

# The North American conservation model

A UNIQUE TRADITION IN NEED OF AN UPDATE

John Motoviloff

The storyline behind the development of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation reads like a novel — full of weighty themes, epic plot twists, wanton destruction and clear-eyed heroism. While the arc of this story might have been complete a generation ago, a postscript is necessary today to bring it into the modern age. First, however, let's go back to the beginning.

## In the beginning

As the glaciers on what is now North America began to recede some 10,000 years ago, Paleo-Indians made their way across the Bering Strait, then spread southeast across the continent. These nomadic hunters encountered herds of great beasts like bison and mastodon roaming the plains while a host of lesser beasts — elk, deer and small game — called the woodland home, to say nothing of the fowl-rich marshes and fish-thick waters. Native people enjoyed this bounty for thousands of years, as did the earliest explorers and traders in the 1500s and 1600s.

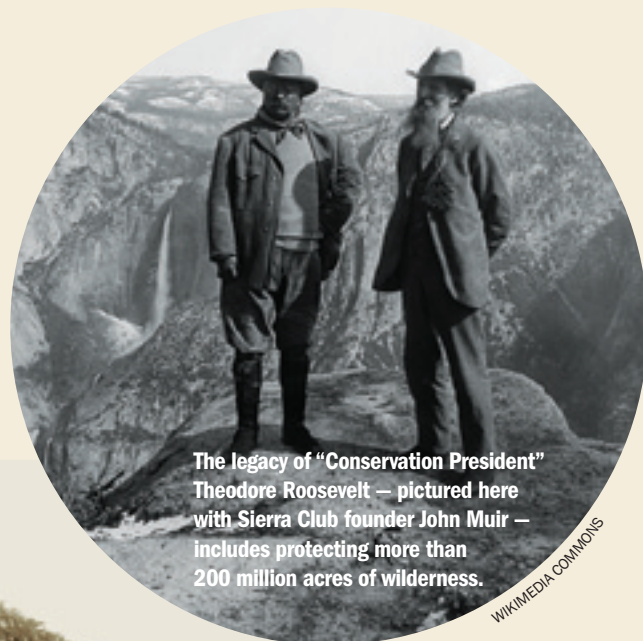
However, intensive trapping, market hunting, the introduction of non-native species and habitat loss all took a toll on wildlife in eastern North America. By the mid-1600s, beaver populations along the East Coast had crashed and white-tailed deer numbers were declining. Pioneers heading west, followed by the establishment of railroads in the mid-1800s, began to tax wildlife populations there. By the late 1800s, the thundering herds of buffalo that once

roamed the Plains were reduced to a few hundred individuals. Populations of elk, bears, bighorn sheep, wild turkeys — and even white-tailed deer — had also been decimated.

## Literature and law

While the conservation movement was still decades in the future, some interesting developments in literature and law seemed to anticipate it. Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" was published in 1836 and Henry David Thoreau's "Walden" in 1854. While different in tone and particulars, both works staked out new ground in defining our relationship to nature. The colonial and pioneer ethic focused exclusively on the usefulness of natural resources such as fur, hides, meat and trees. Emerson, Thoreau and others in the Transcendental movement championed nature's spiritual, restorative and aesthetic qualities.

An 1842 Supreme Court decision would prove to be of greater importance still for the conservation movement. A landowner on the New Jersey coast had tried to exclude others from harvesting



The legacy of "Conservation President" Theodore Roosevelt — pictured here with Sierra Club founder John Muir — includes protecting more than 200 million acres of wilderness.

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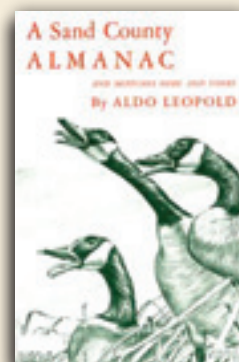
A hunter stands atop a mound of bison skulls, showing in the starkest of terms prevailing attitudes toward wildlife in the late 19th century.

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oysters from a mudflat he claimed as his own. The defendants had a right to harvest oysters there, the court argued, because certain natural resources — the right to fish in navigable waters, for instance — were held in the public trust to be enjoyed by all. While the basis for this decision was formed in Europe centuries ago — the Magna Carta of England of 1215 — its consequences for our developing nation were profound. Natural resources belonged not to the British crown or wealthy few, as was the case in Europe, but to the American people. It was the government's job to protect these resources.

## The age of conservation

It can be argued that these events in the middle part of the century set the stage for the spate of conservation legislation and policy initiatives that would follow: the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the passage of the Forest National Reserve Act in 1891, and the Lacey Game and Wild Birds Preservation and Disposition Act of 1900. Known as the "conservation president," Theodore Roosevelt left



"A Sand County Almanac" is the most famous work of Aldo Leopold. One of the founders of wildlife ecology, Leopold is remembered for his scientific insights and poetic writings.



The Dingell-Johnson Act passed in 1950 placed an excise tax on fishing equipment with monies used for fish habitat programs.

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behind an astounding legacy: more than 200 million acres of wildlands set aside, plus scores of wildlife refuges, national parks and monuments established during his time in office from 1901 to 1909.

This trend continued into the 20th century. The Protection of Migratory Birds Treaty Act (1916) — which made illegal the transport and sale of migratory birds and their feathers — effectively outlawed market hunting. Another landmark piece of conservation legislation, the Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act (1934) secured millions of acres of waterfowl habitat across the nation via the sale of duck stamps. Other crucial funding initiatives, the Pittman-Robertson Act (1937) and Dingell-Johnson Act (1950), generated money for game and fish habitat, respectively, through excise taxes placed on firearms and hunting/fishing equipment.

In the second half of the 20th century, more federal legislation continued the trend: Clean Air Act (1963), Clean Water Act (1972), Endangered Species Act (1973) and Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (1973).

These laws and initiatives did not occur in a vacuum. Conservation organizations began to emerge in the late 1800s. Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell and others helped found the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887. The Audubon Society and the Sierra Club



Similar legislation — the Pittman-Robertson Act of 1937 — taxes firearms and ammunition and is used for wildlife habitat.

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were also founded in the late 1800s. Like their successors in the 20th century — Ducks Unlimited, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited and the National Wild Turkey Foundation, for instance — these early groups worked to protect land and wielded considerable political clout for wildlife.

#### Basics of the model

Hunters and anglers — as individuals

and through conservation organizations — were the first to recognize that wildlife and wildlands were in jeopardy and that something had to be done. This coalition made possible the funding system we know today as the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. In this model, conservation is paid for via two basic sources: license and stamp sales, and excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment. The basics of the North American model can be summarized as follows:

- Public lands and the wildlife on them in North America are held in the public trust — for all to enjoy.
- It is the charge of government to manage this resource in a sustainable way, not only for the present but also for the future. History has taught us that commercial harvest of wildlife — and wanton slaughter as happened with bison populations — were costly mistakes that cannot be repeated.
- Governments are charged with managing game populations by setting bag limits, seasons and methods of take in a fair and democratic way, and with public input and review. Private conservation groups play an important role in this process, by mobilizing hunters, anglers and other conservationists to participate.
- Sound science should guide population estimates and forecasts. The science, known as wildlife ecology, was founded in part by Aldo Leopold in the 1930s.
- Hunting and angling are rights for all. No group or individual may be discriminated against. When possible, accommodations — like barrier-free fishing/hunting structures and special hunts for the disabled — should be made for those who cannot access resources in a traditional way.

#### The future of the model

Following the Depression and Dust Bowl years, wildlife populations and funding blossomed in the second half of the 20th century in the United States and Canada. A prosperous postwar economy meant strong license sales and plenty of outdoor supplies were purchased. Children, boys especially, generally hunted and fished if their fathers did. Set-aside land was plentiful for pheasants and other small game. Frequent clearcuts in public forests meant productive habitat there. The table appeared to be set for decades to come.

However, models are built on as-

**Silent sports — and those who participate in them — may prove a pivotal voice and funding source in the future of conservation.**



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sumptions. Chief among the assumptions of the North American model is that license and equipment purchases would continue at steady levels. While this had been the case for the second half of the 20th century, it will become problematic in the future.

While today's fathers hunt and fish at about the same rate as their fathers, 18- to 34-year-olds are participating less. Other activities (such as biking, hiking, paddling, bird-watching and other "silent sports") and shifting demographics from rural to urban or suburban contribute to this. Whatever the cause, the fact remains and will only become more stark if one looks at implications for young children today. Since recruitment usually happens at the family level, one declining generation would seem to beget another declining generation until at some point, the critical mass necessary for funding ceases to exist.

The other assumption — that those who pay for conservation dictate conservation policy — also proves troubling. On the face of it, there would seem to be an entire group of conservationists who are outside the conservation funding stream and thus outside the conservation debate — namely, silent sports enthusiasts who might not buy licenses or the kind of equipment that funds the current approach. Is it fair to exclude them, even if they are not paying? Is it wise to exclude them, especially given their size — millennials are the largest generation in U.S. history — and their




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**Continued conservation funding depends on recruiting new hunters, both male and female.**

passion for the outdoors, even if they enjoy it in a different way?

#### **New directions**

While some assumptions behind the North American model may not hold, the model itself, or some version of it, should not necessarily be discarded. Because millennials are not hunting and fishing in the numbers of previous generations does not mean they aren't interested in hunting and fishing. Perhaps a new approach centering on key beliefs of this generation, such as environmental sustainability, needs to be advanced. While

we are considering the next generation of hunters and anglers, should we continue to assume the current gender ratio of 90 percent male and 10 percent female, or some other? While we are questioning assumptions, could we revisit what activities require license fees and what equipment is taxable? These are worthy and important questions, and no doubt will need to be addressed as conservation agencies continue to look for innovative ways to fund their missions. 

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