

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUTDOOR ETHICS TO THE FUTURE OF OUTDOOR RECREATION

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The fact that hunter behavior can have a significant impact on public attitudes about hunting is a given that I'm sure none of us considers particularly new or enlightening. The question that intrigues me is the one that asks, "how important is hunter behavior to the future of hunting?" After more than 5 years of trying to find the answer, I have concluded that improving hunter ethics may well be the key to the preservation of hunting in America.

Before I explain I think we should look back a few years. Historical perspective is critical to any examination of public attitudes about hunting. In the mid-1920's a man wasn't considered a sportsman unless he was a member of the Izaak Walton League. The 54 hunters and fishermen who founded the League were fire-breathing evangelists for ethical conduct and they turned a nation of sportsmen to their cause. Those early Ikes wrote and spoke about the outdoors with a reverence that is just not seen today.

Zane Grey, the famed western writer and noted sportsman, was on the League's editorial staff and in September of 1922 Grey penned a front page editorial in the organization's monthly magazine. His words typify the passionate spirit of that era. Grey said:

"... If honest and direct appeal fails to win thoughtless and ignorant hunters and fishermen to our cause then they must be scorned and flayed and ostracized until they are ashamed of their selfishness. . . . Nature abhors weaklings. And red-blooded pursuits operate against the appalling degeneracy of modern days. Nevertheless, sportsmen, as a mass, are hypocrites, and are blind to the hand-writing on the wall."

Zane Grey was just one of dozens of prominent national figures who were preaching the gospel of good sportsmanship in communities from coast to coast. Those circuit-riding crusaders of the 1920's banded together in such large numbers and with such fierce determination that they made unethical conduct unthinkable. Members of Congress, the President of the United States and the Supreme Court Justices pitched right in with them and when they marched on Washington they got what they wanted. Good sportsmanship was patriotic. It was the thing to do and America responded.

During the Great Depression, the late J. N. "Ding" Darling helped keep things from getting out of hand with his hard hitting "fish and game hog" editorial cartoons. Designer of the first federal Duck Stamp, Mr. Darling started the National Wildlife Federation in 1936 helping to weld hunters and non-hunters into a new major national force for wildlife conservation. Ducks Unlimited, formed in 1937, has already put more than \$130,000,000 to work for waterfowl habitat and is an excellent example of hunter responsibility.

The efforts of these fine private organizations, federal and state agencies and thousands of inspired and talented individuals have helped make the public aware of the vital, positive role hunters and hunting play in the enhancement of America's wild living resources. They have helped, but have they done enough?

There are many highly regarded outdoorsmen who feel that sport hunting may be in for its most difficult period during the next 2 decades. Some of their reasons include: the urbanization of America, the increasingly smaller percentage of hunters in the total U.S. population, the growing political sophistication and funding of the anti-hunting, animal

rights and anti-gun movements, the continuing loss of habitat, the increasing use of high-tech gadgets in the field, deteriorating hunter-landowner relations, the illegal actions of far too many hunters, opposition and ridicule by the media and popular public figures, erosion of state management authority, abuse of subsistence hunting rights, lack of funding for state agencies, a largely ineffective game law judicial enforcement process, and primarily a poor job of public relations and education.

I believe that these conditions are backing hunters into an increasingly narrow corner—a corner from which we may not extract ourselves without a revival of the spirit of sportsmanship shown in the 1920's. The future health of sport hunting is too important to trust to gut reaction or casual observation. In recent years there have been hundreds of research papers presented on the hunter, hunting and the public's view of hunters and hunting. An analysis of those papers tells me that the conditions I just mentioned are indeed having a marked effect on public attitudes. When boiled down the surveys reveal that:

- 1) The majority of the public obtains its knowledge of animals from watching television.
- 2) The younger generation is increasingly more preservation-minded and some students believe that life for a wild animal involves no struggle for survival.
- 3) Student objections to hunting also included hunting as sport, overkill, cruelty and unfair chase.
- 4) A high percentage of non-hunters grew up in cities and far more people with anti-hunting views reside in urban rather than rural areas.
- 5) Many people feel hunters require little skill or knowledge to get a hunting license.
- 6) Most hunters are poor joiners of sports and conservation groups (waterfowlers may be an exception).
- 7) Of the negative views, more were directed at the hunter rather than hunting.

Landowners say property damage and a lack of courtesy, rather than safety, are the main problems with hunting today. The surveys and papers studied show that public descriptive opinions of hunters have tended to be negative since the 60's. I could continue to explore this vein in great detail but I don't see the need. Between common sense and stacks of research papers we can easily see that an attitude problem exists with many hunters as well as the public at large.

There are some good signs and possible solutions emanating from the papers of the researchers. There are also some very positive programs under way to improve hunter behavior, the quality of hunting and public education. The researchers' findings show that although attitudes about consumptive and non-consumptive uses of wildlife seem to be set by the early teens, specific, well-targeted education programs can change attitudes in favor of consumptive use. Studies of hunter attitudes show such things as:

- 1) Urban hunters express the greatest concern with unethical hunting practices.
- 2) Many hunters express a willingness to report violations.
- 3) Many hunters are willing to curtail their activity and increase their own costs to benefit the resources and improve the quality of their experience.

Studies of the non-hunting public show that:

- 1) While most are not active supporters of hunting, they are also not anti-hunting and most agree that hunting should continue as a management tool.
- 2) Wildlife is better off with animal population controls.
- 3) Illegal killing should draw stiffer fines.

I recently made 3 trips to Maryland's Eastern Shore where I spent a great deal of time interviewing people who lived in the heart of prime waterfowling country. I wanted to know if attitudes were changing and if so, which way and why. My findings are a mixed bag. Most Eastern Shore residents strongly support hunting as it has tremendous

economic as well as recreational and social benefits. Many merchants do their best during the long goose hunting season and this has been an especially good shooting year.

The people I talked to generally had high praise for the conduct of non-resident waterfowlers, but were less enthusiastic about the activities of some of their neighbors residing in the area. This is consistent with the findings of many researchers nationwide.

I also found that increasing subdivision of Eastern Shore farms was bringing in more and more non-hunters as well as shrinking the land base available to wildlife and hunters. In many cases the new residents became hunters or at least do not oppose hunting. This can be largely attributed to the social and economic importance of waterfowling in the area as well as its rich and romantic history.

There is a great deal of new activity promoting hunter ethics. In May of 1980, the Izaak Walton League, together with the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies sponsored the first National Conference on Outdoor Ethics. Some of the concerns I have just cited were discussed at length by sportsmen, researchers, wildlife managers, state and federal agency heads and conservation group leaders. While the behavior of all outdoor recreationists was to be the broad focus of the Conference, the hunter's image, actions and the public perception of hunting dominated the session. To say the Conference was stimulating would be a gross understatement based on the 3 days of discussion. The commitments made and the follow-up to those commitments are impressive.

Many organizations pledged that they would emphasize ethical outdoor conduct in their overall programs. Included are the Boy Scouts, the Army Corps of Engineers, International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the National 4-H Environmental Education Committee and the J. N. "Ding" Darling Foundation.

The Izaak Walton League offered to serve as a national clearinghouse and information center on all matters pertaining to outdoor ethics. We are gathering data for an Outdoor Ethics newsletter which will cover the many programs now under way and provide tips on how to stage conferences, incorporate ethics into National Hunting and Fishing Day programs and improve landowner relations. Many states have outdoor ethics programs under way or in the development stage.

Possibly no organization has or is doing more to improve hunter behavior and change public attitudes than is the National Shooting Sports Foundation. The work of the Foundation is a model for all of us interested in protecting the quality of future hunting.

After nearly 6 years of concentration on the subject of sportsman behavior I have become convinced that improving the image of the hunter depends first on improving the hunter. To do that we must try and recapture the evangelistic spirit of men like Zane Grey and "Ding" Darling. We must realize that the political and legal institutions of this country are demonstrably inadequate to regulate behavior in the field; that will continue to depend as it always has on what behavior we expect of ourselves.

I come reluctantly, but inevitably to the conclusion that the day has passed when the ethics of the chase could be treated as a merely personal matter, an unwritten contract between a man and his conscience, and not the proper business of anyone else. The time has come when the contract must be enlarged and renewed, when we must assume our share of responsibility for the code of our hunting group and the ethical behavior of our friends, when we must admit that whenever we silently countenance slob hunting in a friend we become slob ourselves.

As much as it goes against the grain, we are called upon to place loyalty to the sport—to the traditions and limitations that make hunting worthwhile—ahead of our short term loyalties to our buddies. Simply put, we must be willing to refuse to hunt with a friend who

is a slob, just as we would refrain from hunting with him if he were habitually careless about gun safety.

We must enforce the rules and the code ourselves, personally and among our companions. It's not good enough to leave it to the state, the Fish and Game Commission, the wardens and the law. Because the state cannot enforce a standard of ethics, the state cannot save hunting. Only we can do that.