

THE POLITICS OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN CALIFORNIA

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Abstract. Resident wildlife is managed for the people of California by a complicated political system which includes the wildlife resources, public, legislature, governor, county supervisors, federal government, land management agencies, Fish and Game Commission, Fish and Game Department, Wildlife Conservation Board, and colleges and universities. Biologists make none of the important management decisions, but are limited to technical, advisory, and educational roles. The political system will produce biologically sound management only if the people demand it. Biologists have an ethical commitment to management based on scientific principles, and must develop public support in order to meet that commitment.

INTRODUCTION

In our democratic system the management of publicly owned natural resources, including wildlife, is an integral part of the political process. Yet one commonly hears that we should "get politics out of wildlife management." I agree that improved management is needed, but it is not possible to divorce wildlife management from politics. Instead, I urge biologists to fulfill their role in the political system.

My conception of wildlife politics has changed greatly since I came to California in 1962. At first it seemed that the responsible parties were ignorant of good game management principles. Then I found that the agencies did know what to do, but they just weren't doing it. Soon I learned that the Fish and Game Commission was listening to the wrong people. Still later I realized that the Commission was listening to everyone interested, but most of the interested people were not pressing for a biological approach to management. I now believe that the mechanism for biologically sound management exists, but that such management will not occur unless there is public pressure for it.

This report reviews the political structure of wildlife management in California and the role of biologists in that political structure. Although my experience is mostly with deer, these comments will apply generally to all resident wildlife, both game and non-game species. This analysis has been stimulated and improved through discussions with Bill Longhurst, Dick Teague, Lew Nelson, Ed Schneegas, and several other biologists. Much of the political structure for wildlife management is outlined in the Fish and Game Code (Goodgame 1967).

THE BIOPOLITICAL SYSTEM AND HOW IT WORKS

The main elements of wildlife politics in California are the wildlife resources, including animals and their habitats, and the public which consists of housewives, hunters, ranchers, loggers, teachers, students, preservationists, and many other special interest groups. The wildlife resources are an asset to most segments of the public but a liability to some. Both the positive and negative values stimulate public demands for various kinds of management action. Human activities often have beneficial or detrimental effects on wildlife creating more demands for action.

Recognizing that the public at large cannot manage wildlife effectively, the people and their elected representatives have created a complex governmental structure for wildlife management (Figure 1). Public demands for action are directed at every level of this biopolitical system. Wildlife management issues are important in many elections, at both state and local levels. Thus wildlife management is an integral part of political activity in California as elsewhere.

Wildlife in California is controlled by the State Legislature. Other bodies or agencies possess only such powers as are delegated to them by the Legislature. The Legislature routinely delegates specific regulatory functions to the Fish and Game Commission and others to the County Supervisors. The Legislature established and constantly revises the Fish and Game Code which guides the activities of the Fish and Game Commission and Department. It controls the budget of the Department and Commission, although it may not divert monies from the Fish and Game Preservation Fund to other uses. The Legislature participates in the activities of the Wildlife Conservation Board and maintains interim committees to study fish and game problems. The Legislature maintains budgetary control over the University. It frequently directs the University to study various problems and sometimes to suggest solutions to those problems.

The Governor is the chief executive officer of state government. His most important wildlife management function is to appoint the 5 Fish and Game Commissioners, and Director of the Fish and Game Department. Persons appointed to the Commission are subject to approval by the State Senate. The Governor may also make recommendations to the Legislature regarding needed legislation.

Each of the County Boards of Supervisors in California administers a County Fish and Game Propagation Fund consisting of half of all fines collected in the County from violators of the Fish and Game Code. The money must be spent for the propagation and conservation of fish and game within the County. Since 1957 the County Supervisors have also possessed veto powers over most antlerless deer hunts within their respective counties. Each county is authorized to hire a county fish and game warden and deputy warden. In addition to these wildlife management functions authorized by the Fish and Game Code, the County Supervisors exercise general police powers which may influence wildlife and wildlife-oriented recreation. For example, they can close areas to the use of firearms for health and safety reasons.

The Federal Government not only controls the federal land management agencies, but disburses the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson funds to state wildlife agencies. These funds, derived from federal taxes on sporting equipment, must be used to purchase or develop wildlife or fish habitat, for investigations and surveys, or for coordination of projects essential to efficient management of wildlife resources. One of the strings attached to this program is that state hunting and fishing license revenues may not be used for any purpose other than the management of fish and game. This provision keeps the Legislature from "raiding" the Fish and Game Preservation Fund to finance other programs.

The Fish and Game Commission possesses only the powers delegated to it by the Legislature. The principal functions of the Commission are to set hunting and fishing regulations and to establish general policies for the conduct of the Fish and Game Department. Before setting fish and game regulations, the Commission must hold public hearings to receive public recommendations.

The President of the Commission serves on the Wildlife Conservation Board.

The Wildlife Conservation Board, established in 1947, consists of the President of the Fish and Game Commission, the Director of the Fish and Game Department, and the Director of Finance. In addition, 3 State Senators and 3 Assemblymen meet with the Board and participate in its activities. The Wildlife Conservation Board selects and authorizes the acquisition of land suitable for recreation purposes and the preservation, protection and restoration of wildlife. It has developed public access to many hunting and fishing areas. The Board's program is financed by a continuing annual appropriation of \$750,000 from state tax revenues collected from bets on horse races.

The California Department of Fish and Game is managed by a Director who is a political appointee. The Director may or may not be a biologist, at the discretion of the Governor. The Director must manage the Department in accordance with the Fish and Game Code and Commission policy. However, he holds office at the pleasure of the Governor and therefore is responsible to the Governor first and the Commission second. The directorship of the Department was apparently an issue in the 1958 gubernatorial campaign (Owens 1962).

THE ROLE OF BIOLOGISTS

Note that I have outlined the main political avenues of wildlife management in California without mentioning biologists. Our biopolitical system does not delegate any of the decision-making to biologists. However, biologists serve many research, advisory, and technical functions as represented by the broken lines in Figure 1. Most of the biologists involved in wildlife politics are employees of the Fish and Game Department.

The Department studies and inventories the wildlife resources to develop a basis for management recommendations to the Commission, the Legislature, and the County Supervisors. It also conducts habitat improvement work, often in cooperation with other land management agencies. It is required to submit biennial reports to the Governor. The Department may ask the University or other bodies to study various problems. It also conducts an information and education program, but I believe the public is most influenced by personal contacts with Department employees. Wardens have much more public contact than biologists and therefore are in the best position to influence public attitudes toward the Department, either for better or for worse.

The land management agencies, such as the U. S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management, also employ biologists. These agencies consider wildlife as only one of many values associated with the land. They manage millions of acres of wildlife habitat but play no formalized role in setting hunting and fishing regulations. It is a well established federal policy not to challenge state responsibility for the management of resident wildlife, even when federal lands are being damaged by excessive wildlife populations. However, the agencies do occasionally make recommendations to the Commission and the Department. The land management agencies conduct research and management for wildlife habitat improvement, often in cooperation with the Department and/or the University. Employees of the land management agencies have many opportunities to influence their public credibility through field contacts.

Theoretically the management programs of federal agencies should be less sensitive to political pressure than those of the Fish and Game Department because the politicians are further away (in Washington). However, they have no shortage of local critics.

The Universities and Colleges have scientific expertise not possessed by the management agencies and they often engage in cooperative studies with the agencies. Research findings are reported to the Commission as well as to the management agencies. University experts also testify before county supervisors, the state legislature, and congress. The University influences the public through its teaching and extension programs. The University is sometimes regarded as an impartial group of scholars free of political domination, but in reality we are dependent upon the Legislature for funds. The University needs public credibility and support just like any other governmental unit.

BIOLOGISTS AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

In my view, wildlife biologists cannot function effectively in California without public support. This support cannot be created by slick advertising. It can be developed only by demonstrating competence on the job and devotion to public service. We cannot expect public support unless we are worthy of it.

One of the most damaging things to the credibility of wildlife agencies is the field man who actively opposes the program of his own agency. This not only damages the agency, but every other employee of that agency as well. In the past this has been a real problem in California. It is impossible for any agency to conduct an effective program without the support of its own personnel.

Although the public consists of many special interests, biologists tend to identify with certain interests such as sportsmen. But wildlife politics are no longer dominated by sportsmen. Biologists might increase their effectiveness by working with other segments of the public, such as women's clubs and school groups, in addition to sportsmen. Some of the federal agencies such as the Forest Service have recognized this for several years.

CONCLUSION

Wildlife management in California is a complicated political process. Professional biologists make none of the important management decisions, but serve a technical and advisory role. The opportunity to advise the Legislature and the Commission is reserved to a few biologists in the higher echelons of wildlife administration. Most field men have no direct input to the political process. Their main contribution is to influence public opinion toward the management program.

It is a common misconception among biologists that wildlife conservation is the goal of our biopolitical system. In reality, the biopolitical system exists to serve the needs and wants of the people. Conservation is the goal only insofar as politicians perceive it to be what the people want. The people can have whatever kind of management they want. This system places great demands on wildlife professionals, because the people can't ask for biologically sound management if they don't know what it is.

In the entire political system, only biologists have an ethical commitment to management based on biological principles. We can meet that commitment only with the confidence and support of the public.

LITERATURE CITED

Goodgame, Monica (compiler). 1967. State of California, Fish and Game Code. 45th edition. Dept. General Services, Documents Section, Sacramento, Ca. 310 p.

Owens, J. R. [1962]. A wildlife agency and its possessive public. Inter-University Case Program #87. Bobbs-Merrill Co., Inc., Indianapolis, Ind. 52 p.

FIGURE 1. WILDLIFE POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA

WILDLIFE POLITICS IN CALIFORNIA

