

# CAPITOL COMMENTS

## Ballot Initiatives — What Do They Mean For Wildlife Management?



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**“This is done in a direct attempt to contravene existing authority from legally responsible agencies.”**

Modern wildlife management coalesced out of the droughts and wildlife population declines in the 1930s, when public alarm provided conservation leaders in and out of government an opportunity to initiate public programs on which wildlife now depends. Federal land management agencies, university programs to train professional wildlife biologists, and non-political state agencies supported by the Pittman-Robertson excise tax are enduring results of that era. All this has been sustained on the premise that stable funding, trained wildlife managers, a land base with public access to wildlife, and agencies and academic systems to support those investments would manage our wildlife for the public good. Yet, this fall, several states will decide wildlife management issues by public votes on ballot initiatives. There is even a national movement to establish a public initiative or referendum process. Many of us have focused on the consequences of individual ballot initiatives that would stop certain types of hunting. These are legitimate threats, but their importance is overshadowed by the broader movement. What do these things mean for the future of wildlife management and hunting?

Currently, mainly in the Midwest and Far West, 24 states allow either initiative petitions or referendums. Some of the states facing votes in 1996 that affect fish or wildlife include Alaska, Colorado, Florida, Idaho, Maine, Massachusetts, Michigan and Oregon. With variable success, wildlife conservation and hunting groups have organized to fight to retain favored hunting activities.

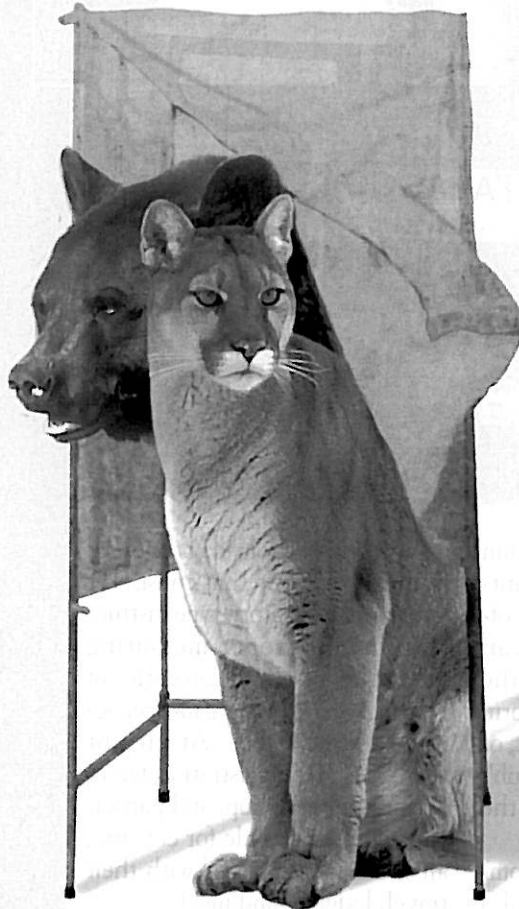
These campaigns are expensive, and there are too many to fight them successfully in a reactive mode. The real dilemma is much larger and more complex.

Conservationists have used ballot initiatives to do good things, such as establishing conservation commissions or funding wildlife programs. Missouri, for example, formed its Conservation Commission in 1936 and went to the public again successfully in 1976 for a sales tax to finance comprehensive wildlife conservation programs for the state. Other states, such as Arkan-

Conservation, are positive from the standpoint of wildlife management and the interests of hunters.

In the case of several of these initiatives, animal rights groups have successfully used emotional arguments to draw in an unsuspecting public to carry out their work. As in the infamous mountain lion issue in California, which has gone to the voters twice, wildlife managers are getting purposefully bypassed by these initiatives. The existing systems of commissions, law-making authority, and the actions of a professional agency that carries out the management work are not providing the answer desired by some small and vocal minorities. The public is being swayed by sound byte and photo op propaganda featuring animals in traps, animals treed by dogs, or baiting animals to shoot them. Hunting or trapping methods, rather than overall management effectiveness, are masqueraded as conservation issues. Then the process becomes a mechanical one of gathering the votes to place the initiative on the ballot. This is done in a direct attempt to contravene existing authority from legally responsible agencies.

The dilemma for proponents of recreational wildlife use, such as hunting, is clear. There are cases where a public relations campaign in opposition is the only avenue open to us, but it is costly and offers no guarantee of long-term solutions. Equally without guarantee, but worth trying because of longer-term implications, is understanding and communicating better with the public. It seems clear that the public at large knows little about our management institutions, and does not have enough confi-



sas and Washington, have tried similar actions, and will likely try again. Some current initiatives, such as in Oregon to return the control of bear and mountain lion management to that state's Department of Fish and Wildlife

## 1996 BALLOT ACTION RESULTS

**ALABAMA - Amendment #1 - Passed**  
Constitutional amendment to guarantee the right to hunt and fish in the State of Alabama in accordance with law and regulations, the "Sportsperson's Bill of Rights."

**ALASKA - Ballot Measure #3 - Passed**  
Prohibits same day airborne hunting of wolf, wolverine, fox, or lynx. This is misleading since airborne recreational hunting is already outlawed by regulation. The effect of this initiative would deny the Alaska Department of Fish and Game the use of airborne hunts as a predator control device.

**COLORADO - Amendment 14 - Passed**  
Constitutional initiative banning trapping.

**IDAHO - Proposition #2 - Failed**  
Statewide initiative banning bear hunting during spring, and bear hunting with dogs and over bait.

**MASSACHUSETTS - Question 1 - Passed**  
Statewide initiative banning trapping, bear hunting with dogs.

**MICHIGAN - Proposal D - Failed**  
Statewide issue banning bear hunting with dog and over bait.

**Proposal G - Passed**  
Designed as a counter initiative to Proposal D. Governor John Engler signed into law Senate Bill 1033, now known as Public Act 377. SB 1033 amends the Natural Resources the exclusive authority to regulate the taking of game in Michigan. This bill was drafted in response to a request by a sportsmen's coalition led by the Michigan United Conservation Clubs (MUCC).

**OREGON - Measure #34 - Failed**  
Sportsmen initiated. Returns bear and cougar management to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission, and provides exclusive authority over hunting regulations.

**WASHINGTON - Initiative 655 - Passed**  
Statewide initiative banning bear baiting, and hound hunting of bear, bobcat, cougar and lynx.

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dence in them on these issues. Yet this public outreach, proactive solution may be as costly and difficult as the reactive pitched battle to defeat an initiative.

Our wildlife agencies are attempting to learn more about their constituents. Market studies, polls, focus groups, and attention to the "human dimensions" of wildlife management are becoming more commonplace, as they should. Studies show that the general public has broader interests in wildlife issues than in the past, and doesn't think about wildlife the same way hunters do. It may be that many people won't support some very traditional hunting practices no matter what they learn about them.

Natural resource management cannot become just a matter of asking the public what it wants, and then just doing it. The public is largely uninformed (and, in many cases, unconcerned) about many resource management issues, and is not equipped to deal objectively with many complex management questions. Public opinion should be viewed as one of many sources of information upon which to base a decision. Just as research by itself should not dictate policy and action in resource management, neither should public opinion. However, professional resource managers are trained in weighing biological data, but are less trained to weigh and balance public attitudes in the course of making a decision. Nor are most members of conservation organizations, including hunters. The challenge will be in maintaining or regaining the trust of the public—many of whom no longer connect with the lifestyle, traditions and values of the past. What do we do if that trust can't be achieved?

There is no easy answer to this dilemma, but we must look with a clear head at what the real threat is. If our public is so easily swayed on issues that they are willing to campaign and vote against the responsible management agencies, then there is something wrong. The blame must be shouldered by the agencies, professional managers, and conservation organizations—

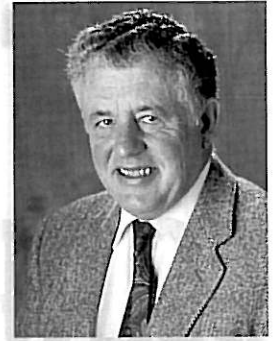
The relocation of Boone and Crockett headquarters to Missoula, Montana, a few years ago provided us with expanded facilities to develop a library program. We can now display books published over the years by the Club and also books by and about Boone and Crockett Club Members and matters relating to North American big game hunting and conservation. Donations to our book collection over the years by Members and others has resulted in duplication of titles. Also, many books have been donated that do not relate to the above criteria.

As a service to Associates and readers of *Fair Chase* some of these duplicate or excess books are being offered for sale. A detailed list of these along with an order form has been inserted into this issue. Proceeds from the sale of these excess books will go toward the Boone and Crockett Library fund enabling us to add missing titles to the library. Many of the books offered are single titles so order promptly if any are of interest. Also, if you wish to donate any of your books to the Club, we suggest you get an appraisal and take a tax deduction while helping a worthy cause!

we can't get anywhere placing blame on the public for "not understanding." Nor can we or should we force them to see it our way. Rather than waging pitched battles in public, longer term solutions need to be sought. Every time the hunting community has to defend itself aggressively, it may win the battle but contribute toward a long-term loss of the war for broad public understanding and support. Regaining the trust and support of the public is an issue that should command our attention for the future of wildlife management and hunting. This will require leadership—and we must be prepared for it.

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