

# CONSERVATION COMPASS

## Elk Management at the Turn of the Century — New Days and New Ways



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Three riders, packhorses in tow, had topped out in the last pass that separated them from their campsite down below in the Wilderness Area. It was mid-November and the sun was low in the sky. The breath of men and horses left foggy clouds in

the air and steam hovered around the horses. The riders stepped down to adjust breast collars, britchens, and cinches. As cold-numbered fingers fumbled with stiffened leather straps, the shrill bugle of a bull elk cut through the stillness. Then, from down below, another bull answered. The mountain came alive and vibrant as the spirit of the place became manifest — a moment of beauty and harmony. Hunting started in two days, but now, the trip was already fulfilling. If there is a creature that personifies the mountain West, it is the elk. The hunters were wildlife biologists — one retired, one with 40 years of service, and “the kid” with 20 years in the game. They smiled knowingly. Each felt privileged. They mounted and descended into the valley.

The years 1900 to 2000 were hugely successful for those who cared about elk. Elk increased from some 3,300 in 1935 to 175,000 in 2000. Hunters increased from about 1,000 in 1930 to nearly 1,000,000 in 2000. But now, times are changing. There are problems emerging in dealing with elk habitat and regulating hunting... problems that will determine the success of elk in this century.

### THE CHANGING FOCUS OF AGENCIES AND POLITICIANS

Land-use planning by the Forest Service made it obvious that “everything is connected to everything else and there is no free lunch.” There were consequences — economic, social, and environmental — involved in each decision. Then, within a decade, plans failed as allocated funds did not match the plans and newly proclaimed endangered species altered plans. Lawsuits and appeals produced constant changes.

In addition, the Forest Service changed the way it manages public lands. Since 1980, emphasis shifted to biodiversity and endangered species. Biologists so

attuned replaced biologists from the “old school” of game management. That caused the Forest Service’s focus to diverge from counterparts in state agencies whose attention remained focused on hunted species and hunters. Why does this matter? Some 90 percent of elk reside for all or part of the year on national forests. Less than 10-15 percent of the areas occupied by elk are Wilderness. Thus, the fate of elk depends largely on how lands committed to multiple-use are managed.

Finally, the political process is not working as well as it could to preserve elk and elk hunting. Attention to elk and hunting are enhanced by making such activities pay for themselves or through the political process, or both. The effectiveness of the political process has declined in effectiveness as “environmentalists” increasingly fill that niche. How will increasingly intensive management of elk, elk hunters, and elk habitat be paid for?

### NEW PROBLEMS EMERGE AS THE GROWTH CURVE FOR ELK GOES FLAT

Elk and the range occupied increased steadily from 1930 to 2000. That has leveled out and begun to decrease in some areas. Until about 1993, many roads were being constructed into pristine habitat providing increased access for hunters. Then, road construction decreased dramatically and has come almost to a halt.

To satisfy demand, hunters were increased faster than elk numbers, with a coincident decline in success rates. Other management machinations include declines in hunting quality, shorter seasons, split seasons, heavier harvest of bulls, increased access, acceptance of distorted sex ratios, special weapons seasons, and acceptance of lowered hunter success. In sum, these actions do not add to good management.

Nevertheless, hunters continue to increase — faster than elk numbers or access — leading to declining success rates. State funds for management come primarily from hunting licenses and shortfalls are overcome through increased sales and higher fees, with a focus on non-residents. Any decline in hunters reduces revenue. But reduction of non-resident hunters disproportionately reduces revenue as they pay many times more for a

license than residents.

A decrease in the number of hunters produces a decline in the value of hunting as viewed by federal land-use analysts, who derive values by multiplying the number of hunters by the average number of days hunted. Unfortunately, there are no points scored related to quality of hunting experience or enhanced animal welfare.

### MORE POLITICS AND LESS SCIENCE IN ELK MANAGEMENT

More and more decisions are made based on political expediencies. The philosophies of resource management that evolved from the progressive era and placed emphasis on technical expertise have faded. Vagaries of “public opinion” carry ever more weight. The decline in the tenure of directors of state wildlife agencies reflects that trend.

### NUTRITIONAL PROBLEMS ON SUMMER RANGE — A NEW PROBLEM

Until the late 1980s, managers struggled to coordinate timber management to be favorable, or minimally damaging, to elk habitat. Today’s problem is adjusting to declines of over 90 percent in annual timber harvest on national forests. Most summer range habitat models assume that nutrition is not a problem. Declines in timber harvest and increase in forests that are in seedling, sapling, and pole stage timber, coupled with wild fire control and full recovery from the extensive fires of the early 20th century combine to produce a decline in forage production that will be increasingly inadequate to allow elk herds to reach reproductive potential.

This will worsen until wildfires occur that will produce boom and bust cycles of forage production due to vagaries of location, size, intensity, and timing of the fires. Controlled burns will be no panacea due to timing of burns, limited application, expense, and likely public backlash.

### THE IMPACT OF MORE ELK —AND HUNTING — ON PRIVATE LAND

The forest stages that provide prime foraging will occur more extensively on private lands with coincident increase in elk use. That will produce increasing conflict with timber production goals or an

opportunity to cash in on growing hunting demands.

There is mounting attention to vegetation management in the interface between national forests and private lands increasingly being subdivided for house sites. This management usually involves thinning to preclude crown fires and controlled burns at frequent intervals to reduce danger from ground fires — exactly what elk managers do to enhance forage production. Are there plans to deal with likely increased elk and deer use of these lands — and with the predators that follow their prey?

#### SUBDIVISIONS ON WINTER RANGE

Then consider the growing effort by some environmental groups to eliminate grazing of livestock on public lands. Ranchers whose lands about the national forests commonly hold permits for such grazing. Livestock reductions, or increases in grazing fees, make such ranches less viable and more prone to sale for subdivision. Private land adjacent to national forests brings premium prices for subdivision.

The move to buy out (with tax dollars) grazing permits, inadvertently, provides incentive for ranchers with permits to sell out to developers. Why? The permit, which is a dead loss when the land is sold for subdivision, would have significant cash value. That, combined, with the value for development would produce an enhanced package to facilitate sale.

The fuel loading that resulted from fire exclusion would be magnified as fine fuels on ungrazed areas add “flashy fuels” to the mix—some of it smack in the interface zone. The law of unintended consequences is apt to be alive and well.

#### HOW ABOUT ELK FARMING? A HOT ISSUE THAT WILL JUST GET HOTTER

Now, consider elk farming — domestication of wild animals, transfer of ownership from the public to individuals, transfer of regulation from game departments to livestock departments, and disease problems. Add the problems of fiscal responsibility, public perception, “canned hunts,” genetic and dietary manipulation to produce “trophies,” and transporting elk across state and national boundaries. Also, don’t for-

get concerns about “takings” related to regulation, legal liabilities, ongoing legal actions, and so on, ad infinitum.

#### DISEASE STIRS THE MANAGEMENT POT

The emergence of chronic wasting disease (CWD) in the deer family is likely a watershed event. CWD belongs to a disease group — transmissible spongiform encephalopathies — that includes mad cow disease, scrapies in sheep, and Crutzfeldt Jacobs’s disease in humans. While CWD has not been demonstrated to infect humans, caution flags are up. Elk farms are a suspected mechanism for CWD transmission to wild ungulates. Several states have prohibited importations of members of the deer family. This has hampered reintroduction of elk into eastern states as well as for elk farming. Other diseases of concern include brucellosis and tuberculosis.

#### THE DECLINE OF HUNTING ETHICS

We overlook cultural values and ethical aspects of hunting. Aldo Leopold warned, “Wildlife administrators are too busy producing something to shoot at to worry much about the cultural value of the shooting. Because everybody from Xenophon to Teddy Roosevelt said sport has value, it is assumed that this value must be indestructible.” Elk are a precious relic that serve as the spirit of place and a link with hunters and hunted of a thousand generations. Elk and elk hunting are cultural connections to be cultivated as we move into a future increasingly dominated by a pervasive tameness and sameness.

When we allow hunting to essentially remove mature bulls as a functioning part of elk behavioral ecology, we should examine our motivations. When we allow hunter densities so high that on opening of hunting season, in more and more places, elk run from hunter to hunter until they stop, with walled eyes and tongues lolled out, too exhausted to run, we need to examine our souls.

Are elk merely targets? Elk deserve better. Hunters deserve better. Our culture demands better. If hunting is to survive it is essential that it shame neither the hunter nor the hunted.

#### THE TIMES THEY ARE A’CHANGING

Times change with or without us—but

we influence change. We must speak for elk—for their welfare, dignity, and place in our culture. We must stand for ethical hunting. To paraphrase Leopold, the autumn landscape in the Rockies is the land, the golden aspen, timbered slopes, and grassy meadows—plus elk. In terms of physics, the elk represents only a tiny fraction of the biomass. Yet, subtract the elk and the whole thing is dead.

#### EPILOGUE

One rider leading three pack horses and two men afoot, each leading a horse carrying manta packs and rifles lashed to McClellan saddles, topped out in the first pass they would cross on their journey to the trail head some 20 miles in the distance. The packs contained quarters of an elk. The six-point antlers were tied to the diamond hitch that held the panniers and top pack on one of the packhorses. It was late November and early in the day. The men’s clothes were dirty and a two-week stubble was apparent on their faces. Each — both men and horses — were thinner than when they stood here two weeks earlier. Crystalline snow sifted in the pass and the warm breath of horses and men hung in the air. As they tightened cinches and lash ropes, they heard, faintly but clearly and from far away, an elk’s bugle. They looked at each other in a communion of sorts and turned down the trail for the world of man.

America still has her vast wild lands of the West. The living spirit of the place — the elk — survives and prospers there. The mountains are beautiful and awe inspiring. But with the elk, the mountains are alive, vibrant, and whole — a legacy from those who assured that elk survived and prospered. These places and the animals they harbor, as always, rest in the keeping of those who care. The older man and his compatriots had made their choices and succeeded, for now. The younger men, his “sons” and successors, would soon bear sole responsibility for that legacy.

The older man looked back and stepped stiffly onto his horse. The younger men gathered up the lead ropes on the horses carrying the elk. The sun was above the horizon as they started down from the pass. Then they heard it again — the shrill bugle of the elk. ■