

CAPITOL COMMENTS

Wildlife Habitat for the Next 100 Years



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The underpinning of what we do for wildlife in Washington or out in the “real world” of America depends on maintaining habitats for wildlife, to serve both the needs of the animals and of people. Habitat emerges as a central issue in so many different contexts: energy development will impact the habitat of elk, mule deer, pronghorn, and sage grouse in the Northern Rockies; sage grouse could be listed under the Endangered Species Act and habitat would be the core issue; the widespread decline of bobwhite quail in the Southeast is due to problems with habitat. With drought returning to major parts of the prairies, you will find that habitat is the key to the near-term future of waterfowl. And, of course, hunting access and opportunity depend on the existence of high-quality habitat.

A Model of Success

Perhaps our greatest habitat success has been the story of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan written and signed between Canada and the United States in 1986 and later adding Mexico. A combination of clear goals and objectives for waterfowl populations, translation of those goals into habitat needs in identifi-

able geographic areas of the North American continent, and you have the beginning of a success story. The original goals were to affect 1.5 million acres of breeding and wintering habitat, at a cost of over \$1.5 billion. More than 15 years later, those goals have been exceeded, and new and larger objectives are driving an even greater attempt to manage habitats for waterfowl, to sustain the progress that has been made.

How did this happen? How does it apply elsewhere? What is the next step if this success is going to be repeated?

Success of the Waterfowl Management Plan on the ground benefited from strong public commitment to waterfowl themselves, direct involvement by provincial, state, and federal resource managers, and a landmark commitment to building partnerships through “joint ventures” to do work on the ground. Wildlife and land protection partners brought powerful financial support and skills for technical assistance in program delivery working with government and private partners.

Geographically based “joint ventures” composed of private and government players set up their own management approaches, learned to capitalize on federal funding where available—such as through the North American Wetlands Conservation Act—but also found their own local resources to fuel habitat work set out in the objectives of the Plan. Importantly, many sources beyond waterfowl people were attracted by the mutual benefit of habitat impacts, and the program has taken on a truly landscape scale affecting watersheds, water supplies, grazing systems, and many other features.

Other Major Opportunities to Provide for Habitat

The Farm Bill has received extensive attention from wildlifera for more than two decades. By the time this article is published, a 2002 Farm Bill will be passed with expansion of conservation programs that provide habitat for game birds, deer, and endangered species while they control erosion and maintain land productivity for the agricultural landscape. A new Grassland Easement Program will conserve remaining grasslands and its wildlife. The fundamental lesson in this is that part of the reason society is more willing to pay

for these huge programs is that additional benefits—like wildlife—are guaranteed as one of the products.

The signing of the 2002 Farm Bill will fulfill one of the early objectives of the Wildlife Conservation Partners (WCP). Although this work started long before WCP itself, many organizations spent endless hours to achieve this success. Now a second large task is implementation of those Farm Bill Programs to assure the wildlife and benefits we desire. It will take commitment, focus, breaking down the old barriers of “how we used to do it,” and addressing the needs of the private landowners. And it will cost a lot of money, money that never would have been provided for wildlife by itself, but which we and other citizens benefit from by working with these farm programs. Another lesson from this for WCP is to learn how to channel other people’s money!

Partial success on another WCP objective—removing disincentives and creating incentives for private land wildlife conservation—depends on targeting more funding through the Department of Interior as well as the Department of Agriculture to create incentives for wildlife conservation on private lands. While it doesn’t solve the whole problem, honest efforts are being made to move in the direction that WCP partners have said was important.

Further examples of huge opportunities to provide for habitat on a large scale include making wildlife conservation part of the national energy policy, reducing gridlock in forest management, and incorporating wildlife habitat objectives in the National Fire Plan. The future of mule deer and elk in the West may well be at stake in working with these opportunities. In these examples, as in the Farm Bill, our country intends to spend hundreds of millions of dollars on managing a process that can produce more wildlife habitat, if done right, than all of the money we will ever get directly for wildlife habitat itself! So we have large habitat opportunities not receiving the coordinated focus that has successfully enhanced waterfowl habitat and organizations.

A burning interest by the Boone and Crockett Club leadership in helping the WCP get started was providing wildlife

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habitats for the next hundred years. That dream includes wildlife habitats managed for wildlife but accessible to people as a foundation for fair chase hunting. It makes sense that we continue to focus our energies on finding ways to advance that cause. But the lessons from the models of success are that we need to focus on a few issues, perhaps one at a time. Which ones should they be?

WCP has, for example, advanced the need for a balanced approach to managing habitats on national forests as a key issue for the future of wildlife habitats. Perhaps we are approaching this the wrong way. Everything about forest management is so polarized at this point that conversations evolve quickly into debates over roadless values, whether timber should be cut at all, and whose national forests are these anyway? Perhaps we need a different approach — that fabled “out of the box” thinking.

Birds May Be the Answer for Big Game

Could managing habitats for birds be the answer? Could harnessing the tremendous zeal with which Americans of all types show an interest in birds, bird watching, hunting, photography, and just advocacy for the welfare of birds be a key to the solution for national forests, grasslands, riparian zones, wetlands, in fact for habitat conservation all across America?

The North American Bird Conservation Initiative has as a purpose, “managing for all birds in all habitats” across North America. A pretty impressive objective! Patterned somewhat after the successful North American Waterfowl Management Plan, in its two years of initial existence it has attracted participation by all of the usual suspects in the bird world, bird advocacy groups, bird watching groups, the waterfowl community, and federal, state, and provincial agencies in Canada, United States, and Mexico. The most recent step has been the formation of an upland game bird working group, bringing together organizations that work for ruffed grouse, prairie grouse, bobwhite quail, wild turkey, pheasants, and others.

Funding objectives center around supporting the basic monitoring, research, and management functions in the federal agencies responsible for birds and their

habitats, providing new state funding like the CARA proposal, expanding work to cover species groups so far poorly supported, working with Canada and Mexico, and finding new tools to attract broad habitat interests to this movement.

One of the most impressive things is that the North American Bird Conservation Initiative is an ad hoc, voluntary “coming together” of conservation interests without funding or formal organization. Federal agencies, in unprecedented discussions, have coordinated their assessments of needs to include doing a better job for birds and bird habitats. There is even new legislation that can be a catalyst for on-the-ground work similar to that provided by Wetlands Conservation Act for the Waterfowl Management Plan.

Early in the game, agreement was reached to focus on logical geographical blocks called Bird Conservation Regions. Working together on a commonly described landscape to find ways to share

the cost of habitat work to achieve mutual benefits is a powerful tool. Game bird organizations have looked at the Bird Conservation Regions and said, “we can do that” — translating their on-the-ground habitat objectives into those geographical areas. This way, funding for habitat work, whether for landscape preservation or management of a farm for quail, can overlap plans for songbirds and other species. Extend this to the public lands in the West and it immediately incorporates a systematic look at riparian zones, management and succession of habitats, fire effects, and all of the other things that can determine outcomes for big game animals as well.

Perhaps our dreams for elk, mule deer, and pronghorn habitat for 100 years from now should be linked to the bird conservation movement. The only question that matters is how will we have the impact that we desire. Are we ready to think out of our box? The success of others tells us it is the right time. ■

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