



Hunters not only support conservation through their license dollars, they volunteer to help youth get acquainted with nature and learn outdoor skills.

Hunting and conservation go hand in hand

CHICO LABARBERA

SO SAYS DNR'S DIRECTOR OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT.

Ryan W. Theiler

There is a long and storied history between hunting and conservation that may not be well known to most. Merging hunting and conservation may seem contradictory at first glance. However, history tells of a relationship that perhaps can best be described as a mutualism between hunters and the environment. I had an opportunity to sit down and talk about this relationship with Tom Hauge, director of the Department of Natural Resources wildlife management program. Hauge has worked for the department since 1979.

Q: What is your experience with hunters and hunting?

A: I grew up in Sun Prairie and my exposure to hunting was through my family. My dad was a farmer and a hunter. I can remember as a young boy being very anxious for Dad to come home on the Sunday of deer season to find out if he got anything. I started hunting when I was 12 years old. Professionally, I began working with hunting organizations with the department in 1979 — first as a local wildlife biologist working with the conservation clubs on a local level, and then with various positions I've held with the department since then.

Q: What are the sources of hunter contribution to conservation and how much do they contribute?

A: There are a lot of ways to look at this. I think most people would think of the dollars hunters contribute through purchasing licenses. During fiscal year 2015 it's estimated that hunters in Wisconsin contributed about \$66 million that went into the Fish and Wildlife Account. That not only supports our program for the management of state wildlife areas, wildlife surveys and enhancing or establishing habitat, but conservation wardens are funded out of those dollars as well. What a lot of people don't really appreciate is the power of the conservation hunting organizations. They often donate work days or volunteer in their local communities to help youth get acquainted with the outdoors. They raise funds for equipment, or run surveys to provide data in tracking wildlife populations. Ducks Unlimited, Wisconsin Bear Hunters Association, Wisconsin Bowhunters, the Wild Turkey Federa-

tion, the Ruffed Grouse Society, Pheasants Forever and Whitetails Unlimited are all nonprofit organizations. These groups raise a lot of money and eventually those dollars go toward conservation and back onto the land. I don't know what the dollar value is, but it's significant, and I wouldn't be a bit surprised to find out it's as big or bigger than the license dollar amount. Another way they contribute is by their voices. Hunters and hunting organizations make their voices known with legislation and budgets. At the federal level a lot of times it's hunting organizations that lead the way. Hunters can also contribute a conservation service by helping to reduce an overabundant population. An example of this is the effort to reduce light geese populations (a collective term for lesser snow geese and Ross' geese) due to overgrazing of breeding grounds in the Arctic.

Q: Is the Department of Natural Resources familiar with, or implementing elements of, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation?

A: We are absolutely familiar with it. I think our whole legal system in Wisconsin is founded on the premise that wildlife belongs to all of the citizens. Chapter NR 1, Wis. Adm. Code, contains our natural resources policies. If you read through those policies you'll see the NAMWC is alive and well. For example: if we have limited permits, we use a system of random selection

to decide who gets those permits. Hunting is democratic. I believe the ideas in the NAMWC underpin our regulations in this state.

Q: I've heard it said that hunters are the DNR's largest constituent group. Is this true?

A: We really don't keep track of the size of constituent groups. But if you measured it purely on the number of licenses sold, fishing would probably be the largest group. Since you mentioned the NAMWC, one of the basic premises of the model is that wildlife species are not owned by one individual. They are owned by the public, and our department is merely the state organization that acts as the trustee. So basically, we view all the citizens of Wisconsin as our constituents. While hunters are a large and important group, if they were No. 5 or No. 10 it wouldn't matter. We'd be trying to give



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Tom Hauge

them good service.

Q: Is there pressure to cater to hunters? Do you think policy reflects that?

A: Again, I don't feel any greater pressure to cater to hunters versus anybody else. Hunting is an important part of the Wisconsin culture, and it's reflected in Wisconsin laws. The

constitutional rights to hunt, fish and trap in Wisconsin are thought to be important enough that they are not to be abridged by frivolous regulations. When we purchase lands through the Stewardship Program there are five nature-based outdoor activities that we are expected to offer on those lands. Hunting and trapping are two of those activities. Hunting does have a special place in our culture, but we won't undercut the resource for it.

Q: Do certain species — for example, charismatic megafauna or those important for tourism — get priority over others for conservation?

A: Any species that is of high interest to the public is going to get extra attention. For example, if it is in high demand (deer hunting), or it is in deep trouble (endangered), it is going to get a lot of interest. My experience is that it is those high-profile species that get most of the attention. Deer, turkeys, waterfowl, black bear, pheasants and grouse get a lot of attention in Wisconsin. With species that have a high interest for hunting, hunters have often established special fees on themselves to create additional funding for critical conservation work. Examples are the waterfowl stamp, pheasant stamp and turkey stamp. So they're going to get more attention. Deer hunting is estimated to have a \$1 billion impact on the state of Wisconsin, so that's going to get attention as well.

Q: Hunters are often accused of caring only about those species they

hunt. In your experience, is this true? If so, is it a concern?

A: Personally, I don't believe this is true. It hasn't been my experience. All of the hunting organizations understand that if they want to do good things for the species they are interested in, they first need to do good things for the habitat and ecosystem those species rely on. An example is Ducks Unlimited, who are all about wetland protection and restoration. If they do a good job of restoration and protection, ducks are going to benefit, but so are a whole host of other species. Ducks Unlimited doesn't begrudge those species; they look at it as an opportunity to bring more people into the fold. Similarly, Pheasants Forever focuses on the habitat as the No. 1 priority for species. Again, personally it has not been my experience that hunters only care about those species they hunt. If you spend time as a hunter in the woods observing what's going on, you start to see those relationships between animals and habitat. You can't help but gain an appreciation for that. On any given issue you may have hunters who are focused on a single issue, but hunters are not unique in this.

Q: What do you see as the biggest threat to wildlife?

A: Habitat loss and degradation are the biggest threats. It doesn't matter if you're talking about hunted species or nonhunted species. I think it's been that way for a very long time. There was a time in this country when over-



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"Recruitment and conservation won't happen on their own," says DNR's Tom Hauge. "If we care about wildlife and conservation, we have to reach out to new hunters."



Nonprofit organizations like Pheasants Forever, Whitetails Unlimited, Ducks Unlimited and others contribute time and funds each year for the Outdoor Heritage Education Expo.



In 2015, hunters contributed more than \$66 million in license fees that helped support management of wildlife areas, like Powell Marsh in Vilas County, and other public hunting and fishing grounds.

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exploitation was a concern; the market hunting days. But those days are long gone, and really it's habitat that is the concern. In fact, credit is due to our law enforcement in this regard. Don't get me wrong, there are still poaching cases and some commercialization, but our wardens do a great job.

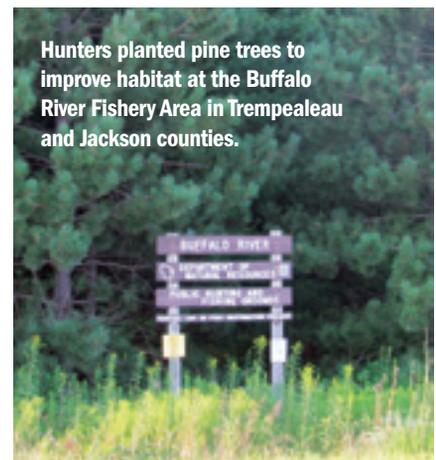
Q: What do you see as the biggest threat or concern for hunting?

A: It's a twofold thing: recruitment of hunters and places to hunt. I had a natural pathway to hunting and places to hunt through my family. Today, that's not the case for a lot of people. We have long been an urbanized society. A lot of those family connections to the land are disappearing and you

might not have somebody to take you hunting. As hunters, we have to give some serious thought to how we build programs for people who have an interest in hunting, but have no one to show them the way. Demographic changes are occurring across the country. In some places Hispanic groups are headed toward being the majority and they have very different traditions related to hunting as compared to the European traditions many of us have. But if we care about wildlife and conservation, it's important for us to figure out how to reach out to those communities. Number one, to extend a hand and say, "Welcome," but also to enlist their help in wildlife conservation. Recruitment and conservation won't happen on their own; it's going to take some dedicated effort.

Q: What do you see as the role for hunting in conservation?

A: First, hunting organizations are a critical voice for conservation when decisions are made to improve or degrade wildlife resources. There are competing demands for resources, and if hunting organizations don't bring their voices to the table, wildlife can be shortchanged in those decisions. Second, the money they bring to the table; hunters have always put their money where their mouths are and continue to do so. Third is reaching out to other organizations with a wildlife conservation interest to try to partner with other groups and be more effective in leveraging change. In the most recent farm bill a lot of the



Hunters planted pine trees to improve habitat at the Buffalo River Fishery Area in Trempealeau and Jackson counties.

RYAN W. THEILER

hunting organizations like Pheasants Forever worked with organizations like the American Bird Conservancy or the National Wildlife Federation to grow the voice or community that was pushing for a strong conservation message to the farm bill.

Q: Is wildlife better or worse off because of hunting?

A: No question, hands down, wildlife is better off because of hunting organizations. Hunting laws ended commercialization of wildlife, created a system of self-taxation to hire professional biologists and wardens, creating habitat and more. That whole story is not well understood by most people. A lot of people are surprised to learn that in most states very little tax money is used to manage wildlife resources. Most of it, in some cases all of it, is generated by the hunters.

Ryan W. Theiler writes from Fairchild, Wisconsin.



CHICO LABARBERA