

INFLUENCING WILDLIFE POLICY

INTRODUCTION

Wildlife rehabilitators with a strong commitment to wildlife may find themselves involved with helping wildlife at the wildlife management policy level as well as through hands-on rehabilitation efforts. When one begins working on wildlife policies, it can be difficult to know where to start and how to become the most effective. This paper describes some ways to increase effectiveness in influencing wildlife policy, as well some tips on how to get started.

AGENCIES RESPONSIBLE FOR WILDLIFE POLICIES

State and federal wildlife agencies are often thought of first when someone mentions wildlife policies. Since they are responsible for issuing rehabilitation permits and licenses, they are agencies with which rehabilitators will have initial and ongoing contact.

However, there are many other government agencies whose policies can significantly impact wildlife. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sets water quality standards and regulates chemicals allowed as herbicides and pesticides. The U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management influence the use of wildlife habitat, including practices such as logging, grazing, use of off-road-vehicles and snowmobiles, and prescribed burns. The U.S. Department of Agriculture sets policies regarding importation of exotic species.

State agencies can have a significant impact. State agriculture agencies often set predator control policy; animal damage control practices (e.g., trapping, poisoning, aerial gunning); and regulate which exotic animals can be raised and sold as “alternative livestock”. State health departments can place restrictions on rehabilitation of certain wildlife species. State forestry agencies set policies regarding logging, grazing, and hunting on lands they control. State parks and transportation departments determine policies regarding human-wildlife conflicts (e.g., prevention of problems, tolerance, or destruction of the wildlife).

Local governments influence animal control ordinances (e.g., dog and cat control, fines), zoning (affecting wildlife habitat loss and if and under what circumstances wildlife rehabilitation is allowed), and open space practices. Local governments can influence policies regarding wildlife conflicts at local airports, waterways, and buildings.

TYPES OF POLICIES

Policies affecting wildlife take many different forms. They can be statutes, regulations, administrative procedures, judicial actions, or informal practices. Policies can be developed by local governments, states, provinces, federal agencies, or tribal entities. Wildlife policies can result from legislation, ballot initiatives, agency action (with or without public involvement), lawsuits, and treaties.

WAYS TO IMPACT POLICY

There is considerable work needed to effectively influence government policy whether it is regulation, statute, procedures, or whatever. The specific ways to work on the policies must be tailored to the specific type of policy and the agency. There are some fundamental techniques that can be used, regardless of the type of agency or policy. It is useful to understand the agency and how it works. Once that is understood, specific

actions can be targeted to help increase effectiveness. Developing positive professional and personal relationships can improve effectiveness as well.

Wildlife rehabilitators are affected by many different state wildlife agency policies. They are affected by regulations and procedures regarding hunting, trapping, animal damage control methods, possession or sale of wildlife, protection of at-risk-species, and rehabilitation. The following model of how rehabilitators can learn about a state wildlife agency and its policies can be applied to many other agencies.

TYPES OF THINGS TO LEARN ABOUT AN AGENCY

Learn the reasons the agency was formed and its basic responsibilities. State wildlife agencies were originally established to maintain fish and game populations. While some state agencies continue to emphasize traditional consumptive wildlife practices, others have expanded their scope. Functions and responsibilities vary by state, but can include consumptive wildlife practices (e.g., hunting, fishing, trapping), protection of wildlife habitat, species protection and conservation, exotic wildlife policies, and wildlife rehabilitation.

Become familiar with general philosophies and values. While these will vary by state, region, and individual staff member, it is useful to “know where they are coming from”. For example, many state wildlife agencies consider wildlife to be a resource to be managed, like a commodity. Many staff members may focus on wildlife population issues, although some appreciate situations involving individual animals. The value of wildlife is translated to money from license sales, although some states receive revenue from other sources. Few public tax dollars fund wildlife agencies.

By statute, most native wildlife is considered to be property of the public, or in other words, the state. Historically, however, state wildlife agencies, many license buyers, and legislators have acted as though they have the primary interest in and power over wildlife decisions. That assumption and power base are changing in some states, with many states now involving non-traditional, non-consumptive constituents.

Learn about changes. Many government agencies are undergoing significant changes. State wildlife agencies are no exception. Public values about wildlife and wildlife treatment are changing. Economies, land use, industries, and public demographics are also changing. There is less habitat for wildlife and wildlife-related activities, resulting in fewer places to hunt and fish.

The public is scrutinizing all levels of government and demanding more involvement in planning, decision-making, and performance evaluation. The responsibilities of state and federal agencies are also shifting, sometimes very quickly. Issues are changing dramatically. State wildlife agencies are being required to spend more time on habitat loss, non-game programs, at-risk-species, privatization, private property rights, and commercialization of wildlife.

Agency budgets are under pressure due to decreasing annual revenues from license fees. Funding non-traditional wildlife programs is an increasingly serious problem for the majority of states, and many are considering funding sources beyond license revenues. Lack of funding can result in fewer staff, less time for activities, and fewer programs and other resources.

Power bases are changing dramatically in many states. Power is no longer concentrated in the sporting community as it was historically. Other groups are becoming more involved and exercising more influence. These include environmental organizations, animal welfare and animal rights groups, real estate developers, agriculture interests, commercial wildlife businesses, politicians, and even wildlife rehabilitators. Many of the state wildlife agencies are facing large numbers of retirements, resulting in staffing changes and new power structures within the agencies. These internal and external factors add up to significant change and challenge for many agencies.

Get to know individuals and their job responsibilities. Many wildlife agency staff members traditionally joined the agencies because they enjoyed being close to wildlife, working with sportsmen, and being involved with wildlife recreation (e.g., hunting, fishing). They also wanted to protect wildlife populations for the future. Now, some are also concerned with individual animals. Many may be interested in collaborating with the public on issues or topics of mutual concern.

The jobs at wildlife agencies are extremely varied. Wildlife agencies include a variety of management and administrative positions, as well as wildlife biologists, habitat specialists, educators, and field wildlife officers. The field wildlife officers have varied responsibilities, ranging from monitoring game populations, checking licenses, and enforcing laws to working with county governments on proposals involving development or zoning, monitoring wildlife disease, handling human-wildlife conflicts, and even inspecting wildlife rehabilitation facilities. Most agency staff work with a wide range of people, including sportsmen, environmentalists, county planners, developers, farmers and ranchers, business owners, and the media. Many of these jobs and personnel have changed dramatically in the last decade. Talking with the agency staff informally and when a crisis is not lurking can strengthen relationships, and identify mutual goals and opportunities for collaboration.

Become familiar with the organization structure and decision-making authority. An appointed body (wildlife commission or board) makes or approves wildlife agency policy in many states. The role of the agency staff is often to recommend, implement and enforce wildlife policy and regulations. The staff is often responsible for providing data to the public and to the wildlife commission. Staff schedules public meetings and hearings, notifies the public or media, sets agendas, presents the background information (science, statistics, precedents, etc.) and recommendations, and manages the process.

It is useful to know the management reporting relationships. It is good to know where the agency fits in the state hierarchy, and who manages the various wildlife agency departments and the people in those departments. In many cases, the wildlife agency is one of several organizations reporting to the Department of Natural Resources, which likely reports to the Governor. It is also helpful to know the relationship with other agencies: state, federal, and local.

Learn the system. Each agency has its own processes, procedures, and timing requirements which impact how internal and external sources work on issues. It is really critical to understand these processes, procedures, and requirements in order to be effective. For example, a person present at a wildlife commission meeting to provide testimony may be surprised to find the time restricted (e.g., less than 2 minutes) or that they missed the opportunity to testify because of a last minute agenda change.

Understand what influences decision-makers. Learn which constituent groups are most effective in influencing decisions (e.g., hunters, anglers, agriculture interests, businesses, landowners, legislators). Learn about agency funding sources because resources and budgets affect decisions. Become familiar with the agency's experience with (and impact of) legislation, ballot initiatives, lawsuits and the media. Determine the level of influence of other government agencies (state, federal, local, tribal). Learn about impacts of local conditions (e.g., disease outbreaks, water shortages or floods), historical precedents, and lawsuits. Assess the amount of input decision-makers seek and consider from the public (e.g., surveys, focus groups) versus reliance more on personal or political contacts.

In many cases, working with staff members can result in influencing decisions during policy development or when policy changes are considered. Sometimes, influence will occur due to informal or formal communications with those approving decisions, such as agency executives, commissions, or even political officials. The media is another tool used to raise awareness and build support for a wildlife policy change. In other cases, more formal mechanisms, such as legislation, ballot initiatives, referendums, or lawsuits may be necessary. These last methods are more controversial, complex, difficult, costly, and risky. They take more effort and skill than less formal methods.

HOW TO LEARN ABOUT THE AGENCY

Published resources. Obtain copies of the agency mandate, annual reports, long-range plans, and budgets. Examine the organization charts and department descriptions. Review copies of regulations and procedures (some are on-line, others are available as publications), remembering that there may be some unwritten policies that require more sleuthing. Read the minutes of Board or Commission meetings to learn about the issues and types of input that are most effective (audio tapes may be available). Press releases, web sites, and media articles can be very helpful.

Regular, informal communications with individuals or groups. These can be with agency staff members, or with other wildlife-oriented groups or individuals (e.g., Audubon chapters, Sierra Club, Wildlife Societies). Members of the media may be good information sources. Invest the time to develop your own broad-based network.

Get involved. Attend public meetings, participate in working groups, get on mailing lists. Keep up with what is happening. Being present at one activity may reveal something about an issue, help build a relationship, or identify ways to effectively impact the decision-makers.

MANY OPTIONS

As discussed above, working effectively on wildlife policy issues is not quick or easy. Here are some tips to consider.

- Start early. Everything takes longer than expected.
- Build positive relationships with a variety of staff, decision-makers, constituent groups, politicians, and media. Relationships are critical. Informal communications can build an important foundation for the future.
- Learn the process used to establish or change regulations. Learn the process, sequence, timing, and which forms of input are most effective.

- Work on a variety of subjects to learn more about the issues and processes, and to build effectiveness. It helps to have some experience working with agencies on wildlife policy before a crisis occurs.
- Do the homework. Thoroughly understand the issues, science, background, alternatives, consequences, costs, impacts, backlash, politics, etc.
- Learn what the agency staff and policy makers consider important.
- Build a strategy and plan, including coalitions and financial resources if needed.
- Stay involved and monitor policies, regulations, resources, etc. Things can change quickly, so it is important to remain current and move quickly.
- Incorporate input and create “win-win” opportunities. Identify and collaborate on mutual goals.
- Be professional and respectful, whether agreeing or disagreeing. Avoid judgmental and polarizing language, even when strong feelings are involved.
- Present a professional demeanor and appearance.
- Build your skills in public speaking, negotiating, conflict resolution, mobilizing groups and media relations.
- Talk with others to learn what has been effective. Collaborate to learn and, where possible, to bring more influence to the table.

CONCLUSION

It is challenging to work on a policy affecting wildlife, whether it is an issue with a state wildlife agency or any other government body. Effectively working with government agencies tends to be more complex, involved, and time-consuming than initially expected. It is not quick or easy. It takes study, skill, work, and persistence. In the beginning, the topic and system may seem overwhelming. However, as many rehabilitators have demonstrated, it is possible for wildlife rehabilitators to have a positive impact on wildlife policies – in the same way that they impact the lives of the wildlife in their care.

RESOURCES ON WILDLIFE POLICIES, ESPECIALLY USEFUL FOR WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS:

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