

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT IN WILDLIFE DAMAGE MANAGEMENT: THE SITUATION IN WISCONSIN

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Wisconsin currently supports record populations of white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*), Canada geese (*Branta canadensis*), and wild turkeys (*Meleagris gallopavo*). These species are real or perceived causes of substantial wildlife damage, and many sectors of the public (i.e., farmers, motorists, suburbanites, etc.) are impacted. Thus public interest, both in a broad sense and in the form of special interest groups, is intense.

Historically, there have been numerous channels for public involvement in wildlife damage decisions in Wisconsin. The Conservation Congress, a citizens advisory body to the Wisconsin Natural Resources Board, has been active in the integration of damage concerns and management programs. The farm lobby is very powerful in Wisconsin, and farmers are represented by the Farm Bureau, the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, and very vocal pressure groups such as Farmers for Acceptable Resource Management (FARM). FARM was formed solely as a response to "excessive deer damage." *Ad hoc* citizens groups have formed primarily to address local issues (i.e., urban deer problems). Also, extensive postal surveys have been conducted to inform wildlife managers on public attitudes and knowledge of all 3 key species.

The most recent opportunity for public involvement was a citizens' *ad hoc* committee on deer management, appointed by the Natural Resources Board in response to a deer herd and attendant problems that were perceived by some people as "out of control." The key directive of the committee's mission statement was "...to develop recommendations to guide the Natural Resources Board and Department of Natural Resources (DNR) personnel in the development of deer season structures that can be easily adjusted to changing conditions in deer habitat and numbers to avoid future crisis situations." The charge was a major task in a state with 1.3 million deer, 750,000 deer hunters, and diverse opinions on the future of deer man-

agement. The committee consisted of 12 representatives of the hunting public, tourism, agriculture, forestry, and Wisconsin Bands of Lake Superior Chippewa Indians, and was supported by DNR deer biologists as resource people.

The committee met 7 times in a small work-group format at a central, neutral location, over a 5-month period. Discussion was open, controlled, and well documented by support staff with flip charts and computers. Consensus on important issues was first achieved by nominal group technique, and then by a two-thirds vote of committee members present. Group dynamics were excellent, and after discussions and compromise, most recommendations were passed by unanimous vote. Twenty-three recommendations, some potentially controversial, were presented to the Natural Resources Board in September 1991. Committee members expressed universal satisfaction over the final committee report and in several cases, under criticism from their constituents, members became highly defensive of the entire committee and its product.

The key factors that contributed to the success of this committee which I believe can be generalized to assist similar public efforts are as follows: (1) a well-balanced group representing all the key stakeholders; (2) each individual possessed credibility and authority within his/her organization; (3) meetings were not attended by unsolicited speakers or the media; (4) the committee Chair managed meetings within set schedules and did not allow tangential, hostile, or excessive discussion; (5) meetings were well supported by printed material and DNR experts; and (6) publicity was controlled and recommendations were not released until the report was finalized and in the hands of the Natural Resources Board.

The citizens committee was able to meet its charge, and I believe, will have significant impact on deer management in Wisconsin during the next decade.