

I have a large ten point buck mounted in my house. We dont have lots of taxidermy, antlers and turkey fans here and there but thats the only real mount. I love that deer. It's not the same kind of love that i have for my wife, or my kids- it's more vague and theoretical. I only knew he existed for a few minutes, I cut his track in wet leaves in October on a rainy morning in the Adirondacks and caught up to him on a little knoll that was covered up in beech nuts- just uphill from a spruce thicket that surrounds Pine Brook. He bedded on the edge of that knoll, with the prevailing wind blowing over his back and his eyes trained down into the beeches. Deer are incredible animals- I'll never cease to be amazed at their ability to carve out a life in the Adirondacks, especially on a year with no hard mast in the woods, and also make it work in the Sonoran Desert (where they go by Cous deer) and be just as successful on Staten Island, dodging cars and eking out an existence in the thin strips of timber between homes. When I see that mount I think of all of that. I think of the spot I caught up with him- and the brook trout in the stream just down through the spruces. I think of my amazement at how much meat we got off him when my dad and I butchered him in the garage the next weekend. I had just started dating the woman who would become my wife and she got me a wild game cookbook that winter- it was with the meat of that deer that I developed my love for more complicated game cooking, an evolution from the "cube it in the frying pan with onions" dish I had made exclusively with every deer before.

I know thats not what everyone else who walks into my house sees when they look at that buck. Some see nothing but a dead animal. Some see a braggadocious gesture of masculinity. Some see a big set of antlers and no more.

I bring this up because I think its appropriately representative of one of the fundamental problems we've run into around S.258. Hunting is incredibly complicated to talk about. It's so nuanced, its so personal- it defies explanation and when explanation is attempted it almost always comes off wrong. Its almost easier just to not even bother, to just hope the outside world will just leave us alone. But this bill and the conversation around it is evidence that we have to try, and we have to pitch this way of life and its merits with honesty and passion.

My name is Alex Smith and I am speaking to you as a hunter, fisherman, advocate for wildlife and wild spaces, and a father of two young children who I hope will have the opportunity to be strong stewards of natural landscapes and love them as I do. Though im involved with BHA, my local conservation commission, and Sporting Lead Free, the thoughts I will express here are my own and not meant to represent these groups. BHA has already submitted written testimony of their own, and I urge you to hear from other members of the group as well- they're well spoken, smart individuals with a deep commitment to conservation.

I have spoken in support of certain principles that underly S.258, and some of the reasons it exists are valid and need to be addressed, but there are some significant issues that I have with the bill and do not support it. However, I'm worried that this bills passage is likely, and I do not want to miss the chance to lobby for amendments to it that would make it more palatable to me and many of my peers in the hunting community- I will lay those out below.

First, a word on the good: this process, exhausting though it has been, has led me to ongoing conversations with several individuals in the Animal Welfare community in an effort to find places that our values overlap. These conversations have been difficult, at times uncomfortable: We have basic, fundamental differences in the ways that we view our place in nature. However we share love for many of the same things, and I think we owe it to wildlife, wild places, and future generations to look for common ground when we can find it. What's more, if we refuse to engage, we forfeit the chance to tell our side of the story about hunting and help craft the narrative, leaving that role instead to social media and online videos which are incapable of demonstrating context and nuance and often portray only the worst of us. I feel that on some level S.258 is a legislative response to interpersonal problems, not just between advocates and the board but between hunters and non hunters, and striving to have a more trusting relationship between these groups is an important part of this process.

I understand their frustration over what they perceive as stonewalling by the hunting community and I acknowledge that there's been truth to it at times- we have gotten so fearful of incremental losses of hunting rights leading to wholesale erosion of them that we're unwilling to hear anything these people are saying, regardless of whether it has merit- I refer to arguments over killing sows with cubs, live action trail cameras, and wanton waste as examples of this. I'm not pointing fingers at the board or anyone else here- I've been as guilty as anyone of this. My ability to hunt and fish, to live what I feel to be the most natural and "human" of lives I can, means so much to me that I cannot stomach the idea of losing it, and my kids in turn losing it. Hunting is far more than "recreation" to me, a somewhat belittling term that I hear thrown around a lot. Its not golf, its not playing video games. It's my life, its how I feed my family, it's how I feel closest to the natural world, it's how Ive come to feel as at home in the woods and on the water as I do in my kitchen. Anything that feels like a step in the direction of losing it is extremely frightening, and makes me want to dig in my heels and fight back with all ive got. I would challenge anyone with a passion like that to consider what it would feel like to think that there might be folks out there who desired to take it away from you, and who thought the thing you loved was mean-spirited and unethical. It hurts, its scary, and it makes me extremely wary of the the task of regulating hunting being done by individuals who wish it didnt exist in the first place.

However, we cannot be so fearful of that that we reject reasonable ideas for fear of the slippery slope. That is not the way forward for us as conservationists, and its not the way forward as members of society. I say this to make the point that I hope that we will all learn from this process that we need to be more willing to engage with ideas on their own merit, rather than recoiling from them out of fear of what may come next.

However, there is one fundamental hurdle towards productive conversations and relationships between hunters and the animal welfare community, and I hope that listeners of that world will take note of this: we (hunters) have no concrete sense of what the end goal of animal rights advocates is. I recognize that this may be nearly impossible to quantify, and that explanations will vary from group to group or person to person, but I urge people in those positions to try. I've heard it spelled out in plenty of high level, philosophical ways- "a more just

world for animals,” “more than just a resource,” etc, but none of us know what that actually means tangibly. Is a more just world one where coyote hunting happens in a structured season with applied wanton waste laws? If so, theres a conversation to be had. Is a more just world one that suggests human predation of wild animals is unnecessary in modern times? If so, I fundamentally disagree. Without a clear understanding of long term goals, hunters will continue to assume the worst and we will not be able to have productive relationships that center around the topics on which we agree- reduction of habitat degradation, mitigation of wildlife/human conflicts, encouraging the transition to non-lead ammunition, etc.

While S.258 does good things- the emphasis on open mindedness, the proposed trainings for board members and the requirement of Senate confirmation of candidates for instance, my concern is that in an effort to honor a broader spectrum of “user groups” and focus on “science based management” it fails to explicitly acknowledge (and thus direct the board to acknowledge) the deep cultural, recreational, and public health values (both mental and physical) of a consumptive relationship with nature. I urge you to consider the testimony of Dr. Meredith Niles on this particular subject, she’s been studying the impacts of self-reliance on food security and health and can speak professionally on the deep benefits of this lifestyle, particularly for Vermonters with below-median income levels.

An attempt to reduce wildlife management to something “science-based” has been called for by both sides on this issue, and that sentiment is reflected in this bill. I agree, as we all do, that sound, impartial science needs to be the first criteria in considering things like bag limits, means of take, season dates, etc, but the value of hunting to the community that engages in it is less easily quantified in that way. For example, me shooting a wood duck off Bristol Pond is of no ecological benefit to anything or anyone but myself, my family, and whoever’s around when I pull it out of the smoker. Ecologically speaking all there is as a result of my action is one less wood duck flying around the pond- a net negative. However, it provided me and my family with nourishment, it led me outdoors into a beautiful place, and it taught me more about the ways of the species. That value cannot be ignored, and must be considered by any board that seeks to regulate these activities, alongside the more tangible ecological criteria.

Moreover, the engagement of the hunting community is not only critical to our quality of life, but also for funding the department and all the work it does for hunted and non-hunted species. Democratically allocated access to sustainable utilization of wild animals is the backbone of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, and that continued opportunity is critical not only to funding for our desperately-needed conservation efforts, but also for engaging future generations with nature- continuing to create advocates for wild spaces and closeness to the land. I’m an environmentalist, I’m a conservationist, I’m an advocate for public land and wilderness, I have a four year old picks who up litter if he sees it along the trail without me mentioning it, and we got to those things through hunting. It’s not the only avenue to being a good steward of nature of course, but its a huge one and we should not in this day and age want to close those doors.

I think it's important as well to acknowledge the role of the Board, and the reason for its necessity and composition. I find myself quite regularly talking about hunting with folks who do not engage in it- I meet a lot of new people through my job as a tile setter in home renovations, I'm a bit of a chatterbox, and I'm constantly thinking about hunting, so these things come up. Through this, I'm often reminded of just how different the picture in people's heads is from the what really plays out in the field- sometimes it's more glamorous, sometimes less so. Hunting is nuanced and complicated in every way, from the reasons we engage in it and the way events unfold to the techniques and traditions behind our methods, and for this reason it's incredibly important that there's significant input into the rule making process from citizens with long-standing personal experience in the field, and a starting-point assumption hunting is our state's primary management tool and that if an animal is significantly abundant it can be harvested and utilized. I see this as a basic human right, and one backed by the state's constitution. I personally take no issue with those people handing over the final say in rule making authority to those whose area expertise is the ecology of the animal in question, but the hunters' lived experience is a critical component in the process and cannot be replaced by theoretical knowledge.

One of the fundamental fears that I have about people without direct experience in the hunting space taking part in regulating it is the potential for over-legislation of ethics. I completely understand why attempting to do so sounds like a good idea- no reasonable person wants a hunted animal to suffer unduly, but having spent a lot of time in the field hunting with a wide variety of techniques and tools I can say with certainty that clean kills and limited suffering are far more a function of the hunters' skill, cool headedness, caution, and self awareness than they are anything regulateable by law. In the overwhelming majority of hunters an extremely strong sense of duty to kill cleanly exists, taught to us and enforced by family, friends, and the greater hunting community and resulting in personal ethical codes that are more potent, more broadly applicable, and yield more tangible positive outcomes for the individual animals we hunt than any legislation could. I recognize that the awful videos that occasionally circulate online in this age of social media do not reflect this, but I promise you that this is not anywhere close to being an accurate representation of the way hunters feel about our duty to the animals we pursue. I urge the new board, should it be created, to stick to tangibles unless overwhelming consensus and input from hunters dictates that a particular technique be too prone to causing extended suffering or wounding animals.

Now, some proposed amendments. Hold onto your hats, I'm glad you don't have anything else going on for the next few months.

- I propose that Section 4041 Subsection D be amended to read: "The Board shall consider whether proposed rule is designed to maintain the best health, population, viewing, and utilization levels while weighing alongside these factors the cultural, traditional, and public health values of hunting/fishing/trapping the species in question." For those of us who fear that S.258 constitutes an attack on hunting rights, it would go a long way to CLEARLY direct the Board to provide hunting opportunity unless it fails to be ecologically sustainable. This is the crux of my fear about the bill, that it does not

adequately recognize the importance of hunting to us, and does not adequately and clearly direct the board to facilitate it when sustainable.

- List Hunting, Fishing, and Trapping as the primary management tools of the Department.
- I also propose that the bill establish a focus group to explore additional pathways to funding the Fish and Wildlife department such as a “backpack tax”. We all acknowledge the precarious state of funding via the traditional streams of largely hunting and fishing related revenue, and this bill proposes scope and procedural changes that will cost the department additional resources.
- Eliminate the ban on certain coyote hunting techniques. Much of the conversation driving S.258 is centered around giving regulatory power to the Department- something I can get behind. If that is the goal, its hard for me to understand rules being made through the legislature (who cannot be expected to be subject matter experts) as well and this is not a precedent I would like to see set. If we are to depoliticize these decisions, they must be made by the biologists.
- However, Replace the ban on hounding and baiting coyotes with a directive to the department to periodically evaluate the status of coyotes and other non-native species and determine whether or not they have achieved a status in their ecosystem that suggests they should be treated as any other native game animal, with the fair chase concepts, season dates, bag limits, etc that come with that. I acknowledge that this is a complicated question, but I do think that a reasonable conversation could be had about whether or not treating them as a nuisance to be eliminated from the landscape is a. Productive and b. Adequately acknowledging and respecting their place in the ecosystem, where they serve to fill a void left by predators we extirpated. Killing coyotes in large numbers at warm times of the year when their fur is worthless is not management of a natural resource, its a war on a nuisance, and it needs to be evaluated whether or not that war is one we should want to fight.
- Finally, while I appreciated the amendment that requires senate confirmation of candidates, I feel that returning the vast majority of appointing power to the governor, while it may benefit the hunting community in the short term, is a regression and will lead to a more partisan makeup of the board than if the task of appointing board members were split between multiple entities, perhaps the Governor, Secretary of State, Natural Resources Committee, and Commissioner. As I stated in my testimony to the Senate, my greatest fear in this process is that it become overly politicized and partisan. As written, the bill also leaves an incredible amount of power in the Commissioner, a single Governor appointed entity. I propose too that the Commisioner require Senate confirmation as well.

I have hope that there is a way for the good in this bill to be accomplished while continuing to honor and promote the deep and rich hunting and fishing tradition of this state, and without undue financial burden on the Department, but it is a long ways from doing those things and I ask you, as my elected representatives, that if yo must pass it, to not do so without rectifying the issues I have laid out above. This bill has been pitched as a way to represent the voices of more Vermonters, but it has become a fight between hunters and the animal rights community- both small percentages of Vermont's people. The overwhelming majority of

Vermonters support hunting, deeply respect its cultural and traditional value, and recognize the importance it has in feeding and connecting people with nature. They also want to see it done sustainably, with fair chase principles adhered to, and with the animal being utilized to its fullest reasonable potential. I ask the board to use that sentiment as its North Star in considering any changes to the way we regulate hunting, fishing, and trapping in the state of Vermont.

In closing- If my family and I cannot live the life we love, hunting and fishing in the way we so deeply believe in, were out. You can all tile your own showers. I'm from the Adirondacks, but my sons are eleventh generation Vermonters. I say that somewhat tongue in cheek, and I did not clear it with my wife, but I'm not entirely kidding- thats what this lifestyle means to us and to so many others in this state- one which is not in a position to want to make itself less hospitable to its rural youth. I beg you to consider carefully the stakes of any actions that could impact our way of life in this way.

Respectfully,
Alex Smith