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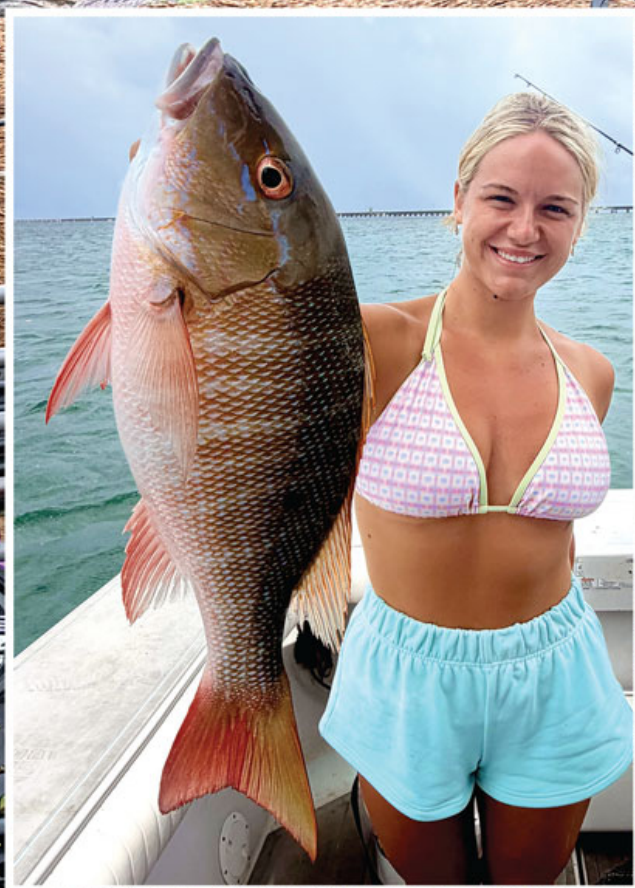
**The Oldest
Profession**

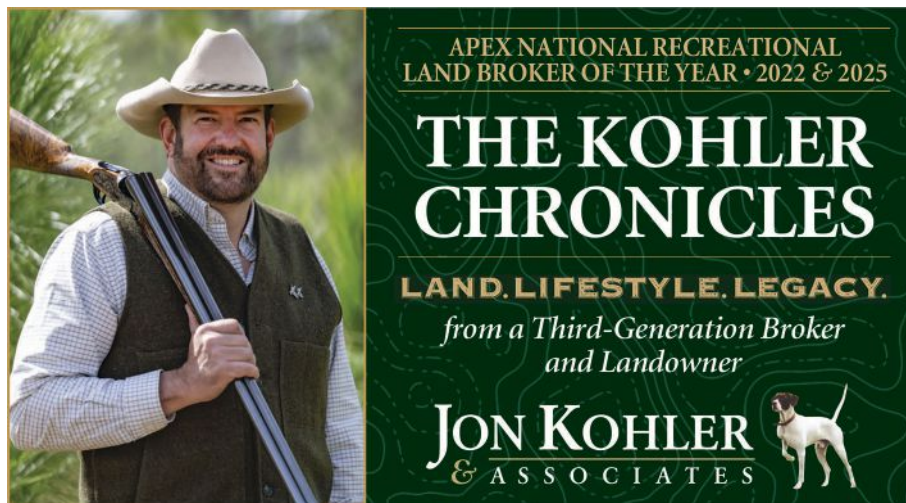
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The Oldest Job in the World

by Jon Kohler

It isn't the one society says it is.

"The Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and keep it."

God created. He said it was good. He rested. And the first thing mankind was ever tasked with was to work alongside Him and take care of the land. Land stewardship is the oldest profession.

I'm picturing a protected, cultivated, abundantly watered estate of trees, food, vegetation and wildlife — a well-man-

aged paradise. I'm sure it was frequently burned and open and park like.

"Work it. Keep it."

Everything else came later. And folks like us, folks that hunt, manage land and love God's great outdoors despite everything that's gone on since, are still at it.

Scripture says that in the last days knowledge will increase. I don't know about you, but what we know today about taking care of land is light years past what we knew when I bought my first bird dog



and started down this road.

The first time I saw it

I'm mesmerized by hunting dogs. The instinct to point, to trail, to track, to retrieve — I've never gotten over it. My company logo is my second pointer, Jake. I've had 22 dogs so far. More if Erica would let me. She's terrified that I might fall off the wagon. I've wintered as many as 40 at a time at Lick Skillet.

Throw in a pair of dog trainers and field trials across the country where I got a ribbon and they kept the purse. She has good reason. A man can only push a wife so far.

I've never taken drugs, never joined a country club and stayed away from strange women, but I can darn sure spend money on hunting dogs. God gave man a partner to balance him. I need balancing even if I don't like it.

With both dogs and people. We can teach manners. Discipline. Obedience.

We can't teach instinct. We can't force love. It's created in them. An option for us to choose. Some have it and give more than others. Ultimately, a relationship with love is what it's all about. With God and men, and men and dogs. Sharing an adventure comes in second.

And the ones we love best are the ones who hunt with us, who share that adventure together, instead of for themselves. The ones who keep checking back for approval. The ones doing the exact thing they were bred for, out in front, be-

cause they want to.

You may already see where I'm going. Perhaps we are God's hunting dogs.

I can still remember my first bird dog, Duke, and some of the first wild birds he pointed. I had little idea what I was doing. I read some books. He had instincts. I didn't do a good job showing him anything else. Yet we learned together, and on that journey made every mistake a young man can make with a good young dog. We had adventures, and we were in love.

It was never about the birds. It was watching something do the exact thing God built it to do, with everything it had. Together.

When it worked, it was beautiful. It was pure. It was good.

The longer I go and the more good dogs I've had, the more I believe this is the model. Why we are here.

Actually, I have no doubt about it. We are God's hunting dogs.

He enjoys watching us work His creation the same way I enjoy watching mine work my little Eden. Thorns and all. Think about Lick Skillet with just me on it. No dogs. Nobody to find and point a covey. Nobody to share an adventure on the land.

Beauty on its own is lonely.

I might not even own it. Or if I did, it'd be half of what it is. I'd go back to grazing cattle.

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Back in Bible times they would have called us 'The Keepers'

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It was never about the land by itself. It's about the relationship – enjoying the land together. If you've been to Lick Skillet or any of the properties I represent, a modern sporting garden might describe them pretty well. Just look past all the briars. Thankfully, quail love briars.

Different dogs, different game, same drive

Mankind was designed with instincts too, and like a good bird dog, it feels right when we're following ours.

We don't all have the same talents. A beagle won't point and a pointer won't trail. A Walker hound will run a deer across Lick Skillet in half an hour and never slow down, yet wouldn't give my quail the time of day. My English lab Lila will flush quail out of the switchgrass all morning for the chance to bring one back to hand. Yet Lily couldn't care less about retrieving. She just wants to find them and proudly hold them on point.

Every one of them is running the same thing through a different set of gifts. And every one of them is beautiful doing it.

So are we, and it took me half a century to finally see it this way. We have a Creator who handles us with subtleties and love. Those who listen and seek Him hear Him. Those who don't hunt on their own.

In the Red Hills, they want more wild quail. The Albany Plantation belt wants quail and a 170-inch Boone and Crockett buck in the same day. The Low-country landowner wants ducks and deer, then redfish on an outgoing tide. In the Black Belt of Alabama, they want white-tails, more of them, and more turkeys and released bobwhites than anybody dreamed possible.

Different gardens. Same adventure.

Put any two of us together and inside 10 minutes we're on the same page. Different playbooks – every piece of ground is different, and every landowner has a different angle – but the goal never changes. Build a place God can enjoy watching us on, that people can share, where a family can have an adventure in His creation.

Take care of the Garden. Take care of creation the way He made it. When we do it right, it is good. There is a kinship involved.

What they'd have called us back then

Back in the Old Testament, God divided the land by tribe, and every tribe got an inheritance except one. The Levites got no acreage at all. They were handed a charge to keep instead, and scattered through everybody else's country to do it.

I've wondered for years what they'd have called people like us. Land stewards? Prescribed burn managers? Doesn't sound very Biblical. Certainly not gardeners. That makes me think of Martha Stewart and my grandma. That's not us.

I think the word is already sitting there. Shamar. To keep. To guard. To protect something entrusted to you that was never yours to begin with. It's the same word God uses for what the Levites did at the tabernacle, and it's the second thing He ever asked of a man in a garden.

A tribe of them would be Shomrim. The Keepers.

That's us. No acreage promised, no applause coming, just a charge to keep – standing on ground that balances what God made against the world we all still have to make a living in.

Now, whether a Florida Cracker like me is ever going to stand up and announce he's a Shomrim is another matter entirely. It reminds me of the fellow who went around telling voters his opponent's sister was a thespian. But the job is the job, whatever we end up calling it.

The argument I watched my father lose but promised to vindicate

Most reading this have felt the pull. The calling to take care of land – not just to enjoy creation but to steward it. To make a difference. The sweat of the brow. Anything worth having is worth sacrificing for.

I first heard what that costs a man through a wall when I was just 14.

My dad wanted to spend every minute at Blue Creek near Keaton Beach – a private freshwater creek running to the Gulf, islands, hammocks, second-growth turpentine longleaf.

He and my mother found it when he was still in medical school, back when land that couldn't be timbered, farmed or developed wasn't thought to be worth much of anything.

Cheap enough a medical student could get a loan to buy it. He loved it a close third behind family and God. He'd



drive three hours to spend 30 minutes watching the tide go out and make sure everything, like the 2,500-year-old cypress, was all right. It always was. Until decades later, when two hurricane eye walls hit it almost back-to-back. But that's another story.

My mother had had her fill of land that cost money instead of making it. Some of it was the time it took him away from us, too, and she had a right to that. She never could see past everything that bit, burned or scratched to get to the raw beauty he saw. And it was even rougher down there back then than it is now. I don't hold any of it against her. Somebody has to ask the question. Us kids didn't.

I used to lay there listening through that wall while he lost the argument, over and over, to spend more time and more money on Blue Creek. It was the first time I ever heard the word divorce.

He never heard the promise I made him through that wall.

I've spent 35 years building the argument he couldn't – perfecting it, putting real numbers behind something he knew in his gut and could never prove to her. He didn't live to see it work. He saw the beginning of recreational land, but he never saw the Legacy Sporting Lands™ we represent today, and he never got to

find out he'd been right the whole time.

He was just ahead of his time, as they say. A lot of you had a dad like that. Even more had a mentor like that.

And here's what else came along in the meantime. Just like we've never had better bird dogs – better breeding, better training, better collars – we have never known more about how to improve habitat. Improve on the sins of the past.

On the 56 acres I started with in college or the 5,600 acres I recently sold to Jake Paul, we all have different goals for the land, and we're all blessed with a different set of gifts. What we learned about developing an instinct into a finished dog, we've learned about bringing land back.

And we do it with love. Because we are land stewards. We are the world's oldest profession. Shomrim.

About the Author

Jon Kohler is a third-generation land broker who pioneered the recreational land niche and built a following demonstrating that the Biblical premise of good stewardship also creates wealth. Twice named National Recreational Land Broker of the Year, he serves on the national Board of Directors of Quail Forever. He burns and manages his own property, Lick Skillet, for trophy whitetails and bobwhite quail – and keeps more bird dogs than his wife agreed.

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