

Wildlife and Economics



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WILDLIFE AND ECONOMICS ARE TWO WORDS THAT MANY PEOPLE THINK DO NOT BELONG IN THE SAME SENTENCE, LET ALONE PAIRED BY A CONJUNCTIVE. OUR AVERSION TO THINKING ABOUT WILDLIFE IN ECONOMIC TERMS PROBABLY DATES BACK TO BATTLES FOUGHT MORE THAN A CENTURY AGO TO OUTLAW MARKET HUNTING OF BIRDS AND MAMMALS. IT, NO DOUBT, INCLUDES A DOSE OF RELIGION DERIVED FROM THE "INTRINSIC RIGHTS OF WILDLIFE" AND TO ADMONITION'S TO NOT LET ECONOMIC VALUE BE THE PRIMARY REASON FOR WILDLIFE STEWARDSHIP. TODAY'S REALITY, HOWEVER, IS SENDING US POWERFUL SIGNALS ABOUT THE NEED TO LINK WILDLIFE AND ECONOMICS.

Wildlife now has a tremendous economic value, as seen in the prices people will pay to hunt, fish, or observe certain species or purchase

viewing has led to provision of special areas and facilities, indeed a national if not continental focus on watchable wildlife. This creates a lot of jobs as people buy clothes, binoculars, and cameras; as they travel and lodge in out-of-the-way places; and as they procure guide services. Some private properties have been able to shift the focus of their activities towards these wildlife values as a result. The popularity and demand for high-quality hunting have caused similar beneficial results for wildlife and their habitats for decades. What makes the difference, whether the use is viewing or hunting, is that some people can sustain a livelihood by putting their energy and resources into wildlife conservation and the provision of various services to enhance the value of experiencing

coastal plains, significant potential economic benefits are foregone to favor wildlife. Recent moves by the Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management in the United States and by their counterpart agencies in other nations to carry out ecosystem approaches to land and resource conservation are largely driven by wildlife and related environmental issues. Wildlife diversity has emerged as perhaps the driving force in public lands policy, at least while current laws are in place and as long as public sentiment heads in its current direction.

Those of us who love wildlife and love to hunt should be pleased to see the positive effects for wildlife that result from the "higher values" now given to the planet's wild native flora and fauna. But we should also be troubled by the failure of our conservation institutions and agencies to take full advantage of these higher values. I am most troubled by this on two fronts: unwillingness to compensate private landowners for the substantial resources they provide for large ungulates, and the penalties private landowners are expected to pay for having endangered species habitats. If wildlife is so valuable to people then why can't we base at least part of their conservation strategy on property rights and free-market transactions? I do not mean market hunting or game farming by this question.

Is it out of the question to grant landowners a percentage of big game permits that they can use or market in whatever way they choose as compensation for the seasonal habitats they provide? Some states do this with landowner and hunter support. Is there a counterpart to this concept for endangered species protection? In the western U.S. I have encountered ranchers, farmers, and foresters who forgo economic revenue from livestock or crops either willingly or unwillingly to support wildlife. I have also seen the impact



THE THEODORE ROOSEVELT MEMORIAL RANCH IS A PRIME EXAMPLE OF PRIVATE LANDS SUPPORTING WILDLIFE.

productive habitats. It also has a high cost, as seen in the economic losses incurred when endangered species preclude certain developments. These realities bear attention and perhaps some rethinking about our long-standing aversion to wildlife and economics.

First, let me give some illustrations of how economics influences wildlife conservation. On the positive side, the popularity of wildlife

diverse and productive populations.

Also on the positive side for wildlife, high public concern for biological diversity and overall environmental quality has caused significant shifts in how lands are used and developed. This is especially true for federal public lands. Whether it be spotted owls in old-growth forests, caribou in Arctic refuges, salmon in rivers of the West, or red-cockaded woodpeckers in the

to wildlife when those landowners are forced to subdivide their properties because they cannot make a go of it anymore. If economic diversification based on wildlife uses and values will help them keep their lands healthy for wildlife we ought to be there to help make that happen with whatever tools and incentives it takes.

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On North American public lands we could extend the habitat management stamps that New Mexico hunters and anglers buy to support habitat conservation on national forests and BLM lands. It is time for landowners and land managers to be compensated directly for the costs of providing the rich diversity of wildlife that we enjoy. An inexpensive resident hunting or fishing license no longer covers even the costs of population management and it is unfair to expect general taxpayers to foot the bill for those who most directly benefit from wildlife conservation.

Now to the sticky subject of endangered species protection. I know of a forest management firm that is among the most environmentally sound stewards of private forests in the U.S. When they select a property for acquisition they survey it to make sure it has no endangered species. Then they set their management programs to protect lands, waters, and wildlife diversity

but to stop short of encouraging endangered species occupancy. Why? Because they will be penalized by our current approach to endangered species conservation if they “slip up.” How do you suppose they would behave if the “conservation market” offered incentives or benefits for providing endangered species habitats instead of penalties? One wildlife protection group is experimenting with just such a program right now in the Rockies.

In the U.S. there are about 700 million acres of private lands that are not tilled or covered by houses, highways, and businesses. This is almost as much land as in federal trust, about 1/3 of the nation’s land area. It is private because it had the best soils and waters when settlement occurred. This means it was and probably still is potentially the best wildlife habitat. Its future will be shaped by prevailing economic incentives. If wildlife values are among the basis for those incentives then the lands will likely stay productive for wildlife. If not, they will go to other uses.

As we modify our federal and state laws and policies for wildlife conservation during the next few years we should give wildlife values and their economic potential a chance to more directly guide the decisions that people make on the uses and stewardship of land. We should at least entertain an open discussion of the utility of property rights and free-market transactions as part of overall conservation strategies. I realize this is a controversial proposition that is likely to draw hard responses on many fronts. It is not this organization’s policy or formal position. It is too early to form such a position. It is time, however, to open the dialogue. The costs to wildlife of ideological purity on rejecting the economic value of wildlife are increasingly high.

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