

# Shifting focus – Is it time?

By Kyle Stelter – Director of Communications – Wild Sheep Society of BC

The morning of December 19<sup>th</sup>, 2018 I woke up and in due course had a quick look online to see what sort of drama was unfolding in the world. I was shocked to learn that the provincial government in British Columbia had offered an early Christmas gift to the anti-hunting world. They had officially announced the closure of the BC grizzly bear hunt to all except for First Nations.

December 19<sup>th</sup> was a pivotal date in that it was a well placed artillery shot by our enemies, or the results there of, displaying what damage they are capable of inflicting. This should serve as a wake up call for all of us in the hunting community of what the anti-hunting contingent can achieve.

One thing is clear that, we as hunters need to change the way we go about our business. That said, some of you are still living in a state of denial and believe that losing the grizzly hunt is not something that affects you directly. For those individuals, let me be very clear. The cancellation of the grizzly hunt does affect you and unless you are willing to change, your precious hunt, whatever it may be, is at risk.

For years, we as hunters have thrown around the catch all phrase “conservation”, and many feel that they have done their part to contribute. The truth is that hunters do a great deal for conservation, however simply saying “Hunting is Conservation” is no longer cutting the mustard and has proven an ineffective means in swaying public perception. For years we have used this mantra and in the end we still continue to lose favor in the eye of the public.

So do we really need to change the way we do business and conduct ourselves in the hunting community? The old statement defining insanity as continuing to do the same thing over and over while expecting different results has never been more true. There really is no dispute that hunters contribute millions of dollars and copious amounts of volunteer hours to wildlife conservation efforts. Where we are falling behind is in the public’s perception of us and this is where we need to rethink our strategy.

One thing we need to recognize first and foremost is that we are at war with ideologues that are well educated, funded and disciplined. In war if you have a worthy foe that vehemently opposes your belief system, are you going to try and convince that enemy of your beliefs? No, so let’s stop wasting our time trying to convince the anti-hunting community that what we do is right. Start thinking of them as our enemy and treat them accordingly.

Where we do have to make a difference is convincing the 90% of the general population that is ambivalent to hunting, those that don’t have a strong feeling either way. Trying to convince the 5% that is anti-hunting and reinforcing it with the 5% that actively support hunting is a waste of resources. We need to focus our

energy on the 90% and convince them that what we do is OK. Do not get me wrong, we should continue to celebrate our successes with our hunting peers, however we need to spend more time engaging non-hunters.

Reaching the non-hunter takes time and effort, however it is necessary. Instead of posting a picture of your latest bounty on Facebook, invite a few neighbor's over and pull out your very best wild game recipe. I have done this several times and now have a host of friends that vie for my sheep tenderloin.

A generation ago communities often congregated for potluck suppers and this was an excellent time to share your harvest. This is no longer as commonplace and rare in an urban setting. That said, I often share game meat while entertaining, or if invited out to dinner to a friend's house. Invariably the conversation goes back to the hunt and this is an opportunity to share what we, as hunters, are passionate about. This is a chance to speak about our connection with the environment, experiencing the gifts nature has to offer, and how we enjoy the organic range fed hormone free meat, that we have single handedly sourced.

At times like this, we can raise the issues that hunters are concerned about including dwindling wildlife numbers and also the conservation efforts that are being under taken by the hunting community. This is where talking about habitat loss and the threat of predators educates others that are on the fence about hunting. Many non-hunting individuals believe that the primary reason for dwindling wildlife numbers is due to hunter harvest.

We can't possibly have everyone over in our community to partake in a wild meat feast and in fact some people just don't want to try it. Occasionally I will hear from someone that they do not support hunting. If someone says they are against hunting look at this as an opportunity. Ask them why they are opposed to hunting and more importantly listen to what they have to say. Many non-hunters are misinformed about what we do and by listening to them you may have an opportunity to change their perception.

It is important that you do not interrupt them and seek out why they dislike hunting. I worked with a colleague that told me how he hated trophy hunters. I listened with respect and heard his arguments through to fruition asking probing questions. When he finished I explained the benefits that "Trophy hunting" brings to wildlife.

At the end of our conversation, he stated that although he still opposed the killing of a magnificent animal, he understand the benefits. Working with him after that discussion he often inquired about my hunts and even asked if I had any photos of the trip. He was captivated with the scenery, the wilderness experience, and the concept of trekking in the backcountry with a heavy pack. After that conversation the only thing that separated him and I was that he did not want to pull the trigger, a common ground.

For those of you that feel like you want to do more, there are many opportunities. Organizations such as the Wild Sheep Society of BC are continuously looking for support and volunteer help to carry out our objectives. Throughout the year we have many volunteer opportunities where our members provide an invaluable role. While donating your money is important, donating your time and supporting your organization with volunteer work is even more valuable.

For those wanting to find a way to help preserve our hunting opportunities, get more involved. If you are not a member of a conservation organization, join today. Find an organization that resonates with your interests and belief system. It could be a national group such the Wild Sheep Foundation, a provincial organization such as the Wild Sheep Society of BC, or your local Fish and Game Club. All of these organizations do important work and rely on their membership to carry out their objectives. I am currently a member of several conservation groups and I am proud to support all of them.

Simply joining as a member is an important step. There is strength in numbers and an organization of 100,000 members is much more effective than a group of only 1,000. Conservation organizations rely on the support of volunteer members to carry out their goals and are the very foundation of what they do. Without volunteer efforts there is little doubt that many of these organizations would cease to exist. In short, get involved.

In the coming months the Wild Sheep Society of British Columbia will hold our Northern Fundraiser in Dawson Creek and our Kamloops Convention. We will be asking our members what direction they would like us to take. Is our membership happy with the status quo, or do we need to alter the way we operate as a Society?

Speaking to some of our Directors we feel that if we do nothing we will continue to suffer a loss of hunting opportunity at the hands of the anti-hunting community. The grizzly bear hunt closure is a government decision that was based solely on emotion and pressure from special interest groups. Science was not the deciding factor in the ban and the government has openly stated this. There is already significant pressure to end wolf hunting and black bear hunting.

We must ask ourselves where are we willing to draw the line with respect to lost hunting opportunity. I sensed some apathy by a large contingent of the hunting community with the outright ban of grizzly bear hunting. Granted, many don't hunt grizzly bears, and maybe that apathy was a result of the feeling the hunt was already lost any way.

Now, if they banned black bear hunting would you have an issue? Moose? Sheep? Ask yourself where you would draw the line. It is well known that the anti-hunting community will not be satisfied until they achieve an out-right ban on all hunting. There is also talk of mandating wholesale catch and release fishing (zero retention). The entire concept of "it does not affect me" just won't work here. If you hunt or fish

you are at risk of losing the opportunity. Now is the time to sit up, pay attention, and ask yourself if defending your right to hunt is worth it.

So what we can do as an organization? If we continue with the status quo, I feel there will be a further erosion of hunting opportunity. One clear option is designating funds and resources to the preservation of our hunting rights. The Wild Sheep Society of BC has always been committed to allocating our funds to conservation-based projects – we wanted all our money to go to on the ground projects. Ideally that is where the money should be going.

In the coming months at our fundraisers we want to hear from you, our members how you would like us to proceed. Do you support us allocating money and resources toward the promotion of the hunting life style to the non-hunting public? Clearly we are losing the battle against the anti-hunters and we must change the way we conduct ourselves if we want to stop it. The old days of putting all our money into conservation and doing the right thing is simply not good enough.

The next few years will be pivotal in how we approach this anti-hunting rhetoric epidemic. As conservationists and outdoor enthusiasts protecting the environment and failing to address this threat has not served as well. We need to broaden our perspective and invest the resources necessary to ensure the 90% is on our side. This change will take strength and courage, as it is something we have never done before. I do feel however that a failure to stem the tide of ill will toward the hunting community will invariably result in further degradation of hunting opportunities.

Our valued members of the Wild Sheep Society will have the opportunity to speak with us, your Directors over the coming months. Ultimately you will have the say on which path we venture down. Do we maintain the status quo and hope for the best – maybe the anti-hunters will leave the sheep alone for the next few years? Or, do we have the courage to make change? Will we as an organization take a leadership role in this fight and forge a new path that will serve to preserve our right to hunt? We look forward to your input.