

THE BIRTH OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

I had originally started to compose an article on volunteers in SCI and the work that they do on a national and international level and then something happened, I stated watching the Ken Burns series “The National Parks - America’s Best Idea” on PBS. After watching episodes one through three, I am compelled to write about the series and for those of you who have not been following the program, it is a MUST SEE!

One of the recurring themes in the program is that America’s National Parks define our country and provide our citizens with not only a sense of place but also with natural areas where we may renew ourselves in the unspoiled wonders of Nature. What many of us may not know is that the United States was the first country in the world to set aside unique national lands for the enjoyment of ALL the people, not just one particular social class.

Living in Wyoming, most of us probably know that Yellowstone National Park was the first National Park to be designated by Congress and that President Theodore Roosevelt issued an Executive Order designating Devil’s Tower as the first National Monument. What many of us may not realize is that these events occurred due largely to the efforts of a small, but dedicated group of individuals - not because the Congress of the United States was determined to preserve our natural heritage. Moreover, the efforts of this small group of dedicated individuals resulted in the birth of the conservation movement in this country, which ultimately gave rise to the North American Conservation Model. Notable among these individuals were sportsmen such as Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell (founders of the Boone and Crockett Club), Gifford Pinchot (generally responsible for the creation of our national forest system), Charles Sheldon (an early naturalist, author of *The Wilderness of Denali* and ultimately responsible for the creation of Mount McKinley National Park) and others, who worked tirelessly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to preserve and protect those areas of the country that were priceless in terms of their natural beauty, unique geologic features, and biological diversity.

While the PBS program is primarily concerned with documenting the history of the National Parks and the process through which the individual parks were established, it also chronicles the beginning of the conservation movement in this country – a movement which is unparalleled elsewhere on the planet. More importantly, the program has repeatedly pointed out that many prominent sportsmen of the age stepped up to preserve and protect what they loved most - the animals and their habitat. One of the key motives for the establishment of Yellowstone National Park was the preservation of the American bison. The last remaining herd of free-ranging bison in the country resided in Yellowstone at that time and was in danger of extinction. If these “conservationists” had not stepped up to the plate, this species may have been lost forever from the American west.

While I find the historical aspects of the development of the National Parks interesting, what has grabbed my attention is the continued references to the need for unspoiled lands, the effect that these lands have on us as individuals, and the commitment of these early conservationists’ to preserve these lands. Several issues ago, I talked about “Why We Hunt” and this program goes to the very heart of that discussion. The National Park system we enjoy today was largely created by men and women of vision who had a passion for wild places, wildlife, and the spiritual renewal that they experienced when visiting these special areas and they recognized that these places needed to be preserved for posterity. The need to know that there are places that we can go to experience solitude, to contemplate the grandeur of nature, and to reflect on the meaning of our existence is what drove the initial conservation movement. These needs remain in our society today, perhaps even more so than then, and hunting provides many of us with an excuse to seek out wild places where we can renew our souls away from the demands and hectic regimen of our twenty-first century lives.

While hunting is not generally allowed in National Parks today, the conservation movement that was started back in the late nineteenth century is still largely responsible for the bounty of wildlife that exists in North America today and also resulted in the establishment of a system of national forests that provide recreational opportunities for hunters and non-hunters alike. When the north entrance (Roosevelt arch) to Yellowstone National Park was dedicated on April 24, 1903, President Theodore Roosevelt stated that "The Yellowstone Park is something absolutely unique in the world...This park was created and is now administered for the benefit and enjoyment of the people...it is the property of Uncle Sam and therefore of us all." The arch bears the inscription "For the Benefit and Enjoyment of the People" as a tribute to that noble concept. In the early days of the conservation movement, everybody was in agreement that we needed to preserve our natural heritage for future generations. Hunters and non-hunters alike worked together to achieve a common goal and history records the success of this movement, which is unprecedented in the human experience. Unfortunately, we have seen movements in the last twenty-five years that generally ignore the fact that concerned sportsmen and women were at the forefront of the conservation movement in the country. The anti-hunting groups, animal rights advocates, radical environmental groups, etc. all fail to recognize that sport hunters were among the first conservationists and that we continue to support conservation of wildlife and wildlife habitat. They also fail to recognize that were it not for the efforts of early groups such as the Boone and Crockett Club, many species that flourish today may well have vanished from North America. I hope that this program on our National Parks will help dispel some of these misconceptions and demonstrate that hunting played a vital role in the early conservation movement and continues to play an important role in wildlife conservation and sustainable use today. But the caveat is that modern sportsmen and women must live up to the lofty ideals of those early men and women who worked so tirelessly to ensure that the natural bounty this country was blessed with remains for future generations.