

Viktor on Conservation

By Penny Randell

Conservation! Now there's a topic I can get down with and wallow in. Of course, this is Viktor and as I have informed you, bull elk like to wallow in excrement when excited and the mating season is upon us. When I consider how close we elk came to total extinction, it makes me weak in the knees, don't you know. After all, for much of human history nature, along with all its grasses and glories, animals and habitat, resources and gems, has been controlled by the government and used only for human gain. Social views didn't change until the 18th and 19th centuries when it was finally recognized that human activity damaged the environment.

It was 1872 when the world's first national park was opened. Yellowstone National Park set a precedent and humankind began to temporarily slight strict financial gain and focus on the value of nature in and of itself. By the middle of the 20th century this refined appreciation for the land and its animals instigated laws and legislation to help preserve fragile and beautiful environments for generations to come. Today these actions are worldwide and not-for-profit associations are readily formed to save valuable reserves.

Conservation Colorado is a non-profit entity whose mission is to "Protect Colorado's environment and quality of life by mobilizing people and electing conservation-minded policymakers." This grassroots organization is statewide and all members work to protect air, land, water, and even people. First on their list of duties and accomplishments is their insurance that more than three million acres of Colorado wilderness stay wild. Adhering to their mantra, "The Future is Worth the Fight," Conservation Colorado addresses concerns such as climate change, transitioning to cleaner energy, protecting rivers and outdoor heritage sites, along with saving what's left of public wildlands.

Next is another non-profit that hits pretty close to home. Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF), was established in 1984 by four hunters from Montana who were on a devout mission. It was their desire to ensure a future for elk, who they considered to be the grandest of all game animals. Which, by the way, sends shivers down my spine. This institution knows healthy animals thrive only in healthy habitats and maintenance of foraging lands, water ways, space requirements, and support for research and management is crucial for our success.

It is the job of RMEF to safeguard vital ranges for elk, both winter and summer. Migration corridors, calving grounds and secure areas which improve hunter accessibility...gulp...are all part of these same efforts. Yes, it's hard to admit, but hunting is a part of conservation. And, reestablishing herds is a winning process that does involve hunting, fire suppression, control of invasive weeds, encroachment of foreign vegetation and drought control. The good news is: RMEF promises to ensure that North America's elk will remain plentiful and robust no matter the efforts involved. Now, that's reassuring.

Over time hunting became controlled and managed through scientific means. There is sound reasoning behind every hunting rule and dollar spent to maintain the sport. In 1937 the Pittman-Robertson act was passed in which hunters voluntarily placed a tax on themselves. Through this act a portion of the money spent on firearms and ammunition was dedicated to saving wildlife and habitat. Today this undertaking alone generates \$700 million annually. This money is

allocated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to agencies across America. All in all, wildlife management in the United States successfully competes worldwide and wins first place in scientific research, maintenance, and conservation.

It is really worthwhile to look at the numbers when questioning the North American Wildlife Conservation Model. Because of the millions of dollars spent and hard work of hunters and anglers, elk herds have increased from 41,000 in 1907 to over a million today. Through Colorado state licenses and fees, conservation initiatives receive over \$796 million a year. The money is then accessed for research, habitat improvement, and enforcement of hunting and fishing laws. And too, these efforts help to protect non-hunted species as well. Clearly, hunting is considered conservation, for it helps to balance the wildlife populations according to available land and it helps to diminish disease among us critters.

Of course, it is painful to see a mate taken by a hunter. Nonetheless, I do admit the system works. At least when you are out hunting you can connect with nature. Also, such activities help to support 680,000 jobs. Folks travel to hunt, which means motels, servers, park fees, and more. And don't forget that game wardens are hired and trained to protect us elk, too. Remembering that today's fast-paced, technological world doesn't necessarily attract outdoor enthusiasts, I guess that's why we must count on the hunters to bolster bonds you humans can establish with nature.

As we approach hunting season again, my wish is that all rules are followed and that my closest herd members remain safe. Indeed, my mother and siblings are dear. That means we'll be hanging around town where it is safer, so beware. In the meantime, I'll be out and about scratching up information to pass on to you humans. Without doubt, the more we know about each other the more we can all enjoy this so very blessed community.