

What is this thing called “Conservation”?

By Dr. Patrick Condy

The word “conservation” is pretty freely used in conversation, by all kinds of people who know a lot or very little about what it actually is. There are so many definitions of it out there. The IUCN’s philosophy on conservation is “the wise and sustainable use of natural resources”. Note the words “... sustainable use ...”. Conservation, as part of a total approach to the use of natural resources, was first introduced by President Theodore Roosevelt from around 1906. In spite of the IUCN’s philosophy, there are real, sometimes hostile differences in today’s modern world, between the pro-sustainable consumptive use and anti-use sectors. The latter are sometimes referred to as “protectionists” who typically resort to ‘bans’ to achieve their interests. The former’s usual, and down-to-earth response is that if something has no use and no value, it will not be cared for or looked after by anyone.

Like most professions, so too does conservation have an industry behind it. It is also a very big, very diversified, and a worldwide industry. It knows no national boundaries. It crosses all religions, all languages, all cultures, all land and ocean, desert and forest. It blankets our entire planet from the depths of the ocean to the tallest mountain peaks.

There are some very BIG players in it. For example, the National Parks movement, active in over 100 countries around the world. Started in this country, with Yellowstone as the very 1st National Park in the world. National Parks preserve, conserve and protect 100s of millions of acres of near pristine nature – whole ecosystems, entire landscapes, whole watersheds and mountain ranges - every living and non-living thing in them including mammal, plant, insect, bird, reptile, amphibian, geologic structures. This is often referred to as the “Protected Area System”. In this country, the National Parks encompass around 300 million acres of native wildlife, nature and landscape.

But National Parks are not the only BIG players. In this country, for example:

- There is the National Forest Service of the USDA (about 193 million acres of National Forests).
- Under the federal Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), there are National Wildlife Refuges (about 500 million acres of refuges).
- In each State, or “Province” as they are called in other countries, there is a State Parks & Wildlife, or State Fish & Game agency. The Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD) state parks system covers about 1 million acres in some 90 state parks in addition to Wildlife Management Areas.
- And this is not to speak of UN World Heritage Areas and Sites, of which there are about 668 scattered across the globe and totaling some 17 million acres.

However, there are two aspects about these BIG players that need to be highlighted:

- First, they are all government agencies at federal or state level. In other words, they are all heavily tax-funded entities. Every tax-paying citizen, like you and me, are contributing to the

conservation work of these BIG players – it's not as though we have nothing to do with them. We are financing them! Every tax paying citizen is contributing directly towards the conservation work of these BIG players – whether you like it or not, whether you support national or state protected areas or not.

- Second, and this is very significant here, the legislation that empowers those national and state parks and refuges and the agencies that administer them, for the most part requires them to focus on INDIGENOUS species of plant and animal, on INDIGENOUS landscapes, ecosystems, wetlands, coastlines, forests, etc. For the most part, it does not empower them to focus on EXOTIC species of plant or animal, or foreign ecosystems and landscapes.

The significance of this last point lies in the fact that it is, therefore, primarily the PRIVATE SECTOR that can engage with exotic species inside the US! The EWA is a private sector entity. Most if not all of its members are private ranch owners with exotic wildlife on their ranches! So, to a very large extent, conserving, preserving, protecting exotic wildlife here in the US is in the hands of the private sector. And the EWA is one of if not the largest private sector organization in this country working with exotic ungulate species and, equally significant, having very large acreage at its disposal for this. Zoos host a greater variety of exotic wildlife, but they have very little space to do this with and, therefore, for the most part keep small numbers of each species – often such that the natural social and reproductive dynamics of a herd/flock/pack/territorial or group-living species is suppressed and breeding is limited.

Conservation is, first and foremost, ALL ABOUT THE SPECIES. Period. It is:

- NOT about religion or culture or nationality or country. It cuts across religion, national boundaries, culture, nationalities, etc.
- NOT about politics, but it is reality that politics does mess with conservation, or vice versa, almost all the time. Unfortunately.
- IS about conserving and saving species. If a species is in dire straits, it needs help. The professional conservationist gets that it does not matter in which country, religion or culture the species' natural range occurs. If it is not helped, because those that could have helped chose not to for religious or cultural or nationality or political or social reasons, they are as much to blame for its demise as anyone else.

So, against all the above background, let me drill down specifically to the EWA, in terms of conservation:

- EWA is a private sector entity, and its members are private sector land and exotic wildlife owners. Between the members there is very large space (acreage) and very many species of exotic wildlife, largely herd-living ungulates, free ranging in the large spaces available to them.
- Therefore, it is the EWA and its members that can, if not MUST, act to conserve and preserve EXOTIC ungulate species of wildlife. The EWA, like no other organization, has among its membership the land (or the 'space') and the interest in wildlife to become the major national force in exotic ungulate wildlife conservation, on two counts:
 1. First, holding and breeding 'insurance' populations of dozens of threatened and endangered hoofstock species from around the world. But this MUST be confined to pure

blooded species. Hybridizing, which is messing with the genetic purity of a species or subspecies, is NOT conservation. When it comes to selling or exchanging animals, if they are known or suspected to be hybrids, this should always be disclosed. Anyone failing to disclose is most definitely not a conservationist.

2. Second, in the breeding of pure-blood exotic wildlife for reintroduction purposes either to boost dwindling populations in the wild, or to re-introduce species that have gone regionally or altogether extinct in the wild.
- The focus has to be on WHAT'S RIGHT AND BEST FOR THE SPECIES. If rising to this challenge means opposing, even fighting the regulators and/or the animal rights community, then there should be no hesitation in doing so. Yes, it is frustrating and most of all expensive. However, the cause - making your land available to insure the existence of, if not actually saving exotic wildlife species - is surely every bit, and more, worth it. It is MAKING A DIFFERENCE in a very tangible and laudable way. And I suspect that the bulk of the US population would support EWA members in this cause.
 - Professional conservationists come in all political colors right across the spectrum. You would expect that would make it impossible for them to agree on anything. But that is not really happening to any major degree. How Come? What they do know, is how to keep their political viewpoints out of the conservation discussion. We all have our political views, but they should not 'taint' a corporate conservation image, reputation and credibility. Typically in politics about half the population leans one way and the other half leans the other way. But just about all will lean in favor of conservation, so it's a much superior platform for winning widespread support from all quarters. The EWA's public face, through printed and electronic media, therefore needs to be politically neutral and the focus needs to be kept ON THE SPECIES and what's right and best for their sustainable existence and for the ranch owner's sustainable ability to host and multiply them.
 - Bear also in mind that to acquire donations and grants for conservation work including research, an organization needs to have a conservation image, reputation and credibility. Be wary of allowing politics, whatever the flavor, to displace a conservation brand. Keep the focus ON THE SPECIES.
 - Hunting is a hot topic, as you well know. There are big and powerful movements out there that are anti-hunting and bitterly against the sustainable consumptive use of wildlife resources. These are the aforementioned ban-oriented "protectionists". And they are making headway among the masses. Most of the abovementioned BIG players do not have a problem with hunting as a wildlife population management tool. Even the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation does not oppose hunting - in fact, hunting and angling are cornerstones of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.
 - The single word that inflames those anti-hunting and anti-consumptive use sectors is not so much the word or concept of "hunting", but rather the word and concept of "trophy". This is what creates the hysteria against hunting – as the 2012 "60 Minutes" program illustrated. We need to find new language. I do not yet know what that could be?

- We all know about the story of the three North African species. It is possible that, among the EWA members, are the largest collections of all three species outside their natural range of the North African sub-Saharan region. This is a remarkable situation. One in which, in my humble view, the EWA has barely extracted and utilized the potentially enormous positive news and image that this opportunity offers. All this has happened in the private sector, with no tax funded support – which makes it even more remarkable. Unfortunately, however, most of the publicity emanating from this story has been mostly about being or not being able to freely hunt these animals. A better imaging/branding approach would have been to take the “conservation” approach – i.e. that ranch owners with these animals on their land have them in the first instance so as to create a ‘species insurance’ population for the future. However, and for this reason, ranchers must properly manage their herds to keep them in healthy physical and genetic condition and at or preferably slightly below the land’s carrying capacity for them, through among other management actions, also hunting – especially of the older post-breeding animals that have already contributed their genetics, their experience and their social leadership into the herd. And which, by the way, are likely to be the ‘trophy’ animals!

The EWA is in an extraordinary good position to brand itself as a conservation organization, if that is what is wanted. That does NOT mean giving up on hunting. Rather, it means emphasizing the conservation aspect and leaving the hunting aspect de-emphasized as simply one of many tools used in managing these extremely valuable populations of exotic wildlife. Let ‘conservation’ dominate the image and brand of the organization. This can bring widespread national, even international, recognition and support to the EWA and its members. This will not neutralize the fringe elements of the anti-consumptive sector, but it will provide a much more powerful platform upon which to fight it, and much greater and more widespread public support for the fight.