

Letter to unborn child

# Voice in the wilderness should be heeded

I grew up in Northern Ontario, in the small community of Cochrane, about 700 miles north of Halton Hills to be exact - as the polar bear flies.

Growing up in a semi-isolated northern community can be both a blessing and a hardship in terms of recreational outlets, of which there weren't too many in Cochrane in the 1960s.

There was no indoor pool, our community arena didn't have artificial ice and usually you could expect nine months of winter, with a three month summer hiatus which was put to excellent use in unthawing various parts of the anatomy.

There was, however, the great outdoors, the vast expanse we called the "bush" which was only a 10-minute bike ride or slow jog from any part of town.

I was never an avid hunter or angler, but the "bush" had a hold on me (that exists to this day) that was almost physical in its beckoning.

My pals and I would disappear for days at a time into the bush during summer months and emerge mosquito-bitten, filthy and hungry with tattered clothes and an almost sensual sense of fulfillment that never really was sated. Winter months and the frozen panorama of snow blanketed woods, offered even more challenges to intrepid youngsters.

My father was a member of the Cochrane Rod and Gun Club and for several years worked for what was then called the Ontario Department of Lands and Forests.

I used to trek with my father to Rod and Gun Club functions and he would often bring me along on work assignments that would take him into the "bush."

The people I met because of this association with the outdoors could accurately be called "salt of the earth types."

Hunters, fishermen, trappers, hunting and fishing guides and lodge owners, who had one thing in common. A true love of the outdoors and a very serious sense of conservation responsibility.

As an ex-serviceman, I have a healthy respect for - but no fear of - firearms. The true outdoorsman reflects this view.

Our outdoor recreation area is shrinking, not by decree of nature but by human decree for the most part, by people whose experience of the great outdoors is limited to watering plants in the backyard or reading volumes of reports written by back-room campers who think a blue jay is a professional baseball player.

In the March 1990 edition of Angler and Hunter magazine, published in Peterborough, Ont., editor Gary Ball offers an editorial view lamenting the sad state of affairs involving the serious threat to our outdoor heritage in a "Letter to a grandchild yet unborn."

With Mr. Ball's permission, I have decided to use the editorial in the Herald.

His is a voice in the wilderness that cries out to be heard. As I see it, anyway.

**D**ear Gary, This is something of a tough letter for me to write. It's tough, mostly, because we've never met. I'm not certain that we ever will meet. In fact, I'm not even sure of your name. It could be Gary, perhaps even Grace. You're the grandchild who hasn't yet been born, my grandchild.

I'm writing this letter now, while everything is still fresh in my mind, to make sure that you and all of my descendants understand what kind of man I was, no matter what your teachers or your history books may tell you. I want you to know from me, before the history books are rewritten. And I know those history books are being rewritten. I see the manipulation and distortion before me each and every day.

My friends and I are being vilified daily in the mass media of this country. We are rapidly becoming the victims of a media and political witch hunt fuelled, as were the first witch hunts, by ignorance and fear.

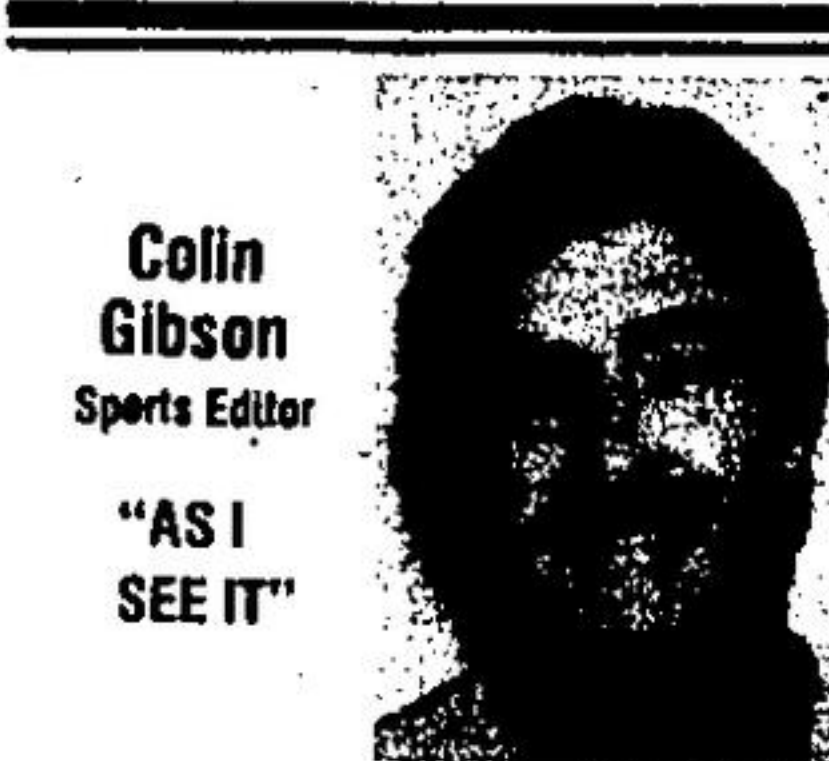
We are beginning to fight back and I am optimistic that if we all band together, work together and stick together we can win. But, should another witch-hunt like this one crop up in your day, I'd like you to know what it was like in my time. It may help in your own struggle, when it comes.

My sin is that I actually own firearms in 1990. Worse, I actually shoot those firearms. And, worse still, from time to time, as the seasons permit, I use those firearms to hunt animals. I am also an angler, but the witch-hunters, seem content to leave anglers alone until the last, until they finish with the trappers, hunters and shooters.

Today, as the issues heat up, my newspapers, my television screen and even my political representatives are all painting the same portrait of hunters and other firearms users. I am portrayed as a raving maniac, a very likely man to abuse my wife and children. My interest in firearms, shooting and hunting is linked by the witch-hunters to some sort of mental disease, sexual perversion or blood lust.

In your day, I guess, the portrait is even more devastating. It doesn't matter a lot that the portrait is completely untrue. It's like a lot of today's popular images; whatever sticks becomes true. I have handled firearms now for nearly 40 years and have never committed a criminal offense, with or without a firearm. The only act of violence committed against my family, excluding my snoring, was the time I kicked Charles in the shins. He'll be either your father, or your uncle. I don't know which. He was so big by then that he could have broken my neck, had he not found the whole thing so funny he collapsed in laughter.

I am neither a saint, nor a sinner. I am simply an ordinary man, doing the best I can do for myself, my family and the country I



Colin Gibson  
Sports Editor

"AS I SEE IT"

live in. Others see me differently. This all started, as do most witch hunts, with acts of insanity. Firearms, are of course, lethal. In the hands of a lunatic, they are chillingly lethal. But no one has yet come up with a way to legislate against insanity.

In the late 1980s there were a number of cases on this continent of mentally-deranged individuals slaughtering innocent people. When they used matches, or knives, or screwdrivers, or ropes, or even motor vehicles to snuff out lives, their acts were accepted as acts of insanity. But when the lunatics used firearms, the witch-hunters declared war on honest, responsible firearms owners and demanded that firearms be restricted and, eventually, banned.

Earlier in the decade there had been a tremendous groundswell of public opinion against the irresponsible use of one of the century's other most lethal weapons, the automobile. Speeding, dangerous driving and impaired driving were taking a staggering toll on our roads and highways. Something, society decided, had to be done. And something was done.

Automobiles were not banned. High-speed automobiles, even racing automobiles capable of speeds double or triple existing speed limits were not banned. Canadians and their lawmakers adopted very rational solutions. Existing laws were used to control criminal behavior, not automobiles. The country clamped down. Judges passed sentence with the idea of deterrence in mind. Driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs meant jail. Careless or criminal behavior behind the wheel drew stiff penalties. Carnage on the streets and highways levelled off and actually began to decline.

It was only a short time before criminal behavior with firearms caused a wave of public outrage in the same country that had reacted so rationally toward curbing the problem of criminal use of automobiles. Interestingly, the witch-hunters were not content to confine their concerns to the criminal abuse of firearms. They went after the firearms themselves and their law-abiding owners. They demanded import restrictions, model restrictions and outright bans on the ownership and use of firearms.

Why did it happen? Why did a country that reacted so sensibly to one form of criminal behavior react so differently when it came to another? Why was the law-abiding fire-

arms owner and user called to account for the criminal behavior of others, when the law-abiding motorist was not?

I am not certain that I can answer either question. The closest I can come is a suggestion that fear and ignorance were at the root of the problem. The fear came from a number of sources, among them the increasing urbanization of Canada's population, a population that neither knew nor understood firearms. That population knew only of the criminal uses of guns, of the increasing violence of an urban society, soaring drug traffic and the violence associated with it, growing alienation from family units and more violence.

These people in the cities were frightened. They had been long removed from the land in this country. Firearms to them, were the tools of warriors and criminals, unfamiliar and frightening. What frightened them, they wanted removed. In contrast, most of them owned, used and even enjoyed automobiles, lethal though they were.

"Control the criminal use of automobiles," they told the politicians, "but leave our personal vehicles alone." And the politicians listened, for they too owned, used and appreciated automobiles.

"But," the witch-hunters said, "we do not own, use or understand firearms. We are afraid of them. Please remove them." And, the politicians began to listen.

And the mass media of the country, the newspapers, radio stations, television stations and magazines, being largely city institutions, shared the fear and ignorance. They fuelled the flames.

These frightened people huddled in their concrete and asphalt jungles, built where ducks once nested and deer once roamed. They pointed their fingers at hunters as destroyers of wildlife. Those of us, hunters almost all, who had worked since the 1920s to preserve wildlife habitat looked on in disbelief. Those of us who had raised and contributed millions upon millions of dollars to ensure a place for the wild creatures of this continent couldn't believe what we were hearing.

We watched as the use of renewable natural resources like wood and leather and meat was replaced by the use of non-organic synthetics, derived from materials that could never be replaced. We watched those synthetics choke our air, our waterways and our lands. We watched as a nation began to bury itself in its own refuse.

Those of us, hunters once again, who had led the fight for licensing and firearms safety training; those who had fought to curb the criminal element within our ranks, were

stunned.

We knew we were right. We knew we were honest, caring, law-abiding citizens who had worked long and hard for wildlife, for forests, for clean air and water. We knew we weren't crazed killers, perverts or criminals. We knew we cared. And we believed, as we had been raised to believe, that eventually the truth would win the day for us.

We were proud and independent people. We watched well-financed charitable organizations plunder Canadian pockets to serve their anti-trapping, anti-hunting, anti-fishing and anti-firearms agendas. We watched as those untold millions were spent - not in preservation of wildlife habitat, not in wildlife rehabilitation or research - but on raising more funds for the witch-hunt war chest.

We watched as these same groups mounted attacks on all use of animals. Agricultural groups, medical research laboratories, breeding operations designed to save endangered species, all came under fire. We stood by and watched.

For years most of us, steadfastly refused to get organized, to get involved. We refused to believe anything bad could happen to us. Our voices were scattered, disorganized and often raised against each other in petty squabbles, hunters against trappers against anglers. We remained aloof from the organizations who fought on our behalf.

Almost too late, some of us began to see the future. We began to join organizations like the Ontario Federation of Anglers and Hunters, the group I belong to. We began to spread our message in the face of the propaganda. We began to demand an accounting from our political representatives and the civil servants our taxes hired. But countless thousands of our fellow hunters and fishermen continued to stand stubbornly alone, unheard.

As I write this letter, our battle is far from over. We can still hunt and fish. We can still own firearms, for the moment. But the witch-hunt is heating up once again, gathering momentum. And still we have not learned to organize, to tell our side of the story, to speak with one voice in defending what is so important to us.

I don't know for sure what will happen over the next decade. I'm not certain what sort of a world you will grow up in. But I know if we, and those who follow us, do not continue to stand up and be counted, you won't have much use for my bequests; my fishing rods, my shotguns and the old .303 Savage that my grandfather left to me.

One thing I ask is that you do not become complacent. We were complacent once and nearly lost a precious part of our heritage and your future.

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