

The Teddy Bear and the Buffalo: Theodore Roosevelt's Influence on Conservation in America

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**Published in Bass Pro Shops Interactive Big Game Hunting Catalog
in September 2013 (available for download only on iPad)**

"Wildlife and its habitat cannot speak, so we must and we will."

– Theodore Roosevelt

For many, Theodore Roosevelt is best known as the 26th President of the United States. For outdoorsmen, hunters, and defenders of the wild, his most important contribution was the way he helped make wilderness and wildlife conservation a widespread endeavor.

The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is a model for the conservation policies of countries all over the world. As described on the Boone and Crockett Club's website, this system "is anchored by a Supreme Court decision that decreed that wildlife belongs to the people, and not government, corporations or individuals. It further directs how this natural resource is to be used and managed under sustainable guidelines for the betterment of wildlife and people. It is the reason why we still have abundant, wildlife populations in the U.S. and Canada and the opportunity to freely hunt, fish or enjoy this wildlife each in our own way."

Today, we take this system of laws and guidelines for granted, but in the late 19th century, it was a revolutionary idea. And none of it would have come about without the leadership of Teddy Roosevelt.

Despite his New York City upbringing, Roosevelt was an avid hunter. He felt most comfortable out of doors, riding a horse, chasing big game, and birdwatching. In later years during his term as President, he often seemed more interested in the birds darting past its windows than in the latest political news.

But in the early 1880s, he was still making a name for himself in the political arena. Then, in 1884, a tragedy changed the course of his life: his wife and mother died on the same day. Grief-stricken and disillusioned with big city politics, he temporarily retreated to his ranch in the Badlands of the Dakotas. It was there at his Elkhorn Ranch that he truly came to know "the West"—its beauty, its harshness, its people...and its diverse and magnificent wildlife. Their influence on him was profound.

According to Douglas Brinkley in his Roosevelt biography *The Wilderness Warrior*, "It was at the Elkhorn that Roosevelt found his voice to caution against careless growth, deforestation, wildlife depletion, and environmental degradation." He writes that by "raising a Paul Revere-like alarm about American wildlife in peril—including buffalo, manatees, antelope, egrets, and elk—Roosevelt saved entire species from probable extinction."

Roosevelt's passion for what he called "a strenuous life" was obvious to all who knew him, and his boundless energy served him well as he took up the cause for protecting wildlife. Roosevelt seemed to be everywhere at once, championing conservation even as he furthered his political career back East, hunted in the West, and rubbed elbows with the luminaries of the time. Roosevelt was an expert on the American West, and one of his favorite activities was writing about the outdoors.

In 1886, Roosevelt authored six articles for *The Outing Magazine*, a glossy magazine full of stories that appealed to sportsmen. In one of these articles, he used his firsthand knowledge of the West to express his concerns in terms he hoped everyone could understand. He wrote: "To see the rapidity with which larger kinds of game animals are being exterminated throughout the United States is really melancholy. Fifteen years ago, the Western plains and mountains were places fairly thronged with deer, elk, antelope, and buffalo...All this has now been changed, or else is being changed at a really remarkable rate of speed. The buffalo are already gone; a few straggling individuals...are all that remain...the same fate has befallen the elk...the shrinkage among deer and antelope has been relatively as serious."

Later that year, he took a hunting trip to the Coeur d'Alene mountains of Montana in search of white mountain goats, whose agility and toughness fascinated him. Roosevelt's guide on the trip was a rugged skin-and-meat hunter named Joe Willis. Willis, like most market hunters of the time, considered wildlife to be worth nothing more than the dollars their skin and meat yielded. Roosevelt had moved on from this shortsighted view, and he tried to convince Willis to look at things differently, with a greater focus on the future. From this time on, Roosevelt talked with everyone who would listen—and even those who didn't want to—about the "fair chase" doctrine that he was formulating.

By 1887, Roosevelt felt compelled to act. He gathered concerned, influential wilderness enthusiasts from all walks of life and founded the first wildlife conservation organization in North America. They chose the name "Boone and Crockett Club" in honor of American wilderness pioneers Daniel Boone and Davey Crockett. Members included naturalist and writer George Bird Grinnell (who founded the first Audubon Society), General William Tecumseh Sherman, Gifford Pinchot (who would later become the first Chief of the United States Forest Service), and 20 more visionaries.

According to the Boone and Crockett Club's official website, "over the next several decades, Theodore Roosevelt, along with members such as Aldo Leopold and J.N. 'Ding' Darling, championed the passage of laws, the establishment of institutions, and the designation of wildlands which today make up our nation's conservation system. The National Forest, the National Park, and the National Wildlife Refuge Systems exist today in large part because of the extensive efforts of the Club and its dedicated membership."

Roosevelt advocated strongly for the use of scientific facts and studies in determining The Club's policies for sharing and protection of our natural resources. As described on its own website, the Boone and Crockett Club provided "seed money for some of the first wildlife research projects. Under the leadership of member Aldo Leopold, The Club began formulating flexible scientific management policies for wildlife

and natural resources to achieve an ecological balance. The Club also called for the first President's Conference on Outdoor Recreation, which led to the establishment of the National Recreation Policy, which coordinated resource management at federal, state, and local levels."

A key part of The Club's philosophy is the idea of Fair Chase as conceived by Roosevelt and later refined by Leopold. The B&C defines Fair Chase as "the ethical sportsmanlike, and lawful pursuit and taking of free-ranging wild game animals in a manner that does not give the hunter an improper or unfair advantage over the animal." For many outdoor enthusiasts, the idea of Fair Chase defines the best possible coexistence of man, beast, and the natural world.

Together, Roosevelt and the Boone and Crockett Club were powerful partners in the struggle to preserve and protect our natural resources. During his years as president, Roosevelt seldom hesitated to exercise executive power on behalf of wildlife. He set aside 234 million acres of land during his presidency, and he was responsible for establishing: *[probably worth highlighting in some way]*

- 4 National Game Preserves
- 5 National Parks
- 7 Conservation Conferences
- 18 National Monuments
- 24 Reclamation Projects
- 51 Federal Bird Reservations
- 150 National Forests

His greatest legacy is that of bringing conservation into the cultural dialogue and appointing each and every citizen a steward of our natural resources.

More than 125 years later, great challenges exist, mainly due to the exponential expansion of the human population. The future of wildlife, wilderness, and hunting are at a crossroads. Theodore Roosevelt may be gone, but thanks to him and the Boone and Crockett Club and conservationists around the country, his legacy remains. As a result, we have a proven system for managing land and wildlife and overcoming these challenges for the betterment of all.

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More info:

<http://www.theodore-roosevelt.com/trenv.html>

<http://www.boone-crockett.org/>

[Sidebar] Roosevelt enthusiasts and outdoorsmen have a new place to visit—the new NRA Sporting Arms Museum at Bass Pro Shops National Headquarters in Springfield, Missouri. The Museum, which just opened in August 2, 2013, has a Theodore Roosevelt Room with several of his hunting trophies and houses four of his firearms. Visitors to The Museum will also enjoy The Archery Hall of Fame & Museum,

which is also located inside the store. Plan a trip to Bass Pro Shops to see both museums today!

[copy about the firearms in the NRA museum to accompany this article]

Theodore Roosevelt's Firearms at the NRA National Sporting Arms Museum

Our 26th president had a wide range of interests, as is reflected in his wide-ranging firearm selection. Roosevelt's firearms collection was recognized as the largest of any U.S. president and he was known to favor Winchesters and Colts.

Theodore Roosevelt's Smith & Wesson New Model No. 3 Single Action Revolver This engraved revolver is chambered in .38 Long Colt and was shipped from Colt directly to Roosevelt in 1898 upon the formation of the famous Rough Riders. It was chambered for the special U.S. Service cartridge because it is believed Roosevelt planned to carry it to Cuba for the Spanish American War. Note the engraving.

Theodore Roosevelt's Fabrique Nationale Model 1900 Semi-Automatic Pistol This .32 ACP handgun features gold inlays and ornate engraving on nearly every exterior surface. It was presented to President Roosevelt and was gifted to The National Sporting Arms Museum by Roosevelt's grandson, Cornelius V.S. Roosevelt. President Roosevelt kept this handgun in the nightstand by his bed in the White House.

Theodore Roosevelt's Fred. R. Adolph Hammerless Double Rifle Well known as a conservationist and hunter, this big-bore rifle was owned by President Theodore Roosevelt. The rifle is chambered in .450 Cordite and was given to Roosevelt after his African safari of 1909–10. Note the presidential seal and bear scene on the firearm plus the unique trigger guard and carving on the grip. The gun was on display in a window in the Abercrombie & Fitch store in New York for many years before Roosevelt gave it to an associate.

General Roosevelt's Winchester Model 1895 Lever-Action Rifle This unique rifle is chambered in .405 Winchester and was owned by one of the President's sons, Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. He used it on a hunting trip. Like his father, Brigadier General Roosevelt was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor.