

Lead Presentation 6/6/2011

Shortly after I became a member of the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, a long time hunting acquaintance came to me and said “Doc, you need to do something about the use of lead in our fishing, hunting and the shooting sports. That stuff is toxic and if we do not show some leadership and do something, some environmental group will do it for us and we are going to look pretty bad in the process.” As a veterinarian I had dealt with lead poisoned animals including dogs, cats, cattle and eagles but hadn’t given much thought to use of lead in my leisure activities. As I looked into the issue, I could see my friend was right and that in the court of public opinion we were pretty vulnerable.

As you are no doubt aware, lead is again emerging as an issue of concern for the hunting, fishing and shooting sports communities. That this should be happening now comes as no surprise to anyone who has been following the issue. The recent petitions to the EPA to regulate the lead components of ammunition and fishing tackle, while generating a lot of controversy and reaction from within the sporting community, are far from the whole story.

Lead and lead poisoning is a public health and societal issue that has been generating a significant amount of renewed attention. The headlines read: “HUD announces 120 million dollar grant to help cities with lead paint removal”, “Reusable shopping bags contaminated with lead”, “CDC mislead District residents about lead levels in water, House probe finds”, “Mattel settles lawsuit over lead-contaminated toys”. The list goes on. Every headline or editorial

in papers like the Washington Post or the New York Times, such as “Get the Lead out of Hunting,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/16/opinion/16prito.html> and public service radio advertisements by groups such as “Lead Free Kids” reinforces to the public that lead is toxic and is something to be avoided.

As we move forward in confronting the lead issue, the debate is not about whether or not lead is toxic to wildlife and humans. That part of the debate is over. There is no one in this room, or elsewhere, who can make a scientifically supported claim that lead, in any amount, is beneficial to any bird or animal. To the contrary, a bibliography compiled by researchers from Minnesota lists over 500 peer reviewed articles published in recognized scientific journals that document the toxic effects of lead on over a hundred species of wildlife. The facts cannot be controverted: lead pellets in wetlands and waterways kill, lead pellets left on uplands and dove fields kill, and lead bullets and bullet fragments left on the landscape kill.

Rather, this debate is about the ethical and moral responsibilities that are part and parcel of our right to hunt and fish as protected by the Wisconsin, and many of your states’ Constitutions. How we assume and carry out those responsibilities is a matter of great importance to the future of hunting, fishing and the shooting sports. With deference to Jack Ward Thomas for borrowing some of his words: “If hunting is to continue in nations that are increasingly urbanized – and in which most citizens have no first hand familiarity with hunting – it is critical that the public’s perception of hunters and hunting be a positive one.” The image

of hunters and hunting is bound up in the development, continued evolution and adherence to a code of ethical and moral principles.

The world we live in is changing. The general public is becoming more concerned about lead and its associated toxic effects on both humans and wildlife; activists among the populace are becoming better organized, more effective in getting their message across, and are discovering the power of “social media.” Failure to recognize this movement and act accordingly will adversely affect our public image.

For decades we have been using the same old arguments to defend our continued use of lead. Whether we believe our own arguments or not is of little consequence. It is whether or not the public believes those arguments that will ultimately determine the outcome of this issue. When I take off my waders and my hunting hat and put on my veterinarian, wildlife/animal enthusiast and environmental hats, I see some holes in our arguments.

It is regularly argued that “wildlife agencies manage populations, not individuals.” And perhaps, in part, that is true. In 1932, Aldo Leopold defined Game Management as “the art of making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game for recreational use.” In that era, management was largely centered on restoring populations; “populations” were of prime concern. But even in 1932, Leopold identified “control of disease” as part of management. Management has evolved. Game management became wildlife management, then wildlife ecology and conservation biology. What constitutes “acceptable losses” must

evolve as well. The argument that “any action to limit lead is unwarranted unless there is undisputed scientific evidence of population level impacts” is simply no longer realistic or defensible. Wildlife management is not and has never been strictly about “population level management.” Regulatory agencies often take actions and impose regulations that have nothing to do with “population level” impacts. Instead, sustaining biodiversity is an important aspect of natural resource agencies’ activities (for example, endangered species programs). Here’s an example: most states prohibit the hunting of big game with 22 caliber rim fire rifles. Is that because of scientifically valid evidence of “population level” impacts? I think not. Rather it is because we have an ethical and moral responsibility to kill cleanly, quickly and to avoid unnecessary waste of a resource.

Definitions of “populations” and “population-level impacts” vary as well. Is it the population of a species in the whole of the US, or in your state, or in a particular management unit? Or is it, as defined by many of our deer hunters, the number of animals under their tree stand? The answer to that depends. To the lady from Northeastern Wisconsin who wrote me about the two eagles living on her lake that died as a result of lead poisoning, those deaths were an unacceptable local “population level” impact and she puts the responsibility for those deaths squarely on our shoulders. Since those deaths were completely avoidable because of the availability of proven alternatives, how should an ethical sportsman respond? How should a natural resource agency respond? How will the public view our response?

Over the past few years there have been various studies attempting to quantify the number of mourning doves poisoned by spent lead shot. I have seen numbers like 6 million, 14 million or more. At the recent Midwest Fish and Wildlife Conference, information from a paper was presented that estimated the yearly mortality from lead toxicity to be nearly the same as the estimated 20 million doves that are harvested each year by legitimate hunting. When the clever little YouTube videos start to appear demonstrating that spent lead shot is poisoning millions of doves and that hunters are condemning those birds to a senseless and completely unnecessary death, how do we justify that? What will be the ethical or moral basis for that justification? It's hard to claim any "high road" when a byproduct of our activities includes millions of unnecessary mortalities.

Raptors are a poster-child of the lead debate. Data collected by our own agencies show that significant numbers of eagles succumb to lead poisoning every year. But eagle populations are sound and even increasing in most areas. It is often alleged that, as long as eagle populations are increasing, lead toxicity is not an important issue for them. Natural Resource agencies - "we" - authorize the use of lead ammunition for hunting. A byproduct of hunting is the unintended "take" of eagles, and eagles are a protected species. We must be clear; this is not an issue of numbers. Can we really justify our actions by saying "we don't poison too many?"

Look at what happens in other areas of commerce when lead contamination becomes an issue. Manufacturers and retailers issue recalls and distance

themselves from that product as fast as possible. They don't make excuses and attempt to down play the risk by saying things such as "I've been sucking on my "hot wheel" car since I was three years and look at me – I'm fine". While tongue in cheek, my comment about "hot wheel" cars does make a point. No one who has absorbed or consumed lead can accurately say that they were not affected because it is impossible to tell what would have been the result had that lead not been consumed. As a child I spent a lot of time playing with lead solder in my dad's electronic store. I was fascinated by the way it melted and splattered on the work bench and by way the splatters could be folded and bent into different designs. I also discovered that my eye teeth were the perfect tool for clenching lead split shot while fishing and that a split shot between the cheek and gum was much easier to find than that one in my pocket. So, did that exposure affect me? Would my IQ be a few points higher? Would my blood pressure be a few points lower? Would my attention deficit disorder be a little less pronounced? I can't answer that, nor can any of you. Would I encourage my grandkids to incur the same exposure? Absolutely not!

My friend Marty loves his guns and he loves shooting. We share a lot of common interests including our 284 caliber rifles. When the lead in venison thing first arose, I x-rayed some of my home processed venison and found significant lead contamination in 3 of the 20 packages I tested. I shared those x-rays and the bullet fragmentation study with Marty and suggested he consider using copper. He went a little ballistic and forcefully told me this was all a bunch of anti-hunting BS. Besides those copper bullets were no damn good. In fact, he had 4 boxes of 284

ammo handloaded with Barnes Triple shock bullets that were given to him by a relative. If I wanted them, I was welcome to them. Marty and I both deer hunt in northern Minnesota about 15 miles apart. I called him after the 2010 season to compare notes. First thing out his mouth was, “Doc, I want you to know that I am shooting copper. The ballistics are great and the killing power is awesome. “What changed your mind Marty?” I asked. He replied, “This lead thing is serious. If we don’t do something ourselves, we are just going to be handing ammunition to the antis that want to put us out of business.”

I use copper bullets to hunt deer in northern Wisconsin and I am completely impressed with their performance. But it’s not just me. The US ARMY decided several years back to design and implement so-called “green ammunition.” For the last year, the Army has been using steel tipped copper 5.56 mm bullets in Afghanistan. In a military press release from June 2010, the Army describes some of the enhancements in this ammunition: “improved hard target capability, more dependable, consistent performance at all ranges, improved accuracy, reduced muzzle flash, and a higher velocity.” They even identified that this new “green” 5.56 mm round outperforms lead-based 7.62 mm rounds against certain types of targets [quote] “blurring the performance differences that previously separated the rounds.” Imagine that, a non-toxic .223 that outperforms lead-based .308s. The Army also cites the environmentally-friendly aspects of their switch – eliminating the discharge of up to 200 tons of lead per year. As of today, it looks like the US Army is more forward thinking and environmentally conscious than many hunters and natural resource agencies.

Many landowners have and are deciding to take this issue into their own hands.

I am personally aware of numerous landowners in the state of Wisconsin who no longer allow the use of lead ammunition on their properties. They have seen the data. They are aware of the issues. They have made a conscious decision to never again put a piece of toxic lead on their properties, and are requiring their guests to do the same. They are tired of waiting for natural resource agencies to do the right thing and are taking action on their own.

Natural Resource agency leaders: we have a choice. We can continue to circle the wagons, deny and stonewall much as the tobacco companies did with cancer, as Nixon did with Watergate or as Bill Clinton did with Lewinski. Or we can demonstrate leadership and become part of the solution to an issue that is not going to go away.

Thank you for your time and I'd be happy to address any questions.