

In My Opinion: Wildlife caretaking vs. wildlife management—a short lesson in Swedish



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Abstract While spending a year working with the Swedish Hunters Association, I discovered that the Swedish language does not have a word analogous to management. Instead, when talking about wildlife, the Swedes use words that have a root in nursing or caretaking. This orientation leads one to think about being partners with nature rather than controllers of nature. I believe this view of nature puts humans as equals with nature where we are part of the man-land community. Our North American wildlife management focus on control often leads to unrealistic goals and practices. I suggest that for a week, wildlife professionals try to call themselves wildlife caretakers rather than managers and see what difference it makes. I also suggest that we have much to learn by looking at how other societies relate to wildlife and that our North American perspective might benefit from such interactions. The Wildlife Society could do more to help provide such opportunities.

Key words international, management, nature, Sweden

We were sitting by a fire on a small rocky island in the Baltic during my 1995 sabbatical in Sweden. The wind was blowing hard off the sea. J. O. Petterson, the Lincoln-esque board chair of the Swedish Hunters Association, slowly took his beat-up pipe out of his mouth and turned to me: “Tom, I notice you frequently use the word management in your lectures and conversations. I don’t know if you realize this, but there is no word for ‘management’ in Swedish.” The Swedes have been mining iron for 500 years, forestry is the second major industry in the country, and the Hunters Association sets goals and quotas for the moose (*Alces alces*) harvest and even has its own research division, where I was working part-time. All of this, it seemed to me, translates into management with a capital M.

At first I assumed this was another of the Swedish cultural misunderstandings I had been running into, like the time I tried to buy a bottle of wine on a Saturday afternoon. In those days the state liquor stores closed Friday night at 1830 and didn’t open again until Monday at 0930. Our guests drank water that Saturday night.

No word for management? Could this really be true?

The next day I checked with a friend who was the board chair of the Private Forest Owners Association, a powerful group of 300,000 members that establishes prices for timber, owns its own mills, and collectively managed their forests. His American English had been honed in California, so I believed him when he confirmed J. O.’s observation. My friend told me that when he wanted to say management in Swedish, he reverted to English the same way Americans occasionally go to French with “coup d’état,” “R.S.V.P.,” and “faux pas.” A few days later, listening to the radio, I heard the English word “management” pop up right in the middle of a Swedish dialogue.

So my friend was right. But then I thought about the huge clearcuts I had seen, massive reforestation efforts, huge harvesting machines, and the Royal Forestry School. How can you manage natural resources as the Swedes seemed to and not have a word for it?

Then I began to pay more attention to the meetings at the Hunters Association. When they were talking about moose populations and goals what words did they use? A common word was “älgskötsel,” used where we would say moose management.

The “älg” is Swedish for moose, which is a pretty close cognate for “elk,” which is what moose are called in Europe.

So the job was to figure out what “skötsel” meant. This wasn’t hard since there had been a “sjuk-sköterska” strike and the word was everywhere in the news. The word “sköt” was in the middle of “sjuksköterska.” This word was just about impossible for me to pronounce, but I knew that a “sjuk-sköterska” was a nurse. The “sjuk” is “sick,” and “sköterska” is “caretaker.” The word “skötsel” actually comes back to womb or lap. What we would call moose management the Swedes were calling something like “moose caretaking” or “moose nursing.”

It doesn’t stop there. Another word associated with management was “vård,” pronounced like “vord” in English. When you cut your hand in Sweden you go to “Vårdcentrum” or to the “care center.” The Swedish agency that in English is called “Environmental Protection Agency” is in Swedish “Naturevårdsverket” or literally “Nature Care Authority.” Notice how different the implications of “care” vs. “protect.”

Still puzzled about this, I went to the head of the Hunters Association Research Division, who had spent a year as a post-doc at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and, like my other friend, was much Americanized. He was usually able to figure out and answer most of my culture questions.

“Why does Swedish use the words ‘nurse’ and ‘care for’ to talk about moose or environmental management rather than a more manipulative word like ‘management’?” I demanded.

Asking why something doesn’t happen in a society is always tougher than asking why it does. My friend sat for a moment and finally addressed me as he might one of his small daughters who would ask a similarly stupid question. “Tom,” he said, “nature is big and powerful and has been around a long time. We don’t control nature or change it. The best we can do is to nurture it, to help it do better what it does best, and we hope to possibly take care of nature. You Americans might like to think you control nature—we try to work with it.”

I thought back to J. O. on that island. The absence of the word “manage” was saying something very important about how humans interact with the environment. J. O., by asking a question, was trying to teach me something about Swedish society, but it had taken me a couple of months of struggle to figure it out.

And then, as with any new insight, I began to see

it in more places. At the time, Sweden had about 20 wolves (*Canis lupus*) that were in the process of making a comeback. In Wisconsin we had about 50, which were also self-restoring. In Wisconsin most of the wolves had been trapped and were wearing radiocollars. In Sweden *none* of them had been trapped and none were radiocollared. In Wisconsin we were “managing” wolves, while in the Sweden they were “caring for” or “nursing” theirs. It was not that wolves were unimportant in Sweden—they were *so* important and the population was judged to be so fragile that trapping and collaring were seen to be a serious human infringement on nature. You don’t trap the dog you love in a leg-hold trap. But if you’re simply managing a natural force, the leg-hold is fine, as it was in Wisconsin. This did not mean that science in Sweden was ignoring the wolf. No. Paid trackers kept track of the wolves, backtracking them into areas they had left to assess kills and behavior patterns. The Sámi were paid for wolf and other predator kills of reindeer (*Rangifer tarandus*). Models were being developed to follow and estimate the population potentials for scientific and political discussion. Wolf conferences were held several times a year, often with international speakers.

Attending one of these conferences, even though it was mostly in Swedish, gave me some more insights about American management vs. Swedish caretaking. The representative American who spoke that year described wolf restoration in Yellowstone. His slides showed scientists carrying drugged wolves; other wolves were stuffed into packing crates and flown hundreds of miles to holding pens. At the Wolf Center in Ely, Minnesota, wolves were penned so the environmentally sensitive visitors could see them. Others were radiocollared so plane loads of tourists could find and circle them and so they could be found more easily for howling sessions. The wolves near Ely and Yellowstone are being *managed*, and in Sweden they are being cared for.

We seem to forget that nature stands on its own. Chronic wasting disease is discovered in Wisconsin, and the stewards of the deer (*Odocoileus* spp.) herd try to eradicate all the wild deer in 1,000 square kilometers. Can they really believe they have such control of nature? Are they so powerful they can manage nature to this extreme? When challenged, they say, “We probably can’t do it, but we have to try.” Why do they have to try? In our efforts to manage nature, exotic species are attacked as if they

threaten human existence. In spite of a record of uncontrolled exotic introduction, wildlife managers are introducing more exotics to kill purple loosestrife (*Lythrum salicaria*). These bugs will, of course, die and go away once the loosestrife is “controlled.” We know because science tells us so. Thousands of members of the Wilderness Society send in e-mails to “protect” the Apostle Islands in Lake Superior by designating them as wilderness—even though the powerful lake, combined with the current National Park designation, do the same, thank you. The Sierra Club demands an end to logging to protect National Forests.

I once met an American who came to Sweden 30 years ago, knowing only 500 words of Swedish. He said he didn’t speak English for a year. For the first months his speech was not very nuanced, but gradually he grasped the language. At the end of the year he claimed that his personality had changed, and he felt it never changed back. Such is the power of language and meaning.

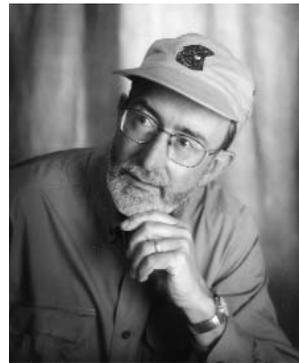
I don’t have a lot of hope for change in America. But as a small step in a new direction I would ask that wildlife professionals try for a week not to use the word manage and replace it with “caretaking.” Change your professional label to Wildlife Caretaker. Introduce yourself as a Wildlife Caretaker. Get shirts and buttons that say Wildlife Caretaker. See if any of this opens up alternative ways of thinking about and dealing with nature.

Ten years after my conversation with J.O. in Sweden, American wildlife management is gaining sway even in Sweden. The wolves are now collared. The Swedish Hunters Association has changed its English name to The Swedish Association for Hunting and Wildlife Management. I am teaching Swedish and European students using a textbook called *Human Dimensions of Wildlife Management*.”

In 1935 Aldo Leopold made his only trip overseas. He was a student on a fellowship, not traveling there to conduct research or to teach. The trip lasted more than 3 months and had powerful effects on his view of wildlife. This change in his thinking was reflected in the publication of 5 papers. The Wildlife Society today (note that we don’t even call our organization the North American Wildlife Society, even though that is the cultural and educational base of most of our members) is beginning to hold international conferences. I do not believe these brief appearances, at which most of the papers presented are by North Americans, are enough. We should provide support for some of our members to attend wildlife meet-

ings (like the International Union of Game Biologists) where most of the participants are *not* from North America. We try to influence international wildlife with a North American Travel Grant, to bring our international members here to learn more about North American wildlife management. Why not consider a similar grant to send our members *outside* of North America, not so much to teach but to learn? It takes months and sometimes years along with an effort to learn something of the language and the culture, to gain insights into how other societies deal with wildlife. Many universities, like mine, provide sabbaticals at full pay for 6 months and half pay for 12 months. A TWS supplement for part of the 12 months if the applicant resides overseas would encourage international experience. The United States government provides a deduction of \$75,000 on earned income if you stay overseas for 11 out of 12 months, so a longer stay, I found, is more financially feasible than a shorter one. Let’s try to learn about how other cultures deal with wildlife. Perhaps this will help rein in North American hegemony and make us even better wildlife caretakers.

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Tom Heberlein earned a B.A. in sociology at the University of Chicago, and an M.A. and a Ph.D. at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, also in sociology. Following a 30-year career in the Department of Rural Sociology at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he retired in 2001. He is currently Professor Emeritus at UW-Madison and a professor in the Department of Animal Ecology at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences in Umeå, Sweden. He was president of the Human Dimensions in Wildlife Study Group and helped found the journal *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*. From 1988 to 2000 he taught wildlife and society at UW-Madison. He spent a sabbatical in 1995–1996 in the Research Division of the Swedish Hunters Association. He currently teaches a human-dimensions unit in wildlife courses at Umeå and divides his time between Stockholm, where he writes and teaches, and northern Wisconsin, where he writes and hunts. Heberlein has published 23 articles or chapters in the four years since he retired. He is currently co-chair of the International Symposium on Society and Resource Management, held in Östersund, Sweden in June 2005.

