

WILDLIFE RECREATION ON PRIVATE LAND - A LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Wayne Long
Dye Creek Preserve and Field Station
Red Bluff, California

Abstract: Wildlife on private land is a resource that should be managed by the landowner. However, in reality, very few landowners manage their wildlife. The primary reason is that they see little, if any, benefit in doing so.

What is required is further research and work into the possibilities of managing wildlife on a more economic basis, so that a landowner will be able to treat it as any other crop. The benefits from a landowner managing his wildlife are many fold. Besides giving him a supplemental income, it puts more land under wildlife management, makes more game and land available to the sportsman, and indirectly lessens the pressure on public hunting areas. An added and important feature is that it should make more jobs available to the professional wildlife manager.

If the wildlife profession can come up with the required answers to managing wildlife on an economic basis, the future of wildlife recreation on private land is a bright one.

Before talking about the future of hunting on private land, I would first like to dwell a minute on the history of hunting in this country. During Davey Crockett's day, and as late as 100 years ago in our own Western States, a rifle and a shotgun were more tools of labor than of leisure. During the settlement of the West they were the tools that provided the meat on the table. Most of us in this room have heard stories from either our father or grandfathers concerning woolly hunting jaunts, jaunts not for pleasure but for meat. This is not saying, however, that the majority of them didn't enjoy their hunting. As the West was settled and vast agricultural production developed, it became less necessary for the man of the house to supplement the groceries with wild game. During those days, however, most housewives were happy to help father pick the ducks or cut up the venison. Today, most women cannot imagine why their husbands spend so much time sitting out in a stinky

marsh in the wet and cold to shoot a couple of ducks, ducks that make a mess of her kitchen, and that she isn't overly fond of either. Quite a change from the old days, I must say. Today the pursuing of game is considered a recreation activity, done during one's leisure.

What are some of the other changes in hunting this country has experienced? There are a few species of game no longer with us, as well as other species that are near extinction. There has been a drastic reduction in the land that is available on which to hunt. There are now smaller bag limits to contend with; besides, the hunter must follow a multitude of rules and regulations. The hardest change for him to live with, though, I think, is the realization that the country is no longer one big, happy hunting ground. It has been our heritage that the game belongs to us, and that we have the right to hunt it, no matter where. All of us have probably experienced the lousy feeling of suddenly being closed out of a favorite hunting or fishing spot by the appearance of a "No Trespassing" sign. Our first reaction is, "They cannot do that to me." Today the hunter who has a rancher friend who still invites him to hunt is a very fortunate man indeed.

In some areas of the country there are so many hunters, and so few places to hunt, it appears that a saturation point has been reached, a point where hunting interest, instead of growing as it has since World War II, is leveling off, or even declining. In a Bureau of Outdoor Recreation publication, "Outdoor Recreation Trends", April 1967, they have the following figures: Of fifteen different outdoor recreation activities, between the years 1960 and 1965, only one showed a decline in participation. That was hunting. While the population increased 8% during that period, the number of individuals participating in hunting activities dropped by 1%. This compared to a 12% increase in fishing activities and a 35% increase in camping activities. I am sure we won't have to worry about the hunter becoming a disappearing race; however, it is not something to rejoice about, either. We must remember that the source of financial support for wildlife management and preservation programs clearly comes from the hunter. It is hard to imagine, then, much expansion in our State and Federal management programs. Also, we must realize that with a decreasing percentage of the population hunting, legislative support may become increasingly difficult. We might ask, too, just where the jobs are going to be for the new crops of game managers who will be continually coming out of the colleges and universities in larger numbers each year.

These, I think, are important questions and problems that are facing our profession. Possibly we should, then, be more concerned with this trend of less hunting interest. Why this decrease in hunting interest?

Earlier I mentioned some of the changes that the hunters have had to contend with, changes or problems that all boil down to the fact that most hunters lack success and/or a quality experience while in the field. The unattached deer hunter in California cannot expect to bag his buck more than once in every eight years. This in itself is bad enough, but while in the woods he is also likely to meet his neighbor or someone like him behind most any rock. The one thing he wanted besides a reasonable chance at bagging his deer, was not any neighbors, at least not behind every rock.

It is presently difficult in California for the majority of deer hunters to find a good hunting place; that is, without expending one heck of a lot of effort. Much of the same is true of waterfowl hunting, where if you don't have to wait in line for hours to gain access to a shooting area, you will still have to contend with the possibilities of someone else shooting over your decoys or spooking birds before they are within gun range. So what is happening? In this state some continue to put up with it, with the better hunters still managing to get home with meat most of the time. Some have put up their guns for good, while others are now concentrating their hunting efforts in other states. This increased gain in popularity of hunting out of state is not only a loss of revenue to the game department, but even a bigger loss to the general economy of the state. Instead of the hunter spending his money in California, he is spending it in Nevada, Wyoming, Idaho, or other states where he can have hunting success and hunting conditions more to his liking. You game people from Nevada are no doubt happy to see the California hunter, as are the casinos.

However, I understand this welcome is losing some of its luster and you are finding it increasingly difficult to handle the large influx of out of state hunters, which, of course, are predominately Californians. Well, you may now wonder what this all has to do with the future of hunting on private land. I like to think very much, for I think that the private sector can help appreciably with some of these problems.

First let's consider ownership of land in the United States. Two-thirds of the nation's land is in private ownership. In the Eastern States the proportions are much higher than here in the West. In California it is roughly half and half. However, virtually all of the more fertile areas where the majority of our upland game and waterfowl are found is on private land. In many cases, however, private land is hunted very little, and if hunted, it is not managed to benefit wildlife. The potential for this state and most others to produce wildlife on private land for hunting purposes is tremendous, a potential that I think has hardly been touched.

To a degree, the State and Federal governments have realized some of the potential and have offered financial and technical assistance to landowners to develop their potential. The technical help, in general, has been

good, but it is spread very thin. Financial aid has by no means been accepted with open arms, for most require the landowner to also put up money, money they are not sure will give them a return. We have yet to prove to the landowner that managing wildlife as a land resource is a feasible and worthwhile business.

We have really never approached wildlife as a resource to manage for profit. If we want to make these lands available and to produce sustained hunting pressure, we will have to change our ideas concerning this matter. And when I say our, I mean the wildlife profession as a whole.

Now what about the landowner; should he be able to capitalize on the wildlife and make a business out of it? I say, "Why not?" And it is about time. The wildlife are a product of his land, and really no different than any other resource that he may be managing such as timber or range. His land is the most important single denominator to wildlife populations, yet in the big business of hunting, he has been the only one not getting a share of the pie. Instead, it has been the arms and ammunition companies, gas stations, motels, grocery stores, etc. If he can see the advantages of managing his wildlife, he will, and, given some direction be able to do a good job of it, too. Actually, a landowner should be able to more effectively and efficiently manage game on his land than what the game department can do on public land.

Now let's look at the hunter. Will he be willing to pay the price that the landowner will want? Even though it may go against their grain a little, many are now finding it is the only way to go. Some, in fact, are more than happy to pay the cost since they are assured better success and a quality experience. In the long run, they may even find it even less expensive, for it saves them from running from here to there attempting to get in a successful hunt. The cost still may prohibit some from this type of hunting; however, we must remember too, that a hunter that is hunting on private land is not adding to the congestion on a public area.

Now some of you may be thinking that commercial hunting isn't anything new, and that we have had pheasant, duck, and deer clubs in this state for some time. True; however, most of these landowners are hunting wildlife for profit, not managing it. Charges on these areas don't consider management, only the supply and demand. What we should strive for are fees based on not only supply and demand, but also the cost of producing the product, like any crop. This would then be more the business of managing wildlife. This is our approach at Dye Creek. To manage wildlife as a product of the land, a product that under proper management should give adequate returns in wildlife and dollars.

We have an ideal situation to give this approach a real test; for, besides having lots of land, 60,000 acres, there is a real diversity of habitats and wildlife. We also have some other elements in our favor that are equally important to a successful operation; that is the required capital, capital so necessary to a new business, and management that has experience in promotion and a willingness to meet the public. Also of importance, we have a very active research program developing.

Our approach to wildlife management is strictly on an economic basis. If we can't see some eventual return in dollars, we don't do it. Also, when we do decide on a particular management practice, we attempt to get the most out of the management dollar. For this reason, we are continually looking for and experimenting with new ways to develop wildlife benefits at lower and lower costs. Along these lines, multiple use plays a very important role. It is surprising how many wildlife management practices also benefit livestock and in general, are good land management practices that may give added returns that were never before considered. For example, we have developed numerous springs on the property for upland birds. Such developments are constructed so that the increased water is also made available to livestock and big game. We have constructed reservoirs in the foothills that benefit not only the livestock, but also upland birds and big game. The efficiency of the livestock has also been increased by the construction of many hunting access roads. Range carrying capacity has theoretically been increased where we have cleared and piled brush and oaks for quail habitat. Another example of multiple benefits from a management practice is where we have constructed numerous shallow waterfowl ponds on a low quality range site. In this case, besides producing waterfowl habitat, we have actually increased the carrying capacity of the area for livestock. In all of these examples, both wildlife and livestock have benefited. Consequently, both have shared the cost.

These are but a few examples. What is important is that the wildlife manager who wants to practice his profession on private land will continually have to think about economics, and will have to find new and cheaper ways to produce wildlife benefits.

This approach to management should be a real challenge to our wildlife profession, a challenge that I am sure the profession will meet; this is one reason that I think game management on private land has a bright future.