



Photo by Shutterstock

Love nature? Thank a hunter

Sportsmen are essential to maintaining the environment

By Lloyd Rowland | November 2023

In an age of grocery stores and urban sprawl, the time-honored practice of hunting wild game has become a relic of the past for most Americans. According to North Carolina State University, hunter participation dropped from 17 million in 1982 to just 11.5 million in 2021. While some may applaud this trend as great progress, hunters are some of the nation's most ardent conservationists. The survival of hunting is vital to safeguarding a stable future for America's wildlife resources.

First of all, the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation relies mainly on funding from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. As a result, sportsmen (rather than taxpayers in general) are where state wildlife agencies derive most of their funding. This method of user pay-public benefit that has stood for over 80 years is now threatened by the declining number of hunters. "Money generated from hunting license sales and federal excise taxes on firearms, ammunition, and angling equipment still provides 60-80% of the funding for state wildlife agencies," according to North Carolina State University. As hunting license sales decline, state

wildlife agencies will have less funding to support conservation work such as habitat restoration and population management.

Secondly, nature is rarely, if ever, in a true state of balance, and hunting is a primary tool for actively regulating wildlife populations. "Most, if not all of

the natural predators have been removed," biologist Larry Holcomb explains in his book "For the Love of Outdoors."

Without hunters, the population growth of prey species such

as deer will be checked by other means, including vehicle collisions and illnesses such as Chronic Wasting Disease. In a worst-case scenario, even these factors may not be sufficient, leading to habitat degradation, starvation and population collapse. In light of these concerns, the Michigan Department of Natural Resources recently published an open letter describing its concerns about overpopulation and actively encouraging deer hunters to harvest more does in the 2023 hunting season.

“The great amount of time hunters spend in the field makes them a unique resource that state wildlife agencies can tap into for the early detection and control of invasive species.”

In addition to assisting with the sustainable management of native wildlife, hunters also play a major part in the fight to control invasive species. Species such as the Russian Boar are extremely destructive to Michigan's environment and have few natural predators. Other invasive species, such as the Japanese Barberry plant, outcompete native species and even alter soil conditions. The great amount of time hunters spend in the field makes them a unique resource that state wildlife agencies can tap into for the early detection and control of invasive species. The Michigan DNR encourages hunters to report sightings of and actively hunt or remove invasive species from the environment. Typically, the DNR allows several invasive species to be hunted year-round, with no more than a valid Michigan hunting license required.

Hunters function as the eyes and ears of state wildlife agencies in other ways. Hunters have a much larger presence than DNR personnel and can cover far more ground, assisting state wildlife agencies in preventing poaching and detecting the presence of rare or endangered species. The DNR also encourages hunters to report any sick or dead animals through its Eyes in the Field reporting system.

Finally, hunters also contribute time, effort and money to nonprofit conservation organizations such as Pheasants Forever and Michigan United Conservation Clubs. Both organizations are supported and staffed by hunters dedicated to the conservation of America's natural resources and wildlife. Pheasants Forever was responsible for "35,806 acres of grassland projects, 109,527 acres of food plots, and 725 acres of wetland projects in Michigan" from 2011 to 2020, according to the Michigan Department of Natural Resources. These efforts were made possible largely thanks to the contributions and volunteer work of hunters dedicated to the conservation and rehabilitation of Michigan's pheasant population and habitat.

As these facts demonstrate, hunting is a tradition centered on the love of wildlife and the outdoors that should be recognized, encouraged and preserved. Hunting (and hunters) will continue to preserve public access to healthy wildlife for generations to come.

Available online at: www.mackinac.org/v2023-33



Lloyd Rowland is an energy and environmental policy intern at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy.