



BY DR. CHARLES E. KAY

# DOOMED

## *For Failure?*

*Is the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation Doomed for Failure?*

There has been a recent spate of articles touting the virtues of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. While I would be among the first to admit that our system of wildlife management has been very successful in the past, it is in my professional opinion that we may also have inadvertently sown the seeds of hunting's ultimate demise. Even Dr. Val Geist, who has been an outspoken supporter of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, is having second thoughts.

Wildlife management in North America is based on two founding principles. First that fish and wildlife are to be reserved for the non-commercial use of individual hunters and anglers, and second, that wildlife populations shall be actively managed so that wildlife numbers can be maintained at optimal levels for this and all future generations. These tenants, in turn, are supported by what are called the seven pillars, or seven sisters of the North American Model

of Wildlife Conservation—the most important being that wildlife is a public trust resource. Under the U.S. Constitution, powers not specifically delegated to the federal government are reserved for the states. Since wildlife is not mentioned in the U.S. Constitution, this has been interpreted to mean that wildlife belongs to the states. Another critical element is that science, not emotion or politics, should guide wildlife management so that viable populations of game species are forever maintained.

It also needs to be remembered that hunters, as a group, are the ones who saved wildlife in North America. Sportsmen took the lead in both restoring wildlife and protecting habitat long before there was any environmental movement. Moreover, hunters are the only people who paid the bill by seeing that all state license fees were spent only on wildlife management. In addition to state license fees, sportsmen





worked to have federal excise taxes placed on all hunting and fishing equipment with those monies earmarked solely for state wildlife management. No other group in the West has ever taxed themselves to support wildlife. Furthermore, to minimize political entanglements, western state fish and game agencies normally do not receive any general fund appropriations from their respective state legislatures. Thus, unless you buy a hunting or fishing license or hunting and fishing equipment, you do not support wildlife management in your state.



Photo - Denver Bryan/ImagesOnTheWildside

*Throughout the West, mountain lions alone are killing four times more mule deer and blacktails than licensed hunters.*

While the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation has generally worked well in the past, today it is under serious threat due to predation, as Dr. Geist has correctly noted. Predation, and the associated problems of declining hunter participation and the failure to recruit the next generation of hunters. It has been known for some time that predation by a suite of carnivores, such as wolves, bears, and mountain lions, will reduce hunter harvest by 90% or more. While study after study has shown that the average age of big-game hunters is steadily increasing because younger hunters are not being recruited due to ever-declining hunting opportunities. Throughout the West, mountain lions alone are killing four times more mule deer and blacktails than licensed hunters. In Utah this Fall, the general rifle mule deer season has been cut to 5 days, while on Vancouver Island, black-

tail harvest has declined from over 25,000 deer per year to less than 3,000 a year since wolves and mountain lions were protected. It is extremely difficult to interest young adults in hunting with such short seasons and their associated low success rates. More importantly, without the fees collected from deer and elk hunters, state wildlife management is doomed. In Montana, resident big-game hunters harvest over 90% of the deer and elk taken each year while paying less than 10% of the big-game fees collected by the state. Non-resident big-game hunters, on

the other hand, harvest less than 10% of the deer and elk but contribute over 90% of the big-game license revenue collected by the state. Montana then uses the money collected from non-resident, big-game hunters to subsidize just about every other program run by the Department of Fish, Wildlife, and Parks. Sport fishing does not pay its own way, nor bird hunting, nor resident big-game hunting, and especially not non-game wildlife. Similar situations exist in Idaho, Wyoming, and Colorado. In Wyoming, for instance, the state game and fish agency spends over one million dollars a year on grizzly bear management. Where does that money come from? Primarily, deer and elk hunters. It certainly does not come from the groups, such as Defenders of Wildlife, who sued to keep grizzlies on the endangered species list. In Idaho, as introduced wolves have decimated the

state's major deer and elk herds, non-resident license sales have declined and are jeopardizing wildlife budgets.

Which brings us to the other major threat to the North American system of wildlife conservation—the increasing role of the federal government and the courts in wildlife management. In addition to the Endangered Species Act, there is the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Wild Horse and Burro Act, and a host of other federal laws and regula-



*It should be remembered that hunters, as a group, are the ones who saved wildlife in North America...long before there was any environmental movement. Shown above is a MDF bitterbrush planting project in northern Utah.*

tions that have all usurped state management of wildlife. The federal government has done this primarily under the Commerce and Treaty clauses of the U.S. Constitution. Only the federal government can regulate commerce between the states, which is how the feds claim jurisdiction over endangered species, while international treaties are the supreme law of the land, which is how the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service took control of migratory birds. Plus there are a host of treaties most people have never heard about, such as the treaty on biodiversity, that have reduced the states' ability to manage wildlife.

Again, the cornerstone of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is that the states hold wildlife in trust for their citizens. In practice this means that the states own

wildlife, but do they? If you or I shoot a deer or elk without the proper license, we are subject to both criminal and civil penalties. In Montana, the civil fine for illegally killing a 4-point mule deer or a 6-point elk is \$8,000 per animal with lesser amounts for antlerless deer and elk. The federal government has no license to kill elk in Montana, Idaho, or Wyoming, but the federally-owned wolves that were introduced over state objections are now killing a minimum of 24,000 elk a year. At an average of \$2,000 per elk that is \$48,000,000 a year, and if summed over the history of wolf recovery is well over \$300,000,000. Now, as far as I know, neither Idaho, Montana, or Wyoming has ever sent a bill to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service for all the state wildlife that has been, and is being, killed by the federally-mandated wolves. So who really owns wildlife? It must be the feds? Who else could get away with poaching on such a massive scale?

As noted earlier, in addition to state license fees, there are federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment. Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds are supposed to be returned to the states by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service based on a congressionally set formula. During the Clinton years, however, around \$60,000,000 of P-R and D-J money went missing, some of which was used to illegally fund wolf recovery while other P-R and D-J dollars wound up in the coffers of anti-hunting groups. The person in charge of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at that time is now the Executive Vice-President of the Defenders of Wildlife, the same group that has repeatedly sued to keep wolves and other predators on the Endangered Species List. Shockingly, none of the states ever asked for any of the missing \$60,000,000 back or even demanded an audit. The states were afraid that if they spoke up, the feds would find some excuse to cut off other D-J and P-R monies. Such are the tentacles of the federal government. And what happened to the courageous Fish and Wildlife Service employee, Jim Beers, who exposed this

scandal? In essence, he was fired for telling the truth after 32 years of exemplary public service. With examples like this, it is easy to see why some people claim that once proud and independent state fish and game agencies are now little more than minions of the federal government and why the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation is headed for a major train wreck.

A while back an attempt was made to place excise taxes on general outdoor



*Study after study show that the average age of today's big-game hunter is steadily increasing. Young hunters must be recruited into our sport, as without big-game hunters to pay the bills, wildlife management is ultimately doomed.*

equipment to fund non-game wildlife. This would have been similar to the federal excise taxes that sportsmen and women pay on all hunting and fishing equipment. You would have thought the new tax was a slam dunk what with opinion poll after opinion poll showing that the general public overwhelmingly supports wildlife, but the proposed non-game excise tax did not even come close to passing. It turns out that talk, public opinion, is cheap while only hunters and fisherman are willing, financially, to support wildlife conservation. To reiterate, without big-game hunters to pay the bills, wildlife management is ultimately doomed.