



Involving all Montanans in paying for wildlife management

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By Dave Chadwick

At the start of the 20th century, fish and wildlife in Montana were in crisis. Once-abundant big game had been hunted to the brink of extinction. Waterfowl were scarce, their habitats drained and their populations diminished. Our rivers were empty due to overfishing and pollution.

In response, hunters and anglers launched a grassroots movement to restore fish and wildlife through science-based management and habitat protection. They decided to pay for these efforts by “taxing” themselves through hunting and fishing licenses. This funding was matched at the federal level by excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment.

Today, we enjoy an abundance of fish and wildlife that was unimaginable a century ago. These resources support the best hunting, fishing, and wildlife-watching in the world, generating billions of dollars a year in economic activity and supporting jobs all over Montana.

At the same time, the pressures on wildlife and habitat continue to grow in scope and complexity. As growth and development continue, we’re taking up more and more of the lands and waters that Montana’s wildlife depend on for survival. The spread of invasive species and diseases poses a constant threat to wildlife populations. Working with private landowners to protect habitat is essential, but also complicated and expensive. As we move into the 21st century, we simply must find new ways to pay for the fish, wildlife, and natural lands that make Montana the Last, Best Place.

One place we can start is by broadening how we pay for wildlife management beyond just hunting and fishing licenses. All Montanans benefit from our state’s fish and wildlife, but many of them never purchase a hunting or fishing license. Wildlife management and conservation shouldn’t be paid for only by sportsmen. Everyone who benefits from the resource should help shoulder the burden.

Last month, Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) opened the door to broadening funding by proposing a “wolf conservation stamp” that would give non-hunters a way to contribute to wolf management. Some have attacked the proposal, suggesting that FWP would be catering to a special interest by taking funds from non-hunters. They’ve got it backward. The agency is already required to listen to all Montanans in their management decisions. This is a core tenet of how we manage wildlife in America, and a legal requirement for FWP as a government agency. All the wolf stamp would do is create a way for non-hunters to start paying part of the bill.

People can disagree about the specifics of the wolf stamp, but we should all welcome the discussion about how to involve more Montanans in paying for wildlife conservation. It is necessary, it is fair, and it is backed by public opinion. Numerous polls show that Montanans overwhelmingly think that everyone should pay for conservation, not just hunters and anglers.

A few states have dramatically broadened wildlife funding beyond hunting and fishing licenses. In Missouri and Arkansas, wildlife management has been funded for decades primarily from a dedicated portion of their state sales taxes. Moving away from a reliance on licenses has strengthened, not weakened, the commitment to scientific wildlife management and hunting heritage in those states.

The wolf stamp has sparked a debate about how we pay for wildlife management. In having that debate, we are standing on the shoulders of giants -- the first generation of responsible hunters and anglers who, a century ago, invented the conservation movement. Today, we have an opportunity to carry on that legacy. By involving all Montanans in paying for wildlife management, we can ensure that our wildlife resources and hunting and fishing traditions endure for future generations.

Dave Chadwick is the executive director of the Montana Wildlife Federation.