

# CAPITOL COMMENTS



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## Progress in Advocacy for Wildlife

**The fourth summit of the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) took place August 21-23 in Ely, Minnesota. It was a successful, energetic meeting of 42 individuals from 27 organizations. Issues included potential**

**transfer of management at the National Bison Range to tribal governments, various projects on hunter retention and recruitment, the true number of hunters in the United States as a political force, relative risk in fire management, access to public and private lands, the changing culture of wildlife professionals, and more aggressive advocacy on behalf of sportsmen and sportswomen in political processes.**

These weighty topics illustrate the maturation of partnerships and coalitions on behalf of wildlife. Major issues of national focus are being considered, great energy is generated, and change or adjustment is the objective. This is what we want from our efforts to organize and strengthen our advocacy for wildlife.

Through AWCP, there has been strengthened work on wildlife issues, recognition that AWCP is a focal point for contact by the administration and its agencies, and more partners bringing forth issues, letters, and possible joint actions. This increased partner involvement is especially important.

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To continue our collaborative success, reexamination of the ground rules for successful partnerships or coalitions is worthwhile. They are:

- Partnerships are composed of organizations with their own identities,
- Action is taken by groups of organizations choosing to do so in their own names,
- Differences in views on issues and their resolution will be respected, and
- All potential actions (sign-on letters, etc.) will be conducted on a “play or pass” basis, without recrimination for any organization choosing not to support an issue or take an action.

With the diversity of interests in AWCP, recognition of these ground rules remains as essential as when the partnership was formed.

During the past year, many groups joined to support forest health initiatives, wildlife conservation in national energy and wetlands protection policies, increasing access to public lands, and wildlife provisions in the complex implementation of the 2002 Farm Bill. Our voice is heard, we are true players in effecting outcomes of these issues, and we are increasing our ability to work together to find common ground on issues.

It must be remembered that the measure of a successful partnership is not that any single organization dictates the group’s decision, so there is a need for operating rules, building relationships between partners, and jointly supporting principles, main issues, and avoiding the often arcane details that lead to differences.

Continuing to measure partnership effectiveness can be difficult. Perhaps thoughts attributed to Henry Ford can put this into perspective:

- Coming together is a beginning;
- Staying together is progress; and
- Working together is success.

Note that in this line of thought the outcome is not a measure of success in partnerships, the fact that we are striving together is.

At the September meeting of The Wildlife Society (TWS), a session titled “Influencing Policies through Coalitions: Why Wildlife Biologists Should Participate,” considered eight partnerships/coalitions. Examples included the Wildlife Partners Network, a coalition of 10 partner groups that jointly support tracking and detailed analysis of Congressional, agency and

administration actions that affect wildlife. Its work often leads to stronger action by the partners in AWCP. Others covered Farm Bill, state wildlife funding, grazing land stewardship, and bird conservation. A focus was on how the groups stay together, how they operate, which issues they focus on, and how they might work best within the political system in advocacy for wildlife.

The coalitions examined by TWS largely base their advocacy on science and analysis of management programs. They make their case through the political system for funding, legal or administrative changes favorable to wildlife. Science-based advocacy also supports hunting. Some are quite successful, like the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement, but others such as the Conservation and Reinvestment Act failed in their final objective. There is much for us to learn from these efforts as our community considers how to become more aggressive on behalf of our objectives for wildlife and habitat.

A target for organized advocacy is the hunting public. While the number of license buyers (about 15 million) is often cited as the U.S. hunting population, more than 43 million people say they hunt — perhaps not every year, but they consider themselves hunters. This larger figure is likely a better measure of the hunting component of our society, and can be a potent political force.

The big question is, “How do we go about being stronger advocates for wildlife and also increase our effectiveness?” At the AWCP meeting there was extensive discussion of becoming more political in our approach, possibly forming Political Action Committees to literally pay our way, as other lobbying interests do, to gain more serious consideration by politicians in outcomes. Most partner groups are non-profit organizations that are not organized for this purpose. We noted that the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership is a known option for planned advocacy for wildlife. AWCP members left the meeting with this important issue unresolved. Work groups will examine how we can be stronger advocates within the law, and what options there might be for more direct political involvement.

It is likely that more than one approach will be needed to achieve our goals in the future, and sorting out how we act together will determine that outcome. ■