

Support I-161 As A Matter of Principle

The Independent Record recently took a position in opposition to I-161, a ballot issue that seeks to end the 5,500 outfitter-sponsored non-resident big game licenses. To get one of these guaranteed big game licenses, a non-resident hunter simply has to be sponsored by an outfitter and be willing to spend the money. All other non-resident hunters must participate in a drawing that allocates the otherwise limited number of big game permits.

This privileged allocation of hunting permits violates a basic principle that is an underpinning of wildlife conservation in America. That principle is that, in this country, wildlife is a public resource and is managed as a public trust for the benefit of all the people – equitably. In a sound bite that means if we are to have wildlife at all, we all need to conserve and share. Consistent with this principle, Montana people took a state that was literally blanketed with the bleaching bones of a commercially decimated wildlife resource in the 19th century and brought it to a wonderful abundance as we began the 21st century, including the deer that literally walk the streets of Helena. This restoration phenomenon is unprecedented in human history – we all conserved – wildlife prospered - and we all benefited.

In England, where wildlife attached to property and privilege rather than the people, the aurochs, boar, bear, beaver, wolf, and reindeer went extinct. Hunting there is now vilified as a residual of the hated aristocracy. We do not need to create and license a new aristocracy of the hunt in Montana. Closer to home there are also states that have been careless or casual with public trust wildlife management responsibilities, like Texas where fee hunting is the norm. One study found that while Texas has five times the deer and three times the human population of Wisconsin, it has but half the deer hunters.¹ We need to learn from Texas, not import their sad reality to Montana.

While I-161 is not a silver-bullet that solves all problems, it is a grassroots expression that our political trustees have violated one of the most basic principles supporting wildlife conservation in America. They have compromised the democracy of the wild and that needs to be corrected. I-161 sends that message and deserves public support. When Theodore Roosevelt set this nation on the course of wildlife restoration and conservation he told us: *“It is in our power to preserve large tracts of wilderness... and to preserve game... for all lovers of nature, and to give reasonable opportunities of the exercise of the skill of the hunter, whether his is or is not a man of means.”* That advice crosses a century of American wildlife conservation with crystal clarity, and I-161 is evidence that Montana hunters still believe it to be true. The initiative deserves our support.

Jim Posewitz

219 Vawter Street, Helena MT 59601 (406) 449-2795

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¹ Valerius Geist, How Markets in Wildlife Meat and Parts, and the Sale of Hunting Privileges Jeopardize Wildlife Conservation. Conservation Biology, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1988.