

House Natural Resources, Fish, and Wildlife Committee: Wanton Waste (H-357) March 12, 2019

Good afternoon Chairwoman Sheldon and members of the Committee

I am Rob Mullen from West Bolton, VT. I have a Bachelor of Science in Biology from UVM and have, in the aggregate, spent years in the field observing wildlife; some as a hunter, especially when I was younger, but mostly as a wildlife artist and wilderness canoe expedition leader. I've run 19 expeditions from Labrador to Alaska to date as a consultant and guest curator for the Smithsonian Institution.

I am a licensed hunter and fisherman in Vermont and while I fish to canoe rather than canoe to fish and primarily hunt with a camera, I strongly believe that hunting plays, and must continue to play, a critical conservation role in Vermont's human-altered ecosystem and that H.357 could help slow or even be part of a process that could reverse hunting's long decline. To that point:

- Hunting has suffered a significant participation decline, threatening its direct conservation role and reducing its funding for the Fish & Wildlife Department.
- Changes in Vermont's demographics and land-use are major forces behind the decline, however, those two causes are exacerbated by the image problem among the public at large created by a relatively small but disproportionately visible number of hunters who engage in wantonly wasteful killing; often with crude displays of sadism.
- A wanton waste bill would reinforce a principal point of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (North American Model) that has been a guiding framework of the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department (and most other US and Canadian wildlife agencies) since its inception. It is not an insult to hunters as has been publicly suggested; it was created by hunters to preserve wildlife and hunting. However, many violators such a law would directly affect, possibly even more importantly, it would be a clear and public declaration that the State of Vermont and its Fish & Wildlife Dept, condemn arbitrary thrill killing. That can only help the image of hunting and hunters in Vermont.

Of the North American Model's seven tenets, the one that underlies H.357 states:

"Wildlife can only be killed for a legitimate purpose. Wildlife is a shared resource that must not be wasted. The law prohibits killing wildlife for frivolous reasons." (U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service).

Note the clear equation of waste to killing without "legitimate" (i.e. "frivolous") purpose.

For clarity, "wanton" according to the Merriam Webster Dictionary:

1. Merciless, Inhumane
2. Having no just foundation or provocation.
3. Being without check or limitation
4. Playfully mean or cruel.

A discussion about wanton waste before this committee February 26th, between the Fish & Wildlife Department Commissioner and a committee member, wandered far from the issue at hand. The discussion focused on the generally true but irrelevant fact that, due to scavengers, “nothing goes to waste in Nature.” It is true that a dead deer or coyote will be consumed and used by scavengers large and small. However, that is not the meaning of “waste” within the context of the North American Model which explicitly means human non-use of a resource; killing for frivolous purpose. This is abundantly clear in the definition above. The word “wanton” cements the issue as it exclusively applies to and describes only human motivations and actions. If I kill a fox with no need of it myself, tossing it in the bushes to rot afterwards does not constitute a “legitimate purpose.” Pretending otherwise is straining to rationalize killing for killing’s sake. That is a behavior civil society has a strong interest in discouraging for reasons beyond wildlife conservation.

Also, at this committee’s Feb 26th meeting, a hypothetical Vermont youth was enlisted to support the notion that there is a nostalgic wholesomeness to wiling away a Saturday killing crows. Growing up in Vermont can be like a Norman Rockwell painting. I had the unfettered run of our surrounding woods, fields, ponds, and streams, started fishing at three, learning to shoot at five (*my father was an Air Force Expert Marksman, NRA firearms and VT Hunter Safety instructor*), and deer hunting at 10 (*learning from my grandfather, a third-generation Proctor Vermont native and his two friends, Pete and Joe Navarre*). We had guns, bows, slingshots, soda-can cannons, spent cartridge case cannons, and a real cannon. My brother and I would burn through boxes of .22 long rifle ammo until our targets were shredded and then turn to shooting daisy stems at 50 feet. We did our share of dumb fun things but learned to never kill for fun. We would no more shoot crows for entertainment than pull the wings off flies or crush barn kittens with hay bales. Even before Dad started to teach us to shoot, he taught us a deep respect for life; to never kill without justification and then to always kill quickly. Along with reading us books like “Wild Animals I Have Known” by Ernest Thompson Seton, that lesson was crystalized for me when he found us happily torturing a bloodsucker when I was four. I imagine that most Vermont kids learned hunting ethics in broadly the same way; then and now. The lessons take to varying degrees. Unfortunately, some people don’t get it yet and now they can reach wide audiences.

Few people I knew as a kid would casually abandon a wounded or dead animal in the woods, let alone kill just for the thrill or out of malice. And (hopefully) no one I knew would kill as many animals as possible or torment those not already dead. Yet it happens. It probably always has, but now it can be filmed in detail and publicized on social media. And, however, relatively few such hunters may be, their ecological impact can be locally disruptive and moreover, their visibility, heightened dramatically in our social media age, sullies the image of all hunting in the eyes of non-hunters. Demographics have changed. They were changing in the 1960’s when the parents of new friends of mine, whose families had moved to Vermont for jobs at IBM, would not allow them in the woods. Today, many Vermonters may know so few hunters that they can easily believe that these crude and cruel videos and photos represent the norm, especially

when they are tolerated by the Fish & Wildlife Department and even more so when they can see the Department oppose efforts to stop them. Ironically, according to Kim Royar, around 2006 or 2007, our Fish & Wildlife Department, possibly inspired by the public outcry over killing contests around that time, did try to stop them, suggesting regulations banning wanton waste to the Fish & Wildlife Board. The effort failed. Fast forward to 2018, and the Legislature had to ban the killing contests over our Fish & Wildlife Department's opposition. Now, the Commissioner, at least, appears to be doing a full 180 to oppose banning wanton waste too.

Taken together, there seems to be a pattern. At a January 2017 meeting of this committee on H.60 which led to the 2018 "Vermont Coyote Population Report," the Commissioner noted that the Dept had asked hunters not to post disrespectful videos of piles of dead coyotes and stated that such social media posts were regretful, but notably did not express any criticism of the behavior itself. Digging the hole deeper, Department leadership now blames the undermining of hunting and the Department on animal rights groups that uncover abusive "Whack-em-N-Stack-em" photos and videos rather than the people who do the whacking, stacking, and filming. It is like blaming a building inspector for undermining your house value by exposing rot in the rafters to your bank. All together, these may play well to a select few, but I suspect that they fuel a feedback loop that continues to erode the image of hunting, hunters, and the Department in the eyes of the general public. That is a bad long-game strategy.

There are pressing reasons to rebrand hunting to adapt to the changing demographics and landscape of the 21st Century. To preserve hunting, we should not only highlight its critical importance to our common environment and the benefits to society, local communities, and individual hunters and their families, but also simultaneously stand unequivocally against its abuses so that hunting can at least start to retain and eventually regain the understanding and support of all Vermonters, whether they hunt or not. Supporting H.357, along with any direct reduction in wanton waste, would be an important step in that process.

Thank you,

Rob Mullen – West Bolton, VT