

PUBLIC LANDS— THE HISTORY

RUSS MASON

Chief of the Wildlife Division of the
Michigan Department of Natural Resources

Unfortunately, it is almost easier for hunter-conservationists to develop meaningful programs and partnerships with states and agencies to enhance and maximize private lands for the benefit of fish, wildlife, and threatened species.

A significant amount of habitat management dollars and personal effort has been initiated by some species-specific NGOs. Members have also given generously to purchase conservation easements for public access and to improve habitat. All of the NGO's share our frustration with efforts to motivate the agencies to fulfill their commitments to the American public. An excellent article was published in the recent Ruffed Grouse Society magazine (June 2015 issue) as part of the President's Message on this very subject. This year the Ruffed Grouse Society filed a petition for rulemaking with the United States Forest Service (USFS) in Washington D.C. to deal with their underperformance in meeting the main goals in the law for regions eight and nine. Rule-making is not a lawsuit, but legal action is often required if rulemaking is not properly addressed. The USFS has twelve months to respond to the petition. It appears that we

have come full circle from the late 1800s and 1900s when most of our public land administration was formal and managed aggressively to protect and enhance the habitat on a sustainable-use basis. We are now so conflicted that we utilize litigation and rulemaking and political posturing, which can end up hurting us all. To alleviate frustration by all parties affected means something new is needed soon!

Approving the H.R. 2647, or the "Resilient Federal Forests Act of 2015" could be one step in the right direction. This bill, which was just passed in the House, is currently in the hands of the U.S. Senate. United States Senators John Barrasso of Wyoming and Ron Wyden of Oregon have introduced other related bills, as have Senator Martin Heinrich of New Mexico and Jeff Flake of Arizona. Along with these more bills are likely, including one bill from the Energy and Natural Resources Committee Chair Lisa Murkowski of Alaska. The Boone and Crockett Club will continue working with these Senators and others toward the same goal we have supported in the House; namely, a faster pace of forest habitat restoration. ■



In the beginning, public lands were established as a practical expression of the Neoromantic desire to preserve wildlife and other natural resources. Later, forestry emerged as a professional discipline, together with the concepts of conservation and wise use. Particularly in the West, states were poorly equipped and in some instances actively opposed to conservation. For that reason, the federal government and the U.S. Forest Service were the first to prove the practical value of public land and sustainable use.

In the 21st century, particularly in the Midwest and eastern United States, circumstances have changed. The ability and capacity of federal agencies to effectively manage lands has diminished due to a lack of funding as well as laws (e.g., National Environmental Policy Act) intended to improve transparency and public participation in decision-making. Largely unfettered by similar legal constraints, states have taken the lead in actively managing landscapes in genuine partnership with stakeholders for the benefit of wildlife. As well, states are leaders when it comes to integrating multiple emerging demands on public lands in ways that are compatible with sustainable use.

Consider Michigan. Natural resources conservation and the importance of public lands to wildlife, hunting, fishing, and other forms of outdoor recreation are central to the state's heritage and catalysts for economic

recovery and reinvention. Michigan's 4.6 million acres of state-managed public lands comprise the backbone of a \$22.2 billion tourism industry. There are 1,300 boating access sites and 84 public harbors that support a \$4 billion boating industry, and provide hunting and fishing opportunities that generate \$4.7 billion annually. As well, these public lands are the drivers of a \$16 billion timber industry and provide 1.1 trillion cubic feet of natural gas storage capacity in the 6.4 million acres of mineral rights underneath. Coordinated sustainable use not only provides abundant recreational opportunity but supports industries that, in turn, accomplish the habitat work upon which wildlife depend (e.g., by ensuring tree species diversity and proper age structures).

Regardless of ownership or the fact that management is funded almost exclusively through license fees and federal matching funds, public lands provide the path and the lens through which most people, whether or not they hunt or fish, define and encounter wildlife and their habitats. More often than not, these lands provide examples of good management and functional ecosystems. This reflects agency mandates to provide for sustainable populations of all wildlife. Public land provides the backbone by which natural systems (i.e., habitats, rare occurrences, and all wildlife) are sustained throughout North America.

Much of the time, public lands provide key opportunities for encounters that blossom into appreciation and support. Yet this is not always the case. Sometimes preconceptions, parochial views, and resentment of government in general become catalysts for conflict. Consider periodic outbreaks



© MARK MESSING

of the Sage Brush Rebellion, simplistic conceptions of ecosystem balance, and Agenda 21 as examples. At a more local level, uninformed aesthetic preferences of what, how, and why management occurs are frequent causes of conflict. The wildlife management importance of clear-cuts can be missed in stridently expressed aesthetic preferences for old-growth forests.

Perhaps the most persistent and pervasive issue facing public lands management is the growing divide among various user groups. Put otherwise, there is no longer a conservation community (if there ever was) that consistently works together for the benefit of public lands. Different user groups fight among themselves and with agency professionals over management strategies that favor some species (e.g., deer) or activities (e.g., hunting) over others (e.g., songbirds or bird-watching). This divide manifests in calls for more or better management, where “more” and “better” are usually code for sectarian expressions of self-interest. As well,

because public lands are available to all and used for a range of wildlife-related and other recreational activities, there is the perception that the quality must be less than that of privately managed lands. John Gierach pointed out that a pond behind a fence is always more attractive.

One role that the Boone and Crockett Club can assume is the branding of conservation. Just as the word environmentalist lacks a clear definition, so too, conservation remains mostly in the eye of the beholder. The North American Model of Wildlife Conservation’s fiduciary analogy of trustees, managers, and beneficiaries, while glib, is a poor description of day-to-day natural resources management. In the absence of some firm baseline, there is no easily defended starting point from which to judge what constitutes or does not constitute acceptable practice. Some clear compass of what fits within the definition of wise, sustainable use is increasingly important as natural resources become a centerpiece to our quality of life. ■

PUBLIC LANDS— THE SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

JOHN F. ORGAN

B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER

Director of the Cooperative Fish
and Wildlife Research Units

Many people consider the state and federal investment in public land ownership in the United States to be our greatest conservation legacy. The saying, “They’re not making land anymore.” is often invoked by advocates for further public land acquisition. Recent legislative efforts to dispose federal lands underscore the fact that many people are divided over whether these resources represent a legacy or a liability. This article summarizes some basic facts about the relevance of public lands to hunting, challenges in public lands management, and the Boone and Crockett Club’s history in regard to this resource.

My generation of wildlife biologists was taught from day one that wildlife needed three things: food, cover, and water. Thus, the quantity and quality of habitat became a driving force in wildlife management. Aldo Leopold in his epic, “Game Surveys of the North Central States,” funded by the Sporting Arms and Manufacturers Institute in the late 1920s, came to realize that private agricultural lands were key to game production in the upper Midwest, and thus Leopold advocated for

rewarding or subsidizing farmers as part of the American Game Policy in 1930. Private land wildlife incentives, best exemplified in the Partners for Fish and Wildlife Program and the conservation provisions of the Farm Bill, are testaments to the vision of Leopold and the recognition that we will never be able to outright purchase enough land to meet public demands for sustainable wildlife resources. So what value do public lands provide?

The Boone and Crockett Club played a significant role in the establishment of federal lands for conservation. George Bird Grinnell is responsible for the establishment of Glacier National Park, like Charles Sheldon is responsible for Denali, and also Theodore Roosevelt for millions of acres of National Forests, National Wildlife Refuges, and other federal lands. The Club in many of its early books, including *American Big Game Hunting*, *Hunting and Conservation*, *American Big Game and its Haunts*, and *Hunting at High Altitudes* emphasized the importance of federal protected lands for conservation.

Public lands of all kinds in the United States – not just those for conservation – amount to around 40 percent of the total land area. Those lands open to hunting comprise a lesser amount. The National Survey of Hunting, Fishing, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, conducted every five years by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the U.S. Census Bureau, has

Many studies on hunter attitudes, behavior, and motivations have identified access to hunting areas as a major concern, and a barrier to recruitment of new hunters.

