

HOW DO YOU STOP AN ARGUMENT BETWEEN A HUNTER AND AN ANIMAL RIGHTS ACTIVIST?

"All I have to do is step between them and start expressing my opinions," says Marty Stouffer, producer and host of the Public Television series WILD AMERICA. Instead of yelling at each other, both groups would soon be mad at me." The outspoken Stouffer sees valid points--and contradictions--in each side's positions. Both a hunter and an ardent defender of wildlife, Stouffer says there are no uncomplicated answers to the intricate problems facing North America's wildlife.

"I have the same problems with self-righteous anti-hunters as I do with self-righteous hunters," says Stouffer. "People want things to be easy, to be black or white. It's not that simple. Our challenge is to make sense out of a bunch of grays. A prerequisite to having a discussion on wildlife is understanding the needs of all these various other creatures. We must respect that we share this planet with other animals, and that it would be a pretty lonely place without them."

While filming in Wyoming's National Elk Refuge for the 1991 WILD AMERICA program called "Valley of the Elk," Stouffer again saw why there are no easy solutions to wildlife issues." Some groups oppose feeding elk on the winter range," says Stouffer. "While feeding sometimes separates calves and cows and occasionally spreads disease, their main argument is that it's unnatural."

"It's also unnatural that people by the thousands have moved into Jackson Hole, bulldozed the land clean and built homes, condos and ski areas. Unless we buy all those homes, move the people out and ship in some wolves, Jackson Valley is not going to be the same as it was 100 years ago. If we stop feeding elk, they will disperse from the refuge. They will get hit by cars, eat the hay ranchers put out for their cattle, overgraze the area and there will be a bust in this now rigorous elk population. In fact, without their popularity as a game animal, the elk might not exist at all.

"If you had 1,000 pound animals munching away at hay and, for whatever reason, no one would pay money to shoot them, I'll bet that species would have been extinct a long time ago," says Stouffer. "There's no easy fix. It's a constant process of understanding and tweaking the delicate threads that hold it together. We have to be careful; the solution can be worse than the problem."

Stouffer has often been in the center of the wildlife debate. After the WILD AMERICA program "North Woods Lynx," he asked viewers to refrain from wearing pelts of wild animals; and to instead select skins of ranch-raised animals. "Boy, did I get it from both sides," says Stouffer. "Trappers thought I was challenging their God-given right to kill these animals. Anti-trappers are so

emotionally distraught about seeing a beautiful animal killed that they don't think any animals should be killed anytime under any circumstances. Both positions are absurd. The former fails to understand the gravity of the threat; the latter fails to accept that death is part of life."

WILD AMERICA'S realistic and straightforward portrayal of predation, coupled with Stouffer's views on hunting as a wildlife management tool, have often made him the focus of attacks. "We have people who write and say 'How could you stand by and let that predator kill that animal? Why didn't you throw down your camera and chase it off?'" says Stouffer. "If your goal is never to inflict death and sometimes even pain and suffering on another living creature, unfortunately you came to the wrong planet."

"On the other hand, if your goal is to keep elk or elephants living in reasonable numbers in a reasonable percentage of their original habitat, then you may have to take some extraordinary or unusual measures to do so," continues Stouffer. "Hunting a species--and using revenue from hunters for the management, regulation and habitat manipulation--might be the only way to save it. It's not so much what is right or wrong. Rather it's what is the best way to perpetuate what we're all after--healthy air, land and oceans and enough animals to keep the world ticking."

Yet, hunters' claims that they have improved certain wildlife populations don't go unchallenged by Stouffer. "Hunters say there are more wild turkeys now than at the turn of the century," says Stouffer. "Let's not blow their horn too loud. They protect those turkeys so they can shoot 'em." Also, Stouffer warns against game departments and hunting groups that support a single popular species to the virtual exclusion of non-hunted species.

"Sometimes a monoculture exists where a game department or hunting group goes so far that they modify the habitat to encourage one species--to the detriment of other species," says Stouffer. "We should always try to manage an ecosystem for all the different animals."

While some say being both a wildlife lover and a hunter is a contradiction, Stouffer says there's more of a paradox in those who call themselves vegetarians and refuse to eat the meat of domestically raised animals while choosing to eat fish. "Eating seafood--animals that really are living in the wild--taken from an already besieged ocean is environmentally far worse than eating a cow that was raised for that purpose," says Stouffer. "Seafood is dead meat. But people can't get opposed to killing sealife unless Flipper is involved."

If properly done, Stouffer supports hunting and, in fact, often hunts himself. "If it's done in the right way, with reverence and respect for the animals, I am not opposed to hunting any animal, bird or fish that is in reasonable or abundant supply," says Stouffer. "Doves, ducks, quail, deer, rabbit, and turkey are all more plentiful than when our pioneer forefathers arrived. Almost all have lost natural predators. How

can there be anything wrong with hunting them? It's a perfectly natural thing, we're just cavemen in business suits anyway.

"I have very primal feelings about hunting," says Stouffer. "It brings me great satisfaction to kill an animal and feed it to my family. I get the same satisfaction if I pick apples from my orchard or dig up a bucketful of potatoes in the fall. It gives me a feeling of self-sufficiency, a feeling of attachment to the land and the world, kind of a oneness with the universe. That tie, that link, that connection is all we have. That's our source. Without it, we are lost."

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