



An Inadequate Construct?

WHAT'S FLAWED, WHAT'S MISSING, WHAT'S NEEDED

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Credit: Heather Varco

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The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has seen a meteoric rise in acceptance and influence among wildlife professionals in the past decade. Since the first articulation of the Model appeared in 2001 (Geist *et al.* 2001), literature about it has grown, professional organizations have endorsed it, institutions have developed curricula to teach it, state agencies have built it into their strategic plans, sessions at professional meetings have focused on explaining it, and an entire issue of *The Wildlife Professional* was devoted to it (TWP 2010).

But what exactly have so many been writing about, endorsing, teaching, explaining, and celebrating? The North American Model is expressed as two related (sometimes conflated) endeavors: a description of the history of conservation in North America, and an ethical prescription for how conservation should proceed. That is, the word “model” is sometimes employed to describe the way wildlife was or is managed in North America, and sometimes the word “model” is used in a congratulatory sense to praise the past and to prescribe how future wildlife conservation ought to be conducted in North America and elsewhere. Yet the rise in the Model’s popularity is worrisome in both its descriptive and prescriptive modes: One rests upon an inadequate account of history and the other on an inadequate ethic.

Inadequate History

When “Model” is used descriptively, it presents a narrative explaining how North Americans came to embrace wildlife conservation. According to this narrative, market or commercial hunting villainously

ravaged North American wildlife populations until the late 1800s. The rise of sport or recreational hunting, however, acted as the salve to wildlife exploitation, eventually saving wildlife populations. Recreational hunting was the critical means by which we grew to care for wildlife, and the fundamental motivation to lobby and pay for conservation.

Yet a broader interpretation of history indicates that recreational hunting was only one of several important factors that led to improved conservation in North America. Beginning in the 1960s, for example, conservation was dominated by non-hunters whose legacy includes key legislation such as the U.S. Wilderness Act, Endangered Species Act, Clean Air and Water Acts, and similar acts in Canada. In addition, what are commonly referred to as “non-consumptive” uses of nature—such as National Park visitation and bird watching—have also been important for motivating conservation action (Duffus and Dearden 1990, Balmford *et al.* 2009). These perspectives on the history of conservation do not stand in opposition to hunting, yet they show how other forces also shaped North American wildlife conservation, and how hunting is not *necessary* for conservation.

The two main sources that advocates of the Model cite to support their historical hunter-conservationist narrative include John F. Reiger’s *American Sportsmen and the Origin of Conservation* (Reiger 2000) and James B. Trefethan’s *An American Crusade for Wildlife* (Trefethan 1975, published by the Boone and Crockett Club). Yet other wildlife histories suggest a dramatically different narrative.

According to Thomas R. Dunlap’s *Saving America’s Wildlife: Ecology and the American Mind, 1850-1990* (Dunlap 1990), a variety of nature enthusiasts strove to save North American wildlife and support conservation. Dunlap also shows that while recreational hunters worked to save wildlife deemed “game species,” some actively worked against the conservation of non-game species under the guise of eradicating “varmints and vermin”—and some still do. Moreover, the historical narrative dominating current literature on the Model

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focuses almost exclusively on the ideas and actions of Theodore Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot, and others with a narrowly utilitarian focus, while downplaying the contributions of individuals such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold, who motivated broad-based conservation without focusing on hunting as its primary tool.

While the Model's selective historical narrative serves the conclusion that recreational hunting is (or at least was) necessary for conservation, a more complete historical narrative does not support that conclusion. Developing a historical narrative to serve the justification of a specific ethical prescription is not uncommon. It is troublesome, however, if that history is so selective that it ignores historical elements contradicting the ethical prescription. Because the Model ignores historical evidence contrary to its ethical prescription, it is based on an inadequate accounting of history.

Inadequate Ethics

The North American Model also represents inadequate ethical reasoning and a misguided prescription for the future of conservation for three main reasons. First, it relies too heavily on the principle that past behavior is an appropriate justification for future behavior. To suggest that a historical episode can justify an ethical prescription is to commit a logical fallacy known as *argumentum ad antiquitatem* (the argument from antiquity or from tradition). One would not argue that society should perpetuate child slave labor or gender discrimination simply because such practices are part of our history. Likewise, it is wrong to conclude that hunting should play a central role in future conservation simply because it had in the past.

Second, if conservation is best served by a multi-pronged approach, then why do advocates of the Model focus almost exclusively on the role of hunting, especially since participation in hunting is on the decline? If one's primary concern were conservation in general, then to focus on hunting as the means to conservation would seem an obviously inadequate strategy. This raises the concern that advocates of the Model are not primarily motivated by conservation, but rather by defending hunting. We do not object to advocating for either. However, these concerns make us wonder if Model advocates have obfuscated motivations, a hallmark of inadequate ethical reasoning.

A third reason to wonder whether the Model's primary interest is hunting rather than conservation is its neglect to address important contemporary instances where the interests of recreational hunters conflict with conservation. For example, hunter interest is

often an important influence behind management leading to overabundance of ungulates and the diminution of ecosystem services provided by predators, both of which compromise ecosystem health. Indeed, some important Model advocates are not allies in efforts to restore and maintain the ecosystem services that predators provide (e.g., Geist 2008).

The “Seven Sisters” of the Model

The seven basic tenets of the North American Model help illustrate its inadequate historical and ethical reasoning. While each tenet may capture a fine principle, it is far from obvious why together these principles represent an adequate or insightful basis for conservation in general, or for wildlife conservation in particular. A great deal of scholarship (Callicott 2005, Jamieson 2008, Speth 2005, Meine 2004) suggests that the future of conservation will depend much more on principles that address complex questions such as: Are non-human creatures and ecological collectives valuable for their own sake or only for their value to humans? Do people living in developed countries have an obligation to reduce

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resource consumption? How do we define ecosystem health, and how can it be maintained while, at the same time, maximizing values such as human liberty and social justice? The seven tenets of the Model do not reflect these important issues.

Even if the seven tenets represent appropriate principles in and of themselves, several of them seem characterized more by the questions they raise than by the conservation insight they provide. For example, one tenet asserts that “*Wildlife Can Only Be Killed for a Legitimate Purpose.*” This principle is as basic and appropriate as it is void of useful insight about defining a legitimate purpose.

Another tenet asserts that “*Science is the Proper Tool for Discharge of Wildlife Policy.*” This is mistaken for equating a desire for policies informed by science with science discharging or determining, by itself, what policies ought to be adopted—a serious, but very common, error in ethical reasoning. Scientific facts about nature cannot, by themselves, determine how we ought to relate to nature or which policies are most appropriate (Moore and Nelson 2010). This tenet is also inadequate because, while



it notes the relationship between science and policy, it fails to recognize the most important obstacle in understanding that relationship. Specifically, understanding how ecological, sociological, economic, political, and ethical knowledge should be synthesized for the purpose of policy development, especially when scientific knowledge is often characterized by an inability to make precise predictions about how policies will affect natural systems.

Several of the seven tenets touch on how natural resource management is related to social justice and human liberty (i.e., *Wildlife are Considered an International Resource*, *Allocation of Wildlife by Law*, *Democracy of Hunting*, and *Wildlife as a Public Trust Resource*). However, these principles are not useful without also acknowledging questions like: In practice, when is it wrong to prevent the over-exploitation of a resource by local people who have no other means to satisfy their short-term needs? And, is it wrong to preclude a rural population from hunting a wildlife population because urban citizens think that is an inappropriate use of that resource? The challenge in a democracy is to know when the interests of the majority are relevant or trivial and whether they should be honored if they represent a serious infringement on the interests of the minority.

Another problematic tenet asserts that the “*Elimination of Markets for Wildlife*” is necessary for conservation. Yet wildlife resources are commercialized and privatized in many parts of the world, including Europe, where conservation seems as well developed as in North America. In addition, “wildlife” such as aquatic organisms, marine organisms, and plants are often commercially harvested. In many of these cases, the concern is for developing a sustainable commercial harvest, not elimination of the market. The Model fails to explain why conserving terrestrial vertebrates in North America ought to be so exceptional to conservation elsewhere.

Moreover, to believe that North American hunting no longer remains a highly commercial and market driven activity is to fail to recognize the commercial interests at stake. Many companies, like hunters themselves, profit from overabundant game populations and wildlife consumption. Consider catalogs from companies like Cabela’s or Bass Pro Shops. The consumption that such “wildlife” markets promote represents a threat to wildlife and conservation. Finally, forms of wildlife management such as the harvest of furbearers perpetuate markets for wildlife. Perhaps “*Elimination of Markets for Wildlife*”

should be replaced with “*Eliminate or Transform Markets that Threaten Conservation*.” This would make it clear that the goal is not merely the elimination of markets that threaten recreational hunting.

Even if the North American Model’s primary motivation *was* to promote hunting, and even if it did so transparently, the Model would still fall short. The problem is not that hunting is an unworthy or indefensible activity, but rather that the Model gives an inadequate defense of hunting; misapprehends the relationships among hunting, conservation, and the seven tenets; and ignores the most potent criticism against hunting (i.e., that some hunts are inconsistent with the tenet that “*Wildlife Can Only Be Killed for a Legitimate Purpose*”).

A More-Inclusive Construct

The ethics of hunting is a complex and easily misunderstood topic requiring far more attention than can be offered here. Ultimately, we doubt the claims of proponents that the North American Model is “probably the greatest environmental achievement of the 20th century ... [and] may be one of the greatest achievements of North American culture” (Geist 2006). Further, it is unclear how the Model is useful for understanding or evaluating what the role of recreational hunting should be in developed countries of the 21st century.

Perhaps the greatest value of the Model, however, is that it highlights the need to confront a more basic question: What is conservation? All of us should explore whether wildlife management and conservation are the same, as implied by Model advocates, or whether the two disciplines represent different, occasionally conflicting, ambitions. The latter view led to the founding of the Society for Conservation Biology, which views wildlife management and conservation as different ambitions (Soulé 1985, Aplet *et al.* 1992).

The future of conservation will require an adequate understanding of these and other issues that are both essential and under-treated (Vucetich and Nelson 2010, Vucetich and Nelson in press). We need to ask: What does it mean for a population or ecosystem to be healthy? Do populations and ecosystems deserve direct moral consideration? How does conservation relate to or conflict with other legitimate values in life, such as social justice, human liberty, and concern for the welfare of individual? Resolving these and other questions and conflicts could provide a truly meaningful conservation model worth celebrating. ■