

Letter from the Editor

Is community-based conservation the future of wildlife management?



IN SEPTEMBER 2015, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) punctuated a decade-long deliberation whether to list the greater sage-grouse (*Centrocercus urophasianus*; sage-grouse) for protection under the U.S. Endangered Species Act with an unwarranted decision. In the decision, the USFWS lauded the success of unprecedented wide efforts that had mitigated the immediate species conservation threats.

Before the listing decision, the media referred the sage-grouse listing decision process as the new “War for the West.” I am somewhat familiar with the concept of war. In addition to being a Vietnam War era draftee, I was mobilized in 2003 as part the international coalition that invaded Iraq. The unit I commanded spend 454 days providing preventive medicine support to forward operating bases. We logged >140,000 convoy miles in theater.

A soldier’s mission in war is to defeat the enemy as quickly as possible. To quote General Patton, “No bastard ever won a war by dying for his country...He won it by making some other poor dumb bastard die for theirs...”

War is inherently violent. War affects the local population and the families of the soldiers who fight it. Ultimately, those yet to be born bear the real costs. As I thought more about the sage-grouse decision process as a war, I wondered if the same principles embraced by North Vietnamese leaders to win their war might also apply. North Vietnamese leaders followed the teachings of the thirteenth century general and Chinese philosopher Sun Tsu, whose basic tenet of winning war was to “know thy self and know thy enemy, a thousand battles, a thousand victories.” North Vietnam’s leaders realized they could not defeat the U.S. military on the battlefield, but they could win the war if they could outlast it. Their goal was simple—to kill and/or maim as many of the enemy as possible, and in doing so, ultimately reshape U.S. public opinion and policy.

To fight the “sage-grouse war,” opposing factions engaged public opinion, social media, the courts, congress, and the political process as weapons to gain victory. However, those most affected by conservation policies, the people who live and work in the communities in the sagebrush (*Artemisia* spp.) biome—often referred to as the working landscape—opted for the non-combative alternative strategy of voluntary conservation. This issue of *Human–Wildlife Interactions* is dedicated to telling the story of how local communities in the western United States came together to work cooperatively to fight their war. In doing so, they learned more about each other, and the resources they wanted to manage, while actively managing them.

Because of their persistence and successes, the knowledge and values of these local communities are now being increasing sought and acknowledged by federal and state agencies and non-governmental organizations as valuable contributions to natural resources conservation and management. The success of these relationships has been linked to reciprocity and transparency in information exchange, common goals, enhanced understanding of rules of law and social processes, and shared scientific discovery that collectively created a foundation for mutual trust. These social engagement processes, often referred to as local working groups (LWGs), are enhancing the connectedness of communities to government and shaping individual and group action leading to increased ownership and positive outcomes.

However, even given the recent innovative successes involving the sage-grouse, wolves (*Canis lupis*), and other species, there remain practical and policy challenges and unresolved questions regarding how government and those who do not live in the affected communities view and will respond to communities empowered to make public land resource management decisions. In this issue, the authors explore these questions in greater depth.

Terry A. Messmer, Editor-in-Chief
