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Taking a Model for Granted

By Jodi Stemler

As hunters, we take a lot for granted.

We take for granted that we can hunt. We take for granted that when we hunt we'll likely find game. Sure, you can grumble about season dates, the cost of licenses, or that you didn't kill that 150-class buck this year – but at the end of the day we have it pretty good.

In fact, what we have in America is a model for wildlife conservation and management that is unlike anything anywhere else in the world. And, in spite of some challenges, this North American Model of Wildlife Conservation works, not only for hunters but more importantly for wildlife.

To provide some perspective on why we have it pretty good, perhaps we should take a trip down memory lane and think about what hunting and wildlife conservation might have looked like, say, 100 years ago. OK, so it probably is a little past most of our ability to recall back that far, so let me give you a little bit of history.

The turn of the last century marked a time when the United States was in full growth mode; we were settling the West, tapping into the vast mineral and natural resources that our country provided us, and laying the foundation for the booming economic power that we were to become. One of those perceived “vast, inexhaustible” resources was wildlife, and the wave of economic prosperity that washed over the nation resulted in the wholesale slaughter of wildlife for commercial use. As we marched through the first decade of the twentieth century the situation got even worse.



Our history books have numerous stories of the waste that was laid for a buffalo robe or egret plume hats. Add to that the rapid loss of native grasslands and forests as well as the drainage of wetlands for agriculture to feed the growing nation, and you have a recipe for disaster.

And that's pretty much what happened. Wildlife across the country plummeted to the point where simply seeing a whitetail was notable since there was less than a half million of them nationwide. Wild turkeys were on the brink of extinction. Only 100,000 elk remained. Do I even need mention the passenger pigeon? Things were pretty bleak.

What turned the tide was an ethic, a model based on a series of principles that had their genesis even before market hunting decimated populations but didn't fully take root until things were at their worst. The two basic tenets of this North American Model are that the harvest of fish and wildlife is solely for the non-commercial use of any individual hunter or angler and that fish and wildlife populations will be managed to sustain optimal levels forever. But the concepts go much deeper and I can guarantee that they are the foundation for why we have it pretty good right now.

There are seven core components of the Model that could each be the subject of its own treatise, but given space considerations (not to mention the "nod off" factor) here are the basic ideas. First, contrary to a European approach that reserved wildlife for the wealthy elite, wildlife in North America is a **public trust** – our wildlife resources are managed by the government for the long-term use of all citizens. With that goes **hunting opportunity for all** and a **democratic rule of law** to manage the wildlife. Simply put, we all have access to this country's wildlife and a say in how populations are managed. As for the taking of wildlife, the Model **prohibits commerce** and requires the **non-frivolous use** of wildlife – both principles that took root after the wanton waste witnessed at the turn of the twentieth century. The Model also recognizes that fish and wildlife don't care about state or international borders – they are **international resources** that move freely, so cooperation and the **scientific management** of fish and wildlife is essential.

Why is all of this relevant now? In 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt hosted a conference that launched the conservation movement as we know it. Since that time, only twice have wildlife managers come together to forge a national wildlife policy – and not since Roosevelt has a sitting president recognized the importance of wildlife conservation and hunting enough to host the conference.

This fall, however, President Bush will be hosting a conference on North American Wildlife Policy, one that will engage the hunting conservation community as well as a bi-

partisan group of members of Congress and governors. Ensuring the continued success of the North American Model of wildlife conservation is a conference priority. The result will be a plan to address the nation's wildlife conservation and hunting priorities for the next decade and beyond.

While you might think the words "wildlife" and "policy" shouldn't go together, or you might just see the snooze factor, it is relevant. It's important to you, your friends in the hunt club and all of us who care about wildlife. The decisions made at this conference will touch all of us.

So stay informed and pay attention. We cannot take for granted our wildlife and hunting heritage.

This is the second in a series about our hunting and conservation heritage, and the implications of this fall's White House Conference on North American Wildlife Policy. The next article will focus on hunters and anglers as the leaders of conservation.

Jodi Stemler has spent more than a decade working on sportsmen's and wildlife conservation issues. She is assisting the American Wildlife Conservation Partners raise awareness about the historical opportunity this conference will present hunters.

For more information, go to www.wildlifepartners.org