

ONE ON ONE WITH VLADIMIR PUTIN

In an exclusive interview, Russia's
Prime Minister speaks out on fishing,
hunting and why he loves the outdoors

BY GAYNE YOUNG

PERHAPS NO OTHER POLITICAL FIGURE since American President Theodore Roosevelt has been more visible in experiencing the outdoors than Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin. His time in the field has been witnessed, admired and, yes, even criticized the world over thanks to a wealth of media exposure. His adventures, ranging from fishing to horseback riding to "hunting" animals with a tranquilizer rifle for scientific research, are lead stories in many news markets.

For the first time ever, Prime Minister Putin talks about his deeply held love for the outdoors in an exclusive interview with *Outdoor Life*.

OUTDOOR LIFE: A great deal of your popularity, both in Russia and in the United States, stems from your involvement in and enjoyment of the outdoors. At what point in your life did you first become interested in the

outdoors? And how has your affection and appreciation for the outdoors grown since then?

VLADIMIR PUTIN: I know there are a lot of enthusiasts in the United States who share my love for the outdoors, but I hope it's not the only thing that attracts their attention. What is important for me is how people evaluate my work and whether Russia's international policy is clear and understandable to them. With respect to your question, I would say that my fondness for the outdoors, like that of many other people, has its roots in my youth and, particularly, in the books I've read. I have always loved and avidly read the novels of Jack London, Jules Verne and Ernest Hemingway. The characters depicted in their books, who are brave and resourceful people embarking on exciting adventures, definitely shaped my inner self and nourished my love for the outdoors.

Besides, youth summer camps have long been popular both in Russia and

in the United States. Young folk who go there simply cannot stay away from their community's life, which abounds with numerous sports events, outdoor games and competitions. In fact, if a person has been happy enough to meet a good tutor during his early years, he or she will keep a lifelong habit of spending his or her time in an effective and useful manner.

In this respect, I was lucky enough. I had an interesting childhood strongly connected with sports. I also had very good teachers. Probably, thanks to this fact, I have not changed my attitude toward outdoor activities. Maybe it has become even more profound and deliberate. I increasingly appreciate what I have achieved because of sports. In other words, a habit for a healthy lifestyle and an opportunity to be outdoors.

I would also like to add that recently my passion for adventures, journeys and outdoor activities has got a new dimension. In 2009 our oldest non-governmental organization, «The Russian

Geographical Society» (RGS), suggested that I should head its Tutorial Council, and, of course, I agreed.

I might now start describing the RGS's longstanding and really legendary history, its great contribution to developing new lands including the Arctic, the Far North, Siberia and the Far East, as well as to studying ethnography, geography and a range of other scientific disciplines and developing Russia's environmental activities and statistics. However, it would take this *Outdoor Life* issue and a few ones to follow. Moreover, you may find everything connected with the RGS on its website (rgo.ru). I will only define its key objectives.

The majority of them are geared to raising public interest in accurately exploring national geography and our historical and cultural heritage, involving our citizens in environmental activities and stimulating scientific work.

The very mission of the RGS reaches out to my heart, namely to inspire people to love Russia. This phrase contains a desire to open up Russia's beauty, diversity and identity to our society and to the whole world, to present its authentic image. And I am happy to get an opportunity to take a personal part in the RGS's work and help to realize its outstanding and substantive projects.

OL. Perhaps one of the reasons you are popular with American outdoors enthusiasts is that you seem not to be concerned with "political correctness." For example, it is highly unlikely that President Obama (or any past president) would ever allow himself to be photographed holding a scoped hunting rifle or with his shirt off, holding a fish he just caught, for fear it would offend some people.

Do you think the Russian people are more open-minded about sports such as hunting and fishing, or have Americans just become hypersensitive?

VP. This question should rather be addressed to a

professional psychoanalyst. I am not ready to assess transformations in Americans' sensitivity and, more than that, I do not think it would be right to ascribe certain characteristics to representatives of one or another ethnic group.

The area where a person lives, the prevailing social and economic conditions and cultural traditions surely leave an imprint on his or her personality but, still, I have met quite a few Americans who could easily be taken for Russians if they did not speak English. In general, we have a rather similar mentality. In any case, we are not snobs. My "popularity", as you call it, with American outdoor enthusiasts is just another proof of that similarity of our views and perceptions.

You say that you cannot imagine the U.S. President even allowing himself to be photographed while hunting, or with his shirt off. But I can because I remember pictures of Theodore Roosevelt taken not just with a hunting rifle or a fishing rod in his hands, but with a lion he killed. And indeed, as recently as last summer, President Barack Obama was bathing in the Gulf of Mexico in front of TV and photo cameras, and he was not wearing a tie, to put it mildly. Does this look like politically incorrect behavior? Not to me, and my ethnic origin has nothing to do with that.

It is certainly very important, particularly for the Head of State, to carry oneself in such a way as not to offend or humiliate people's feelings, in word or deed; however, the society is so rich in various, sometimes mutually exclusive, customs, hobbies, and forms of self-expression, that it is merely impossible to measure one's actions against each of them every now and then. We cannot reduce everything to absurdity, but we should not show off in this context, displaying ostentatious commitment to the so-called "standards of decency." We need to identify and maintain essential, basic things.

I would like to say a few words on political correctness on the whole, and on tolerance, representing the crucial values of modern civilization; on the

topics which have no direct bearing either to hunting or fishing, but belong to basic moral and ethical foundations of our existence.

I have observed more than once that in some countries, including the USA, people who call themselves Christians feel shy, resentful or afraid of showing their commitment to Christian traditions and rituals in public. In fact, they do nothing that could offend other confessions—provided, of course, that they treat those confessions with genuine respect and consider them to be of equal value with the Christian faith; all the more so since ethical values that lie at the basis of all religions of the world are essentially the same. Here the feeling of superiority is unacceptable, even destructive, and we all see it very well. I rank strict observance of political correctness principles in religious matters among those very essential foundations of human behavior.

Returning to the topic of hunting and fishing, I would like to say that these activities are natural for man, being an integral part of our ancestors' life. In many countries of the world—in Great Britain, for instance—hunting remains one of the vivid national traditions. On the other hand, here, as well as in every sphere concerned with nature, man should feel a special responsibility and clearly realize what his actions will lead to. I come out strongly against uncontrolled mass killing of animals and irresponsible fishing. There should be a limit in all things. In old days people used to hunt in order to survive, killing just as much as was necessary. Today, when hunting and fishing are more like a tribute to traditions, a sort of hobby, enthusiasts of these outdoor activities should guide themselves by the "Do No Harm" principle.

OL. You recently met with other global leaders for a "Tiger Summit" where you pledged to double the tiger population in Asia. What do you think will be the most difficult hurdle in achieving this goal?



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VP. Most difficult hurdles indeed exist. For instance, in those countries where the tiger habitat is shrinking due to the intensification of economic activity. Of course, it can be artificially curbed but who will compensate for the lost profits, the consequences of the economic and, as a result, social slowdown? It is not always an easy task to decide what is more important—the well-being of people or that of nature, and this is the matter of achieving a very subtle and fragile balance. And of responsibility as well, and not merely for what is happening in your native country.

Tigers are a very good example. They, as well as all the wild animals, recognize no boundaries, and our Amur tigers move freely on the territory of China and enter the Korean peninsula. You should agree that in such a context no measures taken in an individual country to protect them will be efficient.

This is why I consider the St. Petersburg Tiger Summit and its

resulting documents a real breakthrough in international nature conservation. This was the first time in history that the conservation of a certain animal species was discussed on such a large-scale and high level.

Yet, we were all well aware of the fact that the tiger is a symbol of integrated efforts of the world community to address environmental issues and the problem of conservation of the planet's biodiversity. Restoration of the tiger population will help to settle a whole range of nature protection issues.

Under the adopted Global Program, the Tiger Range States made the commitment to ensure safe and comfortable existence of these animals.

Thus, the predators' habitats will be under special control. The economic activity will be either severely restricted there or fully prohibited. This will allow us not only to preserve the forests and hundreds of other animals, but also to maintain the traditional way of life of local indigenous peoples.

One of the main tasks is to fight poaching. Therefore, we plan to considerably improve the material and technical base of environmental services, increase the staff, and give inspectors additional authority.

The penalties for crimes against tigers will be increased as well. It concerns killing an animal, as well as transporting, storing and selling the so-called derivatives, or parts of dead predators.

I would like to note that the decisions adopted at the forum are fully consistent with the approved Russian plans to preserve tigers. Moreover, they are based on Russian methods that have been developed since the 1940s by our scientists.

The first-ever prohibitions on tiger hunting and tiger cub trapping, the first State programs on protecting tigers were initiated by our country. Therefore, the unique sustainable population of tigers living in Russia numbers some 450 individuals. Considering the biological habitat capacity, as scientists call it, this number is optimal, though globally, in terms of species, it is not enough, which is why we will further extend the strictly protected areas, and take measures to increase the number of hoofed animals required for the survival of the tigers.

In recent years, the Amur tigers began to return independently to their historical habitats, for example to the Amur Oblast. We will do our best to make them feel comfortable there. We are currently responsible for several programs; I am personally supervising one of them, which is being implemented by the Russian Geographical Society.

The wide practical experience, achievements of the Russian environmentalists place a special responsibility on us, therefore we will continue our active work, assist our foreign partners, share with them not only our knowledge but also tiger families to restore tiger populations where they have unfortunately disappeared.

OL. It is one of conservation's greatest ironies that hunting and hunters can actually save animals from extinction.

I think the best example of that would be with the black rhino. By the 1990s it was estimated that there were only 2,500 black rhinos left in all of Africa. Through conservation programs developed and run by hunters that number increased so much that in 2004 CITES allowed hunting permits for five animals. And those initial permits cost hundreds of thousands of dollars—money that went straight back into rhino conservation. Do you think a program such as this could work—in some areas—with tigers?

VP: I am aware of such programs. For instance, Pakistan has for many years used a similar model of trophy hunting for wild sheep recorded in the Red Book. However, it is not time yet for doing the same thing for tigers. We are at the very start of recovering their populations, and time will tell how things will go, because tigers, unlike, say, rabbits, need special, quite exigent conditions. Let me remind you, this is not about money. A permit for killing one tiger in order to feed ten of them is inefficient, because this one tiger may become an ancestor of a big family and give birth to a breed heavily exceeding the number of tigers that might have been supported with additional food for several months. And please remember that tigers are predators; constant hunting is vital for them, otherwise they may grow lazy and lose their chasing skills.

A solution to this problem, as we see it, is the natural increase in food supply for tigers, meaning wild boar, roe deer, musk deer and deer. For that purpose, we implement programs to support hunting grounds organizing controlled ungulate hunting in tiger habitats. The funds received from licenses are partially spent for biotechnical activities, such as supplementary feeding of animals in winter and route clearance for their free movement.

I would like to reiterate that any decision taken for animal conservation should be the least invasive for the natural patterns of the environment.



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OL: As someone who came of age under the Reagan Presidency, I have to say that the idea of hunting or fishing or even visiting Russia someday seemed like a farfetched dream. Yet today thousands of U.S. citizens travel to Russia and vice versa without a second thought. More and more of those Americans visiting Russia are doing so to hunt or fish. What do you feel the future holds for American hunting and fishing tourism in Russia?

VP: This fast reaction by the Americans to the change in the tone of the political dialogue between Russia and the U.S. and their being able to adapt to the new circumstances seems to point to the fact that the vast majority of barriers between our peoples were unnatural and artificially forced upon them. Ordinary people always want to live in peace rather than in war and be able to freely socialize, interact and make friends, if

you wish. For too long, we had been cruelly held apart from each other, so it was only natural that the fall of the “Iron Curtain” generated a huge wave of interest toward Russia.

Naturally, that can be explained, first of all, by the novelty of its kind—the opportunity to see, with one’s own eyes, the things that could earlier be only heard of or peeked at during the scarce TV reports. I am deeply convinced, however, that the major incentive here was the unique wealth of Russian nature. I would not exaggerate if I say that no other country can boast such versatile landscapes and such biological and climatic diversity. Although, that is no wonder, since Russia is the world’s largest country in terms of territory, which exceeds 17 million square kilometers (6.6 miles) and comprises practically all climate zones.

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Perhaps I would not phrase the question this way: What “new things” does Russia have to offer in the future? Let us try to cover some of the “old things” first. I think a human life would not be enough to visit all the places—if only the most picturesque and unique ones—of our country.

The most important thing is that we are ready to provide an opportunity to get familiar with Russia for everyone who is sincerely willing to learn how our country lives, learn its true character. So, we are taking concrete steps to develop tourism, build hotels and road infrastructures, and develop new routes, which, by the way, are targeted at the active forms of recreation. The Russian Geographical Society engages in preparing major projects to enrich Russian tourism with new vectors.

In conclusion, let me point out that it is not only Americans who are visiting Russia. Our citizens have also got the opportunity to freely travel the world, and they are making good use of it, including those who like hunting. Among the popular destinations are North and South America and Africa, which are, of course, rather costly but, as years go by, becoming increasingly available to the people.

OL: What would you consider to be the best hunting and fishing adventures available in Russia?

VP: I will tell you at once that as for me I am not a hunter; that is why I can give you advice relying on the opinions of my friends and colleagues who are experts. According to their stories, it is very popular to hunt for Manchurian wapitis in the Irkutsk Region and in the Republic of Buryatia. The trips to Yakutia to see big-horn sheep, giant elks and reindeer are very interesting. By the way, one can enjoy excellent fishing there as well, because these are just the rivers of Yakutia where the taimens, whose weight can reach 40 kilograms, are found. They say that there is good hunting for wolves on the Taimyr Peninsula, in Kamchatka and Chukotka.

As for fishing, it is congenial to me; I love it and enjoy any opportunity,

which I have very rarely unfortunately, to sit with a fishing rod. To tell the truth, sometimes my job even helps me. How else could I have managed to go fishing in America being accompanied by two Presidents?

To be more serious, according to my personal rating, one can have the best fishing in the world in the Murmansk Region and in the Volga River delta near Astrakhan. It was just right there, by the way, where I was hunting, that is to say “went shooting” at carps with a harpoon gun.

I was very impressed by the fishing in the Republic of Tuva. There is the Khemchik River, which is the largest left tributary of the Upper Yenisei River, or the Ulug-Khem, as the native people call it. I assure everyone that you will have an unforgettable time and not only on the Khemchik’ banks but throughout Tuva in general.

OL: As an outdoors writer, I enjoy reading a great deal of outdoor literature. I grew up reading Hemingway, Capstick, Ruark, Corbett and a host of others. What Russian outdoors writers or books would you recommend?

VP: It seems to me that we have a slightly different understanding of the outdoor concept. For me, it is primarily about sports, and health, and breaking bad habits. For you, it has to do with fishing, hunting and traveling. And the best proof of this is the writers you enjoy reading. Illustrious Jim Corbett, who shot man-eating tigers in India, or Peter Hathaway Capstick, a professional hunter and, I suppose, the most famous hunter biographer, or Robert Ruark who focused most of his stories on African safaris. I would not be wrong, I believe, if I were to say that we have rather different views even on Hemingway. It seems to me that the book you enjoy most is *Green Hills of Africa*. As for me, it is *A Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

However, I could recommend to you to one of the best Russian classic writers, Ivan Turgenev, with his books translated into dozens of foreign languages and, certainly, into English.

His well-known “Sportsman’s Sketches” has been a favorite book of Russian hunting fans for more than a century, which reflects in general the philosophy of hunting in Russia, where the mere process, the fact that you are close to nature and communicate with people, matters, not the outcome.

It does not contain any passionate chases or vivid description of hunting trophies. The main character, in a simple but picturesque and very sympathetic way, tells stories about people he met going hunting, and their lives. They are a sort of sketches on Russia’s heartland of the mid-nineteenth century which provide food for thought and allow us to see our country, its traditions and national psychology in a new light.

Another Russian writer whose books are available to foreign readers is Mikhail Prishvin. You may like his *Green Whisper Short Stories*, which describe hunting and hunting dogs.

OL: If I make it to the Winter Olympic Games in 2014, how is the fishing in Sochi?

VP: In preparing for the Olympics we pay much attention to environmental issues and do our best to make up for environmental impacts, which unfortunately cannot be avoided. For example, upon completion of construction works in the Mzumta river valley, the developer released two and a half million small fry into the river. In 2014, having already grown up, they will be waiting for you.

However, I doubt that you will have time for fishing if you come to Sochi during the Winter Games. We are preparing a very interesting program for the Olympic participants and guests, so in order not to face a hard choice between your hobby and exciting events you should not put off the trip.

You will be able to spend a good time with a fishing rod in the open sea or practice submarine fishing. The most common fish species are horse-mackerel, goatfish and goby fish. If you are lucky, you can fish up a grey mullet, a flounder or even a spurdog. If you are not lucky, you may catch a scorpion

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fish, which I really would not recommend you touch with bare hands.

We also have a large trout farm near Sochi on the way to Krasnaja Poljana. Certainly, trout can be caught in our mountain rivers as well, but that is an occupation for particularly patient fishermen. In the Adler area, there are also some lakes harboring carp, crucian carp, silver carp and sea bass.

By the way, not so far from Sochi, in the Rostov and Krasnodar areas, you can also have a good time hunting mallards and wild geese.

OL: Back in August, you helped scientists obtain skin samples from a whale off Russia's Pacific Coast by darting one with a crossbow. I imagine that has to be one of the more incredible of your wildlife encounters.

VP: That was indeed an unforgettable experience, and I remember very well how impressed I was.

First, all that surrounded me—the low sky, the stormy sea and, of course, the whales—was magnificent. Besides, these elegant giants showed us a real performance leaping out of the water in front of our boat.

Second, I was really thrilled. I do not want to offend your feelings as a hunter but, by its intensity, its dynamics, that was a real hunt. But without killing the animal. And this was a special pleasure. This is not a melodramatic statement. That's the way it really was.

We left not just to see the whales, but to take a biopsy—in other words, to dart one of the animals with a crossbow, which can rip off a small part of a whale skin necessary to make a special analysis. It was not that easy; three times I failed and only the fourth attempt was successful. Of course, I could justify myself that the boat was tossing badly and that it was the first time for me to handle a crossbow, but the main reason I see was in my anxiety, because participation in the scientific experiment is a very important undertaking.

OL: After you successfully darted a whale, a reporter asked you if it was dangerous. You replied that, "Living


in general is dangerous." Do you have any comment on that?

VP: I think everything is obvious. Despite all the achievements of civilization, the human being is still one of the most vulnerable creatures on Earth. None of us is protected from crimes, epidemic outbreaks, natural and technogenic disasters. What I am saying is not a fatalistic view of the world, it is a realistic one.

However, this is not the reason to hide away from life. There is a major Russian writer, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin. In 1883, he wrote a very accurate piece, *Otherwise Gudgeon*. As one can guess from the title, it tells about a gudgeon who, expecting danger, was continuously sheltering under a stone, and finally reached his deep senility, but actually never experienced his life. Of course, careless, unjustified risk-taking can only lead to harm. But one can truly enjoy his or her life only while experiencing it, and it is inevitably related to a certain level of risk.

OL: I have written about your outdoor activities for *Outdoor Life's* web page for several months now. In one of my pieces, I stated that, because of your work in conservation and given the incredible adventures you have participated in, you are probably the coolest man in politics. Please do not be modest; are you the coolest man in politics?

VP: I do not think I am ready to wear the laurel of "the coolest man in politics," and actually I do not find anything out of the ordinary in my work in conservation or my active lifestyle. In my opinion, both things are normal for anyone.

Anyway, I would like to thank you for your high praise; however, I can say about my colleagues—heads of many states and governments—that I know them quite well, some of them are my friends, and virtually all of them are extraordinary, really interesting people, and obviously outperform me in some ways. But, of course, all of us have merits and flaws. 

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