

CAPITOL CONSERVATION

Change is in the Wind

THE OLD SAW ABOUT A 450 POUND GORILLA SLEEPING ANYWHERE IT WISHES LIKELY WILL APPLY TO WILDLIFE MATTERS IN THE NEW CONGRESS. AT THIS POINT NO ONE IS ABLE TO SAY FOR SURE WHAT MAY HAPPEN TO IMPORTANT WILDLIFE PROGRAMS, APPROPRIATIONS, PERSONNEL AND EVEN AGENCIES. BUT CHANGE IS IN THE WIND.

As is well known, the make-up of the new Congress has changed markedly. Committee chairmanships and voting majorities have been reversed. Published reports and public statements indicate that maximum effort will be made to pare down government and thereby reduce its cost to taxpayers, eliminate excessive regulation, speed reaction to specific problems and do all those other good things that such efforts normally promise, but rarely satisfy.

Squarely tangled up in all the turmoil is a negative reaction to the "environment" and "environmentalists." Some political activists have concluded that environmentalism has hindered and will continue to hinder economic development. Their reasoning runs that environmentalism is obstructionist and it and its adherents must be bent to political will.

Wildlife is tarred by the environmental brush. The spotted owl, snail darter, endangered species and other contentious issues have been used by litigious environmental groups to confront economic interests and often times to force alteration or cancellation of their plans. Hence, critics of environmentalism cast all wildlife into the pot, distinctions are blurred and opposing sides square off on the subject in general terms rather than on specific issues. Many times in recent years respected wildlife interests have disagreed with biological aspects of environmentalists' arguments. But the damn the wildlife and the environment wrecking crew streams straight ahead.

Of the approximately one-third of the land surface of the United States held in public ownership, the most important acreage, as they pertain to the basic interests of the Boone and Crockett Club, are administered by the US. Forest Service in

the Department of Agriculture and the Bureau of Land Management in the Department of the Interior. These lands, for the most part are open to public hunting and harbor impressive numbers and diversity of big game species.

Taking the long view, it is fair to say that economic development has been favored in the federal administration of these public lands. Namely timbering, grazing and mining. The most money has been appropriated annually and applying the laws enacted for the benefit of commercial interests. Only in the last couple of decades have the two agencies been obliged to request larger appropriations for wildlife programs, hire more trained personnel, and accept wildlife as a partner in planning public lands programs. That is the good result of biological activism.

Heretofore, the wildlife divisions in the agencies were little more than bystanders, told what was going to take place on public lands, but denied an opportunity to participate in determining how any specific activity might take place or be operated. Only in recent years have wildlife advocates been able to say that their interest has finally gotten to a position of near-parity with other public land uses. Appropriations and personnel for wildlife activities have risen steadily, and planning has given wildlife a seat at the table. Equal consideration of all resources is a basic tenet of multiple use.

Now comes an expected campaign in Congress against environmentalism and environmentalists. The most direct way to force an agency to pull in its horns is via the appropriations route. Simply by denying an agency funds to carry out an activity or by specific language in an appropriations act Congress can forbid use of any of the money for wildlife purposes. And there is no telling what the Administration may do by way of recommending program reductions should it get into a now-top-this contest with the party controlling Congress. Either or both scenarios hold potential harm for the Club's interest. In fact, the Administration already is stumbling over itself in retreating for previous positions, namely on grazing fee increases and protective national park

actions. Some members of Congress are talking about introducing bills to upset laws and programs long on the books.

With both political parties focusing on reducing federal outlays, it is not far-fetched to see such a scenario unfolding, even if the amount of money "saved" by such action is minuscule in terms of how far the federal income/expenditure situation is out of whack. Its attractiveness lies in the appearance of the politicos "doing something."

Paralleling the "reduce the cost of government" drive is a proposed restructuring of congressional committees, particularly in the House of Representatives. Potentially harmful there would be the announced elimination of the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, a subcommittee that had legislative oversight over a broad panorama of wildlife issues. It appears that its responsibilities would be folded into another House committee, the new chairman of which is well known for his dislike of environmentalists and his penchant for proposing simple solutions to complex problems. On the other side of Congress, in the Senate, the pertinent committee having much the same overview as the one in the House, also will be headed by an unconventional thinker from the same state as the House committee. Bad news on both sides.

The most that hunters and wildlife advocates can do at present is to keep abreast of developments, many of which may be fast unfolding. The Club and others of like interest have striven for many years to upgrade and strengthen the wildlife capabilities of the U. S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management. We should be prepared to do more than simply stand by and permit either political party to dismantle or cripple the sound delivery system our efforts have created for advancing and protecting wildlife of the invaluable public lands of which we are in truth part owners. The perpetuation of wildlife and hunting is not and should not be a political issue. But our interest could be seriously harmed if we are unprepared or reluctant to act promptly to protect it.



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CONSERVATION COMMITTEE
Boone & Crockett Club

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