



---

## Does Our Wildlife Have a Future? Why the North American Wildlife Conservation Model is Globally Important

*By Dr. Valerius Geist*

The future is not to be awaited passively, but shaped by our actions today. This we need to keep in mind in order to generate a future for our wildlife so that it may thrive. What we do today makes the future of tomorrow, and we must ruthlessly pursue that future.

The last century in North America generated a remarkable, unique and effective system of wildlife conservation, with lessons we can take globally. With today's systems moving towards globalization the security of Canadian wildlife can only be found in the security of wildlife globally.

Fortunately, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is being considered for global use, and we must take steps now to strengthen it, as it is being degraded in ignorance by our governments, in particular the federal government. Nor is the Alberta government innocent!

We must also consider to what extent the preservationist model of conservation is doing what we had intended it to do, and whether we need the courage to massively overhaul our systems of land dedicated to conservation as opposed to tourism and recreation. We should consider negotiating now a continental treaty on wildlife conservation as a first step in securing global security for wildlife.





Wild Lands Advocate 12(5): 8-9, October 2004

## Wildlife Scientist Devotes Rich Life to Educating the Public

Andy Marshall

Valerius Geist warned two decades ago that the Alberta government's proposal for game ranching was wrong, scientifically and economically. For years, he suffered insults, shunning and even death threats as he publicly noted the errors of the government's ways.

When the biological disaster of chronic wasting disease and the collapsing markets for elk meat and velvet finally forced many ranchers to slaughter their stock and shut shop, vindication was complete but not to be savoured.

"It's not a joy to be right," he says from his Vancouver Island home, which he has shared since 1995 with his wife of 43 years, Renate, and where he continues his never-ending defence of North American wildlife.

In sharp irony, Geist is prepared to serve as a witness for the game farmers, who once so reviled him, in their class action against the Canadian government for its role in this travesty.

"I only asked people to do their homework, which the government didn't do," Geist, 66, explains. "Unfortunately, this is becoming a feature of North America – how much knowledge there is and how little governments pay attention to it."

An ability and willingness to bridge detailed scientific knowledge with public policy debate are a hallmark of this courageous yet gentle scientist who enjoyed a remarkable and broad-based 27-year career at the University of Calgary and who is still professor emeritus of Environmental Science.

"As a tenured professor, I felt a certain responsibility to the public to speak up on matters, no matter how much my heart was fluttering," he says.

The rolling "r" and clipped accent are testimony to 10 years as a boy growing up in Austria and Germany. He was born in Nikolajew by the Black Sea, in the then USSR, but moved in 1943 with his parents, both engineers specializing in marine architecture (his mother worked on submarines and icebreakers).

Recalling his time as a teenager attending high school in Regina – he came with his family to Canada in 1953 – he says at that early age he devoured scientific treatises to feed an almost unquenchable passion for reading and acquiring new knowledge that has characterized his life ever since. "I became interested in large mammals, particularly mountain sheep, very early," he says.

"Val has this incredible ability to see both the big picture over the long term at the same time as he's able to delve into intimate details of specific issues," says his long-time Calgary friend Darrel Rowledge, constantly at his side during the game ranching battle. "I've never encountered a professor with such graciousness," Rowledge adds. "He was willing to go way out of his way to teach people the background to issues."

This drive to share knowledge with fellow scientists and with the public at large in an accessible way led to Geist writing numerous articles in popular and scientific journals and at least 16 books, two of which sold more than 100,000 copies and seven of which he describes as coffee table books.

His books have received several awards, and Geist has many personal honours, the most recent being





the 2004 Olaus Murie Award from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. In November he will receive an AWA Alberta Wilderness Defenders Award.

When he first entered the U of C's Environmental Science department, the push was on for more interdisciplinary research, a trend Geist embraced with gusto. "It was right in my line of thinking," he says. "Gaining knowledge in new disciplines is always rewarding ... it was a great adventure in discovery."

With a BSc in zoology and a PhD in ethology from the University of British Columbia, Geist did extensive post-doctoral work at Seewiesen, Germany before ending up in Calgary.

As part of his interdisciplinary approach, Geist taught graduate courses in environmental science and human biology, in particular how to maximize health environmentally. A second line of teaching and research centred on policies for wildlife conservation and large-mammal biology. Courses he taught for undergraduates have ranged from ethology, ecology and evolution to wildlife management.

His first book in 1971 on mountain sheep won a Wildlife Society book-of-the-year award and was released in Japanese. Other books have dealt with bighorn (a children's book), mule deer, elk, buffalo (an award winner), deer of the world (honoured in France), moose, antelope and whitetail. The ideas in a 1978 book called *Life Strategies, Human Evolution, Environmental Design: Toward a Biological Theory of Health* have also held up well.

"As a professor being paid ultimately out of the public purse, I have gone out of my way to write something for the general public," Geist says.

Particularly relevant to AWA have been his efforts for wildlife conservation. He is anxious to remind people to appreciate that the conservation model established early in the twentieth century by the U.S. and Canadian governments has done wonders for wildlife populations.

Principles that protected public ownership of wildlife and that prohibited the marketing and the killing of wildlife for frivolous reasons, together with the managing by government of wildlife based on sound science, brought numbers back from the disastrous declines inflicted by early settlers during the previous century.

"Our system of conservation has been gloriously successful," he says with customary enthusiasm. But recent public policies, particularly in Canada, are in danger of undermining the progress.

The game ranching adventure was, of course, a prime example where those principles were ignored. Alberta's move toward closing off public grazing leases also privatizes wildlife, Geist explains. "Wildlife is being treated as private property – that's where we're heading right now," he says. "Handing over public land for private hunting will be the destruction of our North American model of wildlife conservation."

The provincial and federal governments have slashed research positions for wildlife, thus abandoning the ongoing search for the necessary scientific knowledge. "We need strong institutions dealing with wildlife," he says. He calls the policies in national parks "a bloody disaster." He decries the destruction of so many bears because of habituation. "We have to keep the bears afraid of humans ... the bears are better off being hunted."

Still passionate about hunting – he recently shot a bear in the northern part of Vancouver Island and relishes the sausages and other meat he gained from it – Geist sees hunters as the best motivated of all the population to maintain wildlife numbers and preserve natural habitat. That's why closing off Alberta's public lands to them will be so harmful.





In his multi-disciplinary approach, Geist introduces economics into the discussion. For example, the annual economic benefits from wildlife viewing and hunting are estimated at \$110 billion US in North America.

Ironically, at a time when Canadian public policy threatens wildlife, other countries are looking at adopting the North American model. Geist's dream is for an international treaty to enshrine the tried-and-true conservation principles.

Rowlage points to Geist's "huge presence on the international stage." As with another internationally acclaimed scientist, water expert and University of Alberta professor David Schindler, the provincial government holds him in similar disdain, he says.

In the meantime, Valerius and Renate tend to the turkey, geese, rabbits and other livestock on their beautifully located 20 acres. Two streams intersect the property, and "I can listen to the bears catching the salmon," Geist says, joy in his voice. Although the pace of work has slowed somewhat, he maintains contact with the world through the Internet.

In his scientific fervour, he has experimented with growing 14 varieties of grape. "I am deeply into brewing. It's great, great fun," he laughs. He has also revived an earlier interest in music, playing the guitar and taking up singing again.

Among conservation projects he would like to be remembered for, Geist recalls his role in changing policies for preserving mountain sheep by moving them into habitat where they could better survive. Previously that was not considered a good idea, but, says Geist, "my contribution to the debate was a matter of clarification." Some 25 years later, mountain sheep numbers had soared by 50 per cent. He celebrated the result in a 1991 book called *Return of Royalty*.

This is just one of many successes in Val Geist's rich life to be celebrated.





---

Wild Lands Advocate 12(6), December 2004

## TRIUMPH OF THE COMMONS

### The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation as a Means of Creating Wealth and Protecting Public Health While Generating Biodiversity

Dr. Valerius Geist

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation arose at the beginning of the 20th century in response to the virtual decimation of wildlife across most of the North American continent by the end of the 19th century. Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons* had run its course to the bitter end followed by the extermination of "vermin" that interfered with cattle and sheep production, including grizzly bear, wolf and even cougar over wide areas of their range.

Several once spectacularly abundant species went extinct, foremost among them the passenger pigeon, and later, the Eskimo curlew. Waterfowl, shore birds, even songbirds were then severely depleted by market hunting and uncontrolled pot-hunting, while wildlife habitat was converted to ploughed fields for corn, wheat, or cotton; livestock pastures; and urban sprawl.

Yet in these dark hours for wildlife there arose a unique system of wildlife conservation and management that restored wildlife to the North American continent and made wildlife a source of wealth and employment. In a surprising fashion this restoration defeated Garrett Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*, and, contrary to advocates for private wildlife, showed that private ownership of wildlife is not compatible with conservation, which deals with maintaining biodiversity. The return of wildlife and biodiversity to the continent of North America is probably the greatest environmental achievement of the 20th century and the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation one of the great achievements of North American culture.

And yet, ironically, that Model of Wildlife Conservation has only recently been recognized as such. It is very poorly known or understood in North America, it is politically incorrect for much of the urban electorate, and it is opposed by various special interests, including some agricultural and environmental organizations. You will not hear about it on radio or TV, and even a good many wildlife managers must plead ignorance when asked about it.

A close examination of that model is most illuminating, as it is pregnant with *tested* ideas about how to manage a renewable resource in a sustainable manner. However, it requires certain pre-conditions to flourish, such as acceptance of wildlife as food and ready access by all citizens in good standing to weapons, which raise questions about its universality and transferability.

The North American Wildlife Conservation Model has evolved over nearly a century. It has since been examined by a number of symposia and has been discussed in the popular press and on the Internet. It is continental in scope, encompassing the United States and Canada, as it was formed in close cooperation among leading individuals from both nations. Here Canada, a loyal colony of Great Britain, opted not for the manner of wildlife conservation of the European mother country, but chose instead to unite under new common policies with the United States.

The model is based on raw grassroots democracy and is thus the product of innumerable political discussions – acrimonious or otherwise. Consequently, it is not the product of a single mind but expresses the collective wisdom of nearly a century of continent-wide debate and hard bargaining. It has retained what has worked. It therefore has a deep wisdom and could not have been invented by any





single mind. We have before us an eminently successful conservation model, one worthy of scrutiny, regardless of one's political philosophy.

### Successes

The major achievements of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model are, briefly, as follows:

- The recovery of wildlife and biodiversity continent-wide. This includes the recovery of species that were at the brink of extinction a century ago, which means most species of wildlife. Some conservation efforts went so well that in the case of the buffalo, the American Bison Society, dedicated to saving the buffalo, voted itself out of existence, considering its mandate fulfilled. Between 1974 and 1999 wild sheep in North America increased in number by almost 50 percent. There are again millions of white-tailed deer in North America, as well as other big game, but the recovery also included waterfowl, shorebirds, and songbirds. Where the recovery is still wanting, concentrated efforts are at work to restore the species, including the much publicized efforts to restore grey wolves and whooping cranes.
- The generation of a novel economic use of wildlife. This results in the creation of great wealth and employment while the resource continues to grow and prosper: it is not merely sustained! In 1996 some 77 million US citizens spent in excess of 100 billion dollars on wildlife-related activities, creating about 50,000 jobs per billion dollars (US) in throughput. There are similar trends for Canada. We can also study the distinction between markets that destroy wildlife, such as markets in dead wildlife, and markets that increase wildlife abundance, such as markets based on encountering living wildlife. Hunting creates public benefits such as the "freedom of the woods" that results from keeping large and potentially dangerous carnivores timid and afraid of humans, as without this we could not use our woods and campgrounds safely. In addition, once wildlife populations expand, hunting keeps in check such wildlife population, which otherwise could expand to cause damage to agriculture, forestry, or the environment at large.
- A new uniquely North American profession: the university-trained wildlife biologist or manager. The first notable practitioner among these was Aldo Leopold, who became an idol of not only wildlife biologists, but also the environmental movement at large with his inspiring writing. It insured that North America's wildlife received well-qualified, professional attention and care in its conservation and management.
- Public involvement with wildlife. This is one of the greatest achievements of North American wildlife conservation. The genius of North America's system of wildlife conservation is that it captured the enthusiasm and support of all strata of society. This includes the whole-hearted participation of the blue-collar segment of society in contrast to a primary involvement of the elite in European societies. This makes for a large volunteer force willing to act on behalf of wildlife. Outwardly, public involvement takes the form of a large number of conservation organizations, formed at the federal, provincial or state, and local levels. Notable among these are sportsmen organizations supporting single species or related groups of wildlife, such as the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Mule Deer Foundation, Ducks Unlimited, Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, Wild Turkey Foundation, etc. There are also effective conservation societies such as the venerable Boone & Crockett Club, the Campfire Club, and the Audubon Society. The volunteers have great achievements to their credit. The Rocky Mountain Elk foundation conserved over 3.8 million acres of elk habitat since its inception. A volunteer force of less than 6,000 Americans and Canadians, uniting biologists, managers, hunters, guides, outfitters, and interested parties in a common cause under the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, increased the mountain sheep population by almost 50 percent in the last 25 years. These are examples – and there are





many others - of what volunteers, irrespective of nationality, in free association, without call for legislation or government funding can achieve under existing legislation.

- Taxing for wildlife. North Americans generated a secure funding base for wildlife conservation by adopting the user-pay principle as policy in 1930 by the American Game Conference. Ever since, North Americans have taxed themselves on behalf of wildlife (Migratory Bird Stamp Act 1934, Alberta's Buck for Wildlife Fund, etc).
- Habitat conservation. North Americans created an extensive public system of protected areas for wildlife, including great national parks and monuments, wildlife refuges, provincial parks ,and ecological reserves. Habitat conservation on agricultural land results from initiatives such as the U.S. Conservation Reserve Program. In addition there are significant ongoing private efforts to acquire habitat such as those by the Nature Conservancy or the many foundations dedicated to wildlife. They act continentally, continually acquiring habitat by purchase or gift, or habitat protection through liens on the land. In addition, military reserves, by long tradition, respect wildlife's presence and contain some of the finest wildlife habitats and populations.
- International treaties. North Americans recognized early the need to protect and manage wildlife that cross national borders in their migrations. They negotiated the first and effective international wildlife treaties, such as the 1911 Fur Seal Treaty, but above all the famous 1916 Convention for the Protection of Migratory Birds.
- Conservation of large predators. Despite early and continuing sentiments against large predators, such were nevertheless retained or reintroduced as functioning entities of ecosystems. They are controlled, protected, or reintroduced, depending on circumstances. Also, predators are better off under hunting regulations because the kill is very closely controlled and is under constant public scrutiny, and persons are held accountable for each kill. Not so in Canada's national parks, in which bears have a notoriously very high chance of dying due to concerns for public safety.
- Preservation of non-game species. From the very outset the out-of-doors was considered an integrated whole. That is, very early on under the so-called Roosevelt Doctrine, conservation was considered broadly. Consequently, the history of bringing non-game species under the same umbrella as game species has a very long history. However, not all conservation was altruistic; rather, it was usually motivated by utility. This included songbirds, which early in this century were considered effective allies against various crop insect pests. Moreover, the focus on particularly desirable game species casts a broad halo effect from which non-game species benefit. Although specific legislation to save endangered species has been in effect across the continent, such legislation could not succeed in the absence of a hunting culture that had practiced broadly based habitat conservation which simultaneously conserved biodiversity.
- Law enforcement. In North America, enforcing conservation law is normally a remarkably civil affair, although it can be as dangerous as its European counterparts when commercial poaching is involved. Because wildlife conservation is broad-based and is an exercise in participatory democracy, much self policing is involved. This differs from European models, in which wildlife is private property and its protection is pursued accordingly.

### Foundation Policies

The foundation values on which the North American Wildlife Conservation Model is built are best summarized in a collaborative paper that includes the insights of Shane Mahoney, then Chief of Research of the Newfoundland and Labrador Wildlife Division, and John F. Organ, Wildlife Program Chief of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.





## 1. Wildlife as Public Trust Resources

Wildlife in North America is public property, not merely *de jure*, but also *de facto*. Wildlife may be held privately, but only as a trust for the public and at the discretion of the sovereign. The Public Trust doctrine has a long history in the U.S.

Why is public ownership of wildlife so important for wildlife conservation?

- Public ownership prevents the inevitable consequences of private ownership, such as the domestication of wildlife, as well its genetic alteration to fit market whims. Domestication systematically diminishes the anti-predator adaptations of a species by making it more tractable and easier to control under conditions of captivity. Domestication has led to severely reduced brain size. Domestication is done so as to serve specific markets and therefore leads to genetic alteration of a species to produce desirable products. Gigantic antlers in deer or horns in buffalo are some examples; the restructuring of bison to assume the carcass confirmation of cattle is another. The latter is done to increase the carcass value, as the carcasses of domestic cattle compared to those of wild bison have a higher proportion of high-priced cuts. Selecting for antler size in deer selects for social incompetence. Domestication is thus the systematic genetic alteration of innate adaptations. Such altered stock can escape into the public domain and pollute public wildlife irreversibly.
- Public ownership of wildlife largely prevents the mixing in captivity of many species and thereby prevents what parasitologists have labeled “transporting the zoo” (of pathogens and parasites). Each species carries its contingent of pathogens and parasites, which, when transferred to another species, may mutate into strains dangerous to public health. Transferring wildlife into domestication increases the risk of pathogens escaping into human populations. Private ownership of wildlife generates a disease bridge across which may pass diseases affecting livestock and human health on one hand and public health on the other. Retaining wildlife in strict public trust therefore prevents wildlife farming and the building of a disease bridge between wildlife, livestock, and people. It is good public health policy. The recent SARS epidemic originated in farmed wildlife – namely, in farmed palm civet cats in China. In any confrontation between private agricultural and public wildlife interests, wildlife is inevitably the loser.
- Wildlife in public ownership insures the ecological basis for native cultures to continue. One way to diminish native cultures is to make wildlife and their habitat private property.
- Because wildlife is in the public domain, it is possible to consider national systems of wildlife sanctuaries and wildlife treaties.
- Because the state is ultimately responsible for wildlife, it is possible to hire professionals to do the conservation and management on behalf of the public. Herein lies the origin of the North American profession of wildlife biologists.
- Wildlife in the public domain is subject to public scrutiny and concern. The public has a say in how wildlife is to be treated. When grizzly bears become private property, *de jure* or *de facto* by virtue of being turned over to owners of private or leased land, their fate is no longer the public’s business.
- Once wildlife is made private, private wildlife is pitted against public wildlife, a battle in which the latter is the inevitable loser.





---

## 2. Elimination of Markets for Wildlife

The elimination of trafficking in dead game animals, or parts and products derived from them, is one of the most effective and important policies of wildlife conservation. Its introduction was revolutionary, as North Americans at the turn of the 20th century were avid consumers and traders of wildlife.

Why is the elimination of markets in wildlife and its parts and products so important to conservation?

- The elimination of markets in dead wildlife eliminates a financial incentive for the illegal taking and selling of public wildlife. Where such incentive exists, it promotes illegal markets and encourages the criminal element to enter and ruthlessly exploit wildlife. Law enforcement under such circumstances is hazardous in the extreme and of questionable efficiency.
- Eliminating monetary value from wildlife encourages the public to enjoy wildlife for its own sake. A grizzly bear is no longer a walking bank account.
- The acquisition of wildlife outside the marketplace is bound to significant private effort. The resulting sweat equity and expenses incurred act as a deterrent to killing wildlife. So does the inability to sell legally killed wildlife.

## 3. Allocation of Wildlife by Law

Allocation of surplus wildlife for consumption by law, and not by the marketplace, insured an equal allocation of wildlife to citizens irrespective of wealth, social standing, or land ownership. Every citizen in good standing is able to participate in the annual harvest of wildlife within the laws set by legislatures. Aboriginal people are an exemption, as wildlife harvest is also governed by treaty rights.

Why is allocation by law so important to wildlife conservation?

- This policy generates a sense of propriety and ownership by those participating in the wildlife harvest and is fundamental to public participation in wildlife conservation, be it directly as volunteers or indirectly via the legislatures.
- This policy, by encouraging citizen to regard wildlife as their own, generates large national and continental organizations of citizen who join together into societies on behalf of wildlife. Large foundations dedicated to single species or species cluster are a North American phenomenon. These NGOs organize volunteers and funds toward the maintenance and spread of such wildlife, as well as the acquisition of their habitat.
- Because all citizen in good standing have access to wildlife as prescribed by law, wildlife is removed from any image of elitism or of the plaything of the filthy rich, a symbol of privilege. Wildlife controlled privately by an elite can become a symbol of the hated elite and suffer the consequences. This can be particularly tragic when public sentiments against the elite and their symbols are unleashed in revolutions.
- Egalitarian allocation provides the basis for an equitable cost of conserving wildlife through a "user pays" principle. Because enough of the public avail themselves of the opportunity to obtain wildlife for private consumption, there is enough funding for conservation. User pay means that hunters are footing most of the bill for wildlife conservation and in so doing provide a benefit to society at large – the maintenance of wildlife and the continent's biodiversity.





- Egalitarian distribution of opportunities to acquire wildlife also generates indirect public benefits.. One of these is the “freedom of the woods”: for example, the harassment of bears through inefficient hunting conditions bears to avoid humans, allowing safe camping and hiking. Clearly, this depends on reasonably large numbers of hunters going into bear habitat.

#### **4. Wildlife Can Only Be Killed for a Legitimate Purpose**

Wildlife can be killed only for cause: that is, for food, for fur, or in self defence or in the protection of property. Wanton waste of hunted wildlife may be considered a felony in some jurisdictions. This policy obliges all hunters to properly make use of animals killed.

Why is killing wildlife for cause only a desirable conservation policy?

- This policy outlaws wanton slaughter, which was once a not uncommon practice in market hunting days or a mark of prowess among so-called hunters. It reduces wildlife mortality and questions all killing.
- Allocation plus regulation of the taking of wildlife by law is enforced inefficiency. This is a very important point, as it is the enforced inefficiency of harvest that generates wealth and employment. Efficient harvest, by contrast, eliminates wildlife without generating public wealth. Since an animal taken in hunting must not be wasted, it insures that the hunter spends a fair sum of money in transporting, processing, storing, and consuming the animal. This generates a demand for services.
- Enforced inefficiency also triggers the invention of gadgetry, a consequence of ingenuity rewarded by the marketplace. North America’s wildlife economy is thus comparable to the automobile industry, where the multiplication of a product that generates convenience, but not transportation efficiency, generated huge wealth.

#### **5. Wildlife Is Considered an International Resource**

Wildlife is considered an international resource to be managed co-operatively by sovereign states. This policy is basic to international wildlife treaties, as well as to the broad-based, continental co-operation between professionals and conservation organizations.

Why is wildlife formally considered an international resource conducive to conservation?

- This policy brings wildlife to the highest political level as a public good. It insures federal involvement in all nations affected.
- This forces – by law – all federal, provincial, state, and municipal jurisdictions affected into active cooperation.
- This generates a lasting federal attention to wildlife crossing the borders.
- Treaty law is considered strong law that supersedes that of lower national jurisdictions. Thus treaties are effective conservation and management tools.

#### **6. Science Is the Proper Tool for Discharge of Wildlife Policy**





Science is considered to be the proper tool for discharging management responsibilities. This is the Roosevelt Doctrine. This is another basic policy that gave rise to science-based wildlife professionals hired by the state to perform wildlife conservation.

- Science is by and large our best tool to formulate appropriate management and policy options because it is based on a disinterested pursuit of understanding. It stands apart from political considerations and favours a hands-off policy by elected representatives.
- This policy insures that public wildlife is in the hands of exceedingly well-educated individuals and that it is scrutinized continuously.

## 7. Democracy of Hunting

The concept of “sport hunting” has origins in Europe. The term “sport” as applied to hunting refers to a code of honour, rather than a frivolous recreational pursuit; it was adopted to distinguish hunting under codes of fair chase from market hunting, and it is not an appropriate descriptor of North American hunting.

The European model allocated wildlife by land ownership and privilege, whereas in North America, all citizens in good standing can participate. The European model, a manifestation of class conflict between aristocracy and commoners, often led to wildlife poaching as a means for inflicting revenge on the ruling class. In North America, where all citizens have the opportunity to participate, everyone is a stakeholder, not just the privileged.

Theodore Roosevelt wrote eloquently of the societal gains to be made by keeping land available for hunting by the common people. Hunting as a deep-rooted passion is thus fundamental to wildlife conservation, but only within a framework of honourable, ethical conduct. By adopting a code of “fair chase,” North Americans explicitly opposed the excess of wildlife slaughter, particularly in enclosures.

### What can we learn from the North American Wildlife Conservation Model?

- Hunters support wildlife conservation because there is something in it for them: a payoff in their annual allocation of wildlife. The motive is selfish, not idealistic. As a profit motive drives a capitalistic economy, so a profit motive drives the North American system of wildlife conservation: the hope for a richer harvest and a richer experience in hunting. Consequently, with self-interests in wildlife, hunters become concerned, active spokespeople for and supporters of wildlife, and experience shows that wildlife will then flourish. Elevate wildlife against the self-interests of the common person and wildlife will suffer and be destroyed if and when the opportunity arises. Our only hope to retain thriving biodiversity is to embrace a human-centred view for the use of the biosphere, in which wildlife provides for human needs and aspirations and is therefore valued by a broad segment of society. An ecocentric, impersonal view of biosphere management cannot but fail, romanticism notwithstanding.
- Wildlife must remain a harvestable resource, supplying in the first instance food for our tables. It is an alternative to agriculture generating utility from the land. It must not be viewed as a purely recreational resource, as a source of sport or entertainment. Its first order of utility is the provision of a harvest of unusual food of exceptionally high value. Wildlife thrives with attention and dies from neglect. Utility fosters attention.
- We must, therefore, retain the utility of wildlife. For instance, songbirds were historically protected not for moral or ethical reasons, but because they were valued as destroyers of insect pests in fields, forests, and gardens – not because songbirds were cute and entertaining. Today





songbirds have no utility in North America and enjoy little organized public support such as is enjoyed by native game birds like the turkey, ruffed grouse, or waterfowl. Songbirds may have the protection of the law, but they have little in the form of tangible popular support – despite birdwatchers.

- We must examine for retention the seven basic conservation policies that have served us so well in bringing back wildlife and retaining continental biodiversity. These contain many counterintuitive lessons about how to maintain and foster a public resource. Would we but dare to manage forests the way we (cheerfully) managed wildlife. Would we but manage marine fisheries the way we manage wildlife – openly, transparently, and with accountability.
- One must point to the awesome power of the democratic process, in which we set aside willingly our differences and unite in a public cause, fostering the welfare of wildlife and through it of the biosphere as well. One should recognize the power of volunteers as social equalizers, as reciprocal carriers of information and power. In this one retains the accountability and openness that has characterized to date the relationship between wildlife managers and the public. It is essential to establish a partnership between managers and the public and to unlock the spirit to act in the public good.
- Wildlife conservation in North America suffers from ignorance of the past, be it an uninformed judiciary or uninformed managers of wildlife unable to defend the system. We must buck the trend!

The universality of the North American Wildlife Conservation Model is in doubt, as it is built on some fundamental assumptions, the primary one being that all citizens may participate in both the harvest of wildlife and its management. And that entails the availability of firearms to all citizens, not merely the country's elite. An armed citizenship, one practiced in the art of grassroots democracy and thus accepting of decisions reached by public debate and compromise, is fundamental.

Therefore, there has to be an acceptance of responsibility for a public resource, despite embracing a capitalistic economy and values. Citizen must see wildlife as a common good and must accept sharing on trust. Even the country's elite must participate in the processes of wildlife conservation and must not be exempt from such. There must be willingness by the public to privately support wildlife, accepting public efforts at conservation as minimal at best.

The North American Wildlife Conservation Model is openly opposed by some agricultural interests who would like to tie wildlife ownership to land ownership, make wildlife a private resource to be managed according to market demands and sold to the highest bidder. The same goes for companies who, for whatever reason, lease large land areas and are interested in generating revenue by leasing out hunting rights to the highest bidder.

There is support for these efforts by a significant sector of urban-based, affluent hunters who chafe at bag limits, short seasons, and crowded hunting grounds. Their efforts are effectively supported by gun-control advocates who lobby for a disarmed public. In practice, that means disarming the blue-collar segment of society, leaving the elite well armed.

Without effective, egalitarian public hunting there will be little opposition to privatizing wildlife, making it a plaything of the elite as it has been so often in the past. Canada's most unfortunate gun-control legislation is well on the way to doing just that and is thus in opposition to the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. It is self-evident that in dictatorships, this model is unlikely to be accepted, based as it is on armed civilians who practice effective grassroots democracy.





---

*(Dr. Valerius Geist is Professor Emeritus of Environmental Science at the University of Calgary. This article is excerpted from a paper that he presented at the International Fund for Animal Welfare Forum 2004, "Wildlife Conservation: In Pursuit of Ecological Sustainability," June 16-19, 2004, Limerick, Ireland. He also presented information from this paper at AWA's 2004 Alberta Wilderness and Wildlife Trust Annual Lecture and Awards. The complete text of Dr. Geist's paper can be found on our website under Wildlife or Lectures.)*

