

**Oregon State Bar
Sustainable Future Section**

Photo: J. Michael Mattingly

The Long View

The Hunting and Wildlife Conservation Connection

By Marie Burcham

Hunters and other sportsmen have historically been a strong voice in land and wildlife conservation because their sports require wilderness suitable for game animals to thrive. In the United States today, a significant portion of wildlife and land conservation funding comes from, or is directly related to, the hunting industry.

There are many sources of conservation funding that are related to hunting activities. First, a federal excise tax on ammunition and firearms is authorized by the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, which is also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act. This Act gives wildlife management agencies a predictable source of revenue, allowing them to commit to long-term conservation projects. Another funding avenue for wildlife conservation lies in the sale of state hunting licenses, tags, and associated fees, the cost of which vary from state to state. These “use” fees are then spent, in large part, to manage wildlife and wilderness areas for recreational and conservation purposes. The “Duck Stamp Act” is another major contributor to wildlife conservation because it requires hunters to contribute money and buy “stamps” before hunting waterfowl. Duck Stamp monies are then used, in large part, for wetland reservation and migratory bird protection. In some states these revenue sources are the primary – and sometimes the only – means by which the state funds its wildlife conservation efforts and wildlife management agencies. In addition, hunting clubs and organizations are strong proponents of land reservation and wildlife protection because the availability of healthy game animal populations fuels their sports.

While funds from the sale of permits and tags support the purchase and rehabilitation of land, money from these sources also pays the salaries of wildlife managers, creating a potential for bias toward hunting activities. Impacts on wildlife and biodiversity can be significant and complex when hunters are added to any equation – and not just because hunters remove some animals from an ecosystem. With such bias, game species such as deer, waterfowl, and wild turkeys get more management attention than species that have no immediate value to hunters.

Habitat management for one or a few species can make the ecosystem as a whole unhealthy. Keystone species are plants or animals whose presence determines the vitality and even the existence of the ecosystem in which that species thrives. Unfortunately, only rarely are game species also keystone species, so supporting primarily game animals in an ecosystem may not help the sustainability and biodiversity of the system as a whole. In some cases a keystone species may directly compete with hunters for the same game. Wolves remain a relevant example of a keystone species that has historically been eradicated to the detriment of every ecosystem in which they thrive. Though hunting is only one factor behind the eradication of wolves, it is a significant factor. When wolves are removed from an ecosystem, elk and other large prey animals can overgraze, destroy riparian zones, and degrade sensitive areas that provide habitat for other species. While hunting is a proposed solution to prey animal overpopulation, it is not one that fills the void left by wolves and similar predators because hunters do not take the same animals – namely the old, sick, and weak – that the wolves do when present.

How land is managed for wildlife may also be influenced by the hunting source of wildlife conservation funding. For example, heavily wooded areas may be cleared to create more meadow spaces for deer to forage without necessarily considering impacts on the other species in the area. However, many management strategies do lead to positive results when the health of a game species is also indicative of the health of an ecosystem, or when that ecosystem is supported holistically regardless of the presence of game animals. Controlled burns are a good example of a holistic management strategy that has positive impacts on game and non-game wildlife. These burns, which mimic historic fires in the tall grass and sagebrush of the West and South, stimulate the growth of native grasses and other plants which provide seeds and shelter for game species like sage grouse, wild turkeys, and quail. The burns also have positive impacts for other plant and animal species in these arid ecosystems because they revitalize soil fertility and support native plants over invasive species that have little to no value to wildlife. So, even though bias can affect how land is managed in favor of hunters’ preferred targets, sustaining healthy game animal populations can be consistent with sustaining ecosystem health and biodiversity as a whole.

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Despite the potential issues of bias in wildlife and land management due to the source of funding, without hunters a significant source of monies for these environmental interests would dry up. Given uncertain economics, climate change, and a limited amount of federal and state funding being used for environmental purposes, hunters provide some of the most reliable income for wildlife management agencies. It is no surprise these agencies want to keep hunters happy, because without revenue from excise taxes, Duck Stamp dollars, and sales associated with hunting licenses and tags there would be next to no money available for supporting wildlife. Right now funding from hunting activities gives agencies an ability to manage wildlife conservation when they would not otherwise be able to do so. Concerns about bias can be addressed through a universal wildlife management strategy that supports overall ecosystem health and biodiversity.

Marie Burcham is an attorney practicing in the areas of small business, agriculture, environmental, and animal law. She is interested in finding and forging connections between science and the law.
