The True Identity of America's Conservationists

The following letter was signed by 37 leading conservation organizations from the American Wildlife Conservation Partners, including the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation

At the beginning of the 20th century, Gifford Pinchot, Chief of the U.S. Forest Service and one of the fathers of the American conservation movement, developed the now widely accepted definition of conservation as the "wise use of the Earth and its resources for the lasting good of men." According to Pinchot, the purpose of conservation is to produce "the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time," with sound science as the recognized tool to accomplish this objective.

Conservationists are people who support and/or engage in this approach to natural resource management. Hunters and anglers are among the first Americans to endorse the idea. Their legacy is now over 100 years old. Through their leadership, state agencies were established to manage our nation's fish and wildlife, and to adopt laws and create programs to conserve these public trust resources.

Arguably, the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs (WSFR), a key component of the **American System of Conservation Funding**, were the most important of these programs to be created. Through this unique "user-pays, public-benefits" system, sportsmen and women are the primary funders of wildlife conservation, providing upwards of 80% of the funding for state fish and wildlife agencies. They also financially support conservation through the purchase of hunting and fishing licenses and permits, Duck Stamps, firearms, ammunition and archery equipment, philanthropy, and the creation of organizations whose sole mission is the restoration and enhancement of species of wildlife.

Unfortunately, the tremendous contribution made by sportsmen and women toward the restoration and conservation of our wildlife resources remains largely unknown to the general public. This situation is exacerbated by the media's broad-based use of the term "conservationist." They are unable to distinguish between individuals and organizations that financially support wildlife conservation and those that don't. The latter include animal rights and anti-hunting organizations, those whose funding is spent primarily on litigating resource management decisions and those that promote a preservationist "don't touch" philosophy in wildlife management.

It is not by accident that these groups and through their interaction with the media seized upon the term "conservationist" in order to cloak their preservationist, anti-consumptive use philosophy. In the 1990's, labels such as "environmentalist," "protectionist," and "animal rightist," became undesirable labels. These groups began the calculated adoption of the term "conservationist" in an effort to reverse the political and societal credibility that they were beginning to lose.

It is critical that we educate the American public about the fact that hunting, angling, recreational shooting, and trapping are closely related to fish and wildlife conservation. In fact, it is almost universally impossible to speak of one without the other. The term "conservationist" must be rightfully applied.

Using phrases like "sportsmen and other conservationists," or "sportsmen-conservationists" when describing ourselves accurately characterizes the relationship between sportsmen and women and our nation's natural resources. "Conservationist" is a title sportsmen and women helped create, work hard to maintain, and are proud to rightfully claim. They truly earned and deserve this distinctive designation.

The community of hunters and anglers must take every available opportunity to educate the American people and the media on what the term "conservationist" means, who the conservationists are, and what conservationists have achieved in making this country's wildlife resources the envy of the world.