
CHAPTER 3

A State-Level Consensus Position on Wildlife Could Be Developed With Assistance From IENR

Questions about access to the state's wildlife touch on deeply-held values.

Because wildlife provides citizens with an abundance of economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits, loss or degradation of wildlife populations could have serious negative ramifications for the state. Deeply-held values regarding the rights of private landowners and the rights of the public to have access to this resource, can come into conflict in the domain of the PLPW program. The program itself is by no means the source of the conflict, nor can it be expected to resolve the impact of these differences. However, this review of PLPW can serve as an impetus for seeking state-level resolution of these issues.

Many Factors Challenge WG&F's Management of Wildlife

Wildlife needs may conflict with other state resource development needs.

WG&F's vision is to maintain sustainable, functional ecosystems capable of supporting wildlife populations at least as healthy, abundant and diverse as they were at the beginning of the 21st century. In Wyoming, where privately-owned land usually exists in a mosaic with state and federal lands, this goal is fraught with political and economic difficulties. The same land that is essential to healthy wildlife habitat is also central to agricultural production, mineral development, residential development, and high-intensity recreational use. Typically, wildlife has been the loser when in conflict with other land uses.

In its first report to the Governor in 1932, the Commission noted a threat to wildlife from development. The report cited loss of an elk migration corridor due to settlement in the western part of the state as one of its most pressing and expensive management concerns. In subsequent years, development pressure has continued, such that the current Commission is grappling with the same problem. Although Wyoming's population growth rate has not been as high as in other western states, development is

Wildlife management responsibilities and costs are increasing.

still a threat. According to the American Farmland Trust (AFT), the greatest threat to intact landscapes is low-density residential development. The AFT has identified more than 2.5 million acres of Wyoming ranchland as strategic ranchland at risk — land most vulnerable to low-density development by 2020.

WG&F also faces increased management costs associated with changing federal policies, increasing regulations, and more recently, managing the effects of disease in wildlife populations. In 1872, the federal government set Yellowstone aside as a wildlife preserve. This was the first of many federal decisions that have had an impact on the state's wildlife management costs and decisions. Increasing federal regulation has extended WG&F responsibilities well beyond the licensed harvest of game animals. Although sportsmen remain the primary funding source for conservation and wildlife management in the state, they alone may no longer be able to carry the full weight of wildlife-related costs.

Wildlife Provides Multiple Benefits

Wildlife is a resource with economic, recreational and aesthetic value. For example, hunting and fishing contribute far more to state revenues than just license and permit fees. According to WG&F, hunters, trappers, and anglers spent \$995,730,322 in Wyoming in 2000. This constitutes about half of the approximately \$2 billion generated by the state's second largest industry, tourism.

Wildlife contributions include economic, recreational, and aesthetic benefits.

In addition, bird watching, hiking, and other non-consumptive recreational uses of wildlife and wildlife habitat contribute to Wyoming's tourist economy. Non-consumptive wildlife recreation, though not currently as profitable for the state as hunting and fishing, is growing rather than declining.

Furthermore, wildlife contributes aesthetic value to Wyoming's sense of place and quality of life. This intangible quality also has an economic impact, for example, in the high-end real estate market that promotes private hunting and fishing opportunities on advertised properties with adjacent (otherwise inaccessible)

public lands. Receiving the WG&F “Landowner of the Year” award is considered a major selling point at the high end of this market.

Historical Conflicts Face Off in the PLPW Program

Decisions affecting land also affect wildlife.

Wildlife neither recognizes nor abides by political or private boundaries. Therefore, land management and development decisions affect wildlife whether they are intended to or not. Because PLPW is designed to work with landowners whose land has valuable wildlife or habitat, the program touches philosophical nerves that have deep historical roots. Citizens hold sharply divergent views on public and private land ownership rights and on the role of government as steward of a natural resource.

Major philosophical issues about wildlife and the use of land surround the PLPW program.

PLPW is the point at which the public’s ownership of wildlife and its right to access that resource meet head-to-head with the value that landowners have the right to decide how their land will be used. For example, PLPW allows landowners participating in the Hunter Management Program to exclude individuals they specify from their land. Is this provision a reasonable incentive to encourage landowner participation, or is it a violation of the public’s right to access a state-owned resource, wildlife? Individuals’ fundamental value systems determine the answers to such questions. While individual values sometimes bring political and financial pressure to bear on state wildlife resource decisions, long-term state interests should guide the development of its policies.

Recommendation: The Commission should request IENR to bring together the diverse groups and interests surrounding wildlife issues.

The William D. Ruckelshaus Institute for Environment and Natural Resources (IENR) at the University of Wyoming was created to develop consensus approaches to complicated and

***IENR specializes
in developing
consensus
approaches to
contentious issues.***

contentious environmental issues. Landowner rights as they conflict with management of the state's wildlife resources are seemingly intractable issues that could benefit from such attention. IENR, through its recent work *Wide Open Spaces: Conserving Working Landscapes and Wildlife Habitat in Wyoming and the West*, is familiar with the issues and with the divisive philosophical, scientific, economic, and educational interests associated with them.

Moreover, IENR has an established process for bringing diverse groups together in an effort to build consensus. This collaborative approach may help to broaden the context of the debate, and, through the exchange of information and points of view, has the potential of generating new insights and approaches. Ultimately, an increased understanding of the value of wildlife to the state as a whole may serve to expand the base of support for WG&F. If all interests have a part in this process, WG&F can more effectively act as steward of the state's wildlife resource, to the significant benefit of the state as a whole.