

# GOOD WILL HUNTING



HUNTERS AND ENVIRONMENTALISTS HAVE FORMED AN UNEASY ALLIANCE TO SAVE WILDLIFE AND ITS HABITAT



“There’s nothing better than a fresh elk steak,” says Lahsha Johnston, a hunter from Idaho, with a pep and gusto that can’t be denied. “It’s not just food, it’s a connection to the land.”

Her comment isn’t unusual for someone from a state where hunting is an integral part of the culture. But given her job—regional associate in the Boise office of the Wilderness Society, a national environmental group—tenderfoot liberals as well as knee-jerk conservatives might find her sentiment unconscionable.

The relationship between hunters and environmentalists in the west is, at best, strained: Sierra Clubbers, writing in their organization’s magazine, describe hunters as “sick” and “Neanderthals,” and hunters in Oregon political campaigns lump environmentalists in with animal-rights “wackos” and Californians. Partisans on both sides see the movements as diametrically opposed.

Meanwhile, other people have a hard time separating them at all.

“Most of the original conservationists were hunters,” says Scott Stouder, who for seven years served on the board of the 6,800-member Oregon Hunters Association. “People like Aldo Leopold and Teddy Roosevelt—they saw that if hunting and wildlife were going to continue, hunters had to protect habitat where animals live.”

“Funny how that turns out,” he exclaims with mock surprise. “Isn’t that pretty much what those environmentalists want?”

Around the west, people like Stouder and Johnston are finding it possible to work with their supposed enemies. They’re getting things done, and testing the patience of their

more radical brethren. And when they go too far, like Stouder, they’re sometimes driven away from the very organizations to which they’ve devoted their lives.

## BOMBS & BIGHORNS

The number of hunters in the west is huge; in Oregon alone, the state sold more than 300,000 hunting licenses in 1997, roughly one for every 10 citizens. Since environmentalists are not required to register with the state, it’s hard to make exact comparisons between the groups. But it’s fair to say environmentalism as a political movement is centered in the cities, while hunting is a tradition of rural life. In some eastern Oregon counties, as much as 40 percent of the population hunts.

In those stark deserts and rugged mountains of the inland Northwest—Oregon and Washington east of the Cascades, and western Idaho—hunting organizations are involved in a lot of projects to protect wildlife and habitat, with and without the help of environmentalists.

When faced with outrageous threats to species they both hold dear, it’s easy for the movements to get together.

In the remote Owyhee Canyonlands straddling Oregon and Idaho, groups composed mostly of hunters, like the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep, have banded together with traditional environmental groups, like the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, to oppose the expansion of an Air Force bombing range. They argue the sonic booms, flares and other side effects of military exercises disturb wildlife and ruin the remote and wild character of the place.

BY MARTIN JOHN BROWN

ILLUSTRATIONS BY GREGORY HARTMAN

"The fundamental concern for protecting the habitat crosses the line," says the Wilderness Society's Johnston. "It's the same whether you want to look at the wildlife or shoot it."

In northeast Oregon, hunter groups like the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, corporations, government agencies and the fish conservation group, Oregon Trout, have contributed to the "Blue Mountains Elk Initiative." The project has closed hundreds of miles of roads and built dozens of miles of fences in an effort to improve elk habitat on public land.

In the Eagle Cap area of the Blue Mountains, the Oregon Hunters Association has bought out old grazing allotments for the purpose of aiding the reintroduction of Bighorn Sheep. The grazing allotment deals are representative of many conservation efforts by hunting groups. They arrange swaps and purchases that preserve or consolidate habitat, and usually open land to public use—sometimes putting large sums of money on the table to make the deals fly.

"It's a win-win situation," says Art Talsma, Northwest regional director for the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a group which has participated in dozens of such deals.

Yet even on these feel-good projects, collaborating partners are often wary of each other.

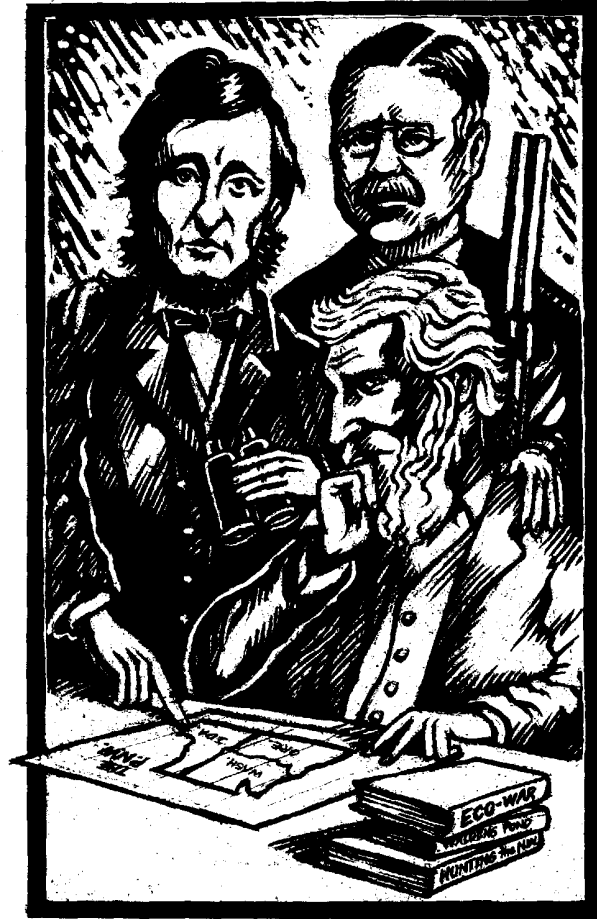
"Environmentalists are extremely distrustful—they think you're trying to improve the habitat just so you can go out there and kill more animals" says Dano McGinn, president of a tiny group of conservation-minded hunters called the California Mule Deer Association.

Meanwhile, hunters suspect "that environmentalists have an agenda to stop hunting," McGinn says.

Such fears can be incendiary, and collaborations have to establish enough trust or obligation to quell them. Tangential topics like animal rights and gun control fly around the discussion like sparks, threatening to ignite the entire political landscape. In at least two cherished places in Oregon, the ashes are already drifting down.

**CHARISMATIC  
MEGAFUNA**

Hart Mountain in south-central Oregon is a place "dear to our members' hearts," says McGinn. Its sagebrush plateaus and spectacular fault-scarp cliffs are home to a sizable part of the region's population of biologically unique Pronghorn Antelope—the fastest North American land animal. Four hundred and thirty square miles of it are managed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as a wildlife refuge.



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For most of the past 30 years, pronghorn numbers have been increasing. At Hart Mountain, they have declined somewhat since 1990. Oregon Hunters Association chairman Bob Webber says members were out on Hart Mountain, taking down fences (a hazard for antelope) and planting bitterbrush for forage. Environmentalists were glad to see them out there, he adds, but he wonders if all the work will make much of a difference for pronghorn because of environmentalist perspectives about coyotes, who eat pronghorn fawns. "[Environmentalists] have consistently opposed reducing the coyote population there," he notes with frustration.

If anything divides hunters from environmentalists in substance as much as style, it is the proper place of predators like coyotes, wolves, cougar and bear in the wild. For environmentalists, they are symbols of nature as deep and ubiquitous as the Marlboro Man. For hunters, the "wildness" has a flip side. Predators are

seen as bandits to be controlled for the common good. What's more, they pose serious competition for human hunters—cougars, for example, eat deer and elk.

In late 1997, Hart Mountain managers proposed allowing coyote hunts on the refuge, citing coyote predation of fawns as a danger to the long-term prospects of the pronghorn population.

Many hunters agreed with the concept.

"Predators obviously consume a lot of animals. We'd rather have those animals to hunt," says the OHA's Webber, adding that no hunter wants the complete elimination of predators.

The proposed hunts raised an outcry from environmentalists, however, who called the hunters' ecological logic flawed. The Oregon Natural Desert Association and the Eugene-based Predator Defense Institute took the Fish & Wildlife Service to court. Signing on as co-plaintiff was an unlikely ally—the California Mule Deer Association, headed by hunter McGinn.

"It's a tough one to handle for most hunters," says McGinn. "For decades they've had it pounded in to them that it's the predators, not the habitat, that are the reason for these population declines... but wildlife populations are dependent on habitat conditions, and predator conditions follow them. Hunters use predators as the scapegoat for land-management practices."

The Fish & Wildlife Service quickly backed down. The conflict embittered some hunters who were already sore over ballot measure campaigns that prohibited the hunting of cougar or bear with hounds or bait—techniques actually practiced by very few hunters, and even regarded by some hunters as cruel and unsportsmanlike. Both animal-welfare groups like the Oregon Humane Society and environmental groups like the Oregon Natural Resources Council opposed a law that would re-legalize hounding and baiting. When hounding and baiting were decisively defeated at the polls, some hunters saw it as one more indication that animal-rights and environmental movements are one and the same thing, and share the same goal: ending all hunting.

"A lot of environmentalists would be tickled to death if the whole state was a state park," OHA president Sandy Sanderson says. "That's an extreme, but in a few words, that's where we are right now." Hunting is forbidden in state parks.

"That's our secret agenda—I hear that all the time," says Susan Mentley, operations director for the Oregon Humane Society. It is not the policy of her organization to oppose all hunting, she says, though it strongly opposes cruel and unfair hunts.

Fears like Sanderson's are even more puzzling to another group: the hunters that work for environmental groups.

"I'm a hunter myself," says Tim Lillebo, eastern Oregon field representative for the Oregon Natural Resources Council. "The main people [promoting environmental issues] out here on the east side of the Cascades are hunters."

Lillebo finds it easier to separate animal rights from environmentalism than environmentalism from hunting.

"In the ONRC we have total animal-rights people, who are like, you should never hurt another living thing," he says, "but ONRC is a habitat group. We're not an animal-rights group."

Meg Miller, outreach coordinator for the Northwest office of the animal-rights group In Defense of Animals, strongly agrees there is a distinction.

"The movements are definitely heading in different directions" she says. "Our experience has been that environmentalists tend to look at animals as species, not as individuals." Significantly, she notes, "a lot of environmentalists may not be

vegetarians, a lot may not oppose using animals for research."

"I guess some people want to lump us all together," she concludes. "We're perceived as the crazies."

Those hunters who look too much like the crazies can end up isolated, without a home in either movement.

"It's a lonely road," says McGinn of the California Mule Deer Association. His group started out as a chapter of a national organization, the Mule Deer Foundation, but split off, he says, because the larger group was too timid to extend their conservation work into an area that really mattered: land-management practices, such as livestock grazing and off-road vehicle use.

"It gets very controversial," he sighs. "We get hit hard by both sides all the time. I have neighbors that won't even talk to me."

### DRIVING AND CRYING

Land management was the territory Scott Stouder was heading into a few years ago, when he convinced the OHA to let him work with a coalition of environmental and Indian groups writing a comprehensive management plan for the Hells Canyon National Recreation Area on the Oregon-Idaho border. If the Grand Canyon is a brash spectacle, Hells Canyon is more rumpled and substantial. Wildflower meadows, forested tablelands, and stark grass terraces step and turn their way down a vertical mile to the Snake River. Mule Deer and cinnamon-colored bears range the patterned landscapes. Environmentalists cherish it as a place still wild enough to "experience nature on its own terms."

The coalition's plan was an ambitious one. Written as an alternative to the Forest Service's plans for the area, it touched on subjects ranging from forest-fire management to development for tourism. It went far beyond the OHA's usual bailiwick—lobbying government on game-management issues and performing hands-on habitat rehabilitation.

"There were several votes on the issue," recalls outgoing OHA board member Ken McCall. "They weren't unanimous, but Scott had the support of our board of directors."

Besides Stouder, the coalition included representatives of the Wilderness Society, the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla, the Nez Perce, and self-employed foresters and fishermen.

Mary O'Brien, a contract scientist for the environmental group Hells Canyon Preservation Council, coordinated their efforts. Working with Stouder changed her preconceptions. "Before, my concept of hunting was that it wasn't very nice—it was like going into someone's house and

looking in all the rooms and shooting them," she admits. "But with people like Scott, you can see how much they love hunting and love the animals."

Even though the management plan they were writing did not touch directly on hunting, she found Stouder had a lot to contribute.

Stouder, a former logger and longtime hunter, knew the migration patterns of game animals and what might disturb them. "He contributed knowledge about what roads really shouldn't be there," she says.

Roads are a key issue. National forest lands are criss-crossed with them—about 383,000 miles nationwide. The argument against these roads reached a kind of fruition in early 1999, when the big roadbuilder itself—the Forest Service—published a synthesis of scientific literature that linked roads to habitat fragmentation, erosion, degradation of aquatic habitat, loss of biodiversity, and blockage of fish and wildlife passage.

Limiting motorized access is a linchpin of the Hells Canyon coalition's plan, a method of reducing overcrowding, reducing maintenance costs, and compelling people to experience Hells Canyon as a wilderness. The plan calls for closing about three-fourths of the roads in that area.

The use of roads is a matter of hunting style: So-called "slob hunters" like to be able to illegally shoot game from their trucks or track down animals nearby without breaking a sweat, whereas anti-road purists emphasize the quality and intensity of the experience of hiking or horse-packing in to hunt. But generally, hunters don't dispute the negative effects that roads have on the animals they hunt.

"The more roads there are, the higher the elk harvest is," says Talsma of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. He says roads and motor vehicles are a stress to animals, reducing the "habitat effectiveness" of the landscape.

When hunters object to road closures, it's usually on other grounds.

"The fear is that access would be lost," explains the OHA's McCall, meaning that road closures can be seen as sly attempts to prohibit hunting, or a way for big government to lock citizens out of their own public land.

In the process, the practice of hunting becomes linked to a whole nexus of conservative political ideas.

### INVASION OF THE BODY SNATCHERS

The Oregon Hunters Association opposed the expansion of roads in Hells Canyon, but to some people in that organization, there was more at stake than driving.

The Hells Canyon coalition submitted its plan to local Forest Service authorities



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in 1996, who at that time rejected it. While the coalition looked for ways to appeal, separate political maneuvering in Congress threatened to reopen a road in Hells Canyon that Stouder and environmentalists called a critical threat to wildlife.

Stouder and others met with Gordon Smith, Oregon's newly elected U.S. senator. According to Stouder and Webber, Smith gave assurances he would not support reopening the road. When in July 1997 Smith sponsored a bill to reopen the road, Stouder was livid. He wrote Smith an angry letter on OHA letterhead.

"He basically called [Smith] a liar," says Webber. When copies of that letter reached more conservative members of the OHA, it broke the camel's back. The long-simmering uneasiness over Stouder's positions boiled into a full-blown revolt.

"People thought he shouldn't have said that about their senator," Webber adds.

To some members of the OHA, Gordon Smith was more than a maker of policy about roads—he was a new ally in Washington for conservative causes.

When Stouder came up for re-election to the board, he did not run. "I was tired of defending myself against people who think I'm the enemy," he says. He stopped representing the OHA to the Hells Canyon coalition in 1998, just as the coalition won a political order forcing the Forest Service to consider their plan.

Soon thereafter, the OHA wrote the Forest Service a retraction, indicating it should not be listed as an author of the coalition's plan.

Stouder charges that political and commercial forces have preyed on hunters, exploiting their fears to win them over to an ultra-conservative agenda unrelated to hunting.

"A lot of hunters have been body-snatched by the wise-use movement" he says. "There's an attitude now in the OHA that we should be allied with the NRA

and that kind of thing. They make it seem like if you want to be a hunter, you've gotta defend someone's right to stand on the corner with an Uzi."

The Oregon Hunters Association does have some relationship with the NRA. The masthead to their magazine, *Oregon Hunter*, states the group is an affiliate of the National Rifle Association.

Curiously, the NRA has acted as a voice for hunters, on an issue unrelated to the Second Amendment—road closures. In early 1998, NRA official Susan Lamson wrote the Forest Service an extended commentary about them. Her letter said the NRA was "concerned with the Forest Service's objective to 'aggressively' decommission unneeded roads." She suggested a new policy that "supports the maintenance of lightly used roads that provide access for recreational opportunities"—that is, hunting and shooting.

Webber dismisses the OHA's link with the NRA as superficial. Still, he seems resigned to a state of affairs where extremism is the only option. "In our society, it seems like if you don't take a radical stance, you get nowhere," he explains. "If you want an inch, you ask for a mile—and maybe you get half an inch."

Other hunters' groups seem to be cultivating a less contentious style. The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation has about 100,000 members worldwide, and about 8,000 in Oregon. Their mission statement, "to ensure the future of elk, other wildlife, and their habitat," comes with a pointed footnote. "The RMEF's resources are focused entirely on that mission, precluding involvement in issues or debates that might inhibit or dilute that focus."

Freud from the internal politics of the OHA, Stouder now serves on the boards of two organizations that others might find antithetical. One is the Mule Deer Foundation, a group composed mostly of hunters. And despite the fact that he is a registered Republican, he serves with his environmentalist colleague from Hells Canyon, Mary O'Brien, on the board of the Wildlands Center for Preventing Roads.

"There's a lot of thoughtful people who are hunters, who don't join" organizations or get involved, says O'Brien, because they've been dismayed by the mislabeling and nasty rhetoric of the public debate with environmentalists. Stouder speculates there are a lot of moderates in both movements, and the situation is urgent enough for them to speak up and work to find common ground.

"We're losing our base of operations, which is our land mass," he says, referring to economic development of traditionally rural and wild areas—something that affects animals regardless of whether humans hunt or merely hike. "It's the habitat, stupid." ■