

## **Wealthy hunters shell out cash, helping conservation**

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David Meyer spent \$156,000 for a 2006 Utah hunting tag that allowed him to kill just one mule deer.

But the retinologist from Memphis, Tenn., says he got a lot more than a trophy rack on the wall for his money.

"You can't think of it as just one animal," Meyer said in a telephone interview. "I bought that tag for the opportunities it gives myself and my family to fund conservation projects to benefit all mule deer in Utah. If that money wasn't slated for conservation, I'd go through the drawing process for a chance to take a trophy animal just like everybody else."

Meyer has purchased six similar Utah tags - although none as high- priced as last year's - as part of the Division of Wildlife Resources' broad and profitable conservation hunting permit program. The conservation fundraising program gives those with money a chance to outbid others for prized hunting tags and avoid years of filling out applications hoping their name will be drawn.

Meyer and an estimated 20,000 other hunters are expected at the Salt Palace Convention Center in downtown Salt Lake City later this week for the first Western Hunting and Conservation Expo.

Hunters with big bucks - the green kind - from around the world will attend the show primarily for the opportunity to bid on high- priced hunting tags at banquets held Saturday by the Mule Deer Foundation and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep.

Up for grabs will be trophy tags from 11 states, Canada, Mexico and the Navajo Nation. Organizers believe the tags will auction for nearly \$10 million, with most of the money going directly to conservation efforts.

Hunting auction tag programs vary, but in Utah all but 10 percent of the take is slated for conservation projects. The Beehive State leads the country, and perhaps the world, when it comes to hunting conservation permits.

The Utah wildlife agency is providing 359 conservation permits - ranging from moose to bison to turkey - for 2007 to be auctioned off by various hunting groups at banquets. More than \$2.5 million is expected to be generated by the 2007 permits and more than \$9.5 million has been raised by the permits in the past 10 years. The value of the auction tags, which are considered tax-deductible contributions, can be doubled and even tripled in some cases when the money is applied to federal matching fund programs.

The top money-producing tags in Utah are the statewide conservation permits that allow the highest bidder to hunt any open unit for the selected species.

The Utah program requires that 30 percent of the total raised from a conservation permit be returned to the state. The hunting group that sells the permit can either return another 60 percent of the total to the wildlife agency or hold the money for its own conservation efforts. The groups keep 10 percent of the total for the cost associated with attracting bidders to banquets.

The results of Utah's conservation program can be seen this week when wildlife officials release approximately 55 Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep from Montana in American Fork and Willow Creek canyons.

Alan Clark, assistant director of the Division of Wildlife Resources, said the joint effort between Utah and the Foundation for North American Wild Sheep will be funded entirely by money from the conservation permit program.

Russ Young, a retired businessman from Illinois, has spent \$1.5 million on conservation permits in the past five years. Just as some people donate to cancer research, others donate to preserve wildlife for the future, said Young, who spent \$185,000 for a bighorn sheep tag in New Mexico last year.

"This program gives a guy like me who is fortunate enough to have some resources an opportunity to hunt trophy-class animals, but the underlying and most important thing is that it provides funds to game and fish departments that they desperately need to fund projects," he said.

Not everyone is fond of the conservation permit program. Some hunters say it caters to elitists buying their way to trophy animals while the average hunter has to go through a frustrating and sometimes fruitless application process for the right to hunt special animals.

Concerned about that perception, Utah wildlife officials introduced the Sportsman Tag. For \$5, a hunter can enter a drawing for a chance at the tag, which gives them all the opportunities of the statewide conservation permit. The odds of drawing the 2007 Utah statewide mule deer conservation tag were one in 6,713. However, the person who drew the 2006 statewide mule deer permit took the highest-scoring Boone and Crockett animal killed in North America last year, pending a required waiting period.

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\* BRETT PRETTYMAN can be contacted at [brettpp@sltrib.com](mailto:brettpp@sltrib.com) or 801- 257-8902.

The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources issued a single "high bid hunting permit" in 1981 for a desert bighorn sheep. The permit sold for a minimum \$20,000 and the money was used to help expand the population and range of bighorn sheep in Utah.

The number and value of the permits has increased over the years. More than 350 are available for auction this year with an estimated value of \$2.5 million.

Ninety percent of the money spent on the permits is used on conservation projects such as habitat improvement and acquisition and wildlife transplants.