

30 Years and Counting

To imagine that it's been 30 years since Wildlife Systems, Inc. (WSI) was started, is simply mind-boggling, to me. And, as I sit here trying to organize a meaningful rendition on how to briefly chronicle a little history of the company, while sharing a few thoughts on the hunting business, there are a myriad of recollections and emotions that swirl.

WSI, in retrospect, was in many ways a twist of fate...and hope. One could say that it started while I was a junior in high school, when Al Brothers responded to my letter, asking him for advice on how to become a wildlife biologist. Then there was my high school principal, Stephen Fleener, insisting that he accompany me on a trip to Texas A&M University, so that we could make an appeal for my acceptance into A&M. I was then fortunate to meet so many instrumental professors and wildlife professionals while at A&M, who helped shape my college career, especially Dr. Nova Silvy and Dr. Wallace Klussmann. I also had some key breaks while trying to fledge WSI, freshly out of college, including meeting Dick and Norma Laros who were instrumental in mentoring my early efforts and who also were vital in allowing WSI to tap into a strong client market in Pennsylvania. I would be remiss not to pay respects to my Mom and Dad; my Mom cleaned houses to help support my college expenses, while my Dad was always there for advice and helped with guiding for several years. And of course my wife, Deborah, and our two amazing kids, Tyler and Erin, who each made many sacrifices that allowed me to be gone from home an immense amount of time for so many years.

As Dick Laros said, "There's no business like the hunting business." And boy was he spot-on! The hunting and wildlife business is a strange and sometimes weird and chaotic way to make a living. There are many reasons for this characterization, but one significant feature is that when it comes to wildlife and hunting, there is often an emotional stir where people's opinions and values vary immensely, and where discussions and discourse can become amped up in the drop of a hat. E.O. Wilson's research and writings on biophilia touch on the significance of how humans are hardwired to want to with other forms of life, and I think there are undoubtedly some ties to how this interacts with this professional field. Similarly, renowned international hunting and wildlife advocate, Shane Mahoney, continues to provide marvelous messages regarding how hunting is imbedded in human DNA...it may not be part of what we all do, but it is part of who we all are! When you wrap these innate human traits around a business practice, it fundamentally creates unique and dynamic challenges.

As far as I'm concerned, any successes that WSI has realized over the last 30 years can largely be tied to three basic tenets:

Private Landowners: WSI has been extremely fortunate to establish some great relationships with many different private landowners over the years. They have generously opened their gates and entrusted us with access to their special properties, allowing us to offer services to our hunting clientele so that our clients can enjoy the wonderful wildlife resources and interesting cultures that exist on those privately-owned lands. Here in the U.S., private landowners hold the most important key to the future health of wildlife, open space, ag production, abundant and clean water, and clean air. Landowners are the true stewards of these vital resources and I'm fortunate to have worked with many of them over the years.

Staff Support: My Dad, when discussing business philosophies, used to tell me, "Your people are to you, as ten are to one." Early on, I thought his observation was a bit corny and shallow, but over the years I grew to have a great appreciation for this profound relationship dynamic. Whether it's business, sports, advocacy, or personal achievement, successes of the mission are a direct function

of the synergies from the collective individuals who are all part of the whole process. I've been blessed over the years to have an extra-ordinary collection of people who have been part of our support team. Guides, cooks, office personnel, technicians, full-time, part-time, and seasonal, the entire mix of our team of support have been difference-makers. They have and continue to inspire me. I tip my hat of gratitude to them for their contributions.

Professional Development: At our WSI annual in-service meeting, we make it a point to discuss the importance of professionalism, addressing strategies for professionalism, and I insist that WSI has no interest in being a "good old boy" type organization. It's not that difficult to try and do things right, with some degree on intellect, respect for the resource, respect for others, all being delivered in a courteous and upbeat demeanor. Part of professionalism is also giving back, and for me, one of my portals for these efforts has been the Texas Wildlife Association (TWA). Being a part of something bigger, something that can help make a societal-wide difference, is very rewarding and energizing. One of the pinnacles of my professional affiliations was being able to serve as President of TWA. I encourage everyone, regardless of their chosen field of endeavor, to become involved with an advocacy group that is relevant to their interests; it'll serve as an energy pill and will serve as a form of civic duty that may help make our world a better place to live.

In looking forward, I'll admit that it is sometimes a bit more difficult for me to be as optimistic as I once was about the future of hunting and the hunting business. With age, I guess I've become more cynical about certain things in life. A growing percentage of our population who are not hunters, serves as basic math that is not favorable for the future of hunting. Also, it concerns me with what we are doing to create too much domestication of our charismatic big-game species, in-particular white-tailed deer. Though my outspoken concerns regarding the integration of captive deer breeding into hunting has certainly created some blowback onto myself, I continue to support a position that hunting and game management should be framed by adaptive regulations and statutes that are reflective of the times, and that new and prudent lines must be occasionally drawn in the sand to ensure "wildness" and health of game and to earn broad public support for hunting. Plus, hunting has served as this country's chief financier for terrestrial wildlife conservation for some 120 years, and whitetails have served as this country's most economically important wildlife species for many decades, so anything that we do that compromises the long-term, broad values of white-tailed deer and whitetail hunting, can impair this country's most important conservation funding mechanism. Arguably, nobody's really to fault for this move toward pen-raising and "mutating" these amazing wild creatures, as people are geared to want to have "bigger and better" things in life, but in this case I think we are tarnishing a resource that has given to the hunting and conservation community in spades. Do we really need artificial insemination, antibiotics and other performance enhancing drugs, ½ acre pens, baby-bottle formula, embryo transfer, line-breeding, and sexing of semen to manage game? Do we really need 400", 500", 600", and now moving onto 700" white-tailed deer, all in the name of a bigger prize for the wall? In some ways and in many circles, we are killing the mystery and magic of whitetail hunting. My critics will be critics, and that's okay, as I've reconciled that it is inevitable that "friendly fire" will take place when we have THIS conversation, but as far as I'm concerned, it's a conversation that MUST take place if we are going to effectively address an intra-community issue that is central to the long-term health of hunting and conservation funding.

On the brighter note, I'm excited about a growing list pro-active programs to introduce kids, women, and inner-city folks into hunting; these platforms for opportunity are absolutely 100% necessary for a re-vitalized movement to increase relevance for our important hunting heritage. I'm also excited to see a newly emerging interest in hunting through the locavore movement, where that culture is attracted to hunting as a means of obtaining locally grown, organic foods, and connecting in a meaningful way with our outdoor world. I'm provided comfort in seeing the educational outreach and advocacy work from many conservation groups such as Dallas Safari

Club, Texas Wildlife Association, Safari Club International, Ducks Unlimited, National Wild Turkey Federation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Quality Deer Management Association, and others. I'm grateful and inspired by the work of some of our natural resource agencies, such as Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, for their leadership and technical guidance that they provide to help ensure reasonable conservation measures.

When asked if I'd do things differently if I had it to do all over, I'll honestly admit that it's convenient to second-guess history, and though there are certain aspects of my business that I simply do not like, if pressed, I'd have to say that I've been a blessed person to "live the dream," blurring the lines between vocational and avocational interests, and being able to continue chasing dreams that were born from boyhood journeys into the pastures behind our home in Combine, Texas.

I'm looking forward to the future. There are still professional endeavors that are left undone. I'd like to someday finish my book, "Enterprise Aspects of The Hunting Business," which I began working on the manuscript some 7 years ago, only to put it on hold when I became too busy with other things. There are other professional callings that lurk inside of me that I have yet to put a finger on regarding what they may be, but there's something there; perhaps I'll figure it out someday? In the meantime, I'll keep doing what I know best, skinning javelinas for a living, and counting my luck stars for the opportunities that have come along over the last 30 years.

Cheers to all,

Greg Simons

Proprietor- Wildlife Systems, Inc.