

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation



Wildlife as a Public Trust: How hunters took bold and enduring action to save wildlife.

Throughout time, humans have depended on wildlife for survival—as a source of food, clothing, and even tools. Wildlife inspired art, spirituality, and discovery about the natural world. While many people through history have taken responsibility as stewards of wildlife, at times people have been wasteful of wildlife. North America reached a tipping point in the late 1800s as extinction and near-extinction of species rose dramatically due to human actions. Could people achieve a “wise use” of wildlife resources?

To understand current processes of wildlife conservation, we must look back at how wildlife policy evolved in North America. Early European explorers found North America teeming with wildlife, seemingly boundless and unregulated. The first stories from America were tales of limitless bounty: “I think in all the world the like abundance is not to be found,” stated Arthur Barlow, Sir Walter Raleigh’s agent, after Raleigh’s trip to Virginia in 1584. As the population of people greatly expanded in the 1800s, much of North America’s natural resources, including wildlife, were exploited. Losses of habitat from deforestation, mining, and water pollution began to impact many species. The commercial killing of wildlife by “market hunters” significantly threatened some species. Market hunters had little to no restrictions and harvested as much wildlife as they could to sell as meat, fur, and animal parts. As North America’s prosperity grew, harvesting wildlife was no longer just for survival. People bought furs and hats adorned with bird feathers for fashion. Market hunters were paid to harvest bison for the advancing railway communities. Ranchers and government agents set their sights on predators and any wildlife that was perceived to threaten human progress. Wildlife was considered an inexhaustible commodity, and there were few limits on harvest. Abundant wildlife species dwindled, and some, such as the passenger pigeon, became extinct, unable to overcome the extreme changes in land use and overharvesting of their populations.

Many people began to see these losses of wildlife and grew concerned about the future of these animals. Several forward-thinking hunters realized the devastating effects of unregulated hunting. They saw a need to set limits in order to sustain wildlife populations and assume responsibility for the stewardship of our natural resources on behalf of present and future generations. They had a strong foundation to stand on. The notion of natural resources as a “public trust” had its beginnings in the Justinian Code of the early Romans, the Magna Carta, and the Charter of the Forest of 1217. In 1842, the U.S. Supreme Court (*Martin v. Waddell*) began to establish the principle that wildlife is a public trust resource. This has been tested and confirmed many times, with the U.S. Supreme Court



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upholding that wildlife resources belong to the people, not the government, corporations, or individuals, and these resources are to be managed by the government on behalf of the people.¹⁻² Treating wildlife as a public trust was, and is, in contrast to the practices of many places outside of North America where landowners, royalty, or the privileged hold management authority over wildlife.

By the early 1900s, hunters and conservationists rallied to support policies and legislation that would sustain North American wildlife populations as a public trust for future generations. Thanks to the pioneering efforts of visionaries such as George Bird Grinnell, Theodore Roosevelt, and Aldo Leopold, and the commitment of hunters and anglers, wildlife conservation took a dramatic and life-saving turn. In 1900, the Lacey Act eliminated market hunting by prohibiting the sale of wildlife. Hunters and anglers worked to pass laws in the United States to fund wildlife research and conservation through taxes on hunting, shooting, and fishing equipment, and motor boat fuels. Wildlife research and management evolved as a sound science to guide conservation and promote the “wise use” of wildlife. Wildlife professionals and sportsmen and women duly recognize the important contribution of our “hunting heritage” to many conservation success stories in Canada and the United States.

The seven tenets listed below form the *North American Model of Wildlife Conservation*. Over time, these principles have evolved and shaped wildlife conservation and management practices in the United States and Canada.

- 1. Wildlife Resources Are a Public Trust.** The government manages wildlife on behalf of the public today and for future generations. States or provinces make and enforce most management regulations.
- 2. Elimination of Markets for Game.** Laws prevent selling certain wild game meat or animal parts to unregulated markets. There are a number of cases in which wildlife products (fish, fur bearers, and certain game animals) may be sold; however, these markets are monitored and heavily regulated to ensure that harvest is sustainable. Laws also prohibit the sale of certain nongame, threatened, or rare species.
- 3. Allocation of Wildlife Is by Law.** Governments use a process of public rulemaking to decide which species may be hunted or controlled in the public interest, and which species may be collected, hunted, or possessed by people. These rules are based on the needs of people and the impact on wildlife.



4. Wildlife is Killed Only for Legitimate Purpose. This tenet is subject to local, state, and regional needs, but its primary intention is to avoid the wasteful and indiscriminate killing of wildlife without purpose. Legitimate purposes typically include food, fur, and defending a person or property.

5. Wildlife Is an International Resource. Many wildlife species regularly move across national borders, such as waterfowl and songbirds. International agreements, agencies, and organizations help protect and manage these species. Federal agencies, in cooperation with state agencies, are legally responsible for managing wildlife that affects national interest, such as most threatened and endangered species and migratory wildlife.

6. Science-based Wildlife Policy. Science informs decision-makers when making wildlife policy and structuring management plans.

7. Democracy of Hunting. Laws offer the opportunity to hunt and fish to all people, not just those who are privileged.

These seven tenets have shaped wildlife management practices in the United States and Canada, contributing significantly to efforts to sustain fish and wildlife species. Wildlife species are now monitored, populations are managed, and hunters and anglers, through license fees, excise taxes on sporting goods and motor boat fuels, and voluntary contributions to conservation organizations, provide nearly \$3 billion annually to support habitat and wildlife conservation.³ The public participates in judicial, legislative, and regulatory processes to influence laws and rulemaking. However, tremendous challenges remain for wildlife managers across the continent, including habitat degradation and conversion, human-wildlife conflict, an undervaluing of wildlife, loss of traditions and education that foster wildlife knowledge and appreciation, locally overabundant wildlife populations, expanding lists of species at risk, and a sparsity of data for many taxa.⁴

The tenets of the North American Model are frequently reflected in the content of Project WILD activities and the Project WILD Conceptual Framework. Project WILD activities are designed to help learners better understand the complexities of wildlife conservation, to help them become well-informed decision makers, and to promote their role as stewards of our natural resources.

For more information about the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation or to access the Project WILD Conceptual Framework, visit www.projectwild.org.

¹ Wildlife Society. 2017. wildlife.org

² Natural Resources Protective Association. 2017. www.nrpa.com

³ Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation. 2017. [Sportsmenlink.org](http://sportsmenlink.org)
<http://sportsmenlink.org/the-media-room/news/sportsmens-economic-impact-report-show-shunting-and-fishing-expenditures-ar>

⁴ International Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA). 2002. *Wildlife Resources Policy Committee White Paper* prepared by Joanna Prukop, New Mexico Department of Game & Fish/IAFWA, and Ron Regan, Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife.

