

OUR “HIDDEN” AGENDA

By James H. Phillips

It comes as no surprise that during our short publishing history Madduck.org has stirred controversy. Our critics have accused us of several offenses --falsifying biological data and/or reaching wrong conclusions based on our analysis of the data. But the one that stands above all others is that we have a “hidden agenda” and therefore anything we say should be viewed as suspect.

The first accusation is easy to refute. The great preponderance of data – age-ratios, harvest, breeding populations, pothole counts, winter surveys and so forth – comes from the files of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. It is the same data used by waterfowl biologists. We generally cite the source so that any skeptic can look up the “facts” for himself. Our critics are loath to do this. Perhaps they recognize they would be proved wrong.

Other data comes from specific biological studies. We generally cite the author, but do not spell out the title and publication for reasons of style and readability. These studies are public record and available to any dedicated waterfowler who wants to confirm our factual accuracy.

Our biological analyses, based on the aforementioned data, offer conclusions that are just that – our conclusions. We “follow the math” to see where it leads us in regard to waterfowl management practices. These conclusions are open to debate, as are all quasi-scientific or scientific conclusions. But our critics have yet to assemble their data to offer a rebuttal. We wish they would. We believe a free exchange leads to greater insight and truth.

The “hidden agenda” accusation is a favorite of ill-informed conspiracy theorists. It is sufficiently vague to raise doubt. It subtly shifts the burden of proof to the accused. It is ideal for those who fear change. It is the resort of those who are constitutionally unable to accept anything at face value – the individuals who ignore our “mission statement” on our home page or dismiss it as deceitful window dressing.

Our agenda, which should be evident to even a casual reader, is to present the basic biological data in a readable manner and compare it to current waterfowl management practices. We seek to expose issues and ask hard questions related to waterfowl management’s historical failure to maintain an abundance of ducks. Hopefully, public exposure will force changes that ultimately will increase the number of ducks winging the length and breadth of the continent.

Although we have not “hidden” our agenda -- indeed, we have shouted it from the rooftops -- conspiracy theorists question our personal motivation for creating and continuing to post on this website. This is especially troubling to fringe elements among the waterfowl-hunting fraternity who view anyone calling for restrictive regulations as an anti-hunter.

Our personal histories are not secret. Our failure to document them more fully should not be viewed as a conspiratorial darkness. It is more akin to an omission. We did not believe our personal histories would be that important to the debate. Therefore, we shall address this concern.

Three of us founded Madduck.org -- publisher Peter Stent, a venture capitalist; Howard Ellman, a lawyer, and myself, a journalist. Each of us has hunted ducks for more than half a century. Our combined hunting experience covers the length and breadth of the continent, from the sloughs and stubblefields of Saskatchewan south to the mangrove lagoons of the Yucatan, from Maine’s rocky coast west to San Francisco Bay. We think about ducks and duck hunting every day and continue to go afield each autumn.

Over the past half-century we have seen an alarming decline in numbers of ducks. This is true not only for us, but for those with whom we have shared a blind over the years. This decline is most pronounced among three of our four most valuable species – pintails, canvasbacks and black ducks. It is not spread evenly across the geographical regions of the continent. Some areas have been harder hit than others.

I take perverse pride in having been an unfortunate witness to some of the starkest geographical declines. In Indiana, the state where I was raised and where I now live, the number of ducks counted in the winter survey has dropped from a peak of 1,037,600 in 1955 (my fourth hunting season) to an average today of 43,804. This is a 96 percent decline. No other state in the union has suffered such a high loss.

On the Maryland portion of Chesapeake Bay, where I lived for years, the number of wintering pintails in my lifetime declined 97 percent, the number of black ducks by 90 percent. As for canvasbacks, once celebrated as the “King of Ducks,” the season is either closed or opened briefly with a one-a-day bag limit.

Today, the Atlantic Flyway fall flights have become so thin that Chesapeake Bay hunters are releasing tens of thousands of free-flying mallards each autumn to provide a semblance of the sport that once was taken for granted. This practice that is rapidly spreading to other parts of the flyway.

Stent and Ellman, who live in California, have been more fortunate, but they too have witnessed a significant drop in numbers of ducks.

These losses provide the personal motivation for us to seek changes in waterfowl management. We are angered by waterfowl overlords who accept these unconscionable

declines as par for the course. We are angered by their refusal to act decisively to stem the losses.

A second factor that we have witnessed over the years involves the changing attitudes of our society, especially the growing portion that today views hunting as a cruel, anachronistic holdover from our hunter-gatherer past. These individuals believe hunting should be banned. This raises the very troubling issue of whether we can we preserve our sport far into the future.

We believe the best way to preserve hunting is to preserve a great abundance of ducks. This means we must change current management practices to reverse the long-term population decline. It means we must demand greater analytical skills from our biologists and heed their insights. It means we must hold our “waterfowl managers” accountable for their actions, firing the incompetents and political pawns. We must offer greater rewards to the resourceful. It means that we must embrace and practice a higher standard of ethical behavior to elevate duck hunting to the level of true sport so that it can withstand public scrutiny and defuse accusations that duck hunters are “nothing but a bunch of killers.”

All of these will force changes from past practices that will be resisted by many. But these are our motivating beliefs, based on our long-term experience in the marsh as hunters and as members of our larger, ever-changing society.

We do not claim Truth (with a capital “T”) will be found in the mathematical analyses we offer in Madduck.org. By the same token, we do not believe Truth will be found in peer-review, scientific documents. We offer our analyses to stimulate debate and guide change. Truth (with capital “T”) ultimately will be determined by what we see afield. Are our skies filled with ducks? Are our waters smothered with resting, feeding ducks? Are we seeing many and taking a few?

A final note: The three of us are of an age when we do not know whether the previous season will be our last. Duck-hunting in gradually diminishing form will out-live us. But over the past half-century our days afield have proved to be so energizing and soul-nourishing that we wish it to continue forever. Our fight to preserve and enhance the sport is not for our generation, but for future generations, for our children and grandchildren. We are committed to preserving both ducks and duck hunting. That is our “hidden agenda.”

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
