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Broken Pledges, Ducked Decisions

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Abstract

Wildlife bureaucracies originally designed to help hunters and fishermen have become less concerned with enhancing populations of game while becoming more engaged in non-game programs. Having mismanaged game on lands they control, governmental agencies and some national non-governmental conservation organizations now threaten private landowners' initiatives to protect and manage wildlife. Limited entry on private land should be given more serious consideration as a way to preserve wildlife and enhance sporting experiences.

INTRODUCTION

Since the generation that spawned the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its fifty state variants is long gone, younger conservationists seem largely unaware that these bureaucracies were originally designed to help hunters and fishermen in the same way that the Department of Agriculture was designed to help farmers and ranchers. Unlike the farmers and ranchers, however, sportsmen were able and willing to pay for what they wanted out of license fees and earmarked taxes rather than using money siphoned from general revenues. Fish and wildlife agencies could raise fees and expand their bureaucracies so long as they kept their covenant with sportsmen to increase fish and game.

For the first eighty or so years of conservation history, hunters and fishermen were represented by coalitions of clubs politically organized along the lines of the farmers' grange system. From 1886, with the founding of the first Audubon bird clubs by hunter and ornithologist George Bird Grinnell and the creation of a Division of Economic Ornithology and Mammalogy by hunter and mammalogist C. Hart Merriam in the federal Agriculture Commission, a close working relationship has existed between government and non-governmental organizations concerned with the perpetuation of American wildlife. The heyday of this cooperation came in the 1930s when the Pittman-Robertson Act was written by executives of the National Wildlife Federation and Ducks Unlimited was founded to do on the Canadian side of the border what the U.S. Department of the Interior was trying to do in the Lower Forty-Eight to protect wetlands

and enhance waterfowl production. Over the past century, the blending of private initiative with public authority has resulted in almost every substantial milestone in conservation history.

DECLINING WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

Times have changed. Everywhere human populations are smothering the planet's capacity to renew itself. Hunter and conservationist Fairfield Osborn, who was also president of the New York Zoological Society, saw the problem as far back as the Thoughtless Fifties when he published a pair of books entitled *Our Plundered Planet* and *The Limits of the Earth*. Osborn understood that the sportsman is on the frontline in the battle to preserve nature because he requires two essentials for an optimum outdoor experience: the sight of lots of game and the sight of nobody else but his guide or other people in his party. The man on the street may still believe there is lots of room out there, but the sportsman knows that this is no longer true. Increasingly, he finds himself crawling over a mountain ridge or floating around a river bend, anticipating opportunity, but finding instead a crowd of people already there.

Yet rather than acknowledge that quality outdoor recreation is based on limited entry—whether such limited access results from a sparse human population or is imposed by law—American politicians insist that any form of exclusion is elitist and undemocratic. By extending such logic, we may expect that one day every baby born in this country will be entitled to go to Harvard or Stanford. After all, testing

and grades are inherently discriminatory. Whereas the word *discrimination* once implied high standards and taste, today it suggests only bigotry.

Thus, in the name of democracy and access for all, most state resource agencies continue to drag their heels on developing substantive testing for hunting and fishing licenses. For a majority of conservation agencies, it appears that perpetuating jobs and promoting bureaucracy is more important than perpetuating game and promoting quality outdoor recreation. In the process, the sportsman's reputation has been devalued, and slob hunters and fishermen are driving ethical wildlife consumers from the field. Rather than go to the heart of these problems with an apprentice system like the ones successfully pioneered by the Germans and Czechs—European peoples whose non-hunting majorities hold hunters in high esteem—conservation agencies in the United States petition legislatures for more money to hire more wardens. The wardens, in turn, convert outdoor recreation into a law-and-order issue. (I expect to see any day now a television show about the stake-out and arrest of fly-tiers who dare to use undocumented starling feathers or children who try to sell bait without a license.)

So long as hunters and fishermen believed their fees were going to stock streams, restore big game, and pay for the enforcement of sensible laws protecting wildlife, they accepted periodic raises in the cost of their licenses. Now, however, sportsmen have learned that stream stocking is an ecological no-no—unless it is to re-establish a long-lost species or subspecies which few, if any, anglers will be allowed to fish for or keep if they catch by mistake—and that states have gone just about as far with big-game restoration as they intend to go and presently spend an increasingly larger share of their budgets trying to re-establish rare or endangered non-game species. Sportsmen even find their money being used to subsidize state publications that duplicate and compete with information and services provided by private sector magazines which support themselves and pay a profit to investors through circulation and advertising. Yet, whereas the editorial staff of *Field & Stream* feels increasingly queasy about publicizing hotspots and encouraging still more people to use them, conservation agency information officers appear to feel no shame at all for doing the same thing.

So long as sportsmen believed that state agencies were primarily concerned with enhancing populations of game, they were content to indulge the state's non-game programs and the conceit of publicly funded outdoor magazines. But the quality of hunting and fishing has fallen off so dramatically most everywhere in the past fifteen years that sportsmen are understandably reluctant to see any part of their license fees and taxes used for other purposes, espe-

cially if those purposes are likely to lead to conflicts with game species or end up preventing hunters from using a national wildlife refuge system they helped create in the first place.

Not long ago, I toured several national wildlife refuges here in the West deemed critical to the North American Waterfowl Management Plan. State agencies had decided to introduce otters to these refuges, even though in the case of at least one refuge, historical records provided only the most circumstantial evidence that otters ever existed there. The very fact that that watershed had traditionally been a prime waterfowl production area suggests the opposite, for otters love to harry waterfowl. On my coastal farm in Virginia, for example, I have seen a hooded merganser jump straight into the air like a pintail to escape the torpedo-like bulge of an attacking otter in shallow water. On my farm, the giant aquatic weasels have even killed nesting Canada geese.

Refuge managers who use funds from the North American Waterfowl Management Plan, yet simultaneously accept otters from the state, are deceiving themselves and the public when they say there is no conflict. They call what they are doing "ecological management," which is an oxymoron because that phrase generally translates into no management at all. Once otters are established and begin making inroads on nesting canvasbacks and grebes, there is nothing refuge managers can do about it. The public at large, conditioned by preservation-oriented nature films, will never allow those managers to harm a single hair on an otter's hide, even if canvasbacks—already down to fewer than half a million birds—were to become even scarcer than at present.

BUREAUCRATIC THREATS TO PRIVATE WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Private landowners, however, still have the ability to choose, which means a genuine capacity to manage wildlife. But for how much longer? I rent the hunting rights on my farm each year to a small group of sportsmen who are just as happy to see otters as I am. They do not begrudge them an occasional merganser or even a goose. But locally breeding blackducks is another matter. Today, they are possibly rarer in the mid-Atlantic region than otters. If otters kill many nesting blackduck hens—and as such birds continue to decline, otter predation becomes more significant—my renters would expect me to add otters to the raccoons and foxes I currently trap and remove each winter.

This statement is likely to incur disapproval. Some people, particularly those who work for states or for the federal government, may reflexively wonder if I

am legally entitled to trap otters. The answer is, yes. But why would they think of such a question except to condemn or enforce a personal moral judgment?

Is an otter worth more than a black duck? For that matter, is an otter worth more than a mallard? The answer depends on local circumstances that only local landowners or surrogate local public land managers can determine. The difference is that whereas I, a private landowner, still have some capacity to act based on the best available information, public land managers increasingly do not. And since nature sentimentalists have succeeded in making a mockery of the word *management* on public land, they are now working to destroy its validity on private land as well.

Yet, rather than help private landowners remain independent of such environmental extremism, state resource agencies frequently play into the extremists' hands. In South Carolina, for example, a strict interpretation by the state of laws affecting wetlands prohibits landowners from repairing centuries-old rice dikes and controlling (meaning *managing*) water levels in adjacent fields, thereby giving the landowners an opportunity to grow and flood grains to attract waterfowl and improve shooting. Yet when the state acquires such diked land, the laws are overlooked, the dikes are repaired, and a new public shooting ground is created. The difference is that whereas the private landowner would have restricted shooting to no more than a couple of days a week, the public ground is hunted relentlessly from dawn to dusk, day after day, and is soon burned out. Who is doing more to sustain wintering waterfowl: the sportsman/landowner who wants to see many more birds than he kills, or the public land user who wants to kill all he sees?

In Michigan, we have the absurd case of Richard and Nancy Delene who bought 2,400 acres on the Sturgeon River in 1981 and set out to enhance its biodiversity. In April 1993, the Barga County Soil and Water Conservation District made Richard Delene its "Outstanding Agricultural Cooperator of the Year." At the banquet, Cooperative Extension Director Jim Krench said, "[Delene] believed in wetlands well before it was fashionable. . . . He used his own land, equipment, and money to develop . . . wildlife ponds. One thing you can't help but realize is when he's [out near the ponds], he comes alive with enthusiasm. There's a spark." Meanwhile, in April 1994, Michigan was suing Delene for failing to get all the proper permits. No one in the state denied that Delene's work represents a net gain for wildlife; the bureaucrats were merely miffed that he started without their authorization. Michigan was seeking a permanent injunction on any further habitat enhancement by Delene and demanding he put his land back the way it was or face fines in excess of \$1.2 million.

Not all state agencies are as arrogant as those of South Carolina and Michigan. In late April and early May 1994, the Virginia Tech Cooperative Extension Service and the Virginia Department of Forestry sponsored a series of seminars entitled "Private Property Rights—How To Stay in Control of Your Land." The purpose was not only to give landowners "a better understanding of the public policies, environmental regulations and taxes that offset your management options," but also to help landowners "develop management strategies that will minimize the impact of these policies on achieving your landowning goals" and discuss "the steps to be taken to modify laws and regulations that [landowners] may not find in [their] best interests."

Virginia, I fear, is an exception to most states' indifference to landowners' concerns just as Washington State's new program to develop stricter standards for the licensing of hunters is an exception to the generally superficial attitude by the states toward hunter education. What compounds the frustration of our best and brightest sportsmen and landowners is that the non-governmental organizations which once represented them in the political arena no longer do so. The suburban-bred administrators of main-line non-governmental organizations appear to share their public counterparts' view that landowners are not to be trusted with nature. The only kind of management the non-governmental conservation community is willing to accept is "ecosystem management" which, as noted before, usually means no management at all.

What was once a conservation calling has become merely a job but with the prospect of a six-figure salary, if an ambitious person remembers never to stick his or her neck out too far on behalf of principle. Cash flow has become the principal criterion of conservation success. Is it any wonder the non-governmental organizations outdo even governmental agencies in their preference for profitable sentiment over thankless science?

Most non-governmental organizations still serving the sportsmen do so through single-species programs focused on private lands. Contrast, for example, the phenomenal growth of Quail Unlimited with the corresponding decline of Ducks Unlimited. The difference is that, although both organizations promise more birds, it is easier for Quail Unlimited to deliver on its promise with non-migratory quail on private farms and managed woodlands that have restricted shooting and ample predator control than it is for Ducks Unlimited to sustain even a tiny fraction of the formerly fabulous flights of highly migratory wildfowl which are shot at from dawn to dusk on almost every public marsh they visit. Furthermore, until Ducks Unlimited starts spending money for predator control on wetlands it already leases rather

than trying to acquire still more acreage to enhance a total that exceeds the organization's capacity for proper management, Ducks Unlimited will continue to fail in its fundamental mission to provide more ducks.

The action in waterfowl conservation today has shifted from Ducks Unlimited to local groups in states like California, Minnesota, and Wisconsin. A dramatic way to demonstrate the importance of this shift is to compare what Ducks Unlimited has done in a two-county area of eastern Virginia with what a homegrown club of do-it-yourselfers is doing in the same area. For the past twenty years, the Eastern Shore chapter of Ducks Unlimited has raised an average of \$20,000 a year at its annual banquet. To date, only about \$15,000 of the more than \$400,000 sent by the chapter to Ducks Unlimited headquarters has been returned to the two counties to protect or restore local wetlands. Of even greater importance, however, these wetlands produce no more waterfowl today than they did before Ducks Unlimited helped acquire them.

Meanwhile, a five-year-old organization called the Eastern Shore Waterfowl Trust, that relies entirely on volunteer labor, has put up and maintained over 400 woodduck nesting boxes, more than 50 Canada goose nesting structures and, with financial assistance from both the Agriculture and Interior departments, improved wetland habitats in at least nine locations in both counties. Furthermore, Trust members trap raccoons and foxes in the winter to give nesting blackducks and mallards a better chance of survival the following spring, and remove snapping turtles in April and May to give ducklings a better chance of fledging. This has all been accomplished at a total expenditure of under \$30,000—including the lion's share that Uncle Sam chipped in. It does not take an accounting genius to calculate which organization is giving local waterfowl enthusiasts more ducks for their bucks.

In the eastern half of this nation, most conservation initiatives are still being carried out on private property by private citizens. State biologists may be cannon-netting and collaring geese or drugging bears and pulling teeth, but the data they develop are doing little or nothing to put more geese or bears into the system. What wildlife needs today is not more monitoring, but more fundamental gamekeeping—more predator control on behalf of scarce waterfowl and more culling on behalf of overly abundant deer. Yet gamekeeping is spurned by bureaucrats and academics reluctant to make unpopular decisions and obviously happier with computer models than the untidy and politically charged world of nature.

What sportsmen find most offensive about public resource policies today is that they are promulgated with the underlying attitude that government knows

best. The angry response of governmental agencies and their non-governmental allies to the swelling Land Rights and Wise Use Movements reveals how arrogant, self-protective, and ignorant of the outdoor recreational crisis such bureaucracies have become.

I am neither a Wise User nor a Land Rights Rebel. But I am a good enough journalist to sense something significant when an audit report (#92-1-833) by the Department of the Interior's Inspector General citing The Nature Conservancy, The Trust For Public Land, and, to a lesser degree, the Conservation Fund for what amounts to graft is ignored by nearly every newspaper and magazine in the country. When I tried to sell my own story about the Inspector General's findings, liberal editors did not like it because The Nature Conservancy is one of their most sacred of Sacred Cows, and conservative publishers would not run it because many influential Americans are making a lot of money out of their cozy relationship with the Conservancy.

Since I thought the story important, however, and since I wanted to combine what the Inspector General had found with my own discovery of mismanagement on Nature Conservancy farm lands, I gave my article to the *Land Rights Letter*, a publication, as its subhead says, "for Americans dedicated to preserving our heritage of private property rights." By appearing in such a "radical rag," the facts of the matter were even more shunned than before by the polite press. It seems that my journalistic colleagues find it more fun to work up anxiety about gays in the military than to publicize the fact that The Nature Conservancy is buying land with public money at more than market value, and that some of this land may have slight ecological merit.

Yet just how radical is the *Land Rights Letter*? Its founder and on-going publisher is a 42-year-old mother of two who lives on a 300-acre farm in Maryland. Ann Graham Corcoran holds an undergraduate degree in wildlife biology from Rutgers University and a master's degree in environmental science from Yale University. At various times in her life, she has worked for the National Rifle Association, the National Audubon Society, and The Nature Conservancy. This latter employment revealed to her the contrast between what The Nature Conservancy's pretty publications say it is doing and what it is actually up to. And since what it and comparable organizations are up to is opposed to the private management of wildlife, Ann decided it was time to blow the whistle with her own newsletter.

The basic problem with The Nature Conservancy is, not that it has a master plan, but that it has no plan at all. For over a decade, it has largely improvised policies as it has gone along, mostly in response to faddish thinking and market forces which have little to do with genuine wildlife management. As

someone who, like Ann Corcoran, was formerly quite close to the organization, I can attest that although The Nature Conservancy once accomplished a lot with surprisingly little, its inclination to wheel and deal has gradually overwhelmed fiscal and scientific restraint. Whereas The Nature Conservancy's *raison d'être* was once to acquire unquestionably valuable wildlife lands at pre-speculation prices and turn the properties over to management-oriented public agencies like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, The Nature Conservancy is now happy to accept a family farm which the previous owner thought would be protected in perpetuity, sell the land to a developer, take the profit and use it to buy property of not always proven ecological worth, often above fair market value, in order to flesh out a refuge whose manager does not have sufficient funds or political support to manage the land for which he is already responsible.

CONCLUSION

A journalist's job is to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable. The American sportsman is presently afflicted by too many comfortable state conservation agencies and non-governmental organiza-

tions. At a time when most sportsmen—particularly those living on the eastern half of the continent—have begun to realize that the future of outdoor recreation lies within the private sector, they are increasingly harassed by public and non-governmental organization officials who insist that private initiatives are inherently wrong. Instead of receiving the educational and financial support we need to do the work that the government is no longer able or willing to do, land-owning sportsmen are treated as environmental Neanderthals by the very agencies and organizations we helped create.

Hunting and fishing in America may never again be what they were when, as Captain John Smith noted, immigrants expected to be masters of their own labor and land. But hunting and fishing can continue to be viable and respected forms of outdoor recreation, even as they are in a Europe where wild boar are hunted in crowded Belgium, wolves still roam the mountains of Italy, and conspecifics of our own grizzly bear still dig roots and rodents from the Pyrenees to the Balkans. Limited entry on private land has long been the key to preserving wildlife in Europe. Isn't it about time we explored the European example to find ways of stopping the fruitless practice of trying to put whatever is left of wild America under the aegis of inherently mediocre public agencies?