

WILDLIFE AND PRIVATE LAND, PART 3

Solutions to wildlife conservation must recognize the landowner as a private custodian of the public good.

In the final analysis, conservation is about one thing and one thing only: preventing the destruction of land. We may struggle with any number of other vexing problems but, in the end, it is the capacity of the earth to sustain nature that will determine the well-being of humanity, the future of nations, and the opportunity for civilization and progress. Yet the majority of citizens are preoccupied with what seem like more urgent matters.

Furthermore, while owning land may be a dream of many, what to do with it once it is owned is seldom a subject of public debate. Each landowner decides, to a large extent, what purpose the land will serve, despite the fact that land use affects all of us as well as the wildlife resource that belongs to us all. The reason for this is the

ideal that is considered, even today, inviolate: The private property of individuals is theirs to transform, to set aside, or to squander. This is not the state's business.

However, within the conservation movement, there is much debate around this issue of private land and its use. While more recently this discussion has centered upon the ownership and commercial use of wildlife on private lands, the conflict arises between the utilitarian and the aesthetic view of landscape, leading to a dichotomy of purpose for all land that wildlife requires, including private holdings. This unholy division often portrayed in the pejorative as a war between the "greenies" and "true conservationists"

has crusaders aligned on each side, a conservation civil war that has no vision beyond bloodletting, and no hope beyond victory. Like most civil wars, it is fueled by a shared history, irrational suspicions, and a failure to think inclusively. In this instance, it is a failure to understand that every portion of land has some capacity to fulfill the diverse dreams of everyone, to satisfy the goals of both combatants who might otherwise be allies in some future and better time. It is also fair to say that there is often a failure by both sides to understand the plight of the landowner who is implored to do the right thing for wildlife and country—and bear the costs for doing so.

Thus we see the clear problem for wildlife and for us who would fight for it. The landscapes of North America are being dismantled and disfigured while a majority of citizens remain disinterested, and those who care remain divided. Private landowners are a varied community that encompasses all these persuasions, fomenting an imponderable mix of attitudes among this critical component of society who actually own land where wildlife exists. This confusing reality flourishes because we have failed as citizens, and as nations, to understand that the people and the land are one. We fail to conceive that our society rests upon

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VIC SCHENDEL

By sheer preponderance, private land harbors a huge proportion of the nation's biodiversity, and some of its best hunting grounds.



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the soil and the materials that either lie below or upon it. We are members of a "citizen forest" whether we wish to think in those terms or not.

Indeed, like our forefathers, we still appear to labor under the illusion that excess land exists and that it is easier and cheaper to exploit new landscapes than conserve what we are already using, perceiving the continent as expanding rather than fixed. But who can fly across this expanse today without being struck by how little undeveloped land still exists? Everywhere there are roads and fence lines, crops and expanding suburbs. Does this not beg the question "where can wildlife thrive?" The most fundamental answer rests with who owns the land. In this regard, both public and private lands policy are in desperate need of reconsideration, but in my view, the greater challenge and opportunity rests with private land and, more particularly, with the private landowner, who must be encouraged and supported to do what is right for wildlife.

More than 60 percent of land in the USA is in private ownership, stitched like a patchwork quilt across the length and breadth of the nation. It represents some 1.4 billion acres and encompasses the fulsome natural diversity of the country. It contains virtually all the nation's cropland and a large majority of grassland pastures and forests. By sheer preponderance, it harbors a huge proportion of the nation's biodiversity. It is also the land that is worked, capable of creating increased wildlife abundance through applied science and management principles while at the same time affording lifestyle and economic opportunities for people and their communities. Furthermore, it is land that can be managed at the personal and/or local level, making decisions that are required for wildlife conservation potentially easier to achieve, and often more practical in conception and application.

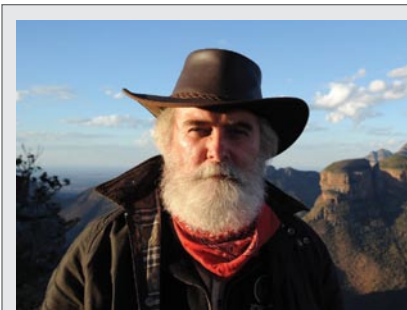
Private land is thus important, for the nation's wildlife and for the nation itself. It was this notion that John Locke articulated when he entwined the "rights of life, liberty, and property" and then linked those with the notion of governance through consent. In the USA, in particular, the private citizen and the land he or she owns is both the sinew of the nation and the great hope for wildlife conservation. It lies structurally at the very foundations of the American economy and forms a constant communication mechanism between the citizen, the private sector, and the government. And if we have learned anything from the twentieth century experiment with conservation, we know that, without this three-legged stool, wildlife conservation ultimately falters. Some economic basis must exist for conservation to work. Either the public pays for it through taxation or the private citizen earns from it in a direct sense and thus pursues it with good intentions and good sense. Eden is no more. We keep wildlife through our collective sweat, blood, and tears. If we cease to labor, wildlife will perish.

If someone asked you to do your best to protect wildlife, where would you start? I believe we should start with private land and that means addressing, head on, the question of how to create incentives for the private landowner. We have only a few general options available to us. Either the private landowner makes money from the wildlife on the land and/or the public decides to financially support the landowner for those efforts that conserve the values of that landscape, aesthetic and utilitarian, that the public wants. Expecting the landowner to do so at his or her own expense is a utopian dream with dire implications for wildlife in the medium and long term. It simply will not work. Even the wealthiest of private landowners with

strong commitments to conservation recognize that some balance between philanthropy and capitalism is required to conserve wildlife and other ecological values of the landscape for the long term.

The private landowner can and must be a custodian of the public good; but a good and enlightened public is also required. We need a public that will economically and morally support private landowners in their efforts. We need a conservation movement that will set aside petty quarrels and divisions and that will also set aside ideologies. We need to focus on the great question of how to keep the wild things with us. Along the way we will have to swallow hard and accept that wildlife on private land is a special case in need of special treatment. Dismissing this reality is a perilous ignorance. 🐾

Editor's Note: Private land issues and the privatization of wildlife have become major debates within conservation circles. This is the concluding article in a series of articles where Shane Mahoney examines this controversy and comments on what has become a divisive issue.



Shane Mahoney

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