful wildlife conservation, although writing about this in hunting magazines is sometimes considered “preaching to choir.” Trouble is, the choir isn’t always paying attention to the sermon.





THE VITAL ROLE OF HUNTERS IN CONSERVATION

Hunters have voluntarily and willingly contributed billions of dollars to support conservation for all wildlife species, not just those that are hunted. They have been the central pillars of conservation and thus are responsible for supporting a wide variety of conservation activities that everyone values. Nearly everyone enjoys wildlife, but most people are not aware of the contributions made by hunters, trappers, anglers and recreational shooters to support sustainable conservation. Although hunters know that their financial contributions from licenses and equipment help pay for wildlife management, many do not always fully appreciate how vital they are in the bigger picture. It is valuable to review the role of hunters in our fantastic system of conservation so we all can fully appreciate and help spread the word.

WILDLIFE POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Hunters are the most effective and efficient way to maintain wildlife populations within the capacity of what the habitat can support to reduce population die-offs, provide for more productive populations, protect habitat, reduce the spread of disease, or to reduce conflicts with humans. In cases where population reduction is the management goal, managers must harvest more animals than the population can replace through reproduction. Population manage-



Funds generated each year from the sale of hunting and trapping licenses go directly back to the resource — to the tune of more than \$600 million per year.

many cases, but also not true in many more. There are many examples of species that will not overpopulate their habitat if we stop hunting them. The truth is more complicated than the simplistic idea of wildlife overpopulation. In reality, the importance of hunting to conservation in the broad sense is not

tied simply to population control. It's important to understand that a simple deer season or duck season might seem like an isolated activity, but it is merely a component — a critical one — of a much larger wildlife conservation model. Game populations are renewable natural resources that literally pay the bills for a far-reaching, comprehensive system of sustainable wildlife conservation that has proven itself superior to any other model.

THE TRUE CONSERVATIONISTS

We frequently hear that hunters pay for conservation, but what does that mean? Millions of dollars each year are hunter-generated for the direct conservation of wildlife and their habitats. During 2016, \$695 million was apportioned to state wildlife agencies in the United States from the excise tax collected on hunting and shooting purchases (Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds, also known as the Pittman-

ment is just one example of hunters working as partners in wildlife management. Wildlife populations are sometimes managed below the biological limit of the habitat because of conflicts with humans such as vehicle collisions, nuisance wildlife, livestock depredation, interfering with agricultural production and concerns for human and domestic animal health or safety.

For many years, hunting and trapping were partially justified as necessary management actions to save animals from a lingering death by starvation. That is certainly true in

Who are the true conservationists? If you're a hunter, just take a look in the mirror. Millions of dollars each year are hunter-generated for habitat improvement projects.



Robertson Act). The sale of hunting and trapping licenses (>\$600 million) and private donations by hunters for conservation efforts (>\$300 million) also contribute, bringing the total to more than \$1.6 billion per year. There are about 13.7 million hunters in the United States alone, and their annual expenditures provide significant support to rural communities in the United States, Mexico and Canada. Overall, hunting and trapping voluntarily redistributes wealth from urban centers to smaller rural communities, where it is multiplied through the local economy. Economic multipliers are commonly used to estimate this compounding ripple effect. In 2011, it was estimated that \$33.7 billion spent in America had an economic impact of \$66.7 billion, supporting almost 660,000 jobs in the United States.



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WILDLIFE LAW ENFORCEMENT

Hunters, trappers and anglers have helped create and maintain an army of law enforcement officers to uphold the massive amount of legal restrictions to wildlife harvest. Regulated hunting is only regulated if the laws are obeyed. Currently, more than 8,100 wildlife conservation law enforcement officers are actively working in the United States, and most are paid with income from the sale of hunting, trapping and fishing licenses.

Besides policing hunters and anglers, they also perform duties related to water quality, habitat protection, public safety, search and rescue, littering, vandalism, trade in threatened and endangered species, and providing backup to other local law enforcement agencies.

Opponents of hunting rarely offer alternatives for funding trained offi-

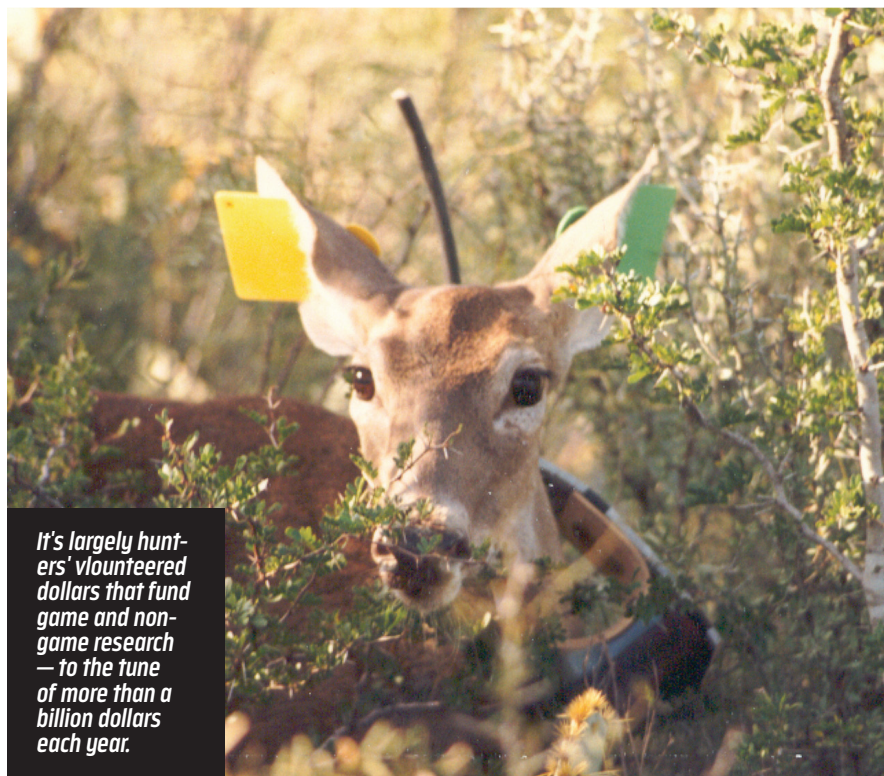
cers to protect wildlife against exploitation. If hunting were made illegal in North America, we would immediately lose this massive protection force and fall into the unregulated market hunting that was common before hunting was institutionalized as the foundation of conservation.

WILDLIFE RESTORATION

The restoration of wildlife populations across North America is the greatest wildlife success story in the history of conservation anywhere. We have restored nearly all of the populations that were overexploited before the development and implementation of our current system of conservation. Species such as Canada geese, wood ducks, white-tailed deer, pronghorns, bighorn sheep and wild turkeys all represent important species whose restoration was driven by hunters who could not bear the thought of a landscape without them. North America has a nearly full complement of native wildlife living in habitat that has changed remarkably little during the past 300 years, compared to other continents. Restoration of large mammal populations continues today, with many big game animals still being successfully translocated into historical ranges for the enjoyment of all residents.



The restoration of wildlife populations across North America is the greatest success story in the history of wildlife conservation anywhere. And it's American hunters who authored that story.



It's largely hunters' volunteered dollars that fund game and non-game research — to the tune of more than a billion dollars each year.

MONITORING WILDLIFE POPULATIONS

Monitoring wildlife populations and accumulating baseline trend data are the basis of well-informed, science-informed decisions that are foundational to our model of wildlife conservation. Hunted species are not the only ones monitored, but they generally do receive the most attention. State, provincial and federal agencies have a history of monitoring wildlife populations, beginning at the very genesis of wildlife conservation in North America. Many agencies have examples of monitoring programs that have remained relatively consistent for decades and provide valuable trend data.

PROVIDING WILDLIFE HABITAT

Land management agencies manage wildlife habitat on millions of acres of federal land. Many states and provinces have also purchased wildlife habitat with the proceeds

from hunting licenses and taxes on hunting, fishing and shooting equipment. During a 12-year period (2000–2012) in the United States, \$308 million from Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds were available to states for the acquisition of more than 74 million acres of wildlife habitat. In addition, wildlife conservation organizations used private donations to purchase land or conservation easements on large tracts of wildlife habitat. Most of these areas are purchased with game animals in mind, but wetlands acquired for waterfowl, forests purchased for deer or turkeys, mountainous areas protected for wild sheep and grasslands restored for quail and pronghorns have benefited all non-game and endangered species that rely on those habitats.

RESEARCH SUPPORT

One of the foundations of our system of wildlife conservation is that management decisions are based in science. In the United States, about \$57 million was allocated in 2009 to state wildlife agencies from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program for conducting more than 10,000 wildlife research projects. During the early years of the wildlife management profession, money was spent exclusively on learning more about species that were at low levels. As more was learned about managing those species back to abundance, research focus shifted somewhat to all species and their habitats.

HELPING THOSE NOT HUNTED

A preponderance of hunter-generated money is still expended on the management and protection of hunted species. This is appropriate because populations of species that are being annually hunted generally require a greater intensity of monitoring, law enforcement, research and management.

For those not fortunate enough to be hunted, other funding sources must be devised. Non-game activities are funded from different funding sources in different agencies, including income tax checkoffs, special stamps, independent grants, donations, lottery or gambling revenue, some sales tax, and hunters' dollars from the Federal Aid in Wild-

life Restoration Program. Millions of dollars are contributed annually by hunters through the Wildlife Restoration Program for the conservation of birds and mammals that are not hunted.

INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Communicating with the public and considering human dimensions in wildlife management have become vital to the effectiveness of management agencies. All wildlife agencies have some public information offi-

cers on staff to disseminate wildlife information and to inform stakeholders of agency activities through press releases, websites, social media, radio, television and a multitude of publications for diverse audiences.

Some wildlife agencies use Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds, but most simply use money garnered from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. In this way, the entire public benefits from the information provided by funding generated from hunting.

POLITICAL INFLUENCE (THE GOOD KIND)

Early groups of organized hunters were instrumental in providing the political support needed to implement the laws that developed into the system of conservation we have today. For example, Theodore Roosevelt organized the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 by assembling most of the powerful conservation-minded people of the day; many of them hunters, but all of them influential. When political influence threatens proper wildlife conservation efforts, sportsmen and women at the local and national levels have shown themselves willing and able to come together in support of wildlife and their habitat. There are also many examples of wildlife agency funding sources coming under attack by politicians, only to have organized hunting groups step up to its defense.

CITIZEN SCIENCE

It has become popular to use the phrase "citizen science" to describe using the public to collect data and help with research or management. Those who think this is a new concept are unaware hunters were the original citizen scientists. Hunters have always been an important source of biological information for wildlife managers. Harvest data such as the total number harvested, sex and age ratios, body weight or condition, harvest location and many other types of related information have been collected at check stations since the early years of wildlife management. Biological samples from harvested animals are used to determine prior disease exposure, parasite loads, nutritional status, genetic relationships or diversity and approximate age. The collection of these types of samples is sometimes done by the hunters themselves and requires a high level of cooperation and commitment.

VOLUNTEERISM

Hunters individually, and the organizations to which they belong, have always been active in providing volunteer labor for habitat improvement projects, construction of nesting structures or boxes, altering fences to be wildlife friendly, teaching hunting and trapping education courses,

wildlife surveys, working check stations, routine facility maintenance, cleaning up trash and many other beneficial activities. These volunteer efforts benefit wildlife directly and allow wildlife management agencies to stretch their conservation dollars further to accomplish additional goals.

THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION

The contribution of hunters and trappers to wildlife and habitat conservation is undeniable. They have been consistent through time, even as society has changed to be more urban and environmentally detached. With these trends not likely to change, and the proportion of hunters in the United States decreasing, we will undoubtedly see some challenges to our system of "conservation through consumption."

Currently, regulated hunting enjoys a broad base of public support in North America. Several surveys have consistently reported that 75 to 81 percent of respondents support hunting and agree it should continue. Trend data from surveys indicate there might be an increasing proportion of Americans who approve of legal fair-chase hunting when the harvest is utilized. But just because hunters had a lead role in the development of the most successful system of wildlife conservation, does not mean we own the future. Those truly interested in perpetuating this proven conservation model will need to work to preserve it. Future efforts to conserve wildlife and wild places will not succeed without a broad base of public support.

Hunters must be recognized for their past, present and potential future contributions. Remaining a relevant force in conservation means we are not seen by the general public as degrading or obstructing wildlife conservation efforts. We must always be conscious of things that give all



The future of conservation in America might depend on our ability to continue to recruit new hunters into the fold who share those values passed through generations of hunters.

hunters a bad name, thereby eroding public confidence in a hunter-based system of conservation. How hunters communicate their vital role in conservation to the non-hunting public will decide whether hunting will be supported far into the future.

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