

FIELD NOTES

FROM THE TRM RANCH

CONSENSUS GROUPS

An Alternative Approach to Managing Elk

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Elk management on Montana's Rocky Mountain Front is at a crossroad. The size of most elk herds is now limited more by social, than biological constraints, and is influenced by a need to increase public hunting while minimizing impacts on private landowners. Shifts in sportsmen attitudes and a dwindling supply of quality hunting opportunities on public lands have put pressure on elk and the wildlife

agency managing elk. Meeting the production challenge has become increasingly more difficult and, as a consequence of a policy of providing maximum sustainable hunting opportunity, elk herds in many backcountry units on the Front are becoming less diverse in age structure, especially within the male segment. Portions of the Bob Marshall Wilderness are a good example of this situation—low male to female ratios have led to fewer hunting opportunities which, in turn, have put more pressure on private landowners to provide quality hunting opportunities. In response to these new management challenges, especially those pertaining to public wildlife on private lands, alternative approaches to management are being tested. One such approach has been the formation of local consensus groups to address issues such as the equitable distribution of the costs and benefits of managing wildlife across ownership boundaries. These consensus groups are based on voluntary agreements and stakeholders often include private landowners, sportsmen, the state wildlife agency, and conservation groups. This fieldnote is devoted to the description of such a local consensus group—the "Devils Kitchen Management Team."

South of the Front in the Big Belt Mountains, the "Devils Kitchen Management Team" formed as a grassroots organization dedicated to integrating the needs of ranchers with those of others in managing elk. With the exception of a state-owned wildlife management area, most of the land in this region is in private ownership and most of that is divided among four

large ranches. In addition to supporting extensive livestock operations, these ranches harbor large herds of both resident and migratory elk. Beginning in 1988, landowners complained of an increase in elk numbers on their lands, and frustrations rose dramatically in 1990 after a fire that burned more than 80% of the adjacent state-owned wildlife management area forced even more elk onto private lands. Landowner complaints to the state wildlife agency focused on two issues: (1) excessive elk numbers on private lands, and (2) a lack of compensation for providing habitat. The existing system of hunting permit allocation through lottery made it impossible for the landowner to effectively obtain economic gain from the wildlife resource.

In 1988, visionary landowners got together with other interested parties in an attempt to avoid the looming "train wreck" between the state agency, landowners, conservation groups, and sportsmen over the controversial issue of elk management. The Devil's Kitchen Management Team formed in an attempt to build consensus around a "win-win or no deal" philosophy, meaning that every participant had to perceive a benefit from the decisions. Four major issues relating to elk management within the larger context of ranching operations were addressed by the team. These include (1) providing public access to private lands; (2) simplifying the hunting permit allocation process; (3) adopting measures to control herd growth; and (4) promoting a more diverse herd age structure while maintaining a viable outfitting industry on private lands.

In 1993, the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission approved a proposal by the team to liberalize hunting regulations. A "five-week antlerless" and a "three-week permit-only antlered" elk hunting regulation was issued with the stipulation that participants would adhere to self-imposed quotas. Quotas on males were designed to promote a more diverse age structure, while those on females to reduce herd size. In exchange for this modified season, landowners agreed to allocate a share of hunting opportunities to the public for both

male and female elk within the limits established by the quota system. To date, the program has been successful in reducing herd size while improving age class diversity, providing additional public access to private lands, and formalizing the economically beneficial sportsmen-landowner-outfitter relationship.

The success of this grassroots organization has been recognized by the Montana Fish and Wildlife Commission. The Devil's Kitchen Management Team has been given a formal voice in the local elk decision-making equal to that of department staff. The "appointment" is contingent upon the teams' continuing incorporation of ideas from all interested parties. In addition to their elk management plan, the group has also implemented a rest-rotation grazing system that encompasses private as well as a portion of the wildlife management area. Improved grassland productivity and forage conditions have resulted in a redistribution of elk, a reduction in risk of fire, and the state-owned wildlife management area is once again a major winter range for the region, alleviating some of the depredation problems on adjoining private lands.

The Devil's Kitchen Management Team brings together diverse parties committed to finding a win-win solution to a long-standing problem: the place of elk in a ranching community, or of public wildlife on private lands. The solution is unique in the annals of Montana conservation history; landowners retain control of their property, but concede limited access rights in exchange for a secure opportunity to derive benefits from a public resource. The public gains access to previously closed areas without the expense of acquiring fee-title to the lands. The ecosystem concept that views the land as an integrated whole and human communities as part of the fabric of that landscape was the essential common ground. In the future, local consensus groups are likely to grow in popularity in the attempt to include ecological, as well as socioeconomic realities in the search for sustainable solution to natural resource challenges.