

Privatization and Commercialization: Hunting's Nemesis

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We Americans like to celebrate our freedoms including free enterprise and landowner rights. And, there seems no limit to demands for more freedom. Even now, some Wisconsin laws, particularly those protecting waterfront, are being modified to favor landowner rights seemingly over the rights and concerns for the greater public good. Free enterprise and open markets may have their place in our economy and some rights must accompany land ownership. But, we know that unrestrained freedom for some can interfere with freedoms of others.

Some freedoms pose a distinct threat to the future of public hunting. Two of these are the freedom to own and commercialize wildlife. Canadian observers, especially, have been warning Americans for more than 2 decades that the greatest threat to the future of hunting is not anti-hunters. Rather, it is the trend to commercialize and privatize wildlife and hunting.

Commercialization

Wildlife commercialization has been with us a long time. Markets respond to consumers' interest. So, we have long witnessed all manner of products including wildlife trinkets and art in the market place. This level of commercialization has little affect on wildlife conservation or hunting.

But, I suspect that most hunters and all wildlife professionals would quickly identify the movie "Bambi" as being quite harmful to public understanding of nature and the role of hunting. The anthropomorphizing of wildlife, the portrayal of them as having human ethics and emotions, grossly misrepresents the fact that the main purpose of most animals is to provide food for another animal.

Somewhat less blatant than "Bambi" are many of the wildlife programs shown on television. While some provide educational benefit, many programs are considered "eco-pornography" by wildlife biologists. I remember an episode on national television featuring northern Wisconsin. The host described the area as habitat for bobcats and immediately followed by saying, "There goes one now!" The film then showed a bobcat strolling in the woods as though anyone wanting to see a bobcat merely had to go to northern Wisconsin. After 60+ years, I can count on my fingers the number of bobcats that I have seen in the woods.

Worse are many hunting videos as they often are filmed in enclosures and/or at pre-baited settings. Most videos seem to emphasize shooting and killing instead of what we know as the broader hunting experience. They also tend to create unrealistic expectations for new hunters. And, they often repulse many hunters and non-hunters in the audience.

Some hunting magazines also follow the format of hunting videos. There is a strong tendency to emphasize trophy acquisition. National and state surveys have repeatedly shown that there is broad support from the general public for hunting so long as it is done primarily for the purpose of acquiring food or managing populations. There is little support for so-called "trophy hunting." Most non-hunters view the quest for trophies as a frivolous use of wildlife.

These commercial efforts may seem to be bland threats to our hunting tradition, but they are not helpful. More egregious than the examples above are the outright sale or trade of wild animals and hunting.

Privatization

Many decades ago, most states legalized game farming. Little harm was imagined when this occurred. For the most part, these laws were passed in the early part of the 1900s when game populations were low. Private game farming was innocently considered as a way to supplement game supply. The first Wisconsin game farm was licensed in 1909.

Private gun clubs actively stocked game including Kansas quail, Hungarian partridge, and Chinese pheasants at the turn of the century. Soon followed the shipment of farm raised deer to replenish decimated herds in other states. The dangers inherent in doing these things were, as yet, largely unrecognized.

Professional and public wildlife stewardship was to come decades later. The Wisconsin Conservation Department was not organized until 1927. Aldo Leopold wrote the text "Game Management" in 1933. But, it wasn't until the late 1940s that game protection began to evolve to professional wildlife management.

Since then, the science of wildlife ecology has been applied by states nationwide. Also, the danger of importing exotic animals has been realized along with the risks associated with breeding and transporting captive wildlife around the country.

Despite this awareness, economic and political circumstances can change quickly. Economic conditions for family farms became progressively difficult in recent decades. Political pressure grew to actively promote game farming as an alternative to improve incomes of traditional dairy or cash crop farmers.

Over the objections of wildlife professionals, game farming was promoted across much of America. Only a few states did not legalize and expand deer and elk farming. Responsibility for deer and elk farming was often delegated to departments of agriculture. Rules were lax. Personnel and funding were limited and there was little interest in enforcement activities. The number of deer and elk farms in Wisconsin grew to more than 1,000. Some farms prospered while most did not. Meanwhile, these farms posed great risk to wild herds.

Renaissance

In recent years, we have begun to realize the downsides of these decisions. But, this story of being a bit careless with privatizing wildlife was just another chapter in our failure to protect "the commons." We allowed wildlife to become private property much like we allowed air and water to be spoiled after the industrial revolution and World War II. The old adage was true again; "we learn from history that we do not learn from history."

It took the book *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962 and Earth Day in 1970 to begin to reclaim air and water to the commons or public trust. What followed included the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, Endangered Species Act, and the National Environmental Policy Act. This was a major renaissance reclaiming for the public what was rightly theirs. But, even these acts of Congress require vigilance as there continue to be private and commercial interests that wish to erode these reclaimed protections of public resources.

Now, CWD (chronic wasting disease) has underscored the dangers of private ownership of wildlife. Other diseases from wildlife that can affect humans also come to mind like monkey-pox, West Nile Virus, SARS, and even HIV-AIDS. While the latter diseases are not associated with deer and elk, one wonders if CWD and its spread from the West to Wisconsin and now to New York and its risk to deer herds nationwide will provide sufficient political motivation to end private ownership of deer, elk, and other wildlife.

Public Trust Doctrine

Most people interested in the out-of-doors, and especially fisherman, seem to be aware that navigable waters are held in public trust by the states for the benefit of all citizens. Fewer persons seem to recognize that wildlife, too, are held in public trust.

The Public Trust Doctrine is rooted in ancient Roman law and was brought forward through Anglo Saxon law and the Magna Carta of 1215. The doctrine, as it has evolved and is applied to wildlife, basically says that states have the affirmative duty to conserve, protect, and manage resident fish and wildlife and that this duty cannot be diminished by popular vote of the public.

Why is this good for hunters? First of all, it means that we all have access to the enjoyment and material benefits (harvests) of wildlife as allocated by law. This access is irrespective of our social standing, wealth, or ownership of land. Secondly, it assures us that wildlife will be under professional stewardship with public involvement. Further, because we all have a stake in wildlife, we are willing to support broad conservation efforts with our tax and license dollars.

Courts have repeatedly supported this doctrine. About this there remains no controversy. Still, private and corporate interests are continually challenging the boundaries of this concept. Upholding the doctrine requires our constant vigilance.

Other Privatization Threats

Again, focusing specifically on Wisconsin deer. There are additional threats to keeping wildlife accessible to all as public trust. Some of these are rather subtle while others are quite overt and intractable. In any case, hunters should be aware of them because many of the threats originate from hunters themselves.

Baiting and feeding of deer has been in the news for several years because of ethical and ecological concerns, but especially disease concerns. Less has been said about the privatization effect of these practices. But clearly, a purpose of these activities often includes attracting and holding deer where they are inaccessible to other hunters.

Similarly, why do we build foodplots? With deer being generally over-abundant from the Mississippi to the Atlantic, who can argue that there is a deer food shortage? Again, one of the major motivations for landowners to construct food plots is to sequester public deer onto private property for personal purposes.

So-called "quality deer management" is increasingly promoted as a simple technique for private landowners to produce large-antlered deer. Often this leads to food supplements, food plots, "sanctuaries," disregard for community-established deer population goals, interest in genetic tampering, and reduced access for public hunting.

Another inexorable trend for which there seems no solution is the sale of land from farmers and industrial forest to recreational owners. Prior owners were often more willing to allow free-by-permission public access while the new owners are more interested in exclusive use. Small recreational properties also increase the temptation to bait or use food plots to attract and hold deer as the hunter-owner no longer seeks deer over a larger area.

Fragmentation of land ownership, high land values, and ever-shrinking access is also increasing the amount of fee hunting. One wonders if the European model of hunting with access only by landowners or wealthy may become an unfortunate inevitability in America. If that were to occur, the popular support for North American wildlife conservation could erode and public hunting as we've known it will be gone.

Conclusions

Powerful interests in the deer management world are pushing us ever closer to commercialization and privatization of deer and deer hunting. Some of these interests involve hunters themselves. How altruistic are hunters regarding the future of hunting? Will self-interest of some supersede concern for the common good?

Do we realize that wildlife management is a complex blend of biology, sociology, and ecology that requires years of specialized training and experience and cannot be reduced to a "How to" booklet? Or, will we choose self-administered, single-species wildlife production?

Will economics and so-called "job-creation" continue to cause politicians to erode public trust considerations? Will hunters finally realize that there is more to politics than gun control? To some extent, hunters themselves are in the driver's seat for addressing many of the threats to the future of hunting.