

Editorial

Controlling the Narrative: *The Key to Hunting's Future*

The late Nigerian novelist, Chinua Achebe, once famously said that, "Until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter." I suspect that Mr. Achebe made a reasonable point when he delivered that assessment, but I wonder if he anticipated that those "historians" would someday rise in the form of social media, fake news, and a narrative that is now shaped by forces that defy the conventional wisdom of the past. Further, "the history of the hunt" no longer always glorifies the hunter! In fact, hunters rarely control the narrative that tends to define how our American society views hunters, hunting, and the merits of the two.

The 5-year study, *National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation*, that has been conducted by the USFWS since 1955, revealed an alarming stat during the most recent cycle from the 2011-2016 period; that being an unprecedented drop in hunting license sales by almost 20%! This remarkable reduction in hunting license sales seems to paint an ominous picture for future of a "past-time" that has historically served as the chief funding mechanism for terrestrial wildlife conservation during the last 100+ years, not to mention the thought of losing an important part of our American cultural fabric. The percentage of our citizens that hunt is now less than 5%, which begs the question that relates to thresholds which render people and things as being irrelevant within the dynamic sideboards that shape societal acceptance; I suspect we are staring that threshold in the face, right now!

Now, our hunting community could simply fret over "better days gone by" and we could, and certainly should, explore the reasons for diminution in hunting participation, but one thing that I would like to ponder in this Editorial is the absolute importance for our hunting community to do a better job of **controlling the narrative** on how we interact with society and how we project messages and images to those around us.

Social Media- Like it, or not, social media has quickly emerged as the medium that people tend glean their daily "news" and information. This largely uncensored communication tool represents a vast sea of material that can create proverbial viral effects on how people view certain issues de jour. "Cecil The Lion" is a prime example of how social media can unjustly write its own history, as Mr. Achebe might have put it. Most recently, when you look at the unfortunate debacle between NRA and YETI, it's yet another example of how social media can shape views and ignite reactions, regardless of the accuracy or intent of the information content.

I'm not a social media expert, but I think that hunters, individually and collectively through NGOs, need to play the social media game smarter and harder. It fundamentally starts with being better stewards of what we post on social media, including hunting photos, as well as written material. I continue to see plenty of garbage that hunters post which can ultimately paint poor images of hunting, especially through distasteful photos that may evoke perceptions of hunters being low-grade people who are blood thirsty and of immoral character. Further, we fall short on sharing wholesome stories and messages that clearly articulate the beauty of the hunt and that reinforce messages that articulate hunting as a conservation tool. From a narrative standpoint, we are often our worst enemy on this front.

Weaving of NGOs- Hunters have historically banded together through affiliation via various sportsmen's groups. We can point to many different NGOs as shining examples of how hunters raise monies and channel sweat equity into causes that are good for hunting and good for our wildlife resources. However, where we seem to fall short with our NGO efforts is in collectively working together to aggregate resources between these groups in a fashion that synergizes our broad efforts, while also creating efficiencies along the way. Just recently, I was reaching out to several different NGOs to consider serving as a sponsor of our Private Lands Summit that is annually hosted by Texas Wildlife Association. One organization, that is one of the largest hunting NGOs in the country, respectfully declined the solicitation by explaining that they have an organizational policy of not financially supporting other organizations. On the surface, I can understand this type of internal policy, but this seems to be an example of how our friendly and relevant NGO community has become a bit too self-consumed and autonomous, instead of breaking down dogmatic barriers and creatively searching for ways to strategically compliment one-another's work, strengthening our collective efforts in controlling the narrative of our advocacy and outreach efforts.

Shaping Public Policy- For the sake of this discussion, the importance of controlling the narrative perhaps resonates no louder than that relating to laws that interact with hunting and wildlife. Fundamentally, with what is intended to be a democratic system where the will of the people is expressed through our elected officials and policy-makers, special interest groups who control the narrative through their strategic efforts are generally well-positioned to advance their agendas. However, once again, our hunting community tends to not be collectively well-organized when it comes to media outreach, public testimony, legislative relationship building, and general educational outreach. Some prestigious and great hunting NGOs, such as Boone & Crockett Club, are often reluctant to actively wade into the public policy mix at the state level, which from my personal viewpoint, is an example of the need for some hunting NGOs to re-think how we tackle public policy issues that affect the current and future health of hunting and wildlife.

Addressing the Slippery Slopes- When hunters' tools look more like military tools, than those of a hunter, and when our tools of technology eliminate too much uncertainty and mystery from the hunt, should we not be willing to ask ourselves what the broad consequences of such tools might be? When game management practices resemble those of livestock husbandry, essentially rendering wild things into those that are somewhat tame and mutant-like, should we not be willing to introspect the ripple-effects? The historical health of our American hunting heritage has largely hinged on the ability for our hunting community to not only self-regulate, but to advocate for laws and customs that have historically placed priority on sustainable broad health of our public trust wildlife resources. The American ideal of hunter-conservationists emerged out of necessity during the late 1800s, when much of our country's wildlife were on the throws of a colossal collapse, and then evolved over time to be reflective of the times. And as "times changed," so did certain laws and practices that were deemed as protectionary of the whole, with some of those intra-community debates leading to a bloody process, in the name of doing what was right for the resource and for the long-term health of our hunting heritage. When such policy discussions are initiated by concerned hunters and wildlife professionals, these discussions tend to create chaos within our own ranks, causing turmoil and infighting that can be self-damaging, and thus presenting paradoxical conundrums. But when you distill it down to its rudiment, the fact remains that our hunting and game management practices must be reasonably defensible in the eyes of our societal majority, or we will otherwise be squeezed out....that may not be your rule, nor mine, but that's simply the way it works these days. The barriers of these slippery slopes must be more honestly and actively addressed, otherwise our advocacy

efforts and our messages will largely fall on the deaf ears of a discerning public that is increasingly intolerant of practices that are deemed as indefensible.

Controlling the narrative, regardless of the task at hand, can certainly be over-simplified, and I recognize that there are many other pressures facing the future of hunting than those that I've pointed out in this Editorial. Bottom line, however, is that our hunting community must do a better job of stepping up to the plate and striving for excellence in our ability to control the narrative. We must do a better job with public relations, we must generate stronger messaging strategies that incorporate better repetition structure on more fronts, and we must do a better job of managing our own house. Otherwise, we will lose the battle....we are losing the battle right now, which is partially evidenced through a 20% reduction in hunting license sales from 2011 to 2016!

Here's to wishing you all a great summer, hoping that you will find some time for fun and rewarding activities. And as they say, "Life's better outside," so enjoy it and encourage your kids to do the same.

Cheers,

Greg Simons

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