

THE DIFFERENCE MAKERS ON CONSERVATION POLICY

A wide-angle photograph of a snowy mountain landscape. In the foreground, a herd of about six deer is running diagonally across the frame from the bottom left towards the middle right. They are leaving tracks in the snow. The background shows rolling, snow-covered hills and distant mountain ranges under a clear sky.

What does it take to create and successfully implement conservation policy? How do you craft something that is durable across different administrations? Who can make the key difference in federal policy circles as well as down on the ground where conservation happens?

“POLICY HAS TO REST ON A
FOUNDATION OF GOOD SCIENCE.
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ON THE GROUND IS ESSENTIAL.”

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER, JIM HEFFELFINGER

Since its very beginning, the Boone and Crockett Club and its members have been the difference makers on conservation policy. The famous meeting of influential sportsmen hosted by Theodore Roosevelt and George Bird Grinnell to talk about what could be done to preserve wildlife and wild places was the genesis of the Club. Those individuals laid a foundation that has resulted in numerous policies that are essential components of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation.

The Club continues to play a key role in conservation policy, but in our modern soundbite society it can be difficult to explain the nuances and behind-the-scenes work that result in success—and often success is incremental at best. Frankly, policy isn't sexy, and connecting the dots to how measurable conservation gets done can be a challenge. However, few issues show as clearly how Club members are making a difference for wildlife and landscape conservation than recent efforts for big game migration corridors and winter range.

Current efforts to conserve big game migration corridors and seasonal ranges is emblematic of the critical role that Boone and Crockett Club members play in conservation action.

START WITH THE SCIENCE

Scientific wildlife management is the cornerstone of conservation, and the Boone and Crockett Club has long advocated for the use of science in making land or wildlife management decisions. The science of big game migrations grew dramatically in the early 2000s as GPS collars became lighter, cheaper, and more powerful. The University of Wyoming's Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit used collaring data in new modeling techniques then worked with cartographers at the University of Oregon to map the migration corridors of pronghorn, mule deer, elk, and other big game species. The science and maps clearly showed bottlenecks along the corridors, key seasonal ranges, as well as stopover points.

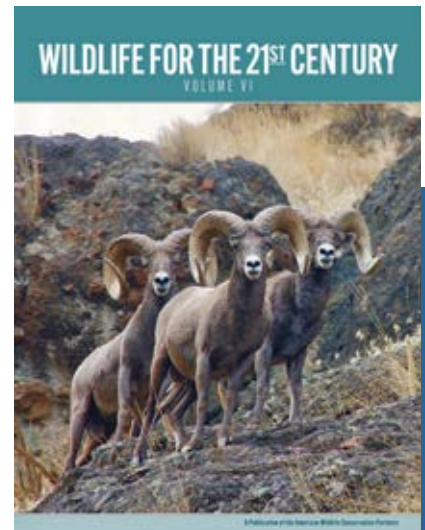
What stems from good science is the opportunity to target conservation actions in the places where they will be the most effective. But who could lead those actions? Big game species are managed by state wildlife agencies, yet

throughout the course of their annual life cycle they pass through or spend long periods of time on federal, state, and private lands. They cross state boundaries, they traverse highways, and they have to navigate numerous fences. With so many different stakeholders in the process, coordinating conservation activities was a challenge.

In 2017, Boone and Crockett Club Professional member Casey Stemler was serving a detail in the office of Deputy Secretary David Bernhardt. Stemler, a career U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee, had experience in field research, congressional affairs, and using science to drive large landscape conservation in the Prairie Pothole Region. Born and raised in the West and a lifelong hunter, he saw the loss of big game winter range and envisioned a conservation effort using the improved migration data to identify the most important areas on a vast landscape to spend limited conservation funds.

"I was in the right place at the right time," says Stemler. "The Department was looking for conservation opportunities and I knew big game migrations was timely and relevant, but also that an organized big game migration corridor and winter range conservation effort would make a tremendous difference on the ground for a whole host of species."

Stemler drafted a concept paper and shared it with Professional member Miles Moretti, then president/CEO of the Mule Deer Foundation (MDF), and Tony Wasley, director of the Nevada Department of Wildlife and a leader in the



Recommendation three in *Wildlife for the 21st Century, Volume 6* states; require collaboration on big game migration corridors and habitats.

Federal-State Coordination Needed:

- Establish a permanent program based on DOI Secretarial Order 3362, with assigned staff and adequate funding for research and implementation by federal and state agencies.
- Develop a companion effort to S.O. 3362 at the U.S. Department of Agriculture through the U.S. Forest Service and Natural Resources Conservation Service.
- Establish a Wildlife Corridors Grant Program to provide matching funds for states and tribes to re-connect wildlife corridors through voluntary partnerships with private landowners, ranchers, farmers, and other stakeholders.

There are 10 recommendations in *Wildlife for the 21st Century*. Read the details for each at www.Boone-Crockett.org.



DOI Big Game Migration Corridor Coordinator Casey Stemler presented background information about Secretarial Order 3362 to state big game biologists learning about new GPS collar modeling techniques.

Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) for review and comment.

Wasley, who is the current president of the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and a pending B&C professional member, notes: “Habitat connectivity and intact corridors are universally essential for functional habitat. States had been working individually on these issues and were very familiar with their piece of ground or jurisdiction. But the key ingredient wasn’t agreement on the importance or need, it was someone who had both field knowledge and policy expertise who could imagine how these things could integrate across the landscape and jurisdictional boundaries. This idea was beautiful in its simplicity—it seemed so obvious, but it had never been done.”

Knowing he had the support of the conservation community, Stemler presented the concept to the Deputy Secretary who carried it forward to then-Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke who embraced the idea. Professional

members Greg Schildwachter and Jeff Crane, president and CEO of the Congressional Sportsmen’s Foundation, note that the Department leadership was primed for conservation opportunity. Through regular meetings with the American Wildlife Conservation Partners (AWCP) and the Hunting and Shooting Sports Conservation Council (both started in part through Club members’ leadership) and based on recommendations from the partners’ *Wildlife for the 21st Century, Volume 5*, the Administration was looking for ways they could support conservation and the sportsmen’s community. Stemler’s big game migration corridor and winter range concept fit the bill, and he was tasked with crafting a secretarial order.

In February 2018, Zinke signed Secretarial Order 3362 Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors during the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo in Salt Lake City, Utah. Moretti notes that choosing to sign the order in the West

at the MDF national convention, surrounded by sportsmen and sportswomen, immediately provided a high level of visibility to the effort. Later that spring, Stemler was hired to implement the order and ensure that the vision of the policy would be effective—it would take significant collaboration across the spectrum of wildlife and land managers. “This was an opportunity for federal agencies to help the states without telling them what they had to do,” Stemler notes. “We were coming to them as a partner and asking how we could work together to make a difference.”

TAKING POLICY TO THE GROUND

When developing policy, thinking through how that policy will be implemented on the ground is essential, and sometimes overlooked. In the case of S.O. 3362, the network of Boone and Crockett Club members helped move implementation forward. Stemler knew that, although this was a federal policy, big game management

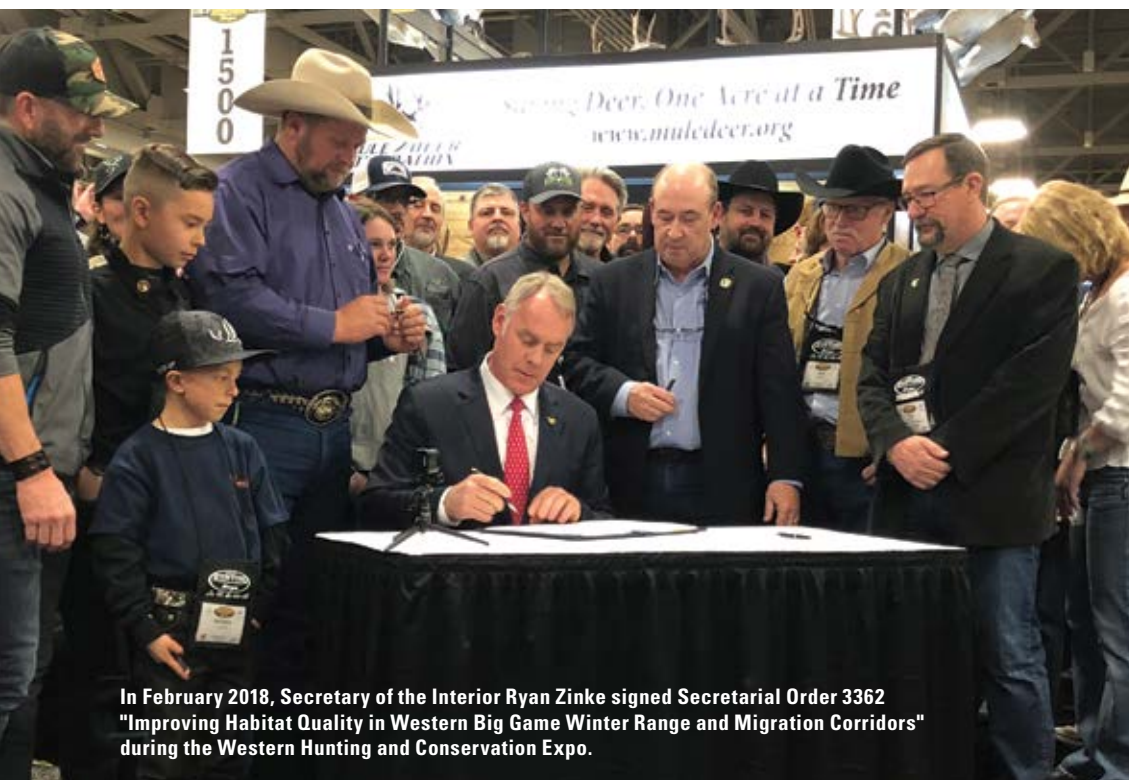
rests with the states and that working in cooperation with the state fish and wildlife agencies was necessary.

“Policy has to rest on a foundation of good science. Using that science to develop policies that work on the ground is essential,” explains Professional member Jim Heffelfinger, wildlife science coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department and chair of the WAFWA Mule Deer Working Group. In 2016, the working group was approached by Matt Kauffman, leader of the Wyoming Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Unit, with an idea to host a series of workshops, from which an interagency corridor mapping team was developed. Shortly after the order was signed, Jim offered his help connecting to this existing network of state big game leads to help identify the biggest concerns.

From this foundation, individual state action plans were developed that highlighted where the priority corridors and seasonal ranges were and identifying the research needs. States that had limited collaring data received funding through the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service’s Science Applications program as well as support and training from the U.S. Geological Survey’s researchers in Wyoming that had revolutionized the mapping methodology.

“I think S.O. 3362 is the greatest example of federal and state collaboration that I have seen in my 30-plus years as a wildlife biologist,” Heffelfinger says. “All of the state agency directors were engaged and excited, and that is because Casey ensured that it was the states driving the bus since they were collecting the data and identifying the priorities that were meshed with federal support.”

State-specific action plans also identified where the greatest habitat concerns were, typically noting the



In February 2018, Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke signed Secretarial Order 3362 "Improving Habitat Quality in Western Big Game Winter Range and Migration Corridors" during the Western Hunting and Conservation Expo.

impacts of habitat loss, fragmentation, or degradation as well as noting barriers to movements including fences and highways. With most corridors crossing a network of federal, state, and private lands, resources were allocated to conservation efforts in these priority areas. The Bureau of Land Management manages 245 million acres, much of it in the West, that often provides core big game winter range habitat. The agency stepped up with funding and prioritization of conservation enhancement efforts. In addition, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Partners for Fish and Wildlife program offered assistance to private landowners and tribes for habitat and fencing modification projects.

Along with federal and state agency efforts, non-profit organizations got engaged by implementing habitat projects on the ground. Through a federal grant program administered by the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation, approximately \$10.5 million was used to kickstart 47 different habitat restoration projects over the first three years of implementation. Perhaps more notable is that \$54.4 million in matching funds were brought to the table for projects ranging from conservation easements to sagebrush restoration projects to transportation infrastructure projects that reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions.

Some of these matching funds, and funding for additional projects, also has a Club connection—Regular member John L. Morris' Bass Pro Shops and Cabela's Outdoor Fund has provided significant funding to the Mule Deer Foundation, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Pheasants Forever, and National Wild Turkey Federation (all with Club professional members in senior leadership positions) for habitat projects in priority areas. The Outdoor Fund also

supports the Boone and Crockett Club's conservation policy program.

In addition to the research and habitat needs, the first round of state action plans spotlighted one overarching concern—highways. All 11 western states included within the order identified wildlife-vehicle collisions as a threat to big game migrations. Stemler reached out to another Professional member, Ed Arnett, chief scientist with the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership (TRCP). The organization engages on policy issues and had worked on federal transportation issues in the past. Arnett was asked to coordinate a conference to discuss this key concern.

Many things came out of that meeting according to Arnett, but of particular note was the recognition that there was no dedicated pot of funding for wildlife crossings. Transportation was a key piece of the corridor process to reduce wildlife-vehicle collisions but also for habitat connectivity. The partners worked to secure federal highway funding, and the recent Senate-passed transportation infrastructure bill includes \$350 million for wildlife overpasses and underpasses.

BACK UP THE POLICY CHAIN, WORKING WITH A NEW ADMINISTRATION

With more than three years of collaborative success on the ground, migration corridors and seasonal ranges have moved back up to the federal policy level. Prior to the 2020 elections, the question of durability was a concern—had the partners created a solid foundation of collaboration and policy implementation that would be sustained no matter who was leading the Department? Schildwachter, Crane, and other policy leaders knew the issue was something that had legs and AWCP included it

explicitly as a priority in *Wildlife for the 21st Century, Volume 6* that was given to both presidential campaigns.

Beyond the hunting-conservation community support, Schildwachter has worked closely with Regular member Simon Roosevelt to coordinate Conservation Roundtable meetings that bring a wide spectrum of conservation and environmental organizations together. The vision is to facilitate conversations to identify the areas of common interest that

lead to better results on the ground—wildlife corridors quickly resonated as one of those issues.

Throughout the implementation process, these roundtable meetings, and the efforts of the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation and other partners, continued to ensure the conservation efforts remained a priority. They also helped affirm that this was an issue supported across a broad spectrum of organizations that could serve as a bridge from one

On September 25, the Boone and Crockett Club supported a wildlife-friendly fence modification on Pole Mountain near Laramie, Wyoming, that was organized by the Mule Deer Foundation. Forty volunteers (below) from local MDF chapters, the University of Wyoming, Laramie Common Outdoor Ground, and the communities of both Cheyenne and Laramie, as well as U.S. Forest Service and MDF staff, participated in the event. Our partners with the Grizzly Outdoor Corps filmed the project and are producing a video that will be posted in early 2022.



B&C Professional member Joel Pedersen, Mule Deer Foundation President and CEO, (left), and Tony Schoonen, Boone and Crockett Club CEO, (right) helped build fences.

,administration to the next.

During the transition and beginning immediately after the Biden Administration took office, the Club and other policy partners promoted this issue as a positive policy action that should continue. Due to these connections, the big game migration corridors effort was explicitly mentioned in Conserving and Restoring America the Beautiful, the new administration's broad plan to conserve 30% of the country's lands and waters by 2030. Schildwachter and Roosevelt say that this is a big first step but advise that implementation must still be project based, targeting the areas where the science directs and ensuring the outcomes are measurable.

Maintaining a focus on big game will also be important. NDOW director Wasley notes that

charismatic megafauna like deer, elk, and pronghorn are something that people can relate to and help explain ecosystem function. They are economically and ecologically important to western states and generally non-controversial, but conservation efforts supporting them help the hundreds of other species that use the landscapes that big game need. In addition, expanding action to the U.S. Department of Agriculture to address summer ranges on U.S. Forest Service lands and increasing the Natural Resources Conservation Service's involvement with big game habitat on private lands will be important.

CLUB LEADERSHIP CONTINUES

While the growth and success of the big game migration corridors and winter range efforts were driven by a wide

variety of partners, there is no doubt that key individuals played a major role. The fact that many of them are Boone and Crockett Club members is not a coincidence. CSF's Crane notes that the Club's network allows the opportunity to identify and define an issue at the macro level in Washington, DC, and drive it to the micro level on the ground.

"Most organizations derive their strength in numbers, but that is not the Club," says Roosevelt. "Our strength comes from a smaller group of individuals who are leaders in the public and private sector of conservation and doing the science that forms the foundation of good policy. As a result, we are in the best position to bring together the thought leaders on wildlife and conservation policy and hunting ethics. Our leadership is recognized and effective no matter what party is in office."

Heffelfinger agrees, "Being a Professional member of the Boone and Crockett Club has put me in touch with the influential people that get conservation done—that was Theodore Roosevelt's vision, and it still works today. The migration corridors effort is a tremendous example of that.

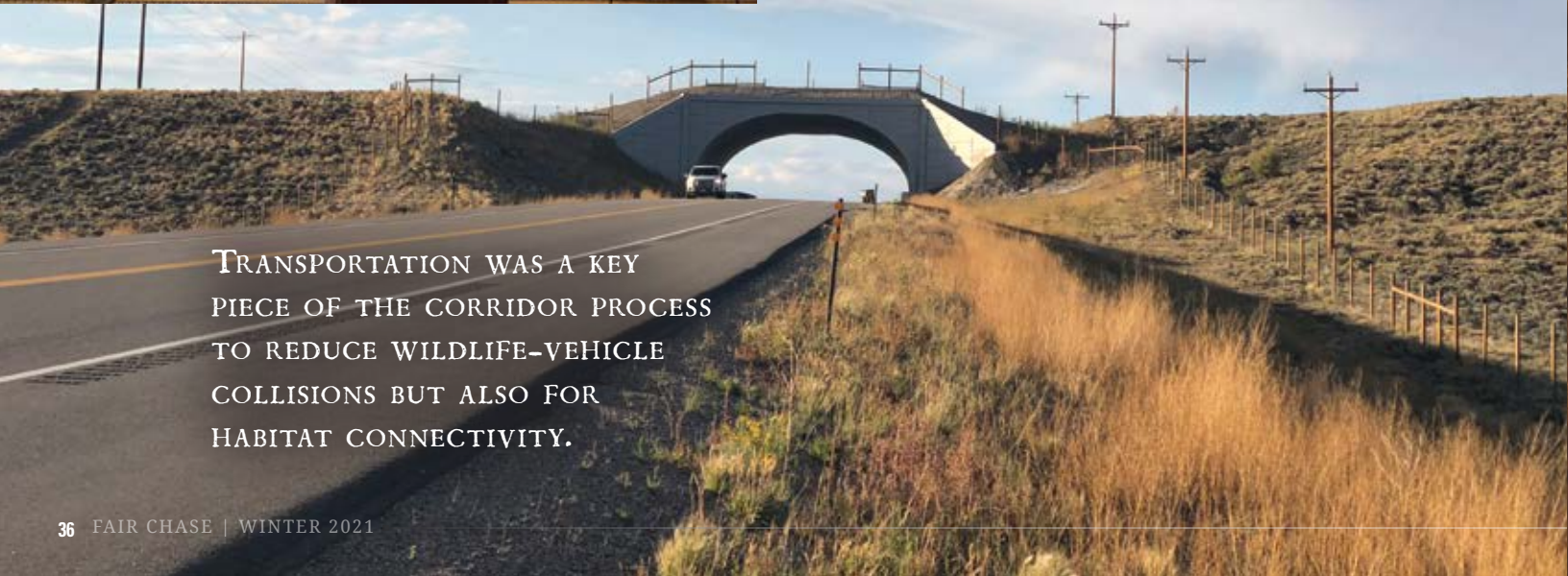
Members provide a nerve network down to the ground for the science and the actual habitat work and can move that expertise back up to drive policy decisions at the state and federal levels."

"Our world is changing at a pace we've never seen before. Little towns are expanding to big towns, suburbs are sprawling with more people living in urban areas, there's increased recreation on our western open spaces—all of these things put pressure on the health of wildlife and our hunting and fishing traditions," Stemler concludes. "This is an example of how the strength of the Boone and Crockett Club can address these challenges through grassroots leadership of the professional and regular members. We need to continue to seek ways to be even more impactful including expanding action to associate members who can raise their voice in local land use decisions."

In every conservation policy success story, there are key players who are the difference makers. The big game migration corridors and winter range efforts show that, once again, Boone and Crockett Club members are those difference makers. ■



Professional member and chair of the WAFWA Mule Deer Working Group Jim Heffelfinger spoke about the science of big game migrations at a 2019 breakfast briefing on Capitol Hill hosted by the Congressional Sportsmen's Foundation.



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