

Wild Sheep Foundation
Grand Finale Banquet/Major Awards Night – Jan 18, 2020

Good evening everyone.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak here tonight, and thank you for being here. And by that I mean you all here in this room – but equally I mean the larger you, collectively — the Wild Sheep Foundation. And I mean here, in Reno; and here in North America — Canada, the US, and Mexico.

And in the world: in the IUCN, in Europe, in Asia. I hope I haven't left out another place you are working – but I wouldn't be surprised if I had.

Thank you.

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You already know something about what I am going to talk about tonight.

You all know that the number of American hunters has declined, and is declining.

You have seen or heard that we are down to around 5% of the US population.

Thus, our common fear, that hunting will end. Participation will die away — Some of the freedoms we have enjoyed since this country's first days, will be eroded away to nothing.

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But there is something worse that has already happened.

The much bigger group of people in conservation – the ones who are today more widely recognized as leaders in conservation than we are - don't know us – don't know anything about us.

We are being forgotten while we are still here.

They don't know that we founded the conservation movement and that we are driving much of it still today. This is a problem, and it's our problem. Maybe it shouldn't be, but it is.

We should be working with these non-hunting conservationists, gaining their support. We need this now.

On the one hand this requires some change – when everyone still knew or remembered what being outdoors really is about, there was no need to explain — and if we're honest,

we aren't by nature a group inclined to explain ourselves. We aren't used to explaining.

On the other hand, you're already doing this. You already gather coalitions around your issues.

You are engaging grassroots through programs such as 1Campfire. You have an incredible youth program.

You are headquartered in one of the world's leading centers of conservation passion, Bozeman, Montana. These folks see your common interest in conservation.

You have opened your doors there to that community – [and tapped a few kegs, which always helps].

That's smart.

The rest of the conservation world is big. We could use their help, they need ours and they can't succeed without us - (whether right now they know it or not).

Counting hunters and anglers and wildlife-watchers all together makes a group of about 40% of the US population.

The outdoor industry says the all-in number of Americans going outdoors is nearly 50%. Recruitment, retention and reactivation is essential, I agree — this is different. It's bigger, but it's easier.

Toward this objective — to remind and educate this big conservation community for

common good — over the last several years I have convened the Conservation Roundtable.

This is an occasional gathering of conservation groups including hunters (notably your Wild Sheep Foundation) and non-hunters.

We have met twice on our own; Twice with Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke; And twice with the current Secretary David Bernhardt.

We now have an active list of issues including two of yours: Big-game habitat corridors and the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.

The entire list includes other issues of importance to us — and to the campers, hikers, bikers, and paddlers who more

commonly represent conservation to the modern world.

In working with them they realize - and help us remind the world - that hunters created the conservation movement, that we hold knowledge, and have experience that is essential to their goals too.

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And there is something else we can do. The conservation founders did it too.

They created a new language for hunting in what they did and what they said.

This earned them the leading role in restoring wildlife.

It should be easier for us than it was for the founders of conservation – hunters all.

By the turning of the 20th century, hunting in America was destroying wildlife. Hunting was open to all, at all times and by all means. It was done to supply restaurants and clothing trades, and much else. It went full on like this until wildlife was too hard to find.

This was hunting. So they coined the term “market hunting”.

In so doing, the founders not only changed the meaning of the word but also persuaded society that hunting - which was the problem at the time - would become the solution.

By enacting game laws they redefined “hunting” and “poaching”. By creating and publishing the Fair Chase ethic they moved “hunting” away from market slaughter, and also made it more than sport – they made hunting into conservation.

They were the first to use the term “conservation” in common talk and print media; and they said Fair Chase® is “the ethical, sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of any free-ranging wild, big game animal in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the game animals”.

By creating forest preserves and refuges, limiting harvest, stopping erosion, and funding wildlife agencies they demonstrated how a personal, often solitary pursuit advanced the conservation of wildlife and habitat, and so was good for the whole of society.

Their campaigns against what they called the “slob hunting” of littering, trespassing, and

game gluttons demonstrated the honorability and respect of Fair Chase hunting.

Now think of Modern Hunting today.

The founders – mainly men – are gone. But where the great fathers pioneered we now have great families – all of you – carrying on the work.

There are fewer of us but more kinds of us. And there are more kinds of conservation-curious people to hear us.

Hunting itself looks a lot different. The great fathers did it with wool, canvas, and leather.

We do it in the phenomenal kits of synthetic materials made by people in this room.

The weapons and other gear – the science of fitness – all are now more diverse, precise,

and effective. Also made by people in this room.

These innovations and the commitment of their makers to conservation are part of why wildlife restoration has worked and continues to work.

But we do not look like the great fathers to the uninformed, and meanwhile, conservation challenges have grown. Some game species are overabundant, and others are threatened by overabundant predators.

Virtually all non-game species are declining.

They don't know what hunting has to offer for these problems. Hunting itself is not part of every solution for these challenges, of course. But hunters can be.

For example, we can explain predator control. We understand the importance of all species and the need to sustain them. We know the policies and programs in place; and, we can help develop new ones needed.

We can hold the movement to a steady direction so the Wilderness Act and the Endangered Species Act don't circle back on us and get in the way of the conservation they are supposed to advance.

*****If we make this connection with non-hunters they will see and understand us as the modern hunters who carry the legacy of the originals.*****

Now, this is how our language of today can blaze through the ignorance and nonsense:

Today the uninformed public hears about “sport hunting”, “trophy hunting”, canned shoots masquerading as hunting, and others. They don’t know what these terms mean, and they can’t distinguish them. We do, and we can.

The term “sport hunting” has got to go. It sounds like we’re in it only for the fun and kill.

We’ve got to do something with “trophy hunting”. It should mean going deeper, farther, and longer, working harder, to find an animal that shows what conservation can produce. (Sheep hunters may understand this the most.)

We talk of “hog hunts” and other “varmint hunts” that differ in purpose and practice from what we usually mean by hunting.

“Culling” is a better word, that has a conservation meaning.

There is an industry of canned shooting that calls itself hunting. We should outlaw this as false advertising.

Our own media industry, which prints for and broadcasts to hunters, is visible to non-hunters too. Our broadcasts must recognize this and show the conservation at the root of the skills, experiences, and equipment on display.

We already have examples of what such change can mean.

We have – you have – coalitions on Wilderness policy in the Desert National Wildlife Refuge and access to the Castle Mountains National Monument.

These partners are with us because they are coming to appreciate the need for management and our help in getting it.

We have coalitions even on predator control - along with Wilderness, one of the most challenging issues. By separating “control” as necessary management, and not hunting, we have made it about ecology.

A bipartisan vote in Congress approved predator control of sea lions in the Columbia River estuary where sea lions were over-killing salmon.

In California, the Audubon Society worked with duck hunters to control skunks and other predators that destroy ground-nests – those of ducks and of plovers.

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You are already part of the most powerful communication system that hunting has ever had. Let's use it to better explain, build broad support for what we do, and advance the conservation of what we most care about.

I hope we'll work together so that your story, and the stories of your corporate sponsors, and their professional communicators, is continually refining the words used and expanding the audiences reached.

It must go out in a new language for modern hunting that restates as brightly today what the Fair Chase ethic said a century ago.

Our new language must be more specific. It must keep conservation foremost. Fair Chase is still the vital force of our passion. It must become our identity again.

Thank you for helping keep the Fair Chase ethic foremost. The Wild Sheep Foundation is and can be a powerful partner in defining modern hunting.

You — all of us — should be equally recognized as conservationists by walking into a room as when you show up in the field to move sheep or improve habitat.

Our language - spoken, written, filmed - can explain exactly, consistently that hunting is an honorable ethic, an expert skillset, and an indispensable part of conservation.

Thank you.