

U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance:
A Study in Oppositionality to Animal Rights
Organizations

Paul C. Gorski
Founder, EdChange
Assistant Professor, Integrative Studies, George Mason University
<http://www.EdChange.org>
gorski@EdChange.org

April 2010

Just as organizational identity is critical to progressive social action organizations (Meyer, 2007), so is it critical in the case of not-so-progressive social action organizations. So when a group of sportsmen founded the U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance (USSA) in 1977 as the Wildlife Legislative Fund of America (WFLA), they sought an identity to distinguish themselves from other organizations that were fighting for the rights and interests of hunters and trappers. They found their identity, not by framing themselves as *for something*, but by framing themselves *against* organizations that are *for something*; namely, animal rights. The organization's history, as told by the organization itself, begins with the decision to position itself oppositionally. It took as its original mission "the defense of hunting, fishing and trapping in the face of the burgeoning animal rights organizations" (USSA, 2009a, par. 1). In fact, the entire history of the USSA can be understood as a progression of strategies and tactics aimed solely at protecting its members—the all-American, wholesome, hard-working family—from evil, anti-science, anti-family animal rights fanatics. Clearly, the USSA sees itself as a thorn in the sides of the Humane Society, PETA, and other animal rights and animal liberation organizations. And evidence suggests that, given its comparatively diminutive size and annual budget, it is a fairly successful thorn.

In this essay I attempt to capture the essence of the USSA through the lens of an animal rights advocate. I begin by providing a brief overview of the organization. I then discuss its primary strategies and major policy battles. I end by considering the future of the organization and its possible implications for the continuing struggle for animal rights.

Brief Overview of the USSA

Just over thirty years old, the USSA was organized in Ohio to coordinate a media blitz opposing an amendment to the state constitution which would have banned trapping. After raising more than a million dollars in this effort, and finding quick success with the strategy of framing animal rights advocates and anybody who supports them as wholesome-family-hating "antis" (Gentile, 1987), the USSA formalized itself (as the WFLA) and began raising money to defend its constituents—hunters, trappers, fisher-people—against any legislation that might limit their abilities to pursue their hobbies unabated. By the early 1980s the USSA had expanded beyond Ohio's borders, lending their numbers and fundraising capabilities to legislative fights all over the United States. Interestingly, the first chairman of the USSA was G. Ray Arnett, former director of the California Fish and Game Department and former president of the National Wildlife Federation (USSA, 2009a). This might indicate both that the USSA recognized the need to have a wildlife "insider" on its side and that Arnett, who had run one of the biggest wildlife organizations in the world, respected the organization or its potential enough to bring his considerable expertise to bare on its behalf.

By 2007, the USSA had a membership of 1.5 million and an annual budget of \$3 million (Freedman, 2007). It also had a more robust mission statement with four primary foci:

To protect and advance America's heritage of hunting, fishing and trapping. We do this by uniting sportsmen to:

- Protect against legal and legislative attacks by the animal rights movement.
- Win public support for outdoor sports.
- Ensure the future of this heritage in involving families in the outdoor experience.
- Promote the sportsman's stewardship role in the scientific management of America's fish and wildlife. (USSA, 2009b)

An examination of the USSA's battles, and the strategies and tactics employed in those battles, shows that they are most focused on the first of these four points, that they define "outdoor sports" and "the outdoor experience" as hunting and trapping, and that the "heritage" and "scientific management" aspects of their mission do not describe their programs so much as their strategy for fighting any threat of "movement" by the animal rights movement.

USSA and Oppositionality

According to its Web site (2009c),

[The USSA] provides direct lobbying and grassroots coalition support to protect and advance the rights of hunters, trappers, anglers, and scientific wildlife management professionals. The USSA is the only organization exclusively devoted to combating the attacks made on America's sportsman traditions by anti-hunting and animal rights extremists. This is accomplished through coalition building, ballot issue campaigning and legislative and government relations" (par. 1).

This statement contains much potential fodder for rhetorical analysis: the strategic inclusion of "scientific wildlife professionals" among its self-defined constituencies, language such as "grassroots coalition," and so on. But most telling, perhaps, is how this statement serves as yet another indication of the USSA's conscious oppositional positioning against animal rights groups—or what it calls "anti-hunting and animal rights extremists."

In Beers's (2006) language, the primary "bogeymen" against whom the USSA aligns itself are the Humane Society (HSUS) and PETA (Freedman, 2005, 2007; Morris, 2008; Oldenburg, 2004). In virtually every interview of a representative of the organization I could find, one of these two organizations is mentioned with consternation. Rick Story, USSA's senior vice president, has been particularly blunt on this front, saying in a 2007 interview that HSUS and PETA were becoming "more and more onerous" (Freedman, 2007, par. 5). Beth Ruth, USSA director of communication, has said of HSUS president Wayne Pacelle, "He is enemy number one" (Oldenburg, 2004, par. 4).

Aligning action with these sentiments, since the early 2000s, the USSA has rallied its members in protest of any organization which enters into partnership with the HSUS,

even when the purpose of the partnership is to raise money for animal shelters and other service-related programs. Since 2002, the organization has organized boycotts against, and complained publicly to, Accor Economy Lodging (Mueller, 2002), Build-a-Bear Workshop (Mueller, 2002), Iams (Muller, 2004a), and Michelin (Davis, 2004), among others. Oftentimes these actions have been successful. According to Mueller (2004), several organizations—General Mills, Pet Safe, Sears, and Ace Hardware, to name a few—have terminated relationships with the HSUS due to the USSA’s complaint campaigns.

The organization similarly will go after politicians who advocate for these organizations. New Jersey governor James McGreevey was the victim of a particularly harsh USSA attack campaign due to his support of SPCAs and his decision not to investigate claims of financial wrongdoing of several of these organizations in the state (*The Beaumont Enterprise Staff*, 2002).

If these examples of oppositional identity are not enough to illustrate the organization’s conscious efforts to define itself in conflictual terms with animal rights organizations, in 2008 the USSA organized, under its own umbrella, a group called “Sportsmen Against HSUS.” Obviously, the purpose of Sportsmen Against HSUS is to fight the organization that the USSA considers to be the world’s top anti-hunting group (Frye, 2008). Its priorities are to “(1) mount national campaigns to educate the media, elected officials, the public, sportsmen and others targeted by the animal rights group, and (2) fund the campaigns that combat the lobbying efforts initiated and supported by the HSUS” (Frye, 2008, par. 4).

Battling the “Antis”

Framing itself in opposition to the HSUS and other animal rights organizations allows the USSA to rally its constituents with an overwhelmingly clear message. *The “antis” (those opposed to hunting, trapping, angling, and so on) are out to get us. The antis want to take away our rights. The antis want to smear our heritage. We must stand up to the antis.*

The antis, of course, include any organization or individual—but especially animal rights groups—that want to place any sort of limit on hunting, trapping, or angling. One of the USSA’s chief strategies is to essentialize animal rights organizations so that it appears as though their only missions are to eliminate hunting, trapping, and angling—to take these hobbies away from real “Americans.” So just as the USSA takes shots at HSUS and PETA whenever possible, it also takes every opportunity to reframe these and other animal rights organizations as “anti-hunting” and “anti-sportsmen,” to reframe the entire animal rights movement as an anti-hunting movement (Freedman, 2005, 2007; Frye, 2008; Moran, 2003; Morris, 2008; Mueller, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c; Roussan, 2007). For instance, Story (cited in Frye, 2005), speaking at a seminar in Alexandria, Minnesota, clarified that the role of the USSA is “to meet, beat, defeat and knock the living daylights out of the anti-hunting movement” (par. 5). In a 2007 interview, Story (cited in Freedman, 2007) explained, “We’re in business to combat the anti-hunting groups. That’s all we do” (par. 2). Similarly, in a 2004 interview, USSA president Bud Pidgeon (quoted in Davis, 2004), explaining the organization’s campaign against Michelin for entering into

partnership with the HSUS, said, “Sportsmen must make Michelin aware that every dollar corporate America provides to fund animal rights groups’ programs represents money that is freed up for use in national campaigns to end hunting and trapping” (par. 6).

Strategically, the USSA’s work to embed this “us/them” binary and code it into the lexicon of its constituency allows it to impose even harsher frames on its adversaries. And it does so, regularly referring to animal rights *terrorism* (Kelly, 2002; Moran, 2003; Roberts, 2002), a ploy to marginalize animal rights and environmental activists that became popular after the September 11, 2001, attacks in the U.S. This, then, enables the organization to frame “sportsmen” as the victims or targets of this terrorism (Roberts, 2002), as Tony Celebrezze (quoted in Mueller, 2005), USSA director of states services, illustrated in a 2005 interview: “...anti-hunters will have a field day ensuring that sportsmen are prosecuted on animal cruelty charges” (par. 3). This framing has helped the USSA rally its membership to lobby legislators to treat direct action animal rights activism as domestic terrorism (Kelly, 2002; Moran, 2003). In fact, in 2003 the organization drafted the Animal and Ecological Terrorism Act, calling it “model” legislation for combating animal rights terrorism. They promoted passage of this act in all 50 states (Moran, 2003). This, along with action by the National Rifle Association and other pro-hunting groups, led to the passage of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act in 2006 (McPhall, 2007), which made it easier to prosecute animal rights activity as domestic terrorism.

The USSA employs many other classic strategies, as well, for galvanizing its base and discrediting the animal rights movement. Like many organizations opposed to social or political change, the USSA often brazenly mocks the HSUS, PETA, and individual animal rights advocates as “silly” and their concerns as “ridiculous” (Morris, 2008; Berg, 2005). Like many “conservation” organizations that oppose animal rights groups (Beers, 2006), the USSA defines part of its work, and the hobbies it defends, in scientific terms, as *wildlife management*, while labeling animal rights concerns as unscientific (USSA, 2007). It warns that animal rights groups are dangerous because they block important scientific research (Roberts, 2002). It also appears as though the organization has a network of journalists, all of whom are employed as sports writers for right-leaning newspapers, who will do its bidding. These journalists regularly write articles that advocate explicitly for the USSA, refer to animal rights groups as “antis,” and portray them as extremists who want to rob hunters and trappers of their rights. Among them are Mueller (2002, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2005) at the *Washington Times*, Moran (2003) at the *New York Post*, and Freedman (2005, 2007) at the *Chicago Tribune*. In several instances, these journalists, not even feigning objectivity, provided readers with information on how to join or contribute to the USSA or how to protest animal rights campaigns. It is interesting, too, that each such journalist I found is a sports writer, and every newspaper article I found that favored the USSA was in a sports section. This might be a strategy employed by the organization to reach its base as directly as possible through the “Outdoors” sections of sports pages, rather than going through other sections of newspapers, which could raise counter-attention by people who are not hunters or trappers (and so who probably do not read the “Outdoors” section of their newspapers).

But without question, the organization’s primary and most successful strategy has been framing itself and its constituents as victims of animal rights terrorism. When people are afraid that they might lose something to which they have grown entitled, and

when politicians and corporations fear losing the support of a considerable portion of the population, they become much easier to scare into compliance with the status quo. The USSA knows this, and has become Rove-ian in its ability to understand its sociopolitical and sociohistorical context—one in which the “terrorist” label carries particular weight—and to take advantage of this context. This can be understood, as well, as a sign that the USSA understands its constituents. The oppositional stance speaks to the same hyper-masculine impulses that drive people (mostly boys and men) into hobbies like hunting and trapping in the first place. Just as the National Football League sells itself on hyper-masculine violence and sex (cheerleaders), and not through the athletic artistry and grace of world-class athletes, the USSA sells itself through hyper-masculine conflict—a sort of pissing contest between opposing social and political interests.

USSA’s Campaigns

The USSA has applied these strategies to a variety of campaigns. It shares on its Web site an impressive list of victories in a variety of situations across the U.S. (USSA, 2009c). For the most part, though, in addition to its publicity and political campaigns against animal rights groups and organizations and politicians that support them, the USSA employs its tactics in two major ways: (1) representing hunters’ and trappers’ interests in state- and federal law suits (Marshall, 1990; Roussan, 2007; USSA, 2006, 2007), and (2) bringing legislation against animal rights groups to fight what it calls “animal rights terrorism” (Kelly, 2002; Roberts, 2002). In most of these battles, the USSA collaborates with at least one other organization that advocates for hunters, trappers, or anglers (USSA, 2006, 2007), such as the Fur Takers of America and the National Shooting Sports Foundation.

One of the organization’s proudest and profoundest victories has been in its advocacy for legislation that would ease age restrictions on hunting (Berg, 2005; Freedman, 2005; Pyne, 2005). Between 2004 and 2005, the USSA built a coalition with the National Wild Turkey Association and the National Shooting Sports Foundation to counteract animal rights groups’ advocacy for increasing the minimum hunting age. This coalition resulted in “Families Afield,” a program that once again framed hunting and trapping as wholesome American “family” recreation and organizations attempting to impose stronger age restrictions on these activities as anti-family and dangerous (Pyne, 2005). As of 2007, the coalition has been successful in easing hunting age restrictions in eleven states. Haas (2007) estimates that, as a result of these victories, five million more children than before have been enabled to hunt with their parents or guardians.

Another victory, of sorts, is the organization’s continued mainstreaming of itself. Even as hunting becomes less popular nationwide (Freedman, 2005), the USSA has grown more vibrant and increasingly mainstream. Evidence of this is its representation on the panel that publishes *Outdoor Life*’s annual Sportsmen’s Voting Guide (Absher, 2008). And it remains big enough to be a real legislative player in many parts of the country.

The USSA has been least successful when it has ventured out of its priority areas, attempting to reach a little beyond its scope. It has lobbied since 2000, so far without success, for reforms to the Endangered Species Act that would require the Department of the Interior and the Commerce Department to consider how changes to the Act would

affect hunters (Holsman, 2000). Equally unsuccessful have been its attempts to fight stricter puppy mill laws by arguing that they would adversely affect hunters who are raising hunting dogs (Laepfle, 2007). Overall, the USSA is more successful advocating for or against legislation that is more directly—or less indirectly—tied to its core constituents than it is advocating for policies that, like the former, transcend this scope or, like the latter, concern only a small fraction of its constituents.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that it positions itself in direct opposition to HSUS, PETA, and other animal rights organizations, there is little indication of these organizations reciprocating the USSA's oppositional obsession. And yet, although the USSA is relatively small whether measured by membership or annual budget, it remains a formidable thorn in the side of the animal rights movement. If the leaders of any particular legislative animal rights campaign that targets hunting or trapping do not have the USSA on their radar, they might be in for a tougher-than-expected battle.

I predict that, as the animal rights movement continues to shift away from mere “protection” and toward “liberation,” and as it attempts to win support for more serious sociocultural changes such as the elimination of sports hunting, the USSA will grow and become an even more formidable counter-force. It has a sort of sentimentality on its side—one that is consistent with the anti-Obama fervor and the recent increase in gun sales in the U.S. And already it is organized *against* organizations that stand for the same spirit of “change” that Obama rode into the White House. It has strong working relationships with other powerful lobbying groups like the NRA. It can lean on the “protect your heritage” arguments that traditionally have worked so well with the white working class masses. (According to the AFL-CIO, 70% of the 4.6 million union members in the U.S. enjoy hunting and fishing [D'Arcy, 2009].) For 30 years it has demonstrated a propensity for employing perhaps the greatest tool against change: fear. And fear is a tool to be reckoned with.

References

- Absher, J.R. (2008). Sportsmen's voter guide. *Outdoor Life*, November 2008, 48-60.
- Beers, D.L. (2006). *For the prevention of cruelty: The history and legacy of animal rights activism in the United States*. Athens, OH: Swallow Press.
- Berg, C. (2005, November 1). Getting a head start on hunting: Mentored-youth hunting plan would let younger kids hunt alongside adult companions. *The Morning Call* (Allentown, PA), p. C9.
- The Beaumont Enterprise* Staff. (2002, September 27). Sportsmen's group takes issue with N.J. governor's stance on state's animal shelters. *The Beaumont Enterprise*, p. A11.
- Davis, B. (2004). Hunters chide Michelin for backing humane group plan. *Rubber & Plastics News*, 33(23), 7.
- Egan, D. (2009, November 7). Union Sportsmen's Alliance is open to members of AFL-CIO. *Cleveland Plain Dealer*. Retrieved November 22, 2009, from http://www.cleveland.com/outdoors/index.ssf/2009/11/union_sportsmens_alliance_is_o.html
- Freedman, L. (2005). More to the story of hunting decline. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Freedman, L. (2007). Fighting the 'antis' keeps watchdog group quite busy. *Chicago Tribune*.
- Frye, B. (2008, May 19). Sportsmen's group fighting the Humane Society. *Pittsburgh Tribune Review*.
- Gentile, J.R. (1987). The evolution of antitrapping sentiment in the United States: A review and commentary. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 15(4), 490-503.
- Haas, D.W. (2007). Legislative watch: Youth licenses are a big hit with kids. *Outdoor Life*, 214(1), 26.
- Holsman, R.H. (2000). Goodwill hunting?: Exploring the role of hunters as ecosystem stewards. *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, 28(4), 808-816.
- Kelly, J.M. (2002, March 7). Alliance targets terrorism. *The Post-Standard* (Syracuse, NY), p. D2.
- Laepple, W. (2007, September 27). Sportsmen fear 'puppy mill' law may affect them. *The Daily Item* (Sunbury, PA),

- Marshall, W. (1990). Mountain sheep experts draw hunters' fire. *Science*, 248(4954), 437-438.
- McPhall, D. (2007). Guild battles the AETA. *Guild Notes*, Spring 2007, 5.
- Meyer, D.S. (2007). *The politics of protest: Social movements in America*. NY: Oxford University Press.
- Moran, K. (2003, January 10). Sportsmen's group targets anti-hunters. *New York Post*, p. O86.
- Morris, J. (2008, November 23). Sportsmen: Be alert for anti-hunting campaigns. *Dayton Daily News*, p. B10.
- Mueller, G. (2002, June 19). Motel chain angers hunting advocates. *The Washington Times*, p. C03.
- Mueller, G. (2004a, January 14). Show is hunter's pet peeve. *The Washington Times*, p. C07.
- Mueller, G. (2004b, January 28). Hunters deny PETA union. *The Washington Times*, p. C07.
- Mueller, G. (2004c, December 29). Antis spending big bucks in fight against hunters. *The Washington Times*, p. C08.
- Mueller, G. (2005, February 23). Proposed New York bill is absolutely criminal. *The Washington Times*, p. C06.
- Oldenburg, D. (2004, August 9). Vegan in the henhouse. *The Washington Post*, p. C01.
- Pyne, L. (2005). Should hunter education happen at home? *Field & Stream*, 100(5), 24.
- Roberts, M. (2002, April 7). Woods 'n' water. *Record-Journal (Meriden, CT)*, p. d03.
- Roussan, G. (2007, January 12). Sportsmen join lawsuit against anti-gun lobby. *Willits News (CA)*.
- U.S. Sportsmen's Alliance [USSA]. (2006, December 28). Trapping in Minnesota may be banned. *Idaho Press-Tribune*, p. 18.
- USSA. (2007, January 7). USSAF joins fight for trappers. *Idaho-Press Tribune*, p. 20.
- USSA. 2009a. History. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://ussportsmen.org/Page.aspx?pid=256>

USSA. 2009b. Mission. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://ussportsmen.org/Page.aspx?pid=235>

USSA. 2009c. About Us. Retrieved November 21, 2009, from <http://ussportsmen.org/Page.aspx?pid=180>.