

BACKCOUNTRY HUNTERS & ANGLERS: A PERSONAL PROFILE

By Ken Wright, CBHA member

Solitude. Tradition. Challenge. Freedom. Health. Family.

Now there's a list, eh? But how do you come by those good things?

By hunting and fishing in big, wild, open spaces, according to the vision of a new sort of public-lands conservation group. Or a new sort of hunting organization. Or a new kind of outdoors adventure advocacy club. Or whatever it is, for unlike any other kind of pro-wilderness coalition out there, Backcountry Hunters and Anglers is all those things.

"Backcountry Hunters and Anglers is dedicated to quality and ethical hunting and fishing opportunities in the wildlands of North America, and the aggressive protection of wilderness and other backcountry habitat for fish and wildlife, upon which these great traditions depend," states the group's proclamation.

Their statement continues: "We are dedicated hunters and anglers who cherish the peace, solitude and challenge of the backcountry experience. As hunters and anglers, we know that our continued enjoyment of these traditions is dependent upon the protection and enhancement of a healthy environment."

"At no other time in history have our traditions been threatened like they are today," the message concludes.

To counter those threats, BHA supports greatly enhanced off-road vehicle restrictions and penalties for abusers, wilderness designation and roadless area protection, the reintroduction of predators such as wolves where biologically and culturally viable, and minimizing inappropriate technology in hunting and fishing — all stances that stand in direct opposition to the messages conveyed in most modern mainstream hunting and fishing media, where wilderness is falsely claimed to "locks up" the land, roadless areas are claimed to prohibit access to backcountry, predators steal "our" game, and ORVs and space-age technology give you a "must have" edge up on those wily animals (while providing big advertising dollars to glossy sportsmen's magazines).

It's a radical approach, then, that BHA is taking: promoting the protection of wild country and healthy ecosystems while renouncing motors and gadgets in favor of muscle and mind in pursuit of game. But it's not a new philosophy, argues BHA co-founder and chairman Mike Beagle.

"What we're working to protect and enhance is the great American outdoor tradition: the freedom to hunt and fish in silent solitude, without urban excesses, and with plenty of physical and mental challenge," he explains. "It's an old-fashioned way of viewing things, which views it as demeaning to wildlife and ourselves to use extreme technology to show our mastery over nature."



His writing having served as partial inspiration for the founding of Backcountry Hunters and Anglers, hunting ethicist David Petersen embodies the values of the organization. Petersen, above, watching for elk after backpacking into the Lizard Head Wilderness.

Beagle, a former army officer, high school teacher, and football coach living in Oregon, refers to Teddy Roosevelt when he talks about “the doctrine of the strenuous life” — getting yourself in and out of the backcountry by your own power, and meeting your prey on their turf in a fair-chase contest of predator and prey. All it requires is leaving the land alone, and leaving the toys at home. Which, of course, would also keep many of the motor-and-technology-dependent, so-called hunters at home, too. Like it used to be. Bad for the outdoor industry. Bad for the outdoor media. Good for America.

So those are the solitude, tradition, challenge and freedom parts. Add to those the health and family benefits of traditional muscle-powered adventuring in motor-free backcountry, and you’ve got a cause well worth fighting for, says Beagle. “These are *real* family values. And it doesn’t cost like a theme park. All we have to do to get into it is sweat a little. We have to earn it. And even at a young age, kids understand the special value of things honestly earned. We just have to protect the solitude and natural, wild, challenging environments by educating hunters and anglers about wild habitat,” he says, summarizing BHA’s approach. “We’re not against anything — we’re *for* things.”

If bridging the big gaps between hunters and fishermen, family values and wilderness protection seems like a stretch, then consider the additional unlikelihood of BHA having been conceived at a Republican gathering in Albuquerque in the fall of 2003.

At a meeting of Republicans for Environmental Protection, Beagle and a group of fellow hunters were discussing the works of hunting writer and ethicist David Petersen, when the idea of a new kind of sportsmen’s group, espousing outdoor ideals of the “radical” sort long proposed by Petersen (and before him, Roosevelt, Leopold, and others) was hatched. Backcountry Hunters and Anglers was born six months later, at a meeting in Beagle’s backyard in the spring of 2004.

“I was ecstatic,” Petersen says about the arrival of an organization aligned to his own sense of hunting ethics and love and protection of wild country — a group sharing and spreading his sense of the need for sportsmen and women to reciprocate by defending wild places and traditional values. Petersen was so ecstatic, in fact, that he soon joined the BHA board of directors and formed a Colorado chapter, today co-chaired by David Lien of Colorado Springs, the largest and most active chapter in the 47 states where BHA has members.

“BHA reflects the same values I have come to champion,” says Petersen. “First and foremost, it’s a pro-muscle-powered, quiet-use wilderness adventure *and conservation* organization.”

Petersen has authored eight books of natural history, including *Elkheart*, a memoir of his love for elk and elk hunting, and *Heartsblood*, an inspiring treatise and deeply personal narrative on the spiritual rewards and moral responsibilities of true hunting and the wild country it requires. He also collected and edited *A Hunter’s Heart*, a ground-breaking anthology examining the ethics of hunting, which earned him national recognition as a “hunting ethicist.”

Given that body of work, Petersen sees BHA as “an antidote to most of the hunting groups you see today. Seems like every time something important comes up, too many hunting groups come down on the wrong side. They’re ideological, paranoid, and self-serving, rather than concerned about protecting the public land upon which utterly depends the future of traditional hunting in America. They’re predator-phobic. They’re anti-wilderness. And they’re spreading ignorance and disinformation, arguing the lie that no motorized access to the backcountry means no access at all. In fact, the situation we have today, where excessive motorized access for a minority of users, steals fair and equitable access from the majority, who still prefer to use the quads God gave us.



Holly Endersby: "I joined because there wasn't another organization out there that shared my values...All the rest were us-against-thrm groups."

“My career in outdoor writing has been largely about trying to expand the idea of what hunting and wilderness are all about in the minds of hunters as well as the majority nonhunting public,” he explains. “We should *all* be hunting-ethicists and wilderness activists. It’s what we owe to nature, our one true home and heaven.

“Today, too many hunters are becoming technologists,” Petersen continues. “It seems like they’re looking for the easiest possible way to “success.” I feel sorry for them — there’s so much more to be gained by challenging yourself. Traditional hunters like to do things the hard way, to deliberately challenge themselves in the woods. We invite that challenge and *want* to hunt hard.

“And if you seek and do all of that,” Petersen concludes, “then you can’t help but become a conservationist. It comes to feel like protecting your own family in the family home.”

The problem is, he speculates, that many would-be conservationist-hunters (and he means anglers, too, for Petersen refers to fishing as “hydraulic hunting”) “haven’t gotten involved because there were so few right-minded and courageous organizations to side with. Until BHA came along.”

Fellow board member and co-founder Holly Endersby.

“I joined because there wasn’t another organization out there that shared my values,” says Endersby, an Idaho-based outdoors writer, backcountry horsewoman, hunter, and angler. “All the rest were’ us-against-them’ groups.”

BHA, she says, appealed to her because of its “unique stress on protecting wild public country” and “a basic outdoor value that has lost its hold in the last few years — that hunting and killing wild animals should not be easy.

“It’s important to me to get my own food,” explains Endersby, explaining that she and her husband, BHA advisory board member Scott Stouder, live on wild game, including elk, deer, bear, upland birds, and fish. “It’s a privilege to hunt and take animals,” she says, “and when you work hard for something, you value it more.”

Endersby also defines that “killing should not be easy” edict as non-technological hunting and angling. She and Scott frequently practice their traditional-style hunting and angling in the nearby Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness, in Idaho.

It's this place that also taught her that "our public lands are every citizen's gift," adding that she considers it "a civic duty to take care of them." That also means, she argues, that "healthy ecosystems need a full range of species, including large predators."

"Most other hunting groups don't address that; don't defend that," she complains.

It's just those values — including a serious consideration of the needs and dignity of the animals we hunt and the habitat that supports them — that puts BHA in a category by itself, summarizes Petersen.

"You've got extremists on both sides — hunters' 'rights' on the one hand, anti-hunters on the other," Petersen elaborates. "So here comes a group embodying the best of the middle ground of common sense, decency, tradition, effort, intelligence, and respect. A group that's not just about perceived 'rights,' but also promotes the other three Rs: respect, responsibility, and resource protection.

"Backcountry Hunters and Anglers embodies all the things hunters and anglers should become," he says. He then adds pointedly, "And all the things we *must* become in order to continue doing what we love."