



Killing for Fun(ds): The centerpiece of agency interactions with wildlife

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Historically, wildlife agencies' primary objective has been to increase preferred game species' populations for the purpose of satisfying hunters' demands for more live-targets to shoot. State agency budgets, reliant on the sale of hunting licenses and matching federal funding, ultimately cater to hunters – a small yet vocal minority whose interests dictate wildlife policies. Consequently, the demands for violence towards animals overshadow the interests of the majority of the public who strive to be wise stewards and coexist with wildlife in their natural environment. An analysis of the current state of recreational hunting in America exposes a vast bureaucracy reliant upon enormous sums of money and far-reaching influence to maintain the public perception that killing animals for recreation is necessary for both humans and wildlife alike. Although wildlife agencies assure the public that lethal policies are aimed at preserving ecological diversity, it has much more to do with preserving the acceptance of hobby killing, increasing hunting participation, maximizing the carrying capacity of land to increase preferred game species numbers, and ultimately ensuring a reliable funding base for the agency.

Financial dependency – follow the money

State wildlife agencies are entrusted with the power to manipulate wildlife populations located within state borders. Historically, the overall “management”¹ trend has been to increase preferred game species to provide additional hunting opportunities for license purchasers.² The potential consequences of failing to satisfy these objectives in terms of agency self-perpetuation and relevance are obvious and profound.

State wildlife managers depend heavily upon the sale of hunting, fishing and trapping licenses for their operating budgets. Revenue generated via license sales has been the “primary single source of funding since the establishment of game agencies” and represents nearly 35 percent of wildlife agency funding.³ Coffers are further augmented by federal funds derived from the Pittman-Robertson Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act of 1937 (“PRA”). The PRA directed the existing 11 percent excise tax applied to the sale of rifles, shotguns, and ammunition to the state agencies for wildlife protection and restoration.⁴ In 1950, the Dingell-Johnson Act created a similar taxation scheme on fishing equipment for the purpose of funding fisheries research and restoration, habitat work, the stocking of fish, and public access.⁵ The items taxed currently consist of a lengthy list of shooting, angling and archery equipment.⁶

The PRA has been amended many times since 1937. For instance, in 1951, language was added making these funds “permanent and indefinite.”⁷ In 1954, the excise tax on pistols and revolvers was increased from 10 percent to 11 percent.⁸ Another amendment was adopted in 1970 to include a 10 percent excise tax on the wholesale price of pistols and revolvers and allowed for these funds to be used for hunter education.⁹ Just two years later, an 11 percent excise tax was added to archery equipment and again, allocated revenue generated to hunter education.¹⁰ In 2000, the Federal Assistance Improvement Act mandated that the first \$8 million collected annually via the PRA be set aside for enhanced hunter education and shooting range development.¹¹ Much of the remaining millions are further divided in accordance with a formula based on the number of certified state hunting licenses sold and the “geographic size of each state.”¹²

Federal funding creates powerful political influence

PRA funds are distributed to states and territories according to a formula¹³ provided in the Act. State eligibility for PRA funding was contingent on each state’s ability to adopt assent legislation directing all hunting license revenue specifically to wildlife management programs.¹⁴ The impact of this qualifier on the federal funding scheme was significant as it served to consolidate a political constituency for “wildlife agencies as one composed of hunting and fishing groups.”¹⁵ Annual appropriations to states via the PRA exceed \$350 million dollars and represent approximately 25 percent of state wildlife agency budgets.¹⁶ As of 2011, more than \$6.8 billion have been received by the states for conservation projects.¹⁷

Within the complex formula of this funding system lies powerful incentive for wildlife agencies to promote killing opportunities and increase license sales. Wildlife managers peddle recreational killing opportunities because the revenue they generate funds agency salaries and operational costs.¹⁸ Consequently, wildlife agencies generally consider hunters – an outspoken minority – their primary constituency, despite the fact agencies are tasked with managing wildlife for the benefit of all citizens. This revenue-based dependency ultimately dictates that wildlife management policy be crafted to cater to the hunters’ killing agenda. As such, any policy favoring non-violent coexistence or an opportunity to broaden the culture of wildlife agencies to embrace a more diverse range of stakeholders¹⁹ is precluded despite the fact that both hunters and non-hunters alike contribute significantly to the funds that are distributed under the PRA.²⁰

Hunters are not the only ones who actively oppose any policy that would challenge the use of lethal force when managing wildlife populations. In fact, the bias that perpetuates killing is written into the PRA itself. For example, the Multistate Conservation Grant, a key PRA funding component, explicitly forbids the funding of any “project that promotes or encourages opposition to regulated hunting, trapping or fishing.”²¹ Although other PRA grant funding options do not use this explicit language, wildlife managers nonetheless distance themselves from life-affirming programs. Indeed, it is easy to understand that these bureaucrats fear doing otherwise might jeopardize eligibility for future federal funding or alienate their hunting constituency.

The federal funding scheme has enabled the rise of an extensive network of supporting actors. PRA funding opportunities create the incentive for partners to serve in various capacities to assist state agencies in the promotion of recreational killing. As such, organizational partners and stakeholders (i.e., conservation organizations, foundations representing the consumptive use and weaponry industries, lobbying organizations, academia, etc.) have all come forward to claim their share of PRA funding. These partnerships can be quite lucrative and state agencies are able to leverage available federal funding to purchase consent or influence needed to implement preferred policies.

Hunter retention and recruitment

Hunting participation levels in the United States have been on a steady decline since the 1980s.²² The lack of participation is even more precipitous on a per capita basis.²³ Although the level of decline in every state varies,²⁴ the numbers can be quite significant. For instance, Jeff Pritzl, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Regional Wildlife Supervisor, stated that for every 100 Wisconsin residents who give up hunting, only 53 new ones begin.²⁵ In Michigan, the findings are even more dramatic with only 26 people replacing every 100 hunters lost.²⁶

For wildlife agencies whose operational budgets rely heavily upon the sale of licenses and matching federal funds,²⁷ a decline of this magnitude places immense pressure on wildlife managers to recruit new hunters into their ranks while also maintaining a high retention rate among current hunters.²⁸ Consequently, hunter recruitment and retention (HRR) programs are a top priority for wildlife agencies.²⁹ The urgency to recruit and retain more hunters is further evidenced by the Multistate Conservation Grant which has repeatedly listed the protection of “outdoor heritage” as a top program priority.³⁰ According to the 2016 grant announcement, “Participation rates in traditional outdoor recreational activities are on the decline, and this trend is expected to continue into the immediate future.”³¹

Long-term research projects, frequently funded by the PRA, point to several dynamics to explain the decline in hunting participation. An absence of social support and lack of hunting apprenticeship experiences are considered critical obstacles.³² Shifting family structures such as single parent or two-wage earner households³³ and the easy accessibility of non-violent recreational activities are also blamed for the diminished interest in killing for fun. The human population shift to urban and suburban communities is also blamed for proportionately far fewer hunters today.³⁴ This is largely due to the fact that a favorable cultural predisposition towards hunting and trapping, often fostered in more rural environments, is lacking in cities and suburban communities.

Wildlife agencies set their sights on critical markets

Desperate to satisfy hunter retention and recruitment goals, wildlife managers are increasingly targeting urban and suburban communities.³⁵ In order to secure this market, hunting opportunities must ensure a reasonable likelihood of a successful kill to satisfy

hunter expectations. If a successful kill is not achieved, the individual may turn to another recreational activity that offers a different form of gratification or may seek the limitless “killing” opportunities that can be found in online or video game environments.³⁶ As a result, wildlife managers search for innovative programs that recruit and retain urban recreational hunters.³⁷

“Hunting today must fit into the existing hectic urban lifestyle and provide a reasonable expectation of success. Our profession can no longer expect young hunters to remain interested in recreational hunting if they only have access to public land where game animals are often scarce.”³⁸

Wildlife managers are particularly concerned about the drastic decline in the number of days spent by small game youth hunters.³⁹ Targeting children at a young and impressionable age is critical as those not hooked in their youth will rarely begin killing animals for fun later in life.⁴⁰ Similar to the urban and suburban crowds, children are also incentivized by “quality” hunting opportunities that consist of special seasons and locations to help maximize the opportunity to kill.⁴¹ The likelihood of a successful kill is further assured for young children by stocking areas with any preferred game species (e.g., hand-reared birds) just prior to the arrival of armed children.⁴²

Programs that target hunters who reside outside state borders are also quite appealing to wildlife managers. Nonresident hunters tend to be wealthier than the locals and often hire guides for their hunts.⁴³ In general, they are more likely to use private rather than public lands⁴⁴ and generate a higher license fee. Furthermore, “out-of-towners” benefit tourism and local hospitality and food service industries. Equally important, nonresident hunters’ higher socioeconomic class increases the likelihood that they associate with prominent figures, government officials, and other decision-makers. This personal access provides ample opportunity to lobby for specific and unique killing opportunities, similar to the highly controversial 2015 Florida black bear hunt.⁴⁵

Catering to hunter demands for more killing fields

Hunter satisfaction surveys are routinely conducted to help guide HRR programs. Common complaints from hunters include time constraints and lack of opportunities as key deterrents to continued and consistent engagement. Hunters also increasingly report that insufficient access to both public and private land for hunting is a leading cause of their dissatisfaction.⁴⁶ Understandably, large open tracts of previously *unhunted* land are especially enticing to hunters as the resident animal populations are typically more mature, less wary of humans, and thus, more attractive as hunting trophies (e.g., larger racks). Typically accustomed to more neutral interactions with people and unaware of human predatory tendencies, these unsuspecting creatures lack the instinct to flee and are much easier targets to shoot.

Hunter demands for more land are rarely ignored. Various programs have been implemented to incentivize private land owners to open up their lands for recreational killing.⁴⁷ For instance, the State of Wisconsin alone received \$1.9 million from the 2008

Federal Farm Bill to “jump-start” the Voluntary Public Access-Habitat Incentives Program which compensates property owners to open up their land for “wildlife-dependent recreation opportunities.”⁴⁸ In August 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture announced the further investment of \$20 million for a partnership with 15 state agencies to “improve and increase wildlife habitat and public access” to privately owned farm, ranch and forest lands.⁴⁹

Hunter demands for more access also extend to publicly owned lands. State forests, wildlife areas, nature preserves and countless other public properties provide hunting opportunities, often unbeknownst to the nonhunting public. For example, the Florida Wildlife Commission manages more than 5.5 million acres of *public land* for hunting purposes.⁵⁰ According to recent media reports, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection is now also considering adding state parks to this expansive list of public lands open to these deadly activities.⁵¹

The art of wildlife manipulation for molding public opinion

Historically, wildlife agencies have manipulated preferred game species populations to their financial advantage. Sex ratios and habitats⁵² are modified to create *perceived* wildlife overpopulations. Practices aimed at reducing predator populations also boost game animal numbers and may assist in intentionally creating wildlife overpopulations. An abundance of preferred game species not only serves to satisfy sport hunters’ demands for more killing opportunities, but can also be cited by the agency to justify more killing.

Wildlife managers publicly contend that hunting is the cornerstone of wildlife management and key to maintaining healthy populations for future generations to enjoy. However, unlike natural predators which play a pivotal role in ensuring overall health of the delicate ecosystem through the natural selection process, hunters rarely target those animals that appear to be spindly or unhealthy. Instead, sport hunters routinely kill the largest, healthiest, and most magnificent specimens available, thereby removing the “fittest” animals from the gene pool, much to the detriment of the overall population.

The cycle continues as hunting reduces the size of resident populations and allows for an increase in available food for survivors. In the case of deer, a species that falls victim to this cycle constantly, an overabundant nutritional supply facilitates breeding by immature does and increases in the number of twin and triplet fawns born,⁵³ thereby again creating more live targets for hunters to shoot. This biological certainty among preferred game species, commonly referred to as the “compensatory reproductive response”⁵⁴ is the inspiration behind the phrase *renewable resource*.

Wildlife management bureaucrats work diligently to cloak this highly profitable activity with rhetoric consisting of clever euphemisms and disingenuous assertions, yet the overpopulations of which they warn are intentionally created by and for hunters, not naturally occurring. In fact, if killing *truly* worked to control populations, hunting would no longer be necessary. The overall trend by fish and game departments has been to manage game species solely to provide hunting opportunities⁵⁵, not to seek appropriate balance, or broader societal benefit.

Reliance on partners to manufacture consent of recreational killing

Molding public opinion favorably toward killing wild animals is a huge industry fueled in large part by PRA funding. State and regional wildlife agencies partner with land-grant universities, conservation organizations and foundations advancing the consumptive use agenda or the interests of the weapons industry to conduct various types of research that further supports the killing agenda. The cycle continues as partners, also referred to as “stakeholders”, equipped with professional-sounding titles and carefully-crafted “problem statements”⁵⁶ promote the idea that lethal control is necessary to address an alleged public policy issue.

Partners cloaked as experts may also help to facilitate cooperative agreements that channel funding to third-party organizations to assist with implementing wildlife restoration plans. These plans include habitat modification activities that serve to increase the quality (size of individuals) and quantity of specific game species. Data collection, human dimension studies, hunter satisfaction surveys and miscellaneous other reports or publications, are then used to help create favorable views of their preferred wildlife management agendas and mold public opinion around the notion that killing wild animals is necessary. Additional partners lacking any obvious stakeholder interest may also be introduced as “unbiased sources”⁵⁷ in those unique situations where animal advocates attempt to expose the dynamics at play or introduce an element of public skepticism surrounding the information used to justify lethal control. The introduction of third-party facilitators gives the public appearance that killing opponents are being adequately heard, while in fact, the animal advocates are being further outnumbered and marginalized.

The media’s role – preserving the status quo (and advertising dollars)

The mainstream media, directly and indirectly, promotes hunting as a benign or beneficial status quo activity for economic reasons. Corporate print, radio, TV, and now social media outlets are all reliant on advertising revenues to drive profits. Advertisers tend to avoid public controversy because it is not an ideal context for selling goods or services.⁵⁸ Since hunting has grown increasingly controversial, the questionable scientific grounds and devastating ethical or practical consequences that pervade any hunting proposal are unlikely to receive any media attention. The absence of news coverage discourages the public from viewing hunting as a political or public policy matter worthy of citizen participation, controversy or debate. Unfortunately, the media’s role in this dynamic encourages only a superficial discourse occurring in an echo chamber where the pro-kill sentiment is amplified and reinforced.

Media advertisers’ preference for entertainment over actual news has a significant impact on public perception. Examples include television programming like *Duck Dynasty*, a reality TV program that perpetuates the perception that killing animals is a wholesome, family-oriented activity. In a society plagued by staggering (and worsening) inequality of income and influence, entertainment plays a key role in diverting public attention from controversy,⁵⁹ further recasting the gross inequality as benign, and generating political apathy – all keys to preserving the status quo and “manufacturing consent”.⁶⁰ De facto

control of corporate media garners credibility for the pro-hunting agenda and serves to marginalize a large segment of the public who opposes killing of wildlife for recreation.

Healthy skepticism surrounding the “need” to kill is warranted

The accuracy of the information provided by hunting proponents must be considered with some healthy skepticism. Unlike the wildlife agencies, land-grant universities, conservation groups, and other like-minded (and often highly compensated) *partners*, those who oppose the recreational killing of animals do not have paid spokespersons and public relations experts, such as the Association of Conservation Information, Inc.,⁶¹ to advocate their view or “spin” information to media outlets. Individual community members who value animals alive are further disadvantaged as they rarely, if ever, purchase advertising space, issue press releases or provide media kits, and as such, lack the leverage and access to news sources that is typically necessary for directing or manufacturing news.

Those with anti-killing viewpoints are often ignored by the press – dismissed or marginalized as sentimental, unscientific, or “extremist” in their positions, and otherwise lacking of substance. However, the large number of individuals who are capable of valuing animals alive do not lack substance. What they lack is the almighty dollar. Without enormous budgets (bolstered by federal funding) and/or lobbyists that garner respect and standing with politicians and bureaucrats, the average non-hunting citizen’s viewpoint is marginalized. Unfortunately, picket signs and online petitions can communicate ideas and values, but they do not change that reality.

Conclusion

Rationalizations supporting the perceived need to kill wild animals in America sit on top of a well-moneyed house of cards held together with the hunting industry’s promotions and propaganda. Guided by the demands of the hunting contingency, reliant on the current antiquated funding scheme, and therefore desperate for increased hunter engagement, state agencies craft wildlife management policy accordingly. The public must decide whether or not the propriety of these strategies is acceptable; however, it is important to note from where the information supporting such strategies is coming. Wildlife agency press releases and well-paid spokesperson are never the most reliable of sources. Caution must also be taken when considering recommendations and policy from institutions which stand to gain further funding and prominence through their associations with wildlife agencies whose mission is to promote hunting opportunities. The resources expended by state wildlife agencies to increase killing opportunities and hunter engagement is perhaps only overshadowed by the deliberate attempts to convince the general public that they have the best interests of wildlife in mind.

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¹ The Center for Wildlife Ethics objects to the term “wildlife management.” The term’s current usage denotes a body of governmental policies that commodify, trivialize and devalue the habitat, lives and bodily integrity of non-human animals. In its official context, “wildlife management” is a popular euphemism for predominantly violent, lethal force government agencies use to intervene in real, perceived or contrived human-wildlife conflicts.

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