

EVOLUTION OF THE AMERICAN SYSTEM OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION FUNDING

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Conservation of fish and wildlife in the United States is unlike conservation anywhere else in the world. Like many nations, we began our conservation story in the throes of wildlife depletion. Rapid settlement of lands in the 19th century, booming population growth by the turn of the 20th century, unregulated harvest of wildlife across the centuries, and the depths of the Depression and the Dust Bowl culminated in accelerating loss of habitat and near-extermination of America's most iconic wildlife.

By 1937, whitetail deer were almost non-existent, having been extirpated from Indiana as early as 1893. Further west, pronghorn and bighorn sheep populations were on the precipice of collapse. Nationwide, beavers had almost disappeared, and wild turkeys were at the edge of extinction.

Fortunately for conservation, 1937 marked not the end of wildlife but the beginning of the greatest story in wildlife restoration. On September 2, 1937, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed into law the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act, which is commonly known as the Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Act—an act strongly supported by the Boone and Crockett Club and one that would set the precedent for future wildlife conservation in America.

The act established an excise tax on guns and ammo and directed those moneys to be used by the states for restoration and scientific management of wildlife. P-R was later supplemented by excise taxes on fishing equipment for sport fish restoration by the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act of 1950, which is commonly known as the Dingell-Johnson (D-J) Act, by adding bows and arrows,

motorboat fuel, and other sporting products.

What makes the 1937 act and its successors so remarkable is not the sheer amount of excise taxes collected for conservation but the conservation funding model and partnership it spawned.

State fish and game agencies existed in 1937 but were, without exception, strapped for cash. Hunting and fishing fees and fines collected for violations were barely enough to cover the cost of enforcing hunting and fishing laws. In South Carolina, for example, a game warden's salary was 50 percent of whatever he collected from fines. Budgets for scientific management of wildlife, not to mention recovery of depleted iconic species, were effectively zero.

After 1937 everything changed. Funding to implement the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation (North American Model) was set in motion by establishing a dynamic partnership between: (1) the hunters and anglers who pay hunting and fishing fees and who purchase sporting equipment subject to excise taxes; (2) the industries that produce those products and pay the excise taxes on them; (3) the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program (WSFR) that administers and distributes funds from the excise tax to all 56 states and territories; and (4) the states and territories that use those fees and excise taxes to conserve wildlife in America.

The dollar figures are impressive. Since 1937, the Wildlife Restoration Fund has distributed over \$15 billion to wildlife management, and hunters have paid \$6.4 billion in hunting fees toward the same. Since 1950, the Sport Fish Restoration Fund has distributed over \$12 billion to

fisheries management and boating, and anglers have paid more than \$6.5 billion in fees to complement those funds. In all, over \$40 billion has been invested in fish and wildlife restoration and management—a conservative figure that does not include other fee and revenue sources available to individual states for fish and wildlife management.

Success of the Pittman-Roberson Act and the partnership it enabled is dramatic. In the first 10 years of P-R, 38 states acquired almost a million acres of land for use as wildlife management areas, most of which were dedicated to habitat reclamation and wildlife relocation. By 1951, Indiana had 5,000 whitetail deer; by 1970, 50,000. Pronghorn populations recovered to 1.1 million and beavers returned in abundance to their historic range. Waterfowl hunting days increased from no season in 1937 to between 50-150 days in the 50 states. Similar trends over this same period occurred for turkey and whitetail deer in the East and elk and mule deer in the West. In the past 25 years, 41 percent of P-R dollars have gone toward habitat development and management, 5 percent for acquisition (purchase or lease), 14 percent for wildlife surveys, 14 percent for research and technical assistance, 14 percent for program planning and coordination, and 12 percent for hunter and archery education.

Fisheries in America reaped similar benefits from the Dingell-Johnson Act and the partnership that stands behind it. Over the past 25 years, 14 percent of D-J dollars have gone toward fisheries research and technical assistance, 24 percent for fisheries surveys, 5 percent for aquatic education, 20 percent for boating and fish access and operations, 24 percent toward fish stocking and development, 8



percent for program planning and coordination, and 5 percent toward improvement of fish habitat. More significantly, almost half of the cost of inland fisheries conservation nationwide is covered by D-J dollars. Together, P-R and D-J funds have provided the financial resources that state and territorial fish and game agencies need to fulfill their conservation mandate to restore and scientifically manage a diversity of species. Despite its notable success, the Wildlife and Sports Fish Restoration Program is not stagnant. It is evolving to meet the changing circumstances and needs of wildlife conservation in America.

The most notable change is that of focus. After almost 80 years of reversing the legacy of the past, the Program and its partners are shifting from restoration to management of wildlife and fish to meet multiple-use objectives that include sustainability of all species and the integrity of supporting ecosystems. This shift is not surprising. With few exceptions, big game species are no longer at threatened levels. Indeed, the explosion of whitetail deer populations in the East and elk populations in the West has created a new set of conservation challenges. The priority is no longer to save deer and elk, but rather to balance their populations with the needs of hunters and, in Aldo Leopold's terminology, the land communities where they dwell. Management of species, whether terrestrial or aquatic, means preserving all of the parts of the underlying ecosystem.

None of this is inconsistent with the original intent of the Wildlife Restoration and Sport Fish Restoration acts. Imbedded in both is the acknowledgment of the importance of non-game prey species and

habitat to the health and sustainability of hunted and fished species. Nowhere is this more evident than in a 1939 letter Aldo Leopold wrote to Albert Day, chief of federal aid in wildlife restoration, Bureau of Biological Survey (predecessor to the USFWS and WSFR) to ask if P-R funds could be spent on bird and mammal species "without any gunpowder value." Within six days of Leopold sending the letter, Day responded affirmatively: P-R funds could indeed be spent on "wild birds and mammals which do not have any hunting value..."

The Program continues to evolve in the direction of inclusivity for all species and their habitats. In 2000, Congress authorized the State Wildlife Grant Program (SWG), under WSFR administration, and authorized the first appropriation of \$77 million in 2002 for the conservation of state-determined species of greatest conservation need (SGCN). Since then, more than \$800 million in state wildlife grants have been allocated to the states and territories by WSFR for SGCN conservation.

In part, the SWG program is an acknowledgement of the ongoing shift in how Americans perceive and engage in wildlife recreation. The National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife Associated Recreation reported in 2011 that 90.1 million Americans (38 percent of the U.S. population) engaged in some aspect of wildlife recreation. Hunters accounted for 13.7 million and anglers 33.1 million. Significantly, the overwhelming majority of wildlife recreationists neither hunted nor fished: instead, they viewed wildlife for pleasure.

Changing American attitudes toward uses of wildlife explain, in part, the evolution in the implementation of the North American Model

toward more comprehensive wildlife and habitat management. Nonetheless, internal changes within the WSFR program are also having significant impacts by strengthening the Model and nudging it in new directions.

For example, WSFR recently inaugurated a project performance reporting system called TRACS to give the U.S. funding partnership a better handle on how well conservation dollars are being spent on projects at the state level and the species and habitat outcomes achieved. This information is essential for the Program and its partnership to thrive. Associated with outcome reporting, WSFR is also inaugurating five-year reports on the overall performance of the program in promoting and achieving programmatic goals. In effect, these five-year interval reports will shed light on the effectiveness of the WSFR state, federal, private, and industry partnership in achieving the wildlife values sought by the American people.

Finally, WSFR, at the urging of Congress, is working with the states and territories to direct increasing amounts of SWG funding to address the needs of imperiled species

designated "candidate species" under the Endangered Species Act. The importance of this cannot be overstated. Keeping species common should be a goal of all of us. Once listed, often adversely, hunters and anglers, the sporting industry, the USFWS, and the state and territory agencies are often left with the greatest burden.

All of these changes are important and understandable, but they do not diminish the spirit or the partnership that stands behind the WSFR funding system—or its continuing importance today. Despite dramatic shifts in public uses and perceptions of wildlife, the core of the American system of conservation funding is intact: hunters and anglers, and the industries that outfit them, are and will remain the funding engine for fish and wildlife conservation in America. Wildlife viewers watch but do not pay. Hunters and anglers do—as do the industries that manufacture guns, ammo, rods, reels, and boat fuel. Serendipitously, this means that the contributions of a few will continue to sustain the public benefits of abundant wildlife and healthy landscapes for all Americans for decades to come. ■

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