

WILDLIFE ISSUE...

PRESERVATION vs. MANAGEMENT

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SINCE THE environmental movement in the United States has gained momentum and support, wildlife management and research also have gained the public's attention. This has created mixed emotions among wildlife managers. It would seem that public support of wildlife, in general, would please wildlife managers, but there are problems associated with public awareness. These develop when people are misinformed regarding the facts related to wildlife populations.

Many people, particularly those in an urbanized society, associate wildlife well-being with preservation. Preservation, or total protection, can spell doom to certain wildlife populations. An experience on Saint Matthew Island, Alaska, demonstrated this. Twenty-nine reindeer introduced onto this island in 1944 increased to 6,000 in 1963. There were no natural enemies and no hunting. In the following winter the herd experienced a massive die-off and less than 50 animals remained. The vegetation on the island had been severely changed and the lichens, the principal food of the reindeer, were completely eliminated.

Another classic example occurred on the Kaibab Plateau in Arizona when in the 1920s a herd of about 3,000 mule deer was given total protection by the federal government. An intensive predator control program was also started and the herd grew to 100,000 animals. Within six years a major part of the range was destroyed and 70,000 mule deer starved to death. Deaths continued until 1930 when, with about 15,000 deer remaining, annual hunting seasons were established and annual cropping of deer was initiated. Unfortunately, the area was so badly damaged by overbrowsing by the deer that the sanctuary was turned into a wasteland with severe erosion leaving its scars. There are other examples with a similar history which have occurred over various regions of the country.

Wildlife populations as well as human populations are controlled in numbers by the habitat available. A given habitat will support a given number of animals. If the number of animals is at less than capacity, they will rapidly increase until each niche in the habitat is filled. Once these niches are filled the animals will have lowered production and increased mortality.

This is a simplified model and other factors may influence the population, but this model applies in most circumstances. Animals unchecked will destroy their own habitat.

In some cases, populations must be protected such as when factors, as determined by qualified researchers, interfere with natural increases in population. To apply preservation principles across the board will not necessarily result in more wildlife, but in most instances it will result in destruction of habitat. When this happens, not only will the animal concerned be harmed, but other animals in the habitat will also suffer. We cannot apply a simplified preservation idea to an animal population that is ecologically tied to many other animals in the habitat.

The anti-hunting movement, which is gaining momentum, is a popular concept to promote when all the facts are not known. Films such as Stanley Kramer's "Bless the Beasts and Children" and television productions such as David Wolpers' "Say Goodbye" are very effective in aligning public opinion against hunting. It is unfortunate that the total story was not told. Hunting, used as a management tool, provides one method of harvesting surplus animals in a population to protect the habitat from destruction. The anti-hunter says "let it balance itself," but it is doubtful if the anti-hunter would want to take credit for massive die-offs associated with a "balance itself" approach.

Perhaps before modern man altered or destroyed much of the wildlife habitat by urbanization, certain agricultural practices, pollution and some forms of predator control, a "balance itself" approach would be the method of choice.

We do not live in those times and we must do the best with what we have. Sound management practices based upon good research are what we must depend upon. Which is more cruel, a program of regulated and controlled hunting of surplus animals, or a "boom and bust" cycle of a population of animals resulting in disease and starvation in a destroyed habitat?

The record of species of animals becoming extinct from the hunter's gun is often cited in anti-hunting propaganda. The important fact omitted is that these historic events were brought about by the market



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hunter who had no restrictions or regulations. It was a financial enterprise not based on knowledge of the resources.

Wildlife research has provided the information needed for wildlife managers to regulate sport-hunting and since its advent in this country, not a single wildlife species has been exterminated by the sportsman-hunter, and no species is currently in danger of extinction from legal sport hunting. Contrary to most belief, many hunted species are in greater abundance today than in the past.

Aldo Leopold, a leading conservationist in this country, wrote in 1925, "We have learned that game, to be successfully conserved, must be positively produced rather than negatively protected . . . We have learned that game is a crop, which nature will grow and grow abundantly, provided only that we furnish the seed and a suitable environment." Wildlife research provides the information necessary to carry out the principles set forth by Aldo Leopold.

It is the sport hunter who has provided the sole means to support wildlife research through the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 which has collected more than \$450 million from an 11 per cent excise tax on sporting arms and ammunition. Additional support from the hunter comes from more than \$110 million a year spent on licenses and permits. Private hunter groups also contribute. Ducks Unlimited, for instance, has spent more than \$17 million to build and restore waterfowl nesting habitat. To date the nonhunting public has not contributed to this effort, but benefits from the programs supported by the hunter that provide habitat and wildlife for him to observe and photograph.

To "whitewash" all hunters with these statistics would be as bad as condemning all preservationists. Many so-called hunter-sportsmen are a discredit to

principles of wildlife conservation, but in a group of over 14 million persons (1970), there are bound to be those who do not or will not abide by rules of good conduct in the field.

Many persons support the preservation movement based upon a sincere concern for animals, and in particular for each individual animal. Their concern is well founded and should not be condemned; however, when dealing in populations of wild animals, it must be the well-being and health of the population that is considered. This makes it very difficult for the person concerned for each individual animal to understand "cropping" of a population for its own benefit. The starving animal versus the hunted animal must be compared by this person to make a final judgement.

Anti-hunting forces argue that the money provided for wildlife research and restoration by the hunter is only directed toward game animals. This argument is only valid to the extent that the primary concern of hunters and state game departments has been game animals. But in providing habitat for game animals by controlling pollution, land planning, construction projects and other activities, the associated nongame animals have also benefited. Each species in a habitat is ecologically tied to the others and, in general, it is a mutually beneficial process. Habitat created for one species results in more and better habitat for other species.

Rather than undermining existing wildlife management programs, which include research on game species, the anti-hunting forces should rally their efforts toward supporting similar programs on non-game species. This would provide additional information to be utilized by wildlife professionals to better manage our resources for a total habitat approach. The information is needed and efforts by preservationists and anti-hunting forces in this positive way would be most welcome. ■

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MARCH - APRIL 1974

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