

FROM THE CENTER

Wildlife Conservation and Ecosystem Management - Implications for Private Lands



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The Emergence of Ecosystem Management

There has been a continuing evolution in public land management toward consideration of larger land units and multiple land management units or ownerships. These changes have occurred as management considerations have shifted to the concept of "ecosystem management (EM)." EM is an evolving concept. Inherent in that concept is the recognition that public land management does not take place independently of conditions and management actions on adjacent land ownerships or management units. Therefore, assessments of conditions and management actions must be considered at much larger scales. The appropriate scale is determined through consideration of a combination of ecological/geographical features, social and economic factors, and political boundaries. Given the myriad land management objectives and activities by various landowners within these larger assessment areas it is essential to consider trends and likely conditions over a longer time frame. And, obviously, it is essential to consider the needs, desires, and actions of *Homo sapiens* as a dominant part of the system under assessment and the EM approach.

Moving From Concept to Context

Critics of these changes have been quick to point out that EM is a nebulous concept. That is indeed so. Therefore, the concept, when applied to assessment and management, must be placed in clearly defined context. That context is provided by definition of the area under consideration with clear descriptions of the factors used, in interaction, to determine boundaries. Context is further provided by determination of appropriate time frames with clear descriptions of why that choice was made. Context is further provided by clearly describing the fac-

tors to be considered in assessment and management decisions – including ecological, economic, social, and legal factors most critical to informed decisions.

The Significance of Private Lands to Wildlife and Users of Wildlife

Private lands are the primary source of wildlife habitat in the United States – and of recreational use of wildlife. Further, these lands, on average, are much more ecologically productive lands than lands in federal ownership. For the nation as a whole, some 70 per cent of all hunting activities occur on private lands. Of course, this predominance is most pronounced in the east and mid-west – but private lands in the west (where most public lands are located) are equally significant as habitat for both wildlife and hunters. In many cases, the seasonal ranges of big game animals such as mule deer and elk encompass both public and private lands.

The Case of Migratory Mule Deer and Elk

For example, in the intermountain west the migratory nature of mule deer and elk between higher elevation spring/fall/summer ranges (mostly in federal ownership) and lower elevation winter ranges (which are predominately in private ownership) presents significant problems to wildlife and land managers. Big game animals, to a large extent, are located on federal lands during the hunting season and are driven to lower elevation private lands by increasing snow depths at higher elevations. There, deer and elk compete with domestic livestock for seasonally scarce natural forage or distributed feed for livestock and, frequently, raid haystacks and cause other damage. Many of the owners of private lands adjacent to public lands absorb significant costs and irritations from harboring big game wildlife and receive little or no benefit in return.

Where Ecosystem Management Comes Into Play

Clearly, an EM approach to deal with such circumstances is required. Assessment and resultant management areas for migratory big game must include public and private lands that, in combination, provide year-around habitat. The prevailing ecological, economic, and political circumstances dictate that assessments and management actions consider an appropriate land base. Legal mandates dictate that federal land managers (who are responsible for habitat on federal lands), private landowners (who control management on their lands) and state wildlife managers (who regulate hunting and enforce regulations related to wildlife) must cooperate. Such cooperation is essential if each is to fulfill their missions and objectives in an equitable fashion. Fiscal realities make it imperative that the private landowners be compensated, in some fashion, for at least some of the costs, both direct and indirect, of harboring the deer and elk and associated predators – some year round and many more during winter. Political realities demand that the public's (who own the wildlife) desires are considered and met to the extent possible considering the objectives of the federal and state agencies, the public, and the private landholder.

Another knotty problem that may occur involves the presence of a species of wildlife that has been determined by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to be threatened or endangered. Recovery plans for such species may impinge on present and potential land management activities and, thereby, impose both real and opportunity costs on landholders.

Personal Motivation, Coercion, and Incentives

Managers of federal lands are required by law, regulations, and policy to achieve wildlife manage-

ment objectives – including the objectives of the Endangered Species Act. Private landowners are motivated to meet those objectives through one of three mechanisms that are applicable singly or in combination – personal motivation, governmental coercion, or incentives. When coercion is employed, it is usually through enforcement of laws that demand or preclude actions on the part of the landholder – i.e., “thou shalt” or “thou shalt not.” Coercion appears to be effective and acceptable – up to a point. Most private landholders do not object, at least vociferously, to constraints such as hunting seasons, bag limits, means and methods or taking wildlife, protection of non-game wildlife, etc. Additionally, there is little or no complaint about harboring wildlife that impose insignificant costs or constraints on land management prerogatives.

Beyond those points, private landowners become more and more irritated and less and less tolerant of wildlife and governments regulators of all shapes and forms. This intolerance increases as costs, hassles with bureaucrats, and regulatory constraints on management prerogatives increase. This intolerance expresses itself across a spectrum from increasingly expressed animosity to the extreme actions such as the “shoot, shovel,

and shut up” syndrome – which to this point are believed to be rare.

At the point that unacceptable coercion begins, probably the most productive avenue to pursue in attaining landholder cooperation lies in replacing or softening coercion through provision of incentives. Incentives can take a number of forms and entail levels of costs that range, in monetary terms, from very small to quite significant.

Private Land/ Public Wildlife Programs

In the Western States, there seems to be a growing awareness by governmental agencies of the significant, even critical, contributions of private lands to the welfare of the wildlife resource and the human enjoyment of that wildlife in all its forms. As a result, there are a number of different approaches currently in play to enhance the welfare of wildlife on private lands. These are increas-

ingly and collectively referred to as Private Lands/Public Wildlife Programs and are being executed, in various forms, by the States. Examples of the various approaches currently in play are discussed below.

Simple Courtesy and Inclusion in Decision Making

Costing very little in monetary terms is the encouragement of simple courtesy to landholders by both wildlife managers and the public that seek access to wildlife on private land. Also involved are inclusion of private landholders in the wildlife management decision process coupled with appreciation for and recognition of the contributions of the landholder to wildlife welfare and the public opportunity to enjoy that wildlife.

It is well, then, that those concerned with wildlife for any purpose are cognizant and supportive of innovative efforts to motivate landowners to be active and willing participants in providing wildlife habitat and access to that wildlife.



Landowners Profiting From the Presence of Wildlife

Next in line, are mechanisms through which the ability of the landholder to profit from resident wildlife are provided. Such can include enhancement of the capability of landowners to lease all or some portion of the hunting rights on their properties to hunters in mode of willing buyers and willing sellers. However, in the minds of some, such an action represents "privatization" of a public resource. In some states, this conflict is reconciled by the rationale that the landowner is leasing the access to property for purposes of hunting and not for the taking of the animal(s) *per se*.

This works well in States, such as Texas, where licenses are purchased from the wildlife agency and the hunter negotiates

for access to wildlife for purposes of hunting with a landowner – i.e., the landowner can lease access to hunting to any license holder. The State exercises no say as to who hunts where. This allows hunters and landowners to negotiate for access for hunting far in advance of the hunting season or, even, negotiate a multi-year or renewable lease.

This works much less well, or not at all, in states where the wildlife agency determines who will hunt where – usually through means of a lottery. In such cases, the hunter and prospective client have little time to negotiate with a landowner and there can be no continuity of arrangements over years. Where there is no potential monetary return to the landowners, the only benefit from the harboring of wildlife is derived from whatever pleasure is derived

from the presence of that wildlife. And, the landowner absorbs whatever costs and impacts associated with hunting or access to wildlife for other purposes by members of the public. In some states, such as Wyoming, the wildlife agency helps facilitate the management of hunter numbers and distribution.

The Hybrid System – Something for the Landowner and Something for the Public

There is a "hybrid" system in which the landowner is provided some limited number of hunting permits to be used by hunters of his or her choice. Obviously, this provides opportunity for the landowner to lease some hunting to a number (determined by the wildlife agency) of willing buyers composed of either in-state or out-of-state hunters. As a *quid pro quo*, the landowner accepts an ordained number of additional hunters, at no charge, as determined by the wildlife agency of the State. Such an approach has been successfully applied, for example, in the states of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico, and California.

However, a suggestion that this approach be applied in Wyoming, even on a pilot basis, produced an acrimonious reaction from hunters' organizations. This uproar stimulated the Commission to withdraw the proposal.



Direct Payments From the State to Landowners

In other states, such as Montana, the wildlife agency makes direct payments to landowners, prorated on acreage, in exchange for access for hunters. While significant when compared to receiving no income from wildlife, these payments are considerably less than might be expected to accrue from the "free enterprise" system in place through much of the south and southwest.

Direct purchase of hunting and fishing access by State wildlife agencies is becoming more common. In such cases, the landowner receives compensation from the state for providing hunters access to their lands for the purpose of hunting. Lands where such access is available are identified by the state wildlife agency. South Dakota pioneered this program which has since spread to Nebraska, Wyoming, Kansas, Oklahoma, and others. Revenues to the landowner under this arrangement are, comparatively, quite modest. But, at least, there is tangible monetary recognition of the contribution of private lands to the wildlife resource and the sustenance of hunting.

Land Acquisitions and Easements

Land acquisition by the Federal or State governments represents yet another approach. But, due to high costs, such activities are limited to lands that have hugely significant or unique ecological values for wildlife or those lands that would make significant additions to the National Parks, the National Forest Systems, wildlife refuges, or wildlife management areas. Funds for such acquisitions come primarily from the Land and Water Conservation Fund. These dollars are derived from a portion of federal revenues from leasing of off-shore oil and gas reserves. States may also acquire lands using these funds, as well as Pittman-Robertson funds (taxes

on firearms and ammunition), Dingell-Johnson funds (taxes on fishing equipment), or fees from hunting and fishing licenses.

Acquiring conservation easements is a relatively recent approach, whereby certain "rights" from the landowner's bundle of rights are purchased by a conservation group or government agency. Such purchase most commonly involves the right to subdivide the land into smaller parcels. But, any "right" can be, in theory, so transferred. Easements are much less costly than outright purchase. In many cases, granting of easements meets the landowner's desire to protect certain aspects of property – usually the maintenance of open space – in perpetuity or, at least, far into the future. This approach, which keeps property in private ownership – and on the tax rolls – and, simultaneously, preserves open space and wildlife habitat, is being more and more widely used. This shift is likely related to increasing objections to increased ownership of land by government entities.

Technical Assistance, Cost-Share, and Conservation Reserves

Some states provide technical assistance or cost-share for habitat enhancement or both to landowners – usually in exchange for some level of access by the public to the land involved. In addition, there are significant funds available from federal coffers for wildlife habitat enhancement on private lands available through the auspices of the 1995 Farm Bill. The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) pays landowners to maintain lands – largely lands marginal for agriculture – in cover crops which, coincidentally, provides significant contributions to habitat for wildlife. Some 30 million acres have been placed in reserve in the last few years with dramatic positive impact on numbers of upland birds and waterfowl. The Wildlife Habitat In-

centive Program (WHIP) provides funds for cost-share and technical assistance for projects on private land to enhance wildlife habitat.

Unfortunately, personnel in state wildlife agencies, in general, have not become as familiar and interactive with the CRP and WHIP programs as would be necessary to assure their maximum effectiveness as a tool of wildlife management. But, that situation is steadily improving.

Private Lands – The Big Key to the Future of Wildlife in the United States

Enhanced and growing recognition of the values and contributions of private lands and their owners to wildlife welfare and the human enjoyment of that wildlife is producing good results for wildlife. For all those with an abiding interest in wildlife, it is essential to maintain that momentum. It is on private lands that much of the future of wildlife in the United States depends. The future of wildlife on those lands will, always, depend on the good will and actions of the folks who own those lands. It is well, then, that those concerned with wildlife for any purpose are cognizant and supportive of innovative efforts to motivate landowners to be active and willing participants in providing wildlife habitat and access to that wildlife. For, therein, lies most of the future of wildlife in the United States. ▲▲▲

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