

KILLING THE GOOSE WITH THE GOLDEN EGG, or  
THE EDUCATED AMERICAN WITH THE MIDAS TOUCH

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The title of this paper may well have had its origin in one of Grimm's fairy tales, or the results of the average American to change the natural resources of the North American Continent to silver and gold. This has been accomplished in the Golden State by people who will long be remembered, not for what they destroyed or plundered, but for what affluence they left their heirs to squander.

For the record, I am not a professional biologist. I do not have a contribution to make at this meeting as the result of extensive research. I am not a wildlife administrator - my decisions will never establish waterfowl management policy. I am an old duck-hunter, an elected official of a public agency, the only one of its kind in America, whose sole purpose is to provide water for waterfowl purposes in the Western San Joaquin Valley of California.

What I think, and what I say, may come as a surprise to all of you. In my opinion few people have very little knowledge on the subject of waterfowl and wetlands as they now exist. I make this provocation as a challenge, and without ill intent. I sincerely believe that until the professional wildlife administrator abandons present day administrative philosophy, and views waterfowl on a truly ecological basis, there is little hope for the waterfowl of tomorrow. We cannot continue to employ the antiquated and inadequate management approaches developed during the 1930's. These are methods of the "dark ages" and will not meet the challenge with which every wildlife administrator is faced in these fabulous 60's. Our waterfowl crisis can be attributed to those responsible people in Government who failed to face the fact that wetlands are not under Government control, never have been under Government control, and I doubt if they ever will be. Because of administrative efforts by Government employees through the exercise of regulatory powers, Government has put forth little effort to come up with a solution to the problem with which we are now faced - how to stop the dwindling away of wetlands, both private and public. There can be no dispute that waterfowl abundance is dependent upon the continued main-

tenance of adequate and suitable wetland-waterfowl habitat. As of now, we should have an inventory of this habitat; we should know where it occurs, how it is managed, and what can be done to continue both prime and marginal living space for wildlife. This is also the taxpayers' responsibility, and our legislators should be so advised.

The sovereignty of our waterfowl is vested by the people in the Federal Government. All of us accept the fact that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service should be the Agency responsible for the administration of laws, rules, and regulations, under which the waterfowl is given assistance and protection. This position is backed up by the various states through assistance to the Federal regulatory powers and the management of public lands set aside for waterfowl, of which hunting must be a part.

With all of this I agree, but is this the complete answer? Is there not a sense of false security, or frustration, in the public's concept that the waterfowl belong to all of us, and will always exist, because our Government is charged with their welfare?

The fact is, unless means are sought to preserve the existing wetlands on the North American continent, today's abundance of waterfowl will cease to exist. Waterfowl cannot be maintained by added regulatory actions, because regulations can only become more restrictive and in effect destroy that which is to be preserved. Man, through his ever-increasing technology, is placing himself in a position wherein virtually overnight he can do his bidding. He has the know-how to reduce the continental waterfowl population to refuge status. With continued agricultural development, the building of the Central Valley Project and the California Water Plan, this could still be possible in California. Here the main flight of the birds of the Pacific Flyway winter under strictly artificial conditions.

Let's take a duck's eye-view of the great Central Valleys of California. Remember, this is the most populated state in the nation, and in the counties of the valleys we find the greatest agricultural wealth ever developed on the face of the earth. This is where the waterfowl of the Pacific Flyway would like to spend the winter. In fact, the California Department of Fish and Game indicates that of the 9-12 million waterfowl in the Pacific Flyway, some 6 - 9 million annually winter in California, and most of these are destined to end up at one time or another in the San Joaquin and Sacramento valleys. Birds concentrate where they find suitable conditions. They wander about from the Sacramento Valley, the Suisun marshes in the Delta, the Grasslands of the San Joaquin, and the irrigated lands of the Southern Imperial Valley. Here they find State and Federal management areas, some seasonally flooded agricultural lands, and the large, man-made marshes of the duck hunter. Seventy per cent of the waterfowl lands in the Central Valley are privately owned, privately managed, and constitute singularly the most important source of waterfowl habitat in the Pacific Flyway.

The contribution made by the duck hunter to waterfowl conservation is further illustrated by a close look at the Grasslands of western Merced County, with which I am most familiar. In the late fall and early winter, a vast inland sea covering some 63,000 acres of native pasture land is established. Every acre foot of this water is man-controlled - 297 landowners and 3 public waterfowl areas create waterfowl habitat at the time when migratory waterfowl will arrive. With no water, these lands would support little wildlife. At today's land prices the investment by the duck hunter in these wetlands is enormous. A capital investment of well over \$22,496,000.00, and an annual expenditure of some \$1,178,000. for County taxes, maintenance and operation, and an out-of-pocket hunting expense of over \$2,000,000 annually during the hunting season. Don't for a minute under-estimate the duckhunters' part in the economy of Merced County, California, and don't under-estimate the wildlife of all kinds in Merced County. Conservationists from all parts of America come to Merced County grasslands to view the marshland during the late fall and early spring.

The very life-blood of these wetlands is the Grassland Water District. On the Flyway, 47,000 acres are owned and controlled, for waterfowl purposes, by 138 landowners (involving some 1800 duck hunters), with an annual budget of \$160,000. This money, each year, is used by the Officers of the District to pay \$75,000. to the Secretary of the Interior for water from the Central Valley Project for waterfowl purposes; \$10,000 each year to the Central California Irrigation District for the use of their canal system (under a ruling of the old California Railroad Commission) for water delivery to the Grassland Canal System, and the balance to maintain and operate some 120 miles of District Canals - a twelve month job. The District has a summer water supply of some 45,000 acre feet of water. This is return flow drainage from 150,000 acres of the prime agricultural land of western Fresno and Merced Counties. Its use is for native pasture and for waterfowl habitat under the direct supervision of the Directors of the Grassland Water District.

The primary land use of the area is waterfowling and livestock grazing. A dual economy which must be maintained. Since the early days this has been the land use.

When the cattle kingdom of Miller and Lux was liquidated during the 1920's and early 30's, wetlands without water-rights were sold to duck hunters, and to local cattlemen. The water rights for this native pasture and wildlife habitat were sold to the United States for a fraction of their actual worth, and became a part of the water to be used for agriculture in the counties of Tulare and Kern, California. It is well known in Conservation circles that in the planning of the Central Valley Project waters for fish and wildlife were completely eliminated. Faced with the drying up of the Grasslands in 1951, the duck hunters took the problem to both the State of California and to the Federal Government. From legislation proposed by the Grassland Duck Hunter, the use of water for fish and wildlife became a beneficial use in California, and the C.V.P. was re-authorized to include water for fish and game.

The Secretary of the Interior then granted the landowners of the Grassland Water District a firm contract for class one water from any project of the CVP at a price not to exceed \$1.50 per acre foot for 40 years. In this manner the duck hunter of the Grassland gave the ducks of the Pacific Flyway a 40-year lease on life. As wildlife administrators, what happens at the end of the 40 years, is your responsibility. (Up to now, the duck hunters have paid well over \$1,000,000 to the Secretary of the Interior for water for waterfowl purposes within the GWD of Merced County.) You will note the legislation states the Secretary is not to charge more than \$1.50 per acre foot for water. As of 1965 the duck hunter has paid the maximum price each year.

Each fall, commencing September 15, flooding is started for waterfowl. Within thirty days, the marsh is covered with water and ready to shoot. During a normal 90-day season, duck-hunters shoot approximately 30 days. This hunting pattern is generally followed by others in the area. Sundays and Wednesdays are shoot days. In toto, these lands furnish 90% of the hunting expended in the Grasslands area. This, then, brings up the 64 dollar question in this discussion of the wetland and the waterfowl situation. Who is the public? Is it the duckhunter who has made a place for wildlife? Is it the unattached sportsman, or is it the duckhunter who values the sport of waterfowling to the extent that he is willing to pay more for his hunting privileges?

In California the majority of ducks are hunted on private property by sportsmen who, by the purchase of duck stamps and hunting licenses, and regular contributions to the Pittman-Robertson funds with the purchase of arms and ammunition, support and make possible their own waterfowl habitat, and at the same time support the waterfowl management programs of both the State and Federal Governments. So far, it has been the duckhunter who has kept the waterfowl on the Pacific Flyway. He pays his money, grumbles and complains, is never satisfied with anything except his gun and his blind, but sometimes in the evening with other duck-hunters you will hear him say, "I wish the State and the USF&W would make a study of the wetlands, what kind of shape they are in, who owns them, and maybe present to the landowners a wildlife easement for a few bucks an acre, to pay for taxes and to buy more water." He would like, in most cases, for the easement to run with the land and restrict the land use to waterfowl and native pasture, or to its present use. No plow or fancy planning, redevelopment or urban sprawl. He has also said, "It's time for the arm-chair statistician to come up with a realistic duck season. How about shooting two days per week, or a mandatory regulation that State and Federal public shooting grounds shoot 100 of the water area? If the State feels a seven-day duck season is good for private lands, then how come public land is shot only three days a week?" And in talking about the double bag and possession limit, the old duckhunter is dead set against it. Maybe a transportation tag or two, but never a double bag every shoot day. I have heard it said, "Bag limits on Flyways should be set once and for all, 4 ducks, 5 ducks, 6 ducks, or 7 ducks, then the Secretary should let the States, after a realistic report, establish the number of hunting days between the first and the last necessary Flyway

date." This depending on waterfowl inventory, could very well be waterfowl hunting ten weekends (20 shooting days) during the season, or with an abundance of waterfowl, fifteen weekends (30 shooting days) and if this would not keep the waterfowl in balance, than a season of three days per week for a total of 45 hunting days per year. A hunting season established in this manner would continue the hunting opportunity and our waterfowl would not be the loser. Continue present waterfowl management and I fear wetlands will be drying up all over the State of California. This the ducks cannot stand. To continue the unrealistic bag limits and hunting season, sorely aggravates the duckhunter.

And last, is the duckhunters' wish for professional advice from the Wildlife Staffs of the State and Federal Government. Law enforcement is necessary, but it is time the waterfowl cop is replaced to a degree by a year-round waterfowl management Advisor. Government employees know there is more to duck-hunting than picking up a shotgun. For the man who maintains a marsh, it is a year-round job. Down in the valley where the cotton grows two and a half bales to the acre, the rice fifty sacks to the acre, and sugar beets are raised to the tune of twenty or more tons to the acre, I hear both farmers and sportsmen ask, "Why can't the USF&W Service, or the USDA, assign a Wildlife Advisor to the Grasslands? He could be charged with the same responsibilities as the local farm Advisor. Then perhaps public funds could be spent on private wetlands for the benefit of our waterfowl."

It is hoped that this exchange of ideas, from a man on the marsh, will in some small way benefit the professional wildlife administrator and his staff. If it does, the meeting has been most worthwhile.

My wish for the day, - "May there always be ducks on the Flyways, wintering grounds in the sun and an old duckhunter willing to pay the bill." You know, he could be the goose with the golden egg.