

# THE PUBLIC'S WILDLIFE

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Everyone enjoys wildlife in a multitude of ways, whether by watching birds at the feeder outside their kitchen window or obtaining free-range, organic and locally sourced meat they have personally curated from field to fork. In the beginning of the wildlife management profession, the focus was on saving and protecting species that were overexploited because there were no restrictions on killing and using them. The species most at-risk were those that had ornate feathers or those that had valuable leather and fur and were filled with meat.

The protections put in place to regulate harvest, along with funding generated from the sustainable use of wildlife, allowed populations to recover, sometimes beyond their original levels. This same funding was also used for research to learn more about how to properly manage wildlife populations and their habitat for future generations. Most funding came from the sale of hunting licenses and tags and a tax on hunting equipment, so the focus remained on properly managing the sustainable harvest of those hunted species. This is sometimes referred to as a “user-pay, public benefit” model.

This early attention on sustainable harvest enhanced conservation of all species by driving the funding and advocacy for broader conservation.



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Species that were not harvested for meat, fur or feathers did not require the intensity of monitoring and management, they just needed good quality habitat.

**Advocacy for Wild Things**

Landscape conservation for all species was not quite on the minds of Americans in the mid-1900s; however, active habitat conservation and management for the hunted species also benefited the rest. For example, grassland improved for quail, wetland conservation supported waterfowl and forest management helped deer — but all the actions benefited all other animals relying on those ecosystems.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, there was growing public interest in wildlife and enjoying time in nature. Aldo Leopold, the father of modern wildlife conservation, earlier referred to this as a “conservation ethic.” State agencies shifted from a focus on producing game animals to a model of using the sustainable harvest of a few species to support the most successful system of conservation on the planet. This growing interest and advocacy for wild things resulted in several pieces of landmark legislation, such as the Endangered Species Act, National

Environmental Policy Act and Multiple-Use Sustained-Yield Act.

The relationship between the public and the agencies that delivered conservation was changing. Citizens increasingly sought to be more involved in government decisions at all levels. As public interest in wildlife increases and diversifies, it is becoming apparent that there are divergent views about how wildlife should be conserved and from where the funding should come. The conservation profession is rapidly maturing to include the desires of everyone interested in wild places containing abundant populations of wildlife.

**Wildlife for All**

Wildlife is managed under a concept called the Public Trust Doctrine, common law from an 1842 Supreme Court decision derived from the Magna Carta and ancient Roman law. Under this system, wildlife is property that cannot be privately owned, but rather owned by all citizens and held in trust and managed by government agencies on the public’s behalf. This is the same as when a collection of assets is put into a trust and managed by a trustee for the good of the beneficiaries.

In the case of wildlife held in the

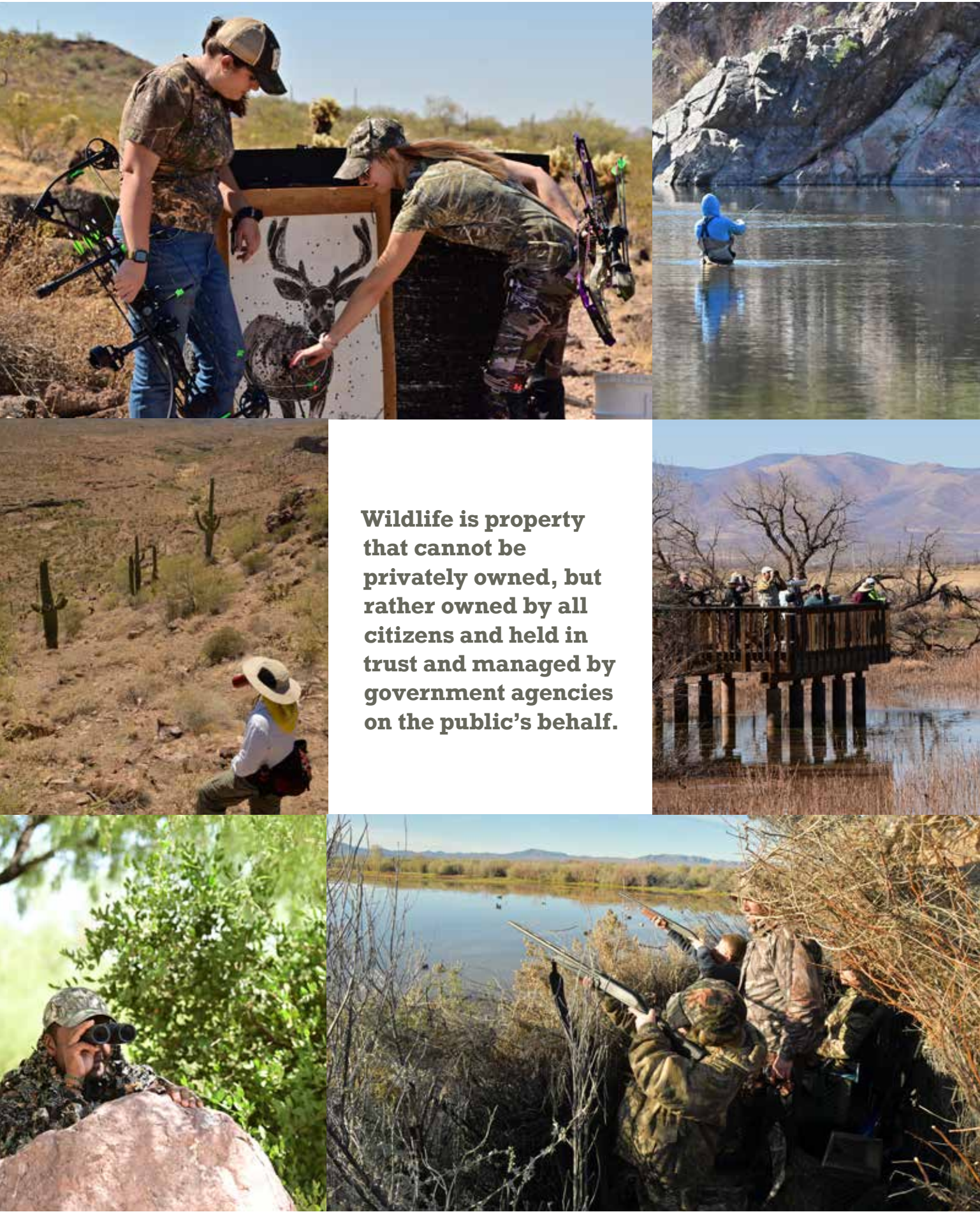
public trust, the government acts as trustee and has an obligation to protect and enhance the trust (wildlife) for the public (beneficiaries) and manage it with good governance practices. It is imperative that everyone has a voice in responsible wildlife conservation. Theodore Roosevelt felt this engagement in conservation was a responsibility of American citizenship.

Managing wildlife resources for everyone sounds simple, but it is not. There are as many opinions about how wildlife should be managed as there are citizens. Everyone wants wildlife managed their way, but those desires may be swamped by other members of the public (who also are beneficiaries of the trust) wanting completely different things. This is what makes conservation so complex and difficult for the agencies, but it is their job to invite and consider diverse and sometimes contradictory desires.

Decisions must be made so the only proper course of action is to focus on protecting the assets of the trust (in this case, wildlife) in the long term by using the best available science, an objective consideration of diverse perspectives, transparency in decision-making and a sense of fairness. Everyone doesn’t get their way, but we all win in the long run if wildlife populations held in trust stay healthy. The goal is for these resources to continue to flourish under this great system of collaborative conservation.

**Diverse Issues**

At the same public meeting it is not uncommon for one person to ask a commission to provide more hunting opportunities, while the next person at the podium calls for the end of hunting. The next speaker may talk passionately about wanting no limit on the abundance of wolves, while the next would like to round that number down to zero. Agencies value native predators as much as their prey, but



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neither are exempt from the need for proper management. The agency considers all suggestions when making management decisions, but in the end, the path forward must be based on a solid foundation of good science and management experience. A scientifically guided system of allocating a portion of wildlife to sustainable harvest — that incidentally funds most state wildlife conservation — is supported by 77 to 81 percent of the American public because they see hunting as a positive force for conservation.

The user-pay, public-benefit model accepts that the sustainable removal of a limited number of individuals from proportionately few and healthy populations, provides funding necessary to care for vastly greater and less fortunate populations and habitats that are not as healthy, and whose issues are not typically hunting or angling related.

Referendums and voter initiatives are sometimes portrayed as a purely democratic process, but they often lack objective, evidence-based knowledge and can allow emotional decisions to drive policy. This often is done independently of the established public-trust framework where professionals gather and consider science, experience, public input, laws and the repercussions on future funding and other wildlife species. In other words, agency trustees are able to look at the big picture to conserve and protect the current and future health of the resource when making policy decisions.

### Your State Wildlife Agency

Today, state wildlife agencies manage all native wildlife species for all citizens including, as Roosevelt put it, the “unborn generations.” As the public became increasingly divergent in their opinions about how wildlife should be managed, so did the makeup of agencies themselves.



APACHE TROUT



CHIRICAHUA LEOPARD FROG

Decades of increased levels of urban living and the inevitable detachment from the natural world, resulted in the public and agency employees having a more diverse view of what conservation today and into the future should look like. Although the change may not be obvious to those less engaged, agencies have been working hard to evolve agency culture and human diversity as they focus increasingly on conserving all biodiversity.

State wildlife agency decisions must be the result of an open and transparent process of melding the best available science and a wide breadth of public desires and interest so that overall decisions reflect the diverse beneficiaries they serve. For those wanting to engage in this process,

every agency has a multitude of ways to make opinions known to decision-makers.

Many states, like Arizona, are governed by a commission or board comprised of members of the public who combine science, agency technical expertise and social input to make decisions. This commission structure was one of the recommendations of the 1930 American Game Policy led by Leopold to buffer conservation decisions from undue political pressure. This policy recommended unpaid, overlapping commission terms to provide stability and insulation from short-term political demands, and to prevent politicians from sweeping away the entire commission and appointing a new one to their liking.

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SNOWY EGRET



NEW MEXICO JUMPING MOUSE

They also felt it important that the commission be responsible for hiring or firing the director of the agency, providing further insulation between conservation and politics. This works well in cases where states remained true to this recommendation, like the five-member Arizona Game and Fish Commission, where the governor appoints one member each year for a staggered five-year term.

The Arizona Game and Fish Commission and Department take seriously the responsibility of managing more than 800 wildlife species for everyone. Arizona has long been a national leader in the conservation of biodiversity. The department championed the Heritage Fund that passed into law in 1992 and directs up to \$10 million annually to be spent on wildlife species that are not hunted and their habitat. The fund helped establish the Nongame Branch 30 years ago, allowing Arizona Game and Fish to play a key role in the conservation of previously overlooked species and the recovery of endangered species.

### Fueling the Conservation Engine

Conservation funding has, from the beginning of the movement in the 1930s, come mostly from a disproportionately small percentage of

the public engaged in the regulated harvest of a relatively few species. This system served the conservation movement well for many years, but the future requires a larger, sustainable and more diversified portfolio of funding to meet societal and environmental challenges.

For at least five decades, state wildlife agencies have actively worked to expand the source of funding to support a broader conservation of the full array of fish and wildlife. Some of these efforts have been successful, such as the establishment of the State Wildlife Grant program that has provided agencies with federally appropriated funding for the last two decades to help keep common species common and off the Endangered Species List.

The Public Trust Doctrine serves the department well, even as we continue to improve the governance of wildlife. Continual enhancements provide effective conservation of the public's wildlife through their broader engagement. There are funding challenges that must be overcome; a large segment of the public needs to “climb out of the wagon and help pull.”

Other challenges will remain besides funding and diverse viewpoints, such as managing public

wildlife on private land. Any conservation system must respect private property rights. Agencies are continually fostering relationships with landowners and building partnerships for conservation on private land and to maintain access to public land beyond it.

Some species will always require more agency focus because of the public interest in sustainably harvesting them. Hunting funds research, habitat improvement, law enforcement, population monitoring and the sharing of information about all wildlife species and nature. A focus on, and funding from, a small group of species doesn't mean all others are neglected.

State wildlife agencies have made great strides in conserving a vast diversity of wildlife species with a workforce that continues to diversify. Science, public engagement, transparent decision-making and equitable access to all wild things in wild places will remain the cornerstone of conservation governance into the future. 🦋

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