

BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Hunters: Founders and Leaders of Wildlife Conservation

By H. Sterling Burnett

The state of wildlife on the African continent today resembles that of wildlife in the United States in the late 19th century. African wildlife populations are declining as habitat is converted to farming, wildlife is competing with or preying on domestic livestock and wildlife pursuit is increasingly commercialized. But first in the United States and now in Africa, hunters have led the charge to conserve wildlife.

Although some may find the fact surprising, outdoor sportsmen proposed and carried out virtually all of the initiatives that saved important U.S. game species from extinction. Indeed, most funding for the research into wildlife needs and habitat preservation still is provided by hunters. If Africa's diverse wildlife is to survive, it too likely will owe that survival to hunters.

Wildlife Conservation in America. President Theodore Roosevelt, a noted big-game hunter, is often credited as the initial force behind American wildlife conservation. While Roosevelt did draw vital public attention to wildlife conservation, hunters began public and private efforts decades before Roosevelt established the first wildlife reservation in 1903.

- In 1846 prominent sportsmen prodded Rhode Island legislators into passing the first seasonal hunting regulation for waterfowl.
- In 1871 a sportsmen's association established the nation's first incorporated game preserve, the 12,000-acre Blooming Grove Park in Pike County, Pa., for the purpose of "preserving, importing, breeding and propagating game animals, birds and fish, and of furnishing facilities to the members for hunting, shooting and fishing."

- In 1877 prominent New York sportsmen formed the Bisby Club in the Adirondack Mountains, and by the early 1890s the original group merged with the Adirondack League Club to protect a 179,000-acre game reserve.
- In 1878 sportsmen in Iowa pushed legislation to initiate the first limits on the number of animals taken daily.

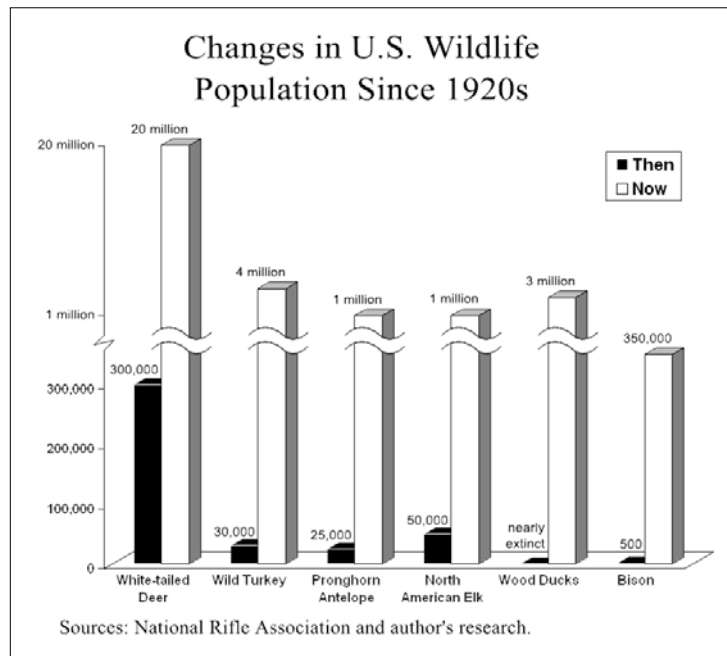
The late 19th century saw lobbying and grassroots organizing by hunting organizations such as the Boone and Crockett Club (formed in 1887) — whose members included Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford

Pinchot, founder of the U.S. Forest Service, and the National Rifle Association (1871); later came the Izaak Walton League (1922). Bolstered by editorials and articles in outdoor journals such as *Forest and Stream* (1873), *Field and Stream* (1874) and *American Sportsmen* (1871), the organizations pressed Congress to pass the first substantial national wildlife management bills:

- The Lacey Act (1900), the first federal law protecting game, prohibited the interstate shipment of illegally taken wildlife and importation of species.

- The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (1918) regulated the hunting of migratory birds.

- The Migratory Bird Hunting Stamp Act (1934), known as the "Duck Stamp Act," required hunters of migratory birds to buy a federal duck stamp, with the generated revenue dedicated to wetlands conservation projects.
- The Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (1937), also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act, created a 10 percent excise tax — increased later to 11 percent — on sporting arms and ammunition. Revenue is deposited in a special trust fund under the management of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be used for state wildlife restoration projects.



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In 1908 New York became the first state to require a hunting license. By 1928 every state had instituted a hunting license requirement, with the funds dedicated to wildlife management.

Hunters' Dollars Save Wildlife. The various licenses, fees and taxes on hunting and hunting equipment fund more than 90 percent of the budgets of state fish and wildlife agencies.

- Since 1923, sales of state hunting licenses, tags and permits have provided more than \$10.2 billion for wildlife management, habitat acquisition and enhancement and conservation law enforcement.
- The Federal Duck Stamp Program has generated more than \$500 million for the purchase and protection of wetlands, with duck stamp revenue reaching \$22.9 million annually by 1996.
- The Pittman-Robertson Act has distributed more than \$3.8 billion to state fish and wildlife agencies since 1937.

In addition, the more than 15 million licensed hunters in the United States direct money, time and effort to conserve wildlife and habitat as individuals and through local clubs, state conservation groups, state hunting organizations and many national associations.

- The 1996 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation reports that hunting expenditures totaled \$20.6 billion, with \$11.3 billion going for hunting equipment, \$5.2 billion for trip-related expenses and \$4.1 billion for other expenses such as land leases, membership dues and licenses.
- Combined with fishing and trapping licenses and taxes, the total sportsmen's wildlife conservation contribution for 2000 was over \$3.7 billion.

Hunters' dollars and efforts have paid off for wildlife. In the 1920s many wildlife populations were at historic lows, but now they are booming. As the graphic shows:

- White-tailed deer populations had declined to approximately 300,000, wild turkey to fewer than 30,000, pronghorn antelope to only 25,000 and North American elk to 50,000; the wood duck was nearly extinct and there were fewer than 500 bison.
- Today there are more than 20 million white-tailed deer, more than 4 million turkeys (with populations in every state but Alaska) and more than 1 million antelope and elk.

- Wood ducks, numbering over 3 million, are the most common breeding waterfowl in the U.S., and bison number 350,000.

By conserving habitat for game animals, hunters benefit non-game wildlife as well. For instance, hundreds of threatened and endangered non-game animals live on the 9 million-plus acres restored by Ducks Unlimited, a private conservation organization founded by duck hunters.

Hunters Benefit African Wildlife. Individually and through organizations such as Safari Club International, big-game hunters from the United States and around the world also have worked with governments in Africa to save threatened and endangered African wildlife. Hunters, private landowners and even tribes and villages have worked together to establish wildlife conservancies in several countries. Hunting is the main source of income for the conservancies and many ranchers and provides native peoples and private landowners alike with incentives to preserve wildlife in Zimbabwe and in other poverty-stricken nations. In Africa the motto is: *If it pays, it stays.*

The conservancies work to develop relationships with and improve the local economy of nearby communities. Conservancies involve locals who work as trackers for hunting parties and as guards to ward off poachers. One conservancy also has set up a trust on behalf of the local communities. To establish an annual income, the trust will purchase wildlife to be released in the conservancy, and the conservancy will later pay the trust for any increases in population over the original number of animals. Among the animals that have come to be seen by Africans as desirable as opposed to pests are elephants, lions, leopards and numerous antelope species.

Conclusion. Among some environmental groups, hunting has a bad name due to the early excesses of market hunting in the United States and poaching in Africa. Yet regulated sport hunting has not caused or threatened the extinction of a single species. On the contrary, in America and Africa, the money hunters spend and contribute pays the cost of wildlife protection.

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