

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

Guns and Greens

If sportsmen and environmentalists worked together, they would be invincible.

By Ted Williams

Audubon, January/February 2005

Possibly you weren't aware that your Audubon membership makes you an anarchist. Neither was I until March 2003, when the Federation of Fly Fishers received a letter about me from G. Roberts, one of its members: "Let me get this straight: You give the Aldo Leopold Award to a guy who works for the National Audubon Society, an anti-fishing and hunting mob that worked, and succeeded, in closing the Channel Islands in California to all fishing, even fly-fishing. . . . The 'antis' will not stop their fight until they have put an end to fishing. . . . So-called mainstream environmental groups such as Audubon and the Natural Resources Defense Council [NRDC] now contain radicals who favor property damage, and eventually, the destruction of our economy and civilization." A handwritten note at the bottom urged me to forget the lavish pay and quit "whoring" for Audubon.

Because I write environmental articles for hook-and-bullet magazines, I am deluged with such communications, many less cordial and all from hunters and anglers supremely ignorant of the issues. Such is the disconnect between sportsmen and enviros. But it works the other way, too. Mr. Roberts, for instance, had missed it, but he would have liked my piece in *Fly Rod & Reel* on how the environmental community alienated sportsmen with its inept attempts to promote marine protected areas (MPAs) in general and the Channel Islands MPA in particular.

I had never thought of myself as anti-gun. I own six shotguns, two rifles, and two pistols; I'm an avid hunter and shooter, and I have a Class A Large Capacity License to carry concealed weapons.

Four years ago, with virtually no outreach to sportsmen, the NRDC attempted to promote MPAs by distributing maps suggesting that enormous offshore and inshore swaths from Cape Hatteras to Cape Cod—20 percent of the area and basically all the best fishing spots—be considered for no-fishing MPAs. This despite the fact that recreational fishing, though hurtful to some species, is on the whole far less damaging than commercial fishing. Anglers, marine biologists, and fish managers were horrified. "Although the NRDC certainly meant well and created the problem inadvertently, if they had wanted to arouse opposition, they could hardly have done it any more effectively," commented Carl Safina, president of the Blue Ocean Institute. Meanwhile, the Ocean Conservancy was launching its Ocean Wilderness Challenge, calling for the designation of "at least five percent of U.S. waters as wilderness." Ninety percent of sportfishing occurs in the 1 percent of U.S. waters closest to shore. Still, the proposal sounded okay until the conservancy explained that, unlike terrestrial wilderness, there would be no fishing in ocean wilderness, thereby confirming in the minds of sportsmen what extractive industries had been telling them all along: that wilderness is really a plot by selfish greenies to kick everyone else out. Both the NRDC and the Ocean Conservancy have been and are effective leaders in protecting marine resources, and both are now working hard to educate sportsmen about MPAs, but the future of these desperately needed management options remains in doubt.

While Audubon stayed out of the MPA squabble, some of its members did not. But that's the price big organizations pay for their grass roots. It was ever thus, and it can't be helped. Sportsmen have never comprehended this. Their paranoia, bred of society's unwarranted disapproval of blood sports, allows them to

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

be easily manipulated by special interests. In political and financial strength, the 47 million Americans who hunt and/or fish are to environmentalists what the NFL is to Pop Warner football. So you'd think that the environmental community would be doing some manipulating of its own—or at least communicating. But it consistently blows opportunities.

"Environmentalists don't reach out to sportsmen," remarks Chris Potholm, founder and CEO of the Potholm Group, a polling and strategic-advice company that has engineered 60 environmental referenda victories in 30 states. Every time Potholm ear-hauls sportsmen and environmentalists together, he's marshaling a minimum of 65 percent of the population—"an absolutely irresistible political juggernaut that can win anywhere," he says. For example, enviros are united in their contempt for the ultraconservative, anti-environmental, pro-coyote-control, access-at-any-cost Sportsman's Alliance of Maine, but that doesn't mean they shouldn't work with it toward common goals. Five years ago, thanks in part to Potholm, they did just that, winning a ballot initiative that got the state a \$50 million bond issue for the purchase of wild land. When the Potholm Group first polled voters, only 38 percent were in favor. After a brilliant TV ad campaign featuring No Trespassing signs and a Maine guide paddling his grandchildren in a canoe, the measure won with 69 percent of the vote.

In 2003 the state's Passamaquoddy and Penobscot tribes sought, by statewide referendum, to develop a \$650 million, 200,000-square-foot casino in bucolic, wildlife-rich Sanford, Maine. Four thousand slot machines and 180 gaming tables would provide more gambling space than any casino in Las Vegas. There would be an 875-room hotel, a 2,000-seat theater, a convention center, a golf course, and 10 nightclubs and restaurants—everything the Pine Tree State didn't need if it wanted to preserve its reputation for quietude and natural wildness. You don't usually get far in Maine when you take on the Indians. Still, L.L. Bean—the outdoor-equipment and clothing store in nearby Freeport—decided to try. With help from Potholm, it brought together a coalition of environmentalists and sportsmen. The first Potholm polls came in at about two to one in favor of the casino. The pro-casino side outspent its opposition \$6.8 million to \$2.7 million, but the alliance of sportsmen and environmentalists was unstoppable. That November Maine voters rejected the casino by about two to one.

"Maybe the best example of what sportsmen and environmentalists can accomplish together is the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement [CARE]," says Mike Daulton, Audubon's assistant director of government relations. This group of 20 organizations has one purpose: securing federal funding for the national wildlife refuge system. Its members include such philosophically divergent groups as Ducks Unlimited, Defenders of Wildlife, Audubon, the Wilderness Society, and the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, but conflicting agendas haven't affected the coalition. "CARE has made a tremendous difference," says Daulton, getting steady increases in refuge appropriations, from \$178 million in 1997 to \$391 million in 2004.

By far the biggest obstacle facing environmentalists who seek to forge alliances with sportsmen is the hook-and-bullet press. Aldo Leopold's lament more than half a century ago is truer now than then: "The sportsman has no leaders to tell him what is wrong. The sporting press no longer represents sport, it has turned billboard for the gadgeteer." Today owners of some hook-and-bullet magazines not only publish billboards for gadgeteers, they *are* the gadgeteers. For every publication such as *Field & Stream*—which, under a new editor, has recently taken to running honest articles about real issues—there are a half-dozen that run disinformation aimed at boosting circulation and ad revenue by playing to readers' fears about the dreaded and ubiquitous "antis." In terms of journalistic integrity they're right down there with the supermarket tabloids.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

Consider the green spray-painting of Representative Don Young (R-AK) by *Outdoor Life*. No member of Congress works harder against fish and wildlife than Young, whose environmental voting record, as collated by the League of Conservation Voters, hovers around zero. Not only does he refuse to work with environmentalists, he defines them as "my enemy," "not Americans," and "self-centered, waffle-stomping, Harvard-graduating, intellectual idiots." But Young never misses a chance to ape for the hook-and-bullet press, dressing like Elmer Fudd, brandishing ordnance, and going on and on about how much he hates "antis." Before the 1994 election, *Outdoor Life* told its readers that Young "is *your* kind of politician," that he "fights the good fight," and that "you'd be hard pressed to find a more fearless Washington advocate of the sportsman's life." Before the much closer 2000 election, which Young might have lost without the support of sportsmen, *Outdoor Life* again oozed and gushed about Young, calling him "a top watchdog" and a "hardheaded defender of sportsmen's rights."

Moreover, few sportsmen read magazines like *Audubon* and *Sierra*, published by groups they've been told oppose hunting. In the quarter-century I've been associated with *Audubon*, we've worked tirelessly to recruit sportsmen. Both magazine and organization have consistently supported hunting; in fact, I have been assigned to *promote* it, most recently in a piece entitled "Wanted: More Hunters" (March 2002), about exploding deer populations. In the same issue David Seideman's editorial summed up my central point: "What's sadder than an innocent animal taking a bullet for the conservation cause? Extinction that causes forests in spring to turn silent and barren for want of songbirds and wildflowers."

The Sierra Club launched a similar effort in 1996 when it assigned me a piece for *Sierra* entitled "Natural Allies." Four years ago the club became a "supporting member" of the Outdoor Writers Association of America (OWAA), which represents 2,000 of America's most prominent hook-and-bullet writers and editors, and which is currently experiencing the worst crisis in its 77-year history. The trouble started last June at the OWAA's annual conference in Spokane, when the Sierra Club distributed copies of "Natural Allies" as part of an ongoing program by the same name.

The program had worked well enough everywhere else. For example, in South Dakota the Sierra Club has teamed with 17 rod and gun clubs (affiliates of the South Dakota Wildlife Federation) to push for the designation of 71,000 acres of wilderness in the Buffalo Gap National Grasslands. Such is the level of trust that the Sierra Club's regional rep, Heather Morijah, now sits on the federation's board. When I asked the federation's director, Chris Hesla, why South Dakota sportsmen favor wilderness when so many others do not, he said: "Most of us understand that some places need to be set aside, and certain uses restricted. We want to save those last frontiers."

So there was the Sierra Club last June at the OWAA conference, reaching out to hook-and-bullet writers and editors, sponsoring a stunning presentation that drew a standing ovation from 700 dinner guests, working the crowd, handing out copies of "Natural Allies." Alas, the longevity of the piece says less about its quality than the fact that so few writers are pushing an alliance. But it is among the few articles I've written that has drawn only one angry response, and this is a full eight years after publication.

During the Sierra Club's presentation, National Rifle Association president Kayne Robinson (formerly the GOP chairman of Iowa) kept slamming his copy of the story against the table and cursing under his breath. When Robinson addressed the conference, he railed against all sorts of alleged slights and injustices to hunters, such as the way the Clinton administration had kicked them off "millions of acres." (At this point Mike Dombeck, former chief of the U.S. Forest Service, poked OWAA board member Tony Dean in the ribs and asked him what the hell Robinson was talking about. Later, at a press conference, Robinson was unable to come up with an example of a single acre the Clinton administration had closed to hunting.) What really outraged Robinson,

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

however, was my article. He called it a Sierra Club plot "to hoodwink hunters into voting for gun ban candidates" and an "attack" on NRA board members, including Don Young.

I had never thought of myself as anti-gun. I own six shotguns, two rifles, and two pistols; I'm an avid hunter and shooter; and I have a Class A Large Capacity License to carry concealed weapons. Nor did I "attack" members of Congress who serve on the NRA board. What I did was report facts about them. Robinson doesn't want the public to know—most notably their voting records—and only to illustrate how easily sportsmen are seduced by their worst enemies. I didn't mention the NRA. Through many drafts my editor, Joan Hamilton, asked me to provide more about the enormous contributions sportsmen have made to conservation. At Hamilton's urging, I added long paragraphs on how sportsmen created the national wildlife refuge system, eliminated market hunting, and restored waterfowl, elk, deer, antelope, and wild turkeys.

I doubt many Sierra Club staffers are as well armed as I am, but there is no evidence they are anti-gun. For example, Bart Semcer, the club's full-time coordinator for sportsmen outreach, told me this: "If we're not working with the hunting and fishing groups, we're nowhere. We support fishing and hunting, and we have no position on guns. In fact, our neutrality on the gun issue allowed us in the 2002 House and Senate races to endorse more than a dozen candidates who had an A-minus or better rating from the NRA."

So what's the noise from the NRA really about, and what's the NRA really about? Despite its in-your-face presence in conservation circles and its appearance in the National Wildlife Federation's "Conservation Directory," the NRA has nothing to do with conservation. In fact, it can be counted on to be on the wrong side of every conservation issue, from the Alaska Lands Act, to nontoxic shot for waterfowl (now mandatory), to the rule to protect roadless areas in national forests, which is supported by 84 percent of American hunters. The NRA is just one of the bottom-feeders that dwell in the deep gulf between sportsmen and environmentalists. If sportsmen get too close to the environmental community, they'll perceive that it has no secret anti-gun agenda, and the NRA will have a tougher time frightening them into joining up.

The big news, however, was not Robinson's predictable behavior. It was the passionate, though mixed, reaction of hook-and-bullet editors and writers. First, the OWAA board of directors voted 11 to 5 to send Robinson a mild, polite complaint about his "harsh criticism of fellow OWAA supporting member Sierra Club." Scores of OWAA members weighed in on the side of the board. "The NRA's campaign to 'propel hunter rights into the public arena' stinks of opportunism," wrote Rich Landers of *The [Spokane] Spokesman-Review*. "Robinson is trying to recruit uninformed hunters with the same big talk and promises a pimp uses to lure vulnerable girls into his realm. Some 12 million to 15 million American hunters are not NRA members, and this is no time for them to change their minds. Now, more than ever, a sportsman who is not an environmentalist is a fool." But 430 OWAA members signed a letter of protest, demanding that the board apologize to Robinson. When this didn't happen, 101 members, including 22 supporting members—among them Remington Arms, Nikon, and the National Wild Turkey Federation—canceled their memberships. *North American Hunter* magazine informed the board that it "will no longer accept [new] manuscripts and/or photos from members of OWAA because you have not issued an apology to NRA nor immediately distanced the organization from the Sierra Club." When I asked editor Gordy Krahn if his publication would also be rejecting advertising from OWAA supporting members, he said, "Well, er, we haven't discussed that yet." OWAA board member Tony Dean says this: "If we capitulate to all this pressure, we might as well fold the OWAA."

Here's a question environmentalists need to ask themselves: Are *Music Man* figures like Kayne Robinson and Don Young, who stomp and shout and warn sportsmen of sin "right here in River City," smarter than us? I can't think the answer is yes, but they certainly are more politically astute. They know what sells and what scares.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

Herewith, a strategy for leveling the field. First, leave your personal values out of it. It's okay to detest blood sports; it's even okay to detest people who engage in blood sports. But it's not okay to sacrifice vanishing fish and wildlife to make political statements. There are plenty of real enemies out there without concocting new ones. If you truly want to save and restore fish and wildlife, you'll welcome and recruit help where you find it. If you have a hard time working with people you consider morally tainted, consider that virtually no game species is hurt and most are helped by legal hunting and fishing, and that powerful, ruthless special interests depend on and perpetuate the rift between environmentalists and sportsmen. Adopt the philosophy of Winston Churchill, who, when questioned about throwing in with Stalin, replied: "I have only one purpose, the destruction of Hitler, and my life is much simplified thereby. If Hitler invaded Hell, I would make at least a favorable reference to the Devil in the House of Commons."

Second, as the NRA has figured out, alliances depend on communication. Wherever you live in the United States, there is a local rod and gun club or a nearby Ducks Unlimited chapter. Join and attend meetings. If you don't hunt or fish, tell the members so. But also explain that you want to help them protect fish and wildlife habitat. You can't restore or create a wetlands for ducks (which is what Ducks Unlimited does) without also benefiting thousands of other creatures, from otters to marsh wrens to avocets to turtles. If there isn't a good project you can collaborate on, come up with one yourself. Your participation and support will deeply touch members, because they feel unloved and unappreciated and have repeatedly been told that enviros and animal-rights zealots are one and the same.

Finally, choose your battles wisely. A good example of an unwise battle is trapping. Sportsmen ardently believe (often with good reason) that the ultimate goal of anti-trappers is to ban fishing and hunting. With rare exceptions trapping is a humane issue, not a management issue. Leave it to the animal-rights folks. My wife, Donna, is the conservation advocacy coordinator of the Massachusetts Audubon Society (independent of and older than National Audubon). In 1996, much to Donna's anguish, her organization joined with ardent anti-hunting groups in a successful effort to outlaw quick-killing conibear traps. Since then the state's beaver population has increased from about 18,000 to 70,000. Flooding of streets and cellars is now a major problem; and animal-control agents must be hired to catch beavers in "humane" traps that immobilize them all night so they may be clubbed to death in the morning. We've converted a resource to a pest.

The real damage in Massachusetts, however, has not been to property but to the potential for alliances with sportsmen. When Donna started stumping for the Massachusetts Rivers Bill—which would bar development from 200 feet on either side of perennial streams—she was informed by sportsmen that they would oppose it. If an anti-trapping outfit was for rivers, then, by God, they were against them. After the bill passed, Donna talked to sportsmen at every opportunity, telling them why natural floodplains are in their best interests, about new fishing and hunting opportunities in and around the cleaned-up Blackstone River system, about wild brook trout populations desperately in need of protection, about her own fishing with me. She publicly defended hunting, explaining the need to control the gross irruption of white-tailed deer that is wiping out forest understories throughout the East and, with them, rare plants and shrub-nesting birds. She attended rod-and-gun-club dinners and drank beer with members. Eventually, she was asked by a local club to help release snowshoe hares purchased from Canada as part of a press event promoting an alliance. It wasn't the time to comment on the project's questionable worth (if we had local hare habitat, we'd have local hares), but hares are native to Massachusetts, and there was no harm. Education could come later and, with it, truly important projects.

Located at:

www.scottchurchdirect.com >> www.scottchurchdirect.com/ted-williams-archive.aspx/2005

On a cold winter night Donna and I, accompanied by club members and a reporter and photographer from the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, lugged the hares up onto conservation land Donna and I had helped our town of Grafton purchase from a developer, and which—because sportsmen had assisted—Donna had posted with signs that welcome hunters. When the moon shadow of the last hare had melted into the snow-draped pines, Donna got a big kiss from the club's president. I can't report that the alliance is strong statewide, but at least there's a foundation.

Ted Williams sits on the Circle of Chiefs of the Outdoor Writers Association of America.

What You Can Do

Sportsmen and environmentalists have no better opportunity for interaction than supporting national wildlife refuges, where the public can hunt, fish, photograph, and watch wildlife. To find out how, go to the National Wildlife Refuge Association's website: <http://refugenet.com>.