



HARBORING, LANDOWNERS & NEW TOOLS

The big game populations we enjoy today are symbolic of what people can do when they work together and commit to a common philosophy and the principles that are imbedded in the most successful wildlife program on earth - the ***North American Model of Fish and Wildlife Conservation***.

The story of Montana's wildlife abundance is one that has not occurred by accident - it is a story of a collective people's vision that has taken billions of dollars, millions of man hours and more than 70 years, and several generations of conservation minded hunters and landowners.

In this story we have an obligation to ensure that our wildlife resources and the opportunity to equitably enjoy and pursue them is available to ALL generations. As Theodore Roosevelt wrote when addressing the 'OWNERSHIP of Game', "...this rightly means the people who are to be born a hundred years hence just as much as the people who are alive today."

If we are to take this obligation seriously - MWF believes that we can not succumb to schemes that attach commerce to OUR WILDLIFE or that diminish the authority of the people's wildlife management agency or that replaces public hunting opportunities for the everyday person with opportunities determined by the size of ones check book. Montana's wildlife wealth is unique in our nation - it is deeply imbedded in our culture and we are one of the last bastions of the truly great frontier for hunting but there is a growing problem.

Harboring, Distribution and Landowners

Issues over big game management have been brewing for the past five to ten years as populations of deer and elk in some regions of Montana have increased. Now they are beginning to boil as sportsmen and landowners both express frustration. The challenges of sustaining and managing big game populations today are far different from those of the past.

The increasing human population and development in Montana, the conversion of agricultural land and new ownerships, the development of natural resources and demands for energy, the harboring, refuging or stockpiling of wildlife and efforts that treats big game as a private commodity are colliding with our traditional values and visions of big game as - the people's wildlife. These influences and efforts of privatization, commercialization, exclusivity, lost access, and outfitting based on privilege are directly and indirectly diminishing the value of the department's ability and the general public's participation in controlling populations, but also – increasingly- they are impacting landowners.

Some landowners are saying enough is enough. Complaints are increasing from landowners that are experiencing crop loss and property damage due to a neighbor harboring or refuging big game. The reasons behind harboring big game may be as simple as aesthetic, a landowner that enjoys seeing animals, or it may be a landowner that does not want the general public or hunters on the property for various reasons, or it could be for personal hunting opportunities or commercially based hunting venues including limited exclusive outfitting.

What is playing out and triggering conflict is that these types of activities do not consider the impacts to neighbors or to sound, proven wildlife management strategies that sustain healthy populations. In most cases it is not a matter of too many big game animals, the carrying capacity of habitats in Montana can support far more, but it is rather a matter of a combination of biological factors, habitat, landowner tolerance, animal distribution and the lack of activities that disperse animals and inadequate tools to manage populations.

Let's take a look at elk for instance, a premier game species which have caused a lot of controversy. Collectively sportsmen, sportswomen, landowners, outfitters and decision makers must truly attempt to understand the most common - recurring reason why elk are over objective, populations set by the department, in some management units. Based upon FWP 2008 data gained from aerial surveys and GPS collar tracking, 36 of 161 districts, 22 percent of districts are over objective or greater than 120 percent of objectives. Elk populations have been as high as 60 percent over objectives in some districts in recent years. The 2004 Elk Management Plan identifies the most common issues:

“the primary management challenge is negotiating hunter access to elk”...“specifically, providing access to those elk finding “refuge” - or that are being harbored - on private land ...where they are unavailable for management”.

Attempting to address these issues the department has expanded hunting opportunities through targeted liberal harvest seasons. In some districts these seasons have worked. Not less than 72 additional hunting districts were “liberal” for the 2007 season and an additional not less than 11 districts moved to “liberal” season structures in 2008. But in many other districts these have had limited success because hunters have little to no access or the hunting that is occurring is limited to paying clients.

In recent years FWP has expanded game damage efforts through special hunts, post season hunting opportunities and measures that protect crops through fencing, permanent stack yards, hazing and the issuance of kill permits to landowners. In some cases helicopters, scare guns and vigilant monitoring has been employed to disperse animals only to have them return during the night or days later. Some animals have been destroyed by department sharpshooters after exhausting, what they considered as all options. The cost to the sportsmen supported department game damage program are increasing. In 2007, 331 complaints for game damage were submitted to the department and the labor intensive efforts cost the agency \$267,000. In 2008, the department program expended \$368,000.

Hunting is a major factor and the traditional vehicle in managing big game populations but it is only as good as the access opportunities allowed. It is also only one component of management that is influenced by a long list of interconnected, complex elements; weather, land use, mortality, expanding residential developments, refuging, habitat, predators, and human presence all influence wildlife management. Distribution, distribution, distribution is the core of the related debates and refuging – for what ever reason - is having a substantial impact on landowners and animal management.

Interviewed for this article, Quentin Kujala, Management Bureau Chief of the FWP Wildlife Division said, “In the short term, hunters have and do see such refuge circumstances as impacting hunter opportunity. On private land, individual landowners see such circumstances as a manifestation of private rights—that can lead to increased game damage and disease risk. FWP, as the agency responsible for elk management, sees such circumstances additionally as a significant negative influence to effective management.”

Kujala added, “In the long term, the impacts of refuge areas—particularly those on private land—can be more significant. Spatial information from ongoing elk research in southwest Montana reveals a reduction of elk presence on effective public elk habitats—and an associated increase of elk presence on private land. Such an evolution speaks to enhanced game damage potential, enhanced disease potential, reduced

elk distribution, reduced elk hunting opportunity and a corresponding reduction of management effectiveness.”

It is becoming more widely accepted that where populations are over objective and/or causing private property damage the primary cause is harboring or refuging for either personal or financial gain or in a misguided belief that a herd needs some protection. In reality this harboring may be increasing the risks to herd health. Many studies have confirmed that concentrations of big game result in increased numbers of disease carry animals and greater transmission of diseases. The Wyoming elk feed lots and the corresponding high prevalence of brucellosis is a good example. Recent confirmations of brucellosis in cattle in the Greater Yellowstone Area also raise some issues.

At a January 22, 2009 legislative hearing on Senate Bill 217, Ken McDonald, FWP Wildlife Division Administrator responded to the bill that demanded, “During any period that the population objectives for game animals are not met, the department shall reimburse livestock producers who are required to test livestock for diseases that may be transmitted by game animals for the actual cost of testing.” Excerpts from the McDonald testimony are important to this issue, “Harboring of elk in certain areas has led to large groups of elk inhabiting relatively small areas on private land where the risk to those elk is predictably low – this is essentially a mini-feed ground scenario.” “In the case of brucellosis, co-mingling of livestock and elk during high-risk periods is the greater concern. In many cases, the co-mingling is a direct result of harboring of elk during the hunt seasons.” “This bill does not address the harboring issue, and therefore one of the main causes why certain elk populations are over objective. Harboring of elk and allowing large concentrations of elk in the vicinity of livestock represents a much greater risk of disease transmission.”

While many well intended landowners in Montana don’t understand the impacts of big game harboring, commercial hunting interests know exactly what they are doing; the more animals, the more bulls and bucks, the more money from clients.. Harboring for exclusive, financial benefits and limiting access to adjacent public lands are most frequently predicated on the males of a big game species for purposes of paid client hunting. Not only does this diminish public opportunity, and impact neighboring landowners, this approach compounds the existing challenges the department has in carrying out its mandates and controlling populations. It is a disrespectful approach to managing wildlife and neighboring landowners.

As successful as our Montana wildlife management programs have been there are abundant challenges and great need for new tools; the harboring of big game needs attention.

In some areas of Montana, landowners, hunters, and policy makers through facilitation supported by FWP are trying to resolve related issues. Groups such as the Pine Ridge Elk Working Group, Bear Paw Mountains Elk Working Group, Sun River Elk Working Group and Madison Valley Ranchlands Group have all grappled with similar issues in different parts of the state with some success. To the credit of landowners, and accentuating the issues, most of these groups have had their beginnings through area landowners. While some of the groups continue to seek collaborative solutions, not all of the well intended working groups work. Differences of opinion over population objectives, hunting, department programs, commercial hunting, game damage caused by a harboring neighbor, and even border disputes have caused some failures.

The flexibility to manage big game populations under the watchful eye of hunters, landowners, wildlife enthusiasts and policy makers requires effective and appropriate tools. Managing big game is complex and involves many uncontrollable variables. Exclusive outfitting on a ranch that was once part of the Block Management Program and/or open to public hunting or a new owner closing a large ranch and instead choosing to harbor a large herd of deer or elk can change management directions and dramatically impact area landowners.

MWF believes the issue of harboring, herd management and the impacts on landowners deserving

of more attention. Farmers and ranchers working with FWP are in great need of new tools to negotiate a sea of collaborative change. Conservation minded hunters would like to work more closely with landowners in crafting these tools that will be good for wildlife management and our prized big game, landowners and hunters, and Montana.