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# Hunt, Fish... and Save the Planet

**Greens with Guns: How can the values of hunters and anglers fit within an environmentalist ethic?**

BY JAMES CARD

On some evenings, I hear the honking music of Canada geese as they fly over my house in central Wisconsin.

"Do we hunt them, Daddy?" asks my five-year-old son. He has eaten geese that I killed, as well as venison, salmon, trout, quail, duck, and pheasant that I have shot or caught. I tell him that we do hunt them, but we must wait until hunting season.

*Paintings by Ross B. Young, [www.rossyoung.com](http://www.rossyoung.com)*

Later I hear the trilling bugle of sandhill cranes flying over the treetops. The long, gangly birds pass by within shotgun range. My son asks if we can hunt them, too.

"Maybe," I reply.

"How do you mean maybe?" He is at the stage where he asks many questions. Some of them are ones that I cannot answer.

This spring Republican state Representative Joel Kleefisch of Oconomowoc, Wisconsin introduced a bill to allow the hunting of sandhill cranes, a species that has not been hunted in the state since the Migratory Bird Treaty Act in 1918. Like many wildlife conservation laws passed in the early part of the last century, the law was a reaction to the grotesque amount of market hunting that almost wiped out the buffalo, exterminated the passenger pigeon, and pushed vast numbers of other waterfowl and wildlife to the brink of extinction. The act lists 171 species as game birds – birds that have been traditionally hunted. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is in charge of determining which of those birds can be legally hunted each year.

What was a game bird in 1912 may or may not be a game bird in 2012. As explained on the USFWS website: "In actuality, the Fish and Wildlife Service has determined that hunting is appropriate only for those species for which there is a long tradition of hunting, and for which hunting is consistent with their population status and their long-term conservation. It is inconceivable, for example, that we will ever see legalized hunting of plovers, curlews, or the many other species of shorebirds whose populations were devastated by market gunners in the last decades of the nineteenth century."

Sandhill cranes are on the list of species that can be hunted only in certain parts of the United States. In the 1936 there were just 25 breeding pairs of sandhill cranes in Wisconsin, with similarly depressing numbers in most other states. Aldo Leopold, the Wisconsin author of *A Sand County Almanac*, wrote about how habitat destruction, mostly logging and clearing meadows for farming, had decimated the crane population: "The cranes were hard put, their numbers shrinking with the remnants of unburned meadow. For them, the song of the power shovel came near being an elegy. The high priests of progress knew nothing of cranes, and cared less."

Today, sandhills are the most populous species of crane worldwide. Across North America there are six subspecies that nest in different regions and use different flyways. The cranes in Wisconsin are of the greater sandhill subspecies and are part of what the USFWS calls the Eastern Population, which numbers around 72,000 birds. The Mid-Continent Population is the largest and is estimated to have 450,000 to 500,000 cranes.

Like Canada geese, once low in numbers and now spilling into parks and golf courses, sandhills are a wildlife conservation success story. But with increased numbers comes an increase in human interest, most of which, at least from the cranes' point of view, is undesirable. Farmers in Wisconsin have complained of cranes raiding their crops and have sought permission to shoot them. Hunters in the state have also noticed the higher number of cranes. There are sandhill crane hunting seasons in Canada, Mexico, and 15 US states, including next-door Minnesota. New Mexico and Alaska have been hunting them since 1961. So, hunters want to know, why not Wisconsin?

Proposed hunts of iconic species create controversy. There are few complaints about hunting invasive hogs or pythons, or catching the Asian carp that are taking over the Great Lakes. But when Wisconsin legislators decided to allow hunting of the timber wolf – a symbol of rugged wilderness – environmental organizations, animal rights groups, and some Native American tribes packed public hearings to protest the move. A two-year legal battle preceded the state's 2003 move to allow a hunting season for the mourning dove, the Christian symbol of peace and the official state symbol of peace in Wisconsin.

The proposed hunting of the sandhill crane, an elegant symbol of longevity and fidelity, has generated similar uneasiness. Hunting organizations are in favor of a hunt, arguing that the cranes' numbers are healthy enough to allow shooting. Some conservation groups, including the [Audubon Society](#), are opposed. Other environmental organizations – among them the [Wisconsin chapter of the Sierra Club](#) – have maintained a studied neutrality on the issue. Although the dispute involves a single species in just one place, it is emblematic of the larger tensions that have existed between hunters and anglers and self-identified environmentalists for at least a generation. The clash over Wisconsin's sandhill cranes is another test of how – or, to some, even whether – the values of hunters can fit into an environmental ethic.

Caught in the middle of the Wisconsin crane-hunting controversy is the [International Crane Foundation](#). The organization has its headquarters in the state and raises cranes in captivity at its facility in the rolling Baraboo Hills of central Wisconsin. The cranes are from all over the world and many are endangered or threatened. Kate Fitzwilliams, the foundation's PR person, gave me a tour of the place one day this summer. As she showed me the center's various pens and ponds, Fitzwilliams expressed frustration about the difficulty of explaining the ICF's position on the proposed crane hunt. The public image of the organization is all about protecting cranes, yet the group is not categorically against the act of hunting the birds. "I don't like the word 'neutral,'" she said. "But we're neither for nor against it. We're trying to bring people together and work with both sides."

The organization's delicate position on the issue was on display in a letter from ICF president Rich Beilfuss that appeared in the group's May newsletter. "ICF could adopt a position against sandhill hunting based on emotional and spiritual values, which do matter," Beilfuss wrote. "However, the benefit of ICF's approach to the issue of crane hunting is that we can do more for crane and wetland conservation by maintaining our balanced position, especially in the long-run, than we can accomplish by directly opposing hunting at this time."

As an ecology-minded hunter, I know it's not so easy to remove emotion from the craft of stalking a creature, killing it, eating it.

He concluded: "I hope we can maintain the difficult but very real balance that allows ICF to continue to draw together environmentalists, hunters, farmers, and all who care deeply about the land."

Beilfuss's carefully crafted statement reveals much about the difficulty of holding hunters and environmentalists in the same big tent of conservationism. Clearly the ICF wants to maintain the passion and commitment of its core supporters, who hold the crane in reverence. At the same time, the group doesn't want to alienate potential allies such as hunters – people who also have a special relationship with the birds and, just as important, a relationship with the wild and not-so-wild places where the birds live.

For Bryant Tarr, this tension is especially acute. Tarr's title at the ICF is Curator of Birds. So naturally he looks at the situation from the points of view of a crane-lover, a birder, and an ecologist. But Tarr is also a hunter. For the past 31 years he has been a falconer. He flies captive red-tailed hawks and goshawks after cottontail rabbits, ducks, pheasants, and gray squirrels.

"I've thought a lot over my hunting lifespan about how people make decisions about what is hunt-able and what isn't," he told me. "It's all a human construct. If you travel the world, you find out that over here, they hunt and eat this kind of thing. And over there, that's a revered creature that would never be touched. The thing that derails us all the time is emotions. I think virtually all hunting decisions have to be completely separate from emotions and based on science, based on biology, and based on sustainability – not whether you would choose to hunt that animal or not. Is it feasible to allow a hunting season on that animal and, if so, what would the sustainable levels be and what would that mean for the life history of the animal?"

As an ecology-minded hunter, I agree. I also know that it's not so easy to remove emotion from the craft of stalking a creature, killing it, eating it – and wanting to preserve it for future generations.

I go to the shooting range on hot summer afternoons. Without practice, my shooting skills become weak and I risk

making a poor shot in the field. I've been warned against this by, among others, John Muir. In Edwin Way Teale's *The Wilderness World of John Muir*, the Sierra Club founder is quoted saying: "Making some bird or beast go lame the rest of its life is a sore thing on one's conscience, at least nothing to boast of, and it has no religion in it."

I don't want such a thing on my conscience, and to make sure a bird or beast does not suffer, I practice shooting. Practicing to become a better marksman is an expensive endeavor. My money goes up in smoke but there is one part of that expense that I can live with: Part of the cost of my shotgun shells goes toward wildlife conservation projects. This year is the 75th anniversary of a tax that is paid for by hunters to help preserve wild habitat. The benefits go not just to hunters, but also to the public at large, and they are uncountable.

In 1937, Congress passed the Pittman-Robertson Act, also known as the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act. It put an 11 percent excise tax on firearms, ammunition, and bows and arrows. The money is distributed throughout the states and used for wildlife restoration projects. The law also requires that the money generated from state hunting licenses be earmarked for such projects. The program has generated \$12 billion for conservation programs since its inception.

After the horrors of destroying the buffalo and other species, American hunters were among the first to call for restraint and for laws to limit the numbers of game animals or birds that could be taken. In one of his essays, the renowned writer and outdoorsman Jim Harrison refers to this concept as "a predator husbands its prey." It is the idea that the hunter is the respectful caretaker of the game that is pursued.

For some, this notion of conservation may seem a contradictory idea. Why look after the well-being of an animal if you intend to hunt and kill it? For hunters and anglers, however, the idea makes perfect sense. A conscientious hunter stewards the wild just as a smart farmer stewards her land, making sure that today's harvests do not outstrip tomorrow's. That is easy enough to comprehend. Much more difficult to grasp are the realities of destruction and extinction. If habitat is lost, all is lost. If a dying wetland will not hold ducks, it will not hold turtles, snakes, or egrets. A plowed-up grassland will not hold prairie chickens, nor will it hold songbirds or badgers. A poisoned stream will not hold trout and it will not be fit for a hiker to drink from. Without habitat protection, there will be no hunting or fishing – or much of anything else that is good in the natural world.

This ethic of mindful stewardship and the hunter's legacy of wildlife habitat protection are evident at the place where I shoot my rounds of skeet. On the clubhouse walls are old-time black and white photos of past members doing rehabilitation work on trout streams and helping in sturgeon restoration projects. This shooting range isn't called a gun club. Its formal name is the [Waupaca Conservation League](#).

One of the most important conservation alliances was, famously, between a big game hunter – President Theodore Roosevelt – and an ecologist – John Muir. When they camped together in Yosemite Valley, hunting and fishing were entirely unregulated and out-of-control logging and mining was destroying great swaths of the continent. Citizens responded to the wholesale rape of the wild by forming groups like the Sierra Club (1892) and the Audubon Society (1905). Congress – spurred by Roosevelt – did its part by passing the Antiquities Act, establishing the US Forest Service, and creating the National Park system, "America's Best Idea," in the words of filmmaker Ken Burns.

In the 1930's, prairie topsoil blew away, wetlands ran dry, and unknown numbers of fish and birds perished during the horror of the Dust Bowl. The devastation forced Americans to rethink how to care for the land. The zeitgeist of the era was summed up in the political cartoons of Jay Norwood (Ding) Darling. With his pen he attacked overhunting, river pollution, poor farming practices, and other environmental subjects. One of his cartoons was titled: "How Rich Will We Be When We Have Converted All Our Forest, All Our Soil, All Our Water Resources and Minerals to Cash?"

In 1936, Darling and others established the [National Wildlife Federation](#). Hunters and anglers formed their own groups to conserve habitat and have a political voice in the management of public lands and waters. [Ducks Unlimited](#) was created in 1937, soon followed by [Delta Waterfowl](#), [Pheasants Forever](#), the [Mule Deer Foundation](#), [Trout Unlimited](#), the [Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation](#), and many others.

In the mid-twentieth century, the relationship between hunters and conservationists was all but seamless. At that time, protecting the environment meant protecting the wild, which also, of course, meant preserving habitat for fish and game. An outdoorsman, to use the language of the era, was synonymous with what today we call environmentalists.

Then things changed. In the 1960s, following the success of *Silent Spring*, environmentalists turned their attention to addressing the dangers of industrial pollution. Wilderness conservation – though still important – became one of just many concerns. Other movements emerged: eco-anarchy, deep ecology, anti-nuke, sustainable agriculture, population freeze. Hunters and environmentalists still shared the same goals of protecting clean air and water, preserving wilderness areas and wildlife habitat, and stopping unreasonable development. Yet a cultural rift began to open between the two.

There isn't any single reason why hunters and environmentalists diverged; several factors were at play. The movement of people into the cities, which led to a decline of hunters, was one. The rise of a distinct animal rights movement within the broader environmental movement was another. The specialization of environmentalism into sub-issues not immediately related to wilderness protection – urban ecology, anti-whaling campaigns, climate change mitigation – exacerbated the split. Gun ownership controversies that often portrayed hunters in a poor light didn't help. By the

1980s, too many environmentalists and hunters could see each other only through the lens of cheap stereotypes: the tree-hugging, bunny loving environmentalists versus the blood thirsty, Bambi-killing redneck hunters.

As an environmentally minded hunter, this distrust pains me. Especially because I know that the division is so artificial. Despite the stereotypes, there is a quiet tolerance and respect for each other that bridges the tired biases and offers an opportunity to work together. Some groups that have been labeled as anti-hunting have always been neutral on the subject. Audubon has never been against hunting in general, though some local chapters oppose hunting certain types of birds. The Sierra Club created the [Sierra Sportsmen Network](#) to harness the passion of hunters and anglers. [The Nature Conservancy](#), a powerhouse protector of wild lands, “does not take a formal position either for or against hunting or fishing” and allows hunting and fishing on some of its properties.

A good example of hunting groups and environmental organizations working together to reach a shared goal occurred in June at the Conboy Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Washington State. At a celebration marking the completed restoration of 3,000 acres of wetland habitat, a cake was served bearing the logos of the partners involved in the effort: the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the [Columbia Land Trust](#), the International Crane Foundation, and Ducks Unlimited. (Disclosure: I once worked as an editor for Ducks Unlimited magazine.) Each organization had its own agenda in the wetland restoration. ICF wanted to benefit sandhill cranes, which are still endangered in that flyway. Ducks Unlimited wanted more habitat for other migratory waterfowl. Together, they created a healthier ecosystem.

On some early mornings I string up my fly rod and fish the Waupaca River near my home. Near the parking area is a sign with the regulations and one sign that states: “Habitat Improvement Funded By State Trout Stamp.” That means if you want to go trout fishing in the state of Wisconsin, you have to buy not only a fishing license but also a stamp. The proceeds of the stamp go toward making rivers like this one better for fish, for all wildlife, and for people.

On the river I come across hikers and birdwatchers on the Ice Age Trail that runs along the river; I can usually count on seeing a few kayakers float by. The hikers and boaters come for the beauty of a healthy river. Other than whatever general taxes they might have paid, for them it is a free experience. It is doubtful that they have purchased a trout stamp.

I hike downstream to a spot where the deep current runs up against a bank that doesn't seem to erode. The stream bank reinforcement was done years ago by a local chapter of Trout Unlimited. Many of those deep channels and sweet-water riffles that the kayakers glide over are the result of many volunteers getting muddy on their precious weekends.

“I fish because I love to,” wrote author Robert Travers. “Because I love the environs where trout are found, which are invariably beautiful, and hate the environs where crowds of people are found, which are invariably ugly.”

Of all the years I've been fishing, I've never found a trout living in a place that was not beautiful. The same can be said for a wood duck, a ruffed grouse, or a wolverine.

By the 1980s, environmentalists and hunters could see each other only through the lens of cheap stereotypes.

I head up a feeder creek covered with brush. It's a tunnel-like place where hikers and kayakers cannot go. There is no trail and it's too thick to hike and the water is too skinny to float. If it weren't for fishing, I would have never explored this tiny creek. It's often these small, untouched places – the ones with swampy earth, shin-tangle and wait-a-minute vines – that have the highest amount of biodiversity. They are the places that hunters and anglers have traditionally fought to protect. It is easy to protect a place like Yosemite or Yellowstone. It's much harder to protect a no-name stream or wetland that is in the path of development or industrial fallout.

I flick a dry fly into the rivulet and it is snatched by a native brook trout. Its colorful wormlike patterns are vibrant and it is small enough to fit in the palm of my hand. It is not big enough to eat or brag about. But for a couple seconds it is mine to hold before I slip it back into the water. The trout are bio-indicators: if the cold water stream becomes warm through climate change, or if logging eliminates the protective shade, the trout will die off. Their death will be a sign that the ecosystem is going down the tubes. For me the point of catching such a small fish is to know that they still exist in such hidden pristine places. I want them to be there.

I see sandhill cranes every day in the fields near my home. Sometimes I pull over along the road, grab the binoculars, and let my son have a look. We can see that the adult pairs now have little fuzzy ones following them through the fields. They are lovely birds.

It will take the Wisconsin legislature at least five years to approve the crane hunt and for biologists to assemble a framework for opening up a hunting season. By then the sandhills will have increased to even greater numbers. To know that they came from the brink of extinction to a population so strong that a small percentage of them can be hunted is something to be celebrated.

Will I ever hunt them? I have five years to decide. In the meantime, I will study their behavior. I will scrutinize their comings and goings, and keep an eye out for anything that is a threat to their habitat. I will be patient, alert to changes

in the environment that could change the birds' habits. I will be watching them like a hunter.

*James Card is a freelance journalist. He has written for The New York Times, Foreign Policy, and National Geographic News, among other publications.*

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## Comments

I've been hunting with my family since I was just a few years old. I We have had this same conversation numerous times. The I really enjoyed reading your article and hope it opens others minds to the fact that we who hunt want nothing more than a healthy and sustainable population of all wildlife species.

By Scott Seward on Wed, September 05, 2012 at 7:37 am

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