



## From the Syracuse Post-Standard Readers' Page

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### People Power: How anglers and hunters swayed Congressional race

As pundits try to explain the 25th Congressional District race, there are plenty of theories floating around. Also afloat — and very influential — are the anglers and other outdoors people of Central New York.

To a politician who has never wet a line or pulled a trigger, the outsized influence of hunters and anglers might be hard to understand. But to those of us who care enough about our sport to crawl out of bed at 2:30 a.m., sit for hours in a treestand in a downpour, or freeze our fingers (or worse!) trying to catch finicky fish through the ice, it seems natural to bring the same passion to holding government accountable for conservation.

To us, conservation issues are hyper-local and hyper-important. We expect our elected officials and agencies to care just as much.

Case in point: Once upon a time, the outgoing congressman for the 25th District told constituents that he would work hard for a popular, successful cormorant management program on Oneida Lake. Two years later, his actions haven't yet matched his words.

When the Congressman had his chance to meet with USDA administrators and Congressional colleagues about the program, he chose not to attend. Members of Congress from other states participated and they got their programs back, but here in New York the funding disappeared. So, we lost a low-cost program that preserved quality angling and tens of millions of dollars in economic impact in Central New York.

To anglers and hunters, it felt like the congressman had decided that other constituencies were more important. But the math doesn't support his decision. About 12,000 people read the Oneida Lake Bulletin, another 157,000 read this newspaper, and 39,000 more read the New York Outdoor News. All three covered the cormorant issue and the congressman's (in)actions. I personally informed about 3,500 local people about the issue and other conservation organizations did the same.

It doesn't take a hotshot opinion pollster to add that up to more than 200,000 impressions on this issue. The news reached plenty of passionate people. Last year in Onondaga County (where neighboring Oneida Lake is the premiere draw for outdoor activities), more than 38,000 of us cared enough to plunk down our cash for a fishing or hunting license. Those who care enough to get up before dawn and fish 'til the middle of the night also care enough to show up at the polls when conservation issues are in play.

Social scientists have studied how hunters' and anglers' voting power changed the agenda of the 1996 and 2000 presidential elections in states like Ohio and Pennsylvania. In 2010, we accomplished the same thing in Central New York. Lots of people were unhappy about the cormorant issue, and there were certainly enough ballots from them to sway a tight mid-term election by 600 or so votes. This is not about Democrats vs. Republicans or national fundraising vs. local dollars. It's not about lobbyists, tea parties or political favors. Sometimes it's not even about issues that get all the publicity, like gun rights or animal rights — it's just the raw power of voters who care most about our wildlife, waters and woods.

For generations, people who fish, hunt and enjoy nature have legally entrusted our outdoor heritage to our governments. We give billions in special fees and taxes, and we count on government to do conservation the right way. We are the people who show up to meetings, start non-profits, volunteer for cleanups and give philanthropic dollars and time to causes that conserve our outdoor heritage.

As a group, outdoors people can be less articulate and less politically connected than slick D.C. or Albany power brokers. But when governments fail to live up to their responsibility, outdoors people have power to hold government accountable!

There are uncomfortable reminders, like the cormorant program's loss or the budget shenanigans with the New York Department of Environmental Conservation and its Conservation Fund, signaling that some politicians have forgotten this truth or never understood it to begin with.

Fortunately, there are still plenty of representatives at all levels who respect their hunting and fishing supporters. It's up to them and to us to remind all governments how much we hold them accountable for conservation.

*By Matthew Snyder, president of the Oneida Lake Association, Inc.,  
a 3,500 member conservation non-profit founded in 1945.*