

HISTORIC ACCOMPLISHMENTS ON BEHALF OF HUNTING AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

CONSERVATION
POLICY COLUMN



Gregory T. M. Schildwachter
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER

As this issue of Fair Chase goes to press, the 117th Congress has convened in Washington, D.C., and a presidential inauguration is approaching. Political drama and the pandemic have combined to make 2020 and the transition to 2021 strange for all and controversial for many. And yet, in contrast, the past year has capped one of the most remarkable periods in American conservation since the achievements of the Boone and Crockett Club at the beginning of the movement.

The 116th Congress (2019-2020) and President Trump's four years (2017-2020) have produced a historic number of legislative and administrative accomplishments on behalf of hunting, recreational shooting and wildlife conservation. The Boone and Crockett Club played a role on your behalf in a number of these through our efforts and with occasional direct involvement by Club members.

We are now a small part of an enormous community, and yet we still play the vital role of focusing on areas where attention is missing and opportunities for growth await.

Unlike many large well-funded organizations with narrower missions, the select group of the Club's Regular and Professional Members, as well as Associates are our workforce. It is not easy and, sometimes it

isn't pretty, but it is always worth the effort. Thank you to each and every member who assisted in moving the Club's conservation program forward. And a special thank you to Johnny Morris and the Bass Pro/Cabela's Outdoor Fund for their substantial contribution to the Club's conservation policy program.

In review of the many recent accomplishments, here we call out a few issues and trends that both typify the Club's approach and define our agenda going forward. These achievements have immediate value and also require future efforts to implement and build upon, which will define the Club's agenda for the coming years.

Behind the biggest news in conservation presently—the enactment of the Great American Outdoors Act (GAOA) and the John D. Dingell, Jr., Conservation, Management, and Recreation Act (Dingell Conservation Act) is a significant development in the oldest initiative in American conservation.

The first and most prominent core of the strategy is to secure land and water as the vital asset in sustaining wildlife and providing commodities and inspiration to the country. At first, the most spectacular places were secured (i.e., Yellowstone National Park and the Grand Canyon). Later, lands with ecological and wilderness values were

added. After expanding national forests, parks, and wildlife refuges, the burden of caring for and maintaining these places began to overwhelm continuing efforts to add to the public estate.

This is why the Great American Outdoors Act is so significant. It puts resources behind the development of American conservation strategy. The GAOA provides up to \$9 billion in mandatory funding over the next five years to the departments of the Interior (DOI) and Agriculture (USDA) to complete deferred maintenance projects on federal lands. Additionally, the bill permanently authorizes full mandatory funding (\$900 million annually) for the Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF). The GAOA also ensures that a minimum of \$15 million in LWCF funding will be dedicated annually to projects primarily configured to increase public access for hunting, recreational shooting, and other forms of outdoor recreation.

The Dingell Conservation Act addresses another aspect of the shift to a 21st century strategy. Public land conservation has become so politically controversial that the disputes are interfering with the delivery of public land values. Addressing this, the Dingell Conservation Act requires federal land management agencies to identify and pursue opportunities to increase access for hunting,

fishing, recreational shooting and other activities. It mandates that a portion of LWCF monies be spent on projects that improve public access to hunt, fish and shoot on inaccessible or difficult to reach federal lands. It declares that applicable federal public lands shall be “open unless closed” to hunting and fishing absent an act of Congress. It also requires the disclosure of Equal Access to Justice Act payments to litigants suing the government over these issues (and others).

Active management of wildlife on the lands and waters of both public and private lands is the other mainstay of the American conservation strategy. The main developments on this have been the big game winter range and migration habitat initiative, Endangered Species Act regulations, and Chronic Wasting Disease. Each of these address areas of conservation that are falling through the cracks in the movement.

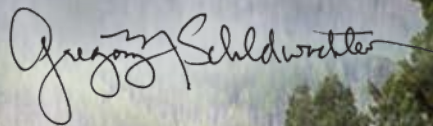
Big game winter range and migration is a component of overall land management that requires focus and coordination outside the routine programs of public land managers. Interior secretary's order 3362 fosters improved collaboration with states and private landowners to

facilitate habitat connectivity for the benefit of western big game populations. Priority states currently include Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, Utah, Washington, and Wyoming. As this has been established at the discretion of the secretary of Interior, it can easily be abandoned by a future secretary. The Club and its partners are advocating its permanent adoption and expansion, particularly to the summer range habitats primarily under the authority of the Department of Agriculture.

The Endangered Species Act was a landmark statement when enacted nearly 50 years ago. Since then, its punitive regulatory provisions have extended protections to many species with very few active programs driving recovery. Even in the few cases of purposeful recovery efforts—such as for the gray wolf and grizzly bear—success on the ground has not been followed easily by the requirement to resume state wildlife agency authority. The Trump administration issued several rules that tweak the program within the bounds of the outdated law. Many more and deeper changes are required to bring this program up to date and to modern understanding of how to recover species and how to fund consistent efforts.

Chronic Wasting Disease, like many diseases, is

proving that in the 21st century, wildlife managers need stronger programs beyond the fundamentals of habitat and population management. This always fatal and difficult-to-detect disease is a threat not only to deer and elk populations but also to hunting and wildlife management. State wildlife agencies are redirecting an average of \$2 million per year per state on surveillance, testing, managing, and response activities. Hunters fear potential health risks as this disease is of the same category as mad cow disease, although transmission to humans is not presently believed possible. The departments of Agriculture and Interior both have authorities to assist the states on CWD, and some progress has been made in recent years to organize and fund their role. As prevalence rates and detections for CWD are rising, the imperative for speedy progress in developing the response is growing apace. ■



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