

# THE IMPORTANCE OF PRIVATE LANDS TO WILDLIFE

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**From its inception, the Boone and Crockett Club promoted the scientific management of wildlife and wildlife habitat throughout the United States. Much of the Club's focus has been on wildlife management and conservation on public lands in states west of the Mississippi River. This emphasis was driven in part by the large amounts of land in public ownership in the western U.S., and also by the first tenet of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation, which states that wildlife belongs to the public and is managed as a public trust resource. In recent years, the Club has renewed its commitment to natural resource conservation, and strengthened its support for science-based management of those resources on both public and private lands.**

## **BUT, WHY PRIVATE LANDS?**

While wildlife is publicly owned, most of the nation's wildlife habitat for game and non-game species is in private ownership. Approximately 1.42 billion acres or 73 percent of all land in the United States is privately owned. Almost 88 percent of the annual rain and snowfall each year is on private lands. About half of all federally listed, threatened, and endangered species have at least 80 percent of their habitats on non-federal lands,

the vast majority of which is privately owned. Over 100 bird species have more than half of their breeding grounds on private lands.

Draw a line from the Dakotas, south to Texas, and in every state east of that line except Florida, Michigan, Minnesota, and New York, private land ownership exceeds 80 percent. While private landowners have various reasons for owning land, the three major land uses are forestry, agriculture, and ranching. The Boone and Crockett Club has the opportunity and also the challenge of serving as the national leader in balancing land use objectives with conservation priorities; ensuring that wildlife habitat and fair chase hunting experiences will exist for future generations of hunters and conservationists.

## **MEETING THE CHALLENGE**

The Boone and Crockett Club is uniquely positioned to integrate science with management of wildlife and natural resources on private lands. Dr. E.O. Wilson, Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, recently attracted attention with his writings about a "long landscape" corridor strategy for conserving up to half of the country for wildlife habitat. While his overall goal is ambitious, the core idea is sound, and is one that translates well to a landscape conservation strategy for the Club. The first step is to identify priority areas for private land wildlife management initiatives that promote habitat for big game and other wildlife species. Then assemble the public and private landowner stakeholders to the table to identify opportunities for meaningful conservation and habitat management. Lastly, work using existing programs and policies, as well

as new administrative efforts and programs to incentivize the project, particularly on private lands. Throughout this process there is a need to build support at the grassroots levels—support from landowners, academia, local politicians, hunters, and other land users. I have observed this approach to be effective for the conservation of black bear and restoration of long-leaf pine in the southern United States, and I believe it could be an equally effective model for future conservation efforts in which the Boone and Crockett Club can have a meaningful role every step of the way.

## **OUR TIME IS NOW**

The time is right for the Boone and Crockett Club to increase our conservation and stewardship mission on private lands, especially in the eastern and southern United States; and to emerge as a thought leader for science-based wildlife management and conservation of natural resources on private and public lands. How can we succeed?

The Boone and Crockett Club and our members need to be engaged thought leaders in major conservation initiatives. Landscape-scale wildlife conservation strategies that retain working forests, working farms, and working ranches, and that promote science-based wildlife management of our natural resources are some of the best ways to unite wildlife professionals and private land owners. The Boone and Crockett Club and our base of regular and professional members, is uniquely positioned to move this strategy forward.

Advocacy will play a major role in furthering wildlife management on private lands. Legislation or policy that provides incentives for

private landowners to manage their lands in a way that benefits the public trust doctrine of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation can pay huge dividends to all of us who own, manage, or hunt on private lands; while legislation or policy that increases the regulatory burden on, or cost of ownership of private lands can cripple conservation or habitat initiatives on those lands, or even worse, result in unintended conversion of those lands to a use not compatible with wildlife management.

The Club must remain true to the vision of our founders; a vision that has carried the club forward since 1887. The mission of the Boone and Crockett Club includes the phrase, "...promote the conservation and management of wildlife, especially big game, and its habitat; to preserve and encourage hunting; and to maintain the highest ethical standards of fair chase and sportsmanship..." Club members as far back as founder Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold were strong advocates for science as a base for natural resource management decisions.

As a natural resources manager, a certified wildlife biologist, a hunter, and a professional member of the Boone and Crockett Club, I believe we must be involved in conservation and management of private lands. If we can meet the challenge of engaging as a thought leader on natural resource issues and strategies, and be tireless advocates for legislation and policy that encourages science-based wildlife management on private lands, and if we remain true to the vision that is the Boone and Crockett Club, we will successfully meet the challenge of maintaining wildlife habitat and hunting opportunities on private and public lands. ■