

## *Letter to the Editor*

# Let's Address a Little-Known Law that Promotes Hunters

Dear Editor:

As the war of words rages stronger than ever over gun violence and how to deal with it, there is one little-examined contributing factor that needs attention: the role of the overwhelming hunting culture going on all across this country.

Where does it start? All "environmental conservation" agencies, including the Department of Environmental Conservation, U.S. Fish and Wildlife and APHIS, have a requirement that, by law, only hunters can serve on their advisory boards. These laws, established almost 100 years ago, guarantee a deck-stacked, lethal outcome for the wildlife they are intended to protect – by deliberately banning non-hunters from decision-making about wildlife, while encouraging all forms of hunting as the "norm" for wildlife "conservation."

At a time of calls across the country for gun control, these arbitrary, discriminatory laws that baselessly promote hunting need to be examined, as well. In fact, breaking the hunter/National Rifle Association stranglehold on our laws must be finally be addressed.

Such laws are being challenged all over the country: "Pro-wildlife citizens demand seat at DNR table" (Madison, Wisc.), "Fish and Game commission needs greater diversity" (New Hampshire), "Hunting foes want to snare seats on Vermont's fish and wildlife board" (Vermont). The public needs to be made aware of these facts – and that there is finally a bill to correct this injustice in New York State: Sen. Tony Avella, champion of several other animal protection issues, has introduced S3327 (companion bill A6519), currently in the Environmental Conservation Committee, which abolishes the unfair "hunters only" requirement of the NYS DEC. We don't want to take your guns; we just want our right to contribute our voice – yet, hunters vociferously fight such change.

Hunters indignantly insist they are the only ones "qualified" to oversee these directives – and claim their license fees entitle them to a special, exclusive position on the DEC advisory board. But the fact is, "non-consumptive" users of NYS parks (defined as bird watchers, wildlife photographers, etc.) are at a record high, with almost 72 million visitors in 2017, yet they have no voice in DEC policy making. This is an outrageous injustice, with hunters stridently objecting to each and every suggestion for modifying this slanted system.

The DEC homepage states, "One of DEC's main responsibilities is to protect New York State's wild animal and plant populations," yet it's next to impossible to find anything on their website except pro-hunting advice, lists of wildlife killing contests, where to kill animals, fairs and other public events that are "admission free" for hunters, etc..

As the national movement and demand for gun control and banning assault rifles – both of which hunters fight against passing – steamrolls across the country, the effort to pry their undemocratic monopoly of wildlife management away from them is hard fought, as hunters – who supposedly stand for America, democracy and the Flag – attempt to deny us our rights. Hunting is in decline, and the hunters know it, yet they hold all the cards; their suppression of democracy just adds more taint to this questionable, antiquated and cruel activity.

An innocent woman walking her dogs upstate is dead because of hunters, and it's not the first time that has happened. With the DEC's excessively-promoted hunting culture in place, upstate New York residents fear going out to their own backyards during hunting season, and children at the tender age of 12 have been empowered and encouraged by the DEC to slaughter animals for sport. In Syracuse, the DEC confiscated a pet squirrel they deemed "illegal," but they promote and encourage squirrel killing contests. Despite nationwide marches for gun control, a NYS bill awaits votes that would allow hunting in densely-populated cities. Although studies have been done on the strong correlation between animal cruelty and violence toward human beings, a current NYS bill would permanently lower the age for universal hunting licenses from 14 to 12 years old; while Florida officials answer the call for gun safety by raising the age for gun purchases from 18 to 21, our senators and the DEC want to put more guns into the hands of children. The "hunters only" DEC law must change: In 2018, we expect all our voices to be enabled; we expect kindness, respect and saner, more measured input to prevail for all. Until the Avella bill passes, suppression and denial of our civil rights to participation in government process will define the DEC. This is not the American way – and it certainly isn't democracy.

**Kiley Blackman**

**Founder, Animal Defenders of Westchester**