

# TURNING WILDLIFE INTO AN ASSET

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**W**ildlife management has always been difficult in the United States because of divided control. Public agencies—primarily, state game departments or wildlife agencies—are charged with managing wildlife, but private landowners have the best habitat. Conflicts arise as a result. For example, landowners lose crops and forage to wild animals that they cannot control because of strict hunting laws. They may respond by making their land less hospitable to wild animals.

In addition, federal agencies, which control much of the land in the West, have policies that may not foster good habitat for wildlife. The U.S. Forest Service has traditionally concentrated on timber and the Bureau of Land Management on grazing. More recently, wilderness values have dominated land management decisions.

As concern about wildlife protection increases, state managers' jobs are becoming more challenging, not less. The good news is that policy makers can help wildlife, nongame as well as game species, become assets for both private landowners and the public. This handbook will offer four recommendations to help state governments accomplish this goal.

## 1

**ALLOW PRIVATE LANDOWNERS  
TO PROFIT FROM WILDLIFE  
ON THEIR LAND.**

- ✓ IMPROVES HABITAT AND PROVIDES GAME MANAGEMENT AT LOWER COST TO STATE GAME AGENCIES
- ✓ MAKES WILDLIFE AN ASSET TO LANDOWNERS
- ✓ CREATES BETTER WILDLIFE OPPORTUNITIES FOR RECREATIONISTS AND SPORTSMEN

**P**roblems are unavoidable when privately owned land hosts publicly owned wildlife. Too often, landowners bear the costs of wildlife on their property, but receive no benefits. Worse yet, the federal and state governments can impose land-use restrictions in the name of wildlife protection. These restrictions fly in the face of any attempts to provide landowners with incentives to encourage wildlife. State policy makers need to consider incentives for private stewardship of wildlife.

Ranching-for-wildlife programs are one option that have proven beneficial to wildlife, landowners, and state game agencies. Not to be confused with game ranching, ranching for wildlife gives landowners the opportunity to earn income as the result of certain rule changes. Longer hunting seasons are allowed along with a limited number of hunting tags that landowners can sell for hunts on their property. This loosening of restrictions frees landowners to get involved in fee hunting, a growing trend across the West. In addition, the programs provide property-specific game management that helps control wildlife numbers. In return for these benefits, the landowners protect habitat and, in some cases, provide nonfee access to hunters who procure their tags through the state instead of the land-

owner. Best of all, these programs come at little cost to the state.

Landowners greatly appreciate longer seasons because they can shut down the property for a few days either to take care of ranch chores or to let wildlife recover from the stress produced by hunting. When the landowner reopens his property, it is like the first day of hunting season all over again. The longer seasons do not endanger the wildlife because only a set number of ranching-for-wildlife tags are allocated to the landowner based on surveys of game in the area.

Four states in the West have well-established ranching-for-wildlife programs: California, Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. Four more states have fledgling programs: Washington, Oregon, Oklahoma, and Nevada.

Legislators wishing to promote ranching for wildlife can enhance existing programs or establish pilot programs. Existing state programs that designate tags to landowners could simply be expanded to make the tags transferable so that landowners could sell their tags to hunters who wish to take an animal on the property. Pilot programs can help win converts and prove their worth, both of which will be useful when seeking support for a more permanent program.

Legislators might also garner support by allowing some hunters to participate without paying landowners for access. A small portion of the tags designated to a property could go to public hunters selected through the state's hunting lottery.

Based on experiences in states with existing programs, the following recommendations can help assure a successful ranching-for-wildlife program:

- Minimize the bureaucracy so that landowners will enroll and prices will be kept down.
- Eliminate restrictions such as a minimum acreage requirement or a cap on the number of entrants in the program, both of which limit competition and raise hunting prices.

- Educate sportsmen concerning the cost of wildlife to private landowners and the possible benefits for habitat and hunting opportunities when owners are given financial incentives.

Ranching for wildlife can also improve habitat for non-game species. The flexibility in regulations benefits landowners who are helping wildlife through ranch-specific management. For example, creating new watering holes helps both the game and the nongame species that share the same habitat. This type of management also adds value to the hunting experience offered by the landowners. Hunters not only want to take an animal, they also want to enjoy a complete outdoors experience and this includes viewing a wide variety of birds and nongame animals. The better the experience, the more the hunter is willing to pay. Thus, the proceeds from fees for access and hunting help nongame, as well as game animals.

Pooled management of wildlife habitat helps to meet the demand for habitat and hunting on private land that is divided among several owners. At present, many states require a minimum acreage to enroll in their ranching-for-wildlife programs. This policy helps keep administration costs down, while offering hunters larger territories with potentially more wildlife.

A more flexible approach has been adopted in Utah giving even small landowners a chance to participate. While normally landowners must have at least 10,000 acres to enroll, the state allows adjacent landowners with smaller properties to join together as one management unit in order to qualify for the program.

There are many advantages to the type of program offered in Utah. Combining several landowners into one unit lowers administration costs for the program. The cost to landowners is reduced because they can pool their funds to cover enrollment fees. Sportsmen are able to access larger, more

desirable hunting territories, rather than just a single property, as is typically allowed with a ranching-for-wildlife tag. Integrated habitat management improves conditions for wildlife as well as hunting opportunities. And finally, states get better wildlife management at a lower cost.

👉 For more information, see Leal and Grewell (1999).

**2**

**ENCOURAGE LANDOWNERS TO PROVIDE  
HABITAT FOR NONGAME SPECIES WITH  
FLEXIBLE LAND-USE RULES.**

- ✓ REWARDS LANDOWNERS FOR QUALITY HABITAT
- ✓ PROMOTES PROJECTS TO ENHANCE THE ENVIRONMENT

Seventy-five percent of U.S. wildlife live on private land, as do half of all endangered species. It is important to encourage the efforts of landowners who attempt to improve or maintain wildlife habitat on their property. Programs that provide regulatory flexibility are a key ingredient to getting the incentives right.

Consider the story of Dayton Hyde. By spending \$200,000 on wildlife projects, Hyde turned 2,000 acres of his Oregon ranch into valuable fish and wildlife habitat. He built a lake, restored wetlands in 25 percent of his pasture lands, and even formed a foundation dedicated to the improvement of wildlife habitat on private lands. He eventually planned to recoup some of his investment by allowing limited development on his property so people could enjoy living with wildlife as he did. The development was designed to minimize disturbance to the animals, while providing Hyde with some revenue in return for his habitat improvements.

Before the development occurred, however, Oregon adopted a new land-use law that prohibited the conversion of prime agricultural land to other uses. To make matters worse, the passage of the Endangered Species Act (ESA) created another ill-timed liability for Hyde. He was providing habitat to endangered bald eagles as well as a rare species of algae that grows in only six isolated places in the world. With the new legislation, Hyde says, “federal regulators had the authority to shut me down anytime, without compensating me.” According to Hyde, the land-use restrictions and the threat of the ESA forced him and other landowners interested in wildlife to think twice before providing habitat on their own.


Landowners need to be given opportunities to see wildlife as beneficial. Otherwise, the liabilities created by land-use restrictions and the ESA forces them to see only the costs. Regulatory flexibility can be a key component to turning wildlife into assets for private landowners.

In 1979, entrepreneur Peter O’Neill came up with a vision for a housing development that would enhance the environment. Known as River Run, plans for this development along the Boise River in Idaho included a seven-acre lake, watering holes for migratory birds and small animals, and free-flowing trout streams with the only viable spawning grounds on that stretch of the river. O’Neill built all of these environmental amenities into his development, which was completed in 1989.

Despite the enhancements, O’Neill doubts that there will be any more developments like River Run in the area because of increased bureaucratic interference. “The shame of it is that we could not do it today because of a combination of stricter ordinances and a heightened bureaucracy unwilling to explore ‘out of the box’ or ‘entrepreneurial’ solutions to issues,” O’Neill says.

The success of O’Neill’s first project was due in part to help from the Idaho Department of Fish and Game,

which realized the value of his project to the state's wildlife. State wildlife agencies can expedite good projects by setting up fast-track systems to cut through the regulatory bureaucracy. While states can do little about federal regulations like the ESA, they can remove land-use restrictions such as those that have evolved in Idaho and Oregon. These restrictions have the unintended effect of discouraging wildlife-enhancing developments by entrepreneurs such as O'Neill and Hyde.

 For more information, see Anderson and Leal (1997).

**3**

**CHARGE ACCESS FEES ON STATE LANDS  
AND ENTER INTO FEE ARRANGEMENTS  
ON FEDERAL LANDS.**

- ✓ INCREASES REVENUES AND IMPROVES THE CARE OF STATE LANDS
- ✓ MAKES WILDLIFE AN ASSET TO STATE LAND MANAGERS
- ✓ IMPROVES THE ACCOUNTABILITY OF SPORTSMEN AND RECREATIONISTS
- ✓ ENCOURAGES PRIVATE LANDOWNERS TO PROVIDE HABITAT

The private lands/public wildlife dichotomy is not the only problem in dealing with wildlife. Even when public wildlife are located on public lands, problems arise. Free access to state lands creates a disincentive for private landowners to provide habitat and wildlife amenities. A market cannot develop when the private sector must compete with free amenities provided by the government. Evi-

dence of this can be seen in the southern and eastern United States where public lands are fewer and the offering of private recreational amenities is greater.

Another problem is that state lands are often required to earn the highest revenue possible to support public schools. While such a system encourages sound management of several different resources such as grazing lands and forests, it cannot help wildlife. Without fees on hunting and the other recreational amenities provided by wildlife, state land managers are more likely to focus on the resources that bring in revenue. For example, when managers emphasize timber harvesting, wildlife may pay a price.

User fees for hunting, fishing, and other types of recreational access cut down on crowding, vandalism, and wear and tear on trails and campgrounds. Fees also reduce the overharvest of young bucks and bulls that will eventually lead to poor hunting opportunities because of the lack of mature big game males. If the money is directed back into the hunting, fishing, and recreational programs where it was generated, it can help with habitat maintenance and improvement projects. For example, it can be used to create and protect riparian areas, plant trees and critical vegetation, maintain trails and campgrounds, and hire additional biologists.

Crowds of people diminish hunting and other nature experiences. User fees relieve congestion as recreationists must consider the costs of going to a particular area over and over again. While the first trip might be worth the fee, subsequent trips may be of less value. The same is true when choosing to harvest an animal. If there is relatively little expense in taking an additional animal, overharvest of young animals may occur.

The success of user fees in combating human degradation of lands can be seen on the land of two private enterprises that offer recreation, the North Maine Woods and International Paper. In the past, these two organizations



offered recreational opportunities on their land at practically no charge. Littering, arson, vandalism, and damage from off-road vehicle use ended all of that. Both companies began charging for recreational use of their lands and found that user fees reduced the damage from illegal activities. The fees helped to pay for additional support staff to enforce the rules on their land. Higher fees discouraged vandals from entering the recreational areas in the first place, and when damage did occur, fees helped to pay for the repairs. These efforts in turn provided better habitat for wildlife. The same benefits can accrue on public lands with fees for access.

Former chief of the Forest Service Jack Ward Thomas proposed fees for hunting on federal lands as far back as 1984. He countered the notion that fees could turn hunting into a rich man's game by pointing out that fees for hunting access would be relatively small when compared to the overall price hunters pay to outfit themselves and travel to the location of the hunt. He concluded, "The poorest hunter is one without opportunity—including a place to hunt and a quarry to pursue." Without fees, there will be many poor hunters. The opportunities for hunting decline as land uses that bring in revenue push out those that don't. States should encourage partnerships with federal land agencies to develop fee structures for licenses and for daily use that provide more incentives for the land agencies to consider wildlife values. For example, state wildlife agencies might lease habitat from federal agencies and pay for the leases from license fees.

Fees for hunting and other forms of access such as fishing, hiking, ATV-use, etc., on state and federal lands can help create many new wildlife and hunting opportunities, and they can also help support public schools. Since state lands are frequently mandated to earn the greatest possible return to support public schools, it seems only logical that state land managers consider the potential source of in-

come from charging fees. To assure that revenues from fees continue to accrue in the future, the state would have to invest in providing a quality hunting experience. As Jack Ward Thomas wrote, “Hunter fees would go to local governments (to support schools and roads), to state governments (to mitigate problems for private landowners), to the land management agency (to manage wildlife habitat), and to the Federal Treasury (perhaps to be appropriated for wildlife management). Such contributions might enhance the image and influence of hunters.”

👉 For more information, see Fretwell (1999); Thomas (1984).

#### 4

#### ALLOW STATE GAME AGENCIES TO SET HUNTING FEES AND DIVERSIFY THOSE FEES TO REFLECT AN ARRAY OF DEMANDS IN THE HUNTING MARKET.

- ✓ DIVERSIFIES HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES
- ✓ INCREASES FOCUS ON QUALITY RATHER THAN QUANTITY OF WILDLIFE
- ✓ IMPROVES WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Current wildlife management focuses on quantity over quality. This has led to an over abundance of low-quality game at the expense of high-quality animals. In some states, an over abundance of game is to blame for increased depredation to property and more traffic accidents caused by wildlife. The current institutions governing the setting of prices and the budgets of state game agencies deserve some of the blame.

In most states, the legislature sets the price for hunting

tags and licenses, not the game agencies. Normally, these prices only discriminate between resident and nonresident hunters and do not take into account the quality of the hunts provided. The problem with one-size-fits-all pricing is that it ignores the fact that not all hunts are created equal. Hunters are willing to pay more for high success rates and trophy animals. This type of quality hunt offers the state a chance to generate greater revenues at no additional costs.

Fee hunting on private lands and ranching-for-wildlife programs have shown that there is indeed a demand for higher quality hunts and that hunters are willing to pay a premium for the experience. While not all fee-hunting experiences are high priced, they do cost more than the relatively cheap hunts on public lands because of the better quality. In 1998, deer hunters on ranching-for-wildlife lands in California had a 53 percent chance of harvesting a deer compared with only 18 percent statewide. In Colorado during the period 1993 to 1997, elk hunters enjoyed a 70 percent success rate on ranching-for-wildlife properties compared to 38 percent on other lands. Why then are higher success rates not seen on state lands?

Many state game agencies fund their budgets from revenues generated by hunting licenses and tags, but they have little control over the pricing. The legislatures keep fees low in response to pressure from constituents. This helps explain the large disparity between resident and nonresident prices for big game tags.

Since the agencies cannot build their budgets through diversified pricing for hunts of varying quality, the budgetary incentive is to focus on producing more hunts rather than better hunts. In addition, economist Dean Lueck notes that because the formula for allocating Pittman–Robertson federal funding to state wildlife agencies includes hunter numbers, there is further incentive for state agencies to encourage a higher number of hunts. If state game agencies were free to diversify their fees, they would have

more freedom to manage for higher hunter success rates and trophy animals.

There is good evidence that hunters are willing to pay more for certain hunt characteristics. Using data from Colorado's lottery and preference point system, economists David Buschena, Terry Anderson, and Jerry Leonard have shown that hunters are willing to invest more in obtaining preference points for bull elk hunts, better trophies, and early elk seasons. These results suggest that agencies could charge differential prices, collect more revenues, and have more to invest in improving wildlife populations and habitat.

By giving state game agencies more power to set fees and diversify pricing, legislatures could provide an incentive to maximize revenue by maximizing hunter satisfaction. While other factors, such as interest group pressure and bureaucratic organization will provide some counter to the budgetary incentives, these changes would still eventually lead to a greater variety of hunts ranging from those with high success rates and trophy animals at a higher price to those with lower success rates at a lower price.

The marketability and value of different hunts can be seen in the fee hunting markets of the private sector. For example, New Mexico landowners offered deer hunts in 1995 that varied from \$15 to \$4,000. All of these hunts are clearly not offering the same quality or no hunter would be willing to spend \$4,000.

The state of New Mexico has begun to recognize the demand for a variety of hunting opportunities. It currently offers "quality hunts" at a higher price. Quality hunts are defined as providing "an increased opportunity to achieve a successful harvest, a harvest from a wider selection of mature deer or elk, and a pleasurable experience." In 2000, the price of a quality elk hunt is \$756 compared to \$471 for an ordinary mature bull elk. These premiums on quality hunts, however, only apply to nonresident hunters. Resi-

dent hunters pay the same fee of \$66 for a bull elk across the board. State game agencies should be free to experiment with diversified hunting opportunities as the private sector has done.

Diversified pricing also allows the state game agency to charge higher rates for popular hunting areas and lower rates for less frequented hunting grounds. This reduces hunter congestion, provides safer, more enjoyable hunts, and reduces pressure on game in highly hunted areas.

➡ For more information, see Buschena, Anderson, and Leonard (2000); Davis (1995); Lueck (2000); Wenders (1995).

## CONCLUSION

**W**ildlife are held in trust by the states, so it is the duty of the states to give these animals the best chance to flourish. Turning wildlife into assets for both private landowners and public land managers creates an incentive for those most closely involved in wildlife and habitat management to properly steward the animals.

In light of a growing demand for nongame species, an increasing trend toward private wildlife management, and increasing federal control under the Endangered Species Act, state wildlife agencies must explore new policies if they are to avoid becoming obsolete. The above recommendations will go a long way toward turning wildlife into assets and getting the incentives right for wildlife managers as well as public and private land managers.

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