

Partnerships, Principles, and Purposes— Reaffirming Conservation Through Wise Use

Shane P. Mahoney, *Wildlife Ecosystem Research, Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Division, PO Box 8700, St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada A1B4J6*

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 51:4-7

Each time a group of people come together with common purpose, with principles in their hearts and ideas in their minds, the world stands to gain immeasurably. Every such time a new chance is born, a new opportunity offered. This is the 51st time that this group has met. How this meeting will succeed in comparison to all its predecessors will depend entirely on us. Every person here has been to many such meetings and probably few are memorable. But we can make a difference. I believe beyond all doubt that an idea harnessed to passion is an unstoppable force. We have a terribly important responsibility and a noble undertaking as our chosen way. I ask you, respectfully, let us turn everything we have, our wisdom, talent, and experience; indeed, even our weariness and frustration, to the task at hand. When on this very morning a bugling elk shattered the morning sun, or a pronghorn danced away into the shimmering distance, we, in a very real sense, were there.

Since man's earliest engagements with nature, first as prey and then as consummate predator, the necessity of partnership was inescapable. To thwart the lion, to subdue the mammoth, men alone were doomed to failure; as a collectively, however, they were brilliantly, and demonstrably unstoppable. In this sense humanity's capacity for success through coordinated effort mirrored the very basis of all life. For humankind itself, like all organisms and, in fact, all processes and constructs within nature, is a virtual partnership, even unto our internal mechanisms. From protein to organelle, from cell to organ, from organ system to organism complete, from individual to species, there is an inevitability to the consequence of mutual interdependence and success through cooperation. Life and death, within the ecology of this rarest and loneliest of planets, is itself a partnership of competing interests doomed to mutual success by an unavoidable marriage of dependency. Through decomposition and decay there is provided the primordial stuff of new life; through new life beginning, the unquestionable assurance of death, detritus, and deliverance once more. We are all, as nature's creations, greater than the sum of ourselves and inextricably tied to a unified inevitability of life.

Across the boreal and arctic biomes of the world a group of prostrate and unimpressive plants define not only the capacity of partnerships to enhance survivorship, but also to embellish the world around them. Lichens, those creeping carpets of spongiform carbohydrate that support the great biomass of ungulates and predators—the musk oxen, the caribou, the wolf—are themselves a wondrous example of partnership in nature. Composed of algae and fungi, living in what we as scientists term a symbiotic relationship, these composite plants provide for and by each partner what the other cannot, and in so doing have occupied a niche exclusive to themselves but vital to the broad community of life around them. The algae, with its capacity to trap and transform the sun, feeds its partner while its own important concerns over desiccation of its fragile structure are eliminated by the protective strength and water gathering capacity of the fungus. Their interests, as in all parties to cooperation, are individual and selfish, and non-identical; their objectives, however, are sufficiently entwined to engender a greater good. Not all that is holy in this world is the hand work of saints!

Partnerships in human society are, of course, not the same as those we can identify in the purely physical and evolutionary context. It would, however, I believe, be a mistake for us not to recognize the lessons and examples which nature provides, even if these are not identical to our own condition. Metaphors, after all, are powerful instruments of illustration, despite their inexactitude. Furthermore, we must not fail to study our own histories and to draw from them, as though from a well of truth, guidance and examples for success. Too frequently we seem to view the only reality and to assume that change, because of its inevitability, is also inscrutable and immune to our influence. This can often be accomplished by a decision to retreat behind walls of familiarity and to unwittingly await the inevitable strengthening of forces gathering, unobserved, outside. Hadrian's Wall, built to protect Rome in the second century AD, and the Great Wall of China, constructed 300 years before that, are lessons not to be repeated. However, reaching out blindly into the night of the future, either alone or accompanied only by those whom we do not know well, is not a tried recipe for human success either. Standing upon our strengths to view the distant horizon is the ideal we should pursue. From such a vantage point obstacles may be avoided and direct routes chosen. From there our goal is unobscured.

It is in this context of man and nature, therefore, and in the context of a past lighting a way to the future, that I challenge us to consider the questions of conservation leadership and cooperation. We in this gathering of wildlife and fishery professionals are members of an elite to whom a grave responsibility has been given. We are asked to protect the world. We have been guided to accept this by our love for nature and our commitment to conservation, not only of the animals and the habitats they require, indeed not only to the very processes that sustain all life, but also, crucially, to the full range of traditional interactions of humanity with animate and inanimate creation. This includes, but has never been restricted to, interactions of lethal consequence. Yes. We have killed, and for perhaps millions of years; but we have also been awed to silence and immobility. Yes. We have consumed in order for our bodies to live and to recreate; but we have also watched and envied and let live the "others" whose language we do not share and whose beauty and freedom we may worship . . . and have.

We must remember and acknowledge also, however, that we did not unilaterally originate this work that we have inherited; nor are we alone in its undertaking at present. Our own niche, our own work and identity, is itself a product of partnership, one from which we were simultaneously created and to which we, with consistency and significance, have contributed. The partnership of which I speak is the most successful conservation movement in the history of the world. It is the North American system of "conservation through wise use." Its origins were a partnership of diverse ideas and commitments and intellectual, social, and political resources. The substrate for all, however, was a concern for the future of wild animals and fish and of man's privilege and opportunity to observe, pursue, capture, and consume them. Fully a century after this continent provided a working and brilliant example, the world entire decided to invent a *new* approach to world and human preservation. They called it "sustainable development." Only a child, asleep and in the consummate warmth of its mother's arms, could fail to notice the similarity.

Of course the world is changing and of course we face new challenges. Our increasingly urbanized continent, slavishly pursuing the destruction of peace and tranquillity in the name of progress, is a far different world than that which faced Grinnell, Pinchot, and Roosevelt; or is it? It is historical fact that before the Civil War began sportsmen were already agitating against the destruction of forests as well as game in this country. They saw even then the clear need for habitat programs. It was in 1646 that Rhode Island passed a law prohibiting the taking of deer in summer and early autumn. Ethics for the hunt is not a 1990s phenomenon. And we should remember that the first hunting and fishing periodicals, *American Sportsman*, *Forest and Stream*, and *Field and Stream* were in existence by the 1870s, serving to focus utilitarian conservationist concerns over forest, wildlife, and fish depletion.

Indeed, while it is customary to identify a handful of prominent individuals as the saviors of wildlife and hunting and fishing and to suggest that the early concerns for wild animals were only directed towards having "lots to kill," the truth is that by the 1870s at least, sportsmen had been working on a series of important conservation issues that are almost identical to the main thrust of our efforts today. These included restriction on commercial traffic in wild animals, elaboration of fish hatching technologies and programs, efforts to control pollution of waterways, increased enforcement capabilities, the development of new legislation, and the establishment of a system of protected nature reserves. Furthermore, Roosevelt and Pinchot were products of a movement, not its originators. By the turn of the century they were out in front but there were decades of effort, by thousands of persons behind them. These conservationists were largely comprised of hunters and fishermen, but we must acknowledge, too, that there were persons who held many of the same views but who did not support or believe in the killing of wild things.

Ahead of us looms the millennium. Where will our traditions, where will our wilderness and wildlife be in another 50 or 100 years? Who will be the players of tomorrow; who will be the leaders of today? What diverse collectively, sharing commonality of principles and goals, sharing a belief in one another and in themselves, is poised to carry on the great work of conservation? Who sits at the table

now? Who should be invited to share this meal? Surely the answer to this question is fundamental to the future of all persons, industries, and organizations concerned for wildlife and fish on this continent. Surely we must decide how to strengthen our partnerships, how to improve our leadership, how to succeed for another 100 years in the conservation of nature and humanity's legitimate and formative role within it. There is much at stake and we must successfully meet challenges ahead. To fail would be disastrous; to fail for lack of effort would be a disgrace. In Newfoundland we have a saying, "An old dog for the hard road and a pup for the marshes"; well, we are on the hard road and we will need all the old dogs we can find. I see success, truly, in the audience before me. I ask us all to make the best efforts we can. There is a way forward and it is by reaching out in a spirit of cooperation and inward in search of the leadership in us all.