The Gamekeepers

Wisconsin Wildlife Conservation from WCD to CWD

David L. Gjestson

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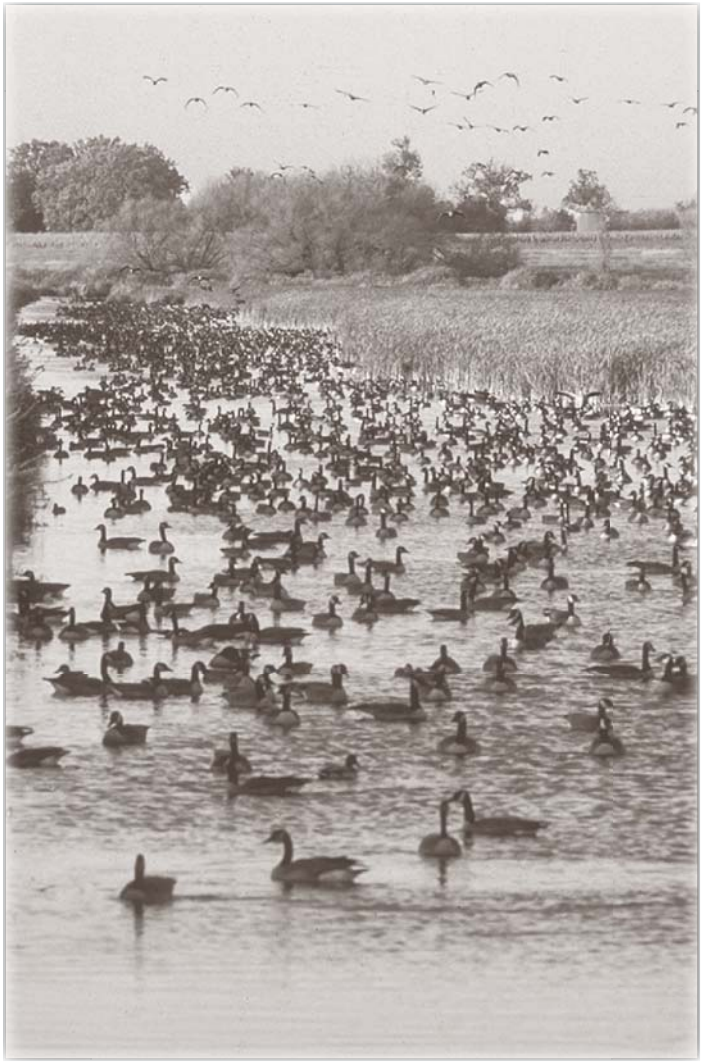

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In short, twenty centuries of "progress" have brought the average citizen a vote, a national anthem, a Ford, a bank account, and a high opinion of himself, but not the capacity to live in high density without befouling and denuding his environment, nor a conviction that such capacity, rather than such density, is the true test of whether he is civilized. The practice of game management may be one of the means of developing a culture which will meet this test.

— Aldo Leopold

Foreword

I agreed to write this introduction for several reasons. On a personal level, Dave Gjestson has been a career-long friend and colleague, and it was easy to sense how much he had invested in this project. On a professional level, I believe that the story of the wildlife conservation program in Wisconsin needs to be told.

Electronic databases and publishing have resulted in the loss of significant (and still relevant) "old publications." Our contact with the pioneers in wildlife conservation is vanishing. I was painfully reminded of that while writing this introduction as I learned of the death of Art Hawkins, a Leopold student well known for his career in waterfowl management. Further, I am troubled by the all-too-common phrase "history starts today." I fear there are those who truly believe that and therefore doom themselves to repeat failures that could have been avoided.

Telling the story of wildlife conservation in Wisconsin is an important and difficult task. Much like The Wildlife Society's *Conserve Our Outdoor Heritage* (COUCH) project, wildlife biologists with a penchant for and an understanding of history's importance realize that our links to it are slipping away. Many from the early generations have passed on, taking with them rich stories and memories. Records get lost. Only through a concerted effort to assemble and document all that has gone on in the past can that history be preserved, along with the opportunity to learn from it. Sadly, as the reader will see, we have not done a very good job on the learning from the history front—especially with deer!

Not only did the story need to be told, it was a job for an insider, someone with personal experience and passion who could draw energy for the task from knowing many of the primary players. This means a short list of willing candidates and a real risk it might never be done. Fortunately, Dave took on the challenge. As a retired 30-year DNR veteran with long experience as a field and administrative wildlife manager and possessing an unusual mix of political savvy, writing skills, and historical interest, he has the right credentials for this project.

It was fortuitous that Dave was willing to go beyond archival research and write this history. Originally, he had only agreed to do the archival research for the DNR, expecting them to hire a professional writer to complete a book on the topic. Unfortunately, CWD struck, and the Bureau of Wildlife Management was forced to spend the book funds. With no budget and little prospect for money in the future, Dave took on the task rather than run the risk that the boxes of archival research material he had assembled would be lost.

Dave willingly called attention to his "limited writing skills" and the fact that the written history he has produced is far from complete. However, I feel he has done a remarkable job of uncovering the agency's wildlife management beginnings and introducing the reader to the splendid mix of personalities that made the wildlife management profession in Wisconsin one of the best and strongest in the United States. Everyone should have such "limited writing skills!"

The first eight chapters cover time periods of roughly 10 to 20 years that Dave felt could be delineated and categorized. The final chapters transcend time periods already discussed in order to trace specific programs like deer management, CWD, endangered resources, and program successes that stretch across the entire time frame. The reader should take special note that many of the stories along the way are from a "state agency perspective," so keep that in mind.

Several common themes are apparent and well integrated in this history story, issues so pervasive and important that they are always in the mix. Examples include the "deer wars," the on-again/off-again relationship with the Conservation Congress, the mostly "off-again" relationship with the Wisconsin Legislature (primarily individual legislators who feel compelled to dabble in wildlife management), reorganization (again and again), and the constant struggle for human and financial resources to accomplish the huge job always at hand. In Chapters 1 through 8, Dave begins with

significant historic events of the period; Chapters 2 through 8 provide an overview of the state agency's progress to enable the reader to understand how wildlife conservation fits into the bigger picture of natural resources conservation.

In Chapter 1, "The Prelude," Dave explores a nearly century-long period of settlement and exploration that set the stage for wildlife conservation. He describes the logging era, market hunting, early regulations, and the early conservation movement. The critical early role of wardens, the early institutional framework for conservation in Wisconsin, and the first appearance of management practices still with us—refuges, stocking, and predator control—are all explored. The chapter ends with the early years of the Wisconsin Conservation Commission and the arrival in Madison of a forester by the name of Leopold.

Chapter 2, "Game Division Evolution," describes the early years of the Wisconsin Conservation Department (WCD), which was created in 1927. In 1928, the WCD created a Game and Fur Bureau, commonly referred to as the Department of Game and initially led by Wallace Grange. The warden force remained critical to field operations, and the state game farm, public hunting grounds, refuges, bounties, winter feeding, regulations development, and other well-known activities came online. Aggressive plans were laid out for surveys, research, and educational activities. Aldo Leopold's growing influence is well described in this chapter. Don't miss the "gamekeeper" reference.

Chapter 3 explores the early years of "The Game Managers," the evolutionary beginning of today's wildlife biologists and managers. With the creation of the Department of Game Management at the University of Wisconsin in the 1930s, Leopold began to produce a steady supply of students well trained in the new discipline. The end of World War II also produced a pool of young, eager manpower, and the WCD's Game Division hired 30 veterans in 1946. Game management began in earnest. The chapter also covers the development of the Conservation Congress and the first of what was to be decades of "deer wars."

Chapter 4, "Building a Profession," documents the development and continuity of the many tasks now in the hands of Game Division staff, including the advent of numerous required reports. The first attempts at "reorganization" led to new leadership titles and responsibilities. The reorganization tactic surfaces in later chapters with the 1996 effort, probably the most contentious because of its jumbled leadership, loss of disciplinary identity, and other problems. This chapter also begins a chapter-by-chapter summary of key species programs (deer, bear, pheasants, waterfowl, etc.), wildlife research, and key individuals.

Chapter 5, covering the 1960s, is titled "The New DNR." The text emphasizes ongoing game programs, but land acquisition intensified, and long-term research as well as information and education blossomed. The system for estimating the deer population became sophisticated when researcher Bill Creed developed the Sex-Age-Kill methodology for Wisconsin, which is still in use today. Most notably, the Kellett Commission, appointed by the Legislature to reorganize state government, resulted in just that: over 100 state agencies were reduced to 32. On August 1, 1967, a new "super-agency" called the Department of Natural Resources was created.

Chapter 6, "A Change of Focus," follows the evolution of the DNR. Under popular leader Tony Earl, the DNR expanded its traditional natural resource-based programs to include new environmental standards designed for cleaner air, water, and soil. The phrase "I'm from the DNR and I'm here to help you" was coined by Earl and is still in the jargon. The federal Endangered Species Act had a significant impact on traditional game management and led to an improved program in the restructured Bureau of Wildlife Management. Comprehensive planning came into vogue, and long-term research programs began to pay off with publications that became classics in the wildlife literature. Canada goose management at Horicon became a controversial topic, and a separate Bureau of Endangered Resources evolved.

Under new leadership at the top—C.D. "Buzz" Besadny and, in the Wildlife Management Bureau, Steve Miller—the late 1980s and early 1990s are described in Chapter 7 as the period of "Holistic Management." By this time, base programs were cruising along, research and field experience had provided a good understanding of the ecological principles upon which management was

based, and it was possible to take a broad, integrative look at resource use and management. New partners emerged, such as USDA Wildlife Services and the Chippewa bands in northern Wisconsin. A variety of national initiatives under the Farm Bill, waterfowl, and wetlands plans became important efforts. Wildlife conservation in Wisconsin became an integral part of a larger whole.

Chapter 8, "Maturing Profession," takes the reader to the present and beyond, including several infamous changes. First was the 1995 institution of a cabinet form of government for the DNR. The DNR secretary would hereafter be appointed by the governor rather than be appointed by the Natural Resources Board. Second was the major DNR reorganization of 1996. While the customer-driven, service-oriented plan sounded good, traditional programs like wildlife became less visible. Chapter 8 describes a host of other programs, activities, and relationships up to the present.

Chapter 9, "Deer Management and CWD," speaks for itself. The deer program in Wisconsin has a long and rich history and has long been regarded as one of the best in the county. However, despite its successes and tremendous opportunity for Wisconsin hunters, there are serious dark issues within deer management. Deer, like many wild animals, present a moving target for management. Many factors influence annual and long-term population dynamics, often beyond the control of managers. Yet managers are usually blamed when something real or perceived goes wrong.

It is also not easy being a civil servant when so many tax-paying citizens have a vested interest in the deer herd and, even worse, often consider themselves "experts" simply as a result of time spent a-field. We are only just now beginning to understand some of the powerful social, economic, and political forces behind the public's keen interest in deer. Nevertheless, seemingly endless debates over deer numbers, hunting season regulations, and a myriad of other deer matters will likely continue, unfortunately, further complicated by the challenge and tragedy of CWD.

Chapter 10, "The Endangered Resources Program," traces DNR involvement with rare and endangered species from the earliest efforts at protection up through the creation of the Office of Endangered and Nongame Species in 1978 that merged with the Natural Areas program in 1982 to become the Bureau of Endangered Resources (BER). Initially hampered by underfunding, the BER initiated some creative financing, first with the endangered resources "check-off" on state tax forms and later with the popular wolf state license plate. Many high profile programs followed, including trumpeter swan restoration, whooping crane restoration, and eagle and wolf recovery.

Chapter 11, "Successes and Failures," is just as billed: a recounting of notable successes and failures over the history of the wildlife program. Note that there are more successes than failures, and the chapter culminates in what most consider the greatest success of all—the wild turkey program.

Chapter 12, "People Along the Way: Heros, Mentors, and Friends" includes a collection of personal vignettes of some of the classic DNR staffers through the years. These are the people whose collective efforts made the DNR wildlife program what it is today. Dave has done a thoughtful and sensitive job of characterizing them and their contribution. Some may say, "*What about so and so?*" However, I think the choices selected are solid and give the reader the intended thought... quite a mix of personalities created the wildlife profession.

While covered briefly here and there, the reader must realize there are many players in both the history of wildlife conservation and its contemporary execution beyond the employees of the Wisconsin DNR. The Wisconsin DNR was, is, and hopefully will remain one of the top agencies in the country. However, along the way the DNR and Wisconsin's wildlife resources have benefited greatly from countless private citizens, non-governmental organizations, enlightened private landowners, outdoor writers, university researchers and teachers, nature centers, conservation/outdoors sports groups, and many others who are woven into the fabric of wildlife conservation in Wisconsin.

So concludes this 150 plus years of wildlife conservation. Hopefully, another author with convictions similar to Dave's will come along someday to add the next installment.

Scott Craven
Professor Emeritus, Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology, University of Wisconsin-Madison

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Dr. Ruth L. Hine, 1949.

Preface

This document is the result of more than 25 years of personal archival collection culminating with two years of historical research funded by the Department of Natural Resource's Bureau of Wildlife Management and compiled by the author in 2002. The primary research purpose was to identify the wildlife management profession's origin and to assemble written materials adequate for producing a publication about the subject's historical development.

This historical review is far from a complete narrative about the profession. It is simply chronological documentation of interesting and significant events related to this particular state agency that have occurred in the past three centuries. There are a myriad of untold personal stories about the men and women who made the profession one of the finest in the United States. It was, after all, the people, not the bureaucracy, who made the agency functional in taking care of the public's wildlife resources.

The story is told from an agency perspective—the Wisconsin DNR. Many other organizations and individuals contributed to the growth of wildlife conservation in Wisconsin, but the law clearly assigned the responsibility to this one entity on behalf of the citizens of the state. Recognize this bias as you read the text. You will be looking through the eyes of a state employee, so the perspective may be different from your own.

A special effort was made to tape-record retired wildlife managers and researchers. More than 40 interviews were completed and served to personalize historical findings and add information that cannot be found in any other source. The interviews shored up my belief that it was these individuals who gave the agency character. Each contributed in a unique fashion that made the agency what it is today.

My motivation for delving into this topic was because of fascinating early agency stories, missing links in key events, and professional pride. I expected some qualified writer to blend my findings into a well-told tale. Unfortunately, the funds allocated for this task were diverted to chronic wasting disease (CWD) activities, so I had to make do on my own. Writing is a very challenging medium.

Most historical writers of bureaucratic accomplishments inscribe program evolution, administrative systems, and important dates of its historical growth. Sometimes leaders are mentioned by name, but the essential story ingredients are very impersonal. I believe the addition of participants by name not only adds color to what could be a dull story but also gives long overdue credit to those working behind the scenes. Without these special, dedicated individuals, the organization would be just another middle-of-the-road bureaucracy.

A historian's prime obligation is to write the truth. This usually means verification of facts from more than one source. That wasn't always possible in researching an agency that kept poor historical records. Sometimes only one report or a single newspaper article documented an important event. Quoting historians or other qualified individuals with known expertise doesn't mean the information is accurate. So, recognize from the get-go that the history cited in this book could be vulnerable to some degree of error.

Not all of the management history could be retrieved, and not all that was retrieved was included. I filtered findings and exercised the author's privilege to select what is meaningful for publication. This type of bias faces all historians simply because of the limits of time and space. I can only tell you this: I used my best judgment, which was filtered by at least 10 experts in the fields of wildlife management and wildlife research.

I was deeply emerged in a bureaucratic system for 30 years, so I think I have a reasonable grasp of its principles. That includes a working knowledge of the politics that guides and confronts all state agencies. "Biopolitics," as it is called, is a mandatory part of natural resources management even though we may wish it wasn't. Many of us in the profession find it very frustrating to deal with because it's usually politically motivated, unscientific, factually distorted, emotionally driven, and overly weighted in decision making. Nonetheless, it has a bearing on most DNR programs and needs to be recognized by all participants.

Avoiding partisan politics would be a good thing in historical writing. However, I found those influences on the DNR programs too common and too visible to overlook. *The reader should note that the effect on DNR programs weren't always bad and that both sides of the aisle applied them.* Both political parties support good conservation, but clearly some politicians have an agenda designed to suppress the DNR's authority over natural resources and its ability to prevent people from doing irreparable harm.

The public has long known about the '"behind-closed-doors-of-smoke-filled-rooms" nature of politics but probably aren't aware of how nasty it can be at times. Because of the clandestine way politicians sometimes go about their business, it's difficult to really understand this level of decision making. My appearances in front of numerous legislative committees in my capacity as the DNR representative on hunting and trapping regulations allowed me to observe one of the working parts of this complex process up close and personal. I have witnessed politicians unnecessarily belittling state employees, reading newspapers while receiving public testimony, and rudely leaving meetings during public presentations. It can be an unpleasant public forum. As a result, my view of this situation was that some political commentary is warranted in this book.

To the wildlife biologists reading this history:

I hope this documentation reinforces the professional pride you have in your life's work. Learning about the roots and development of state agency wildlife conservation is an essential ingredient to understanding its principles. Chuckling at its blunders and being awestruck by its significant accomplishments will not only entertain and educate but also clearly demonstrate that the road to glory is not an easy one.

Historical recollection is not simply nostalgic reminiscing but rather a vital process of learning about the whole. History creates a continuum for the human experience and a true sense of belonging. It weaves the lives of early participants with your own, connecting you with Aldo Leopold, Wallace Grange, and Bill Grimmer. Knowing your professional roots will give you purpose, pride, and passion for what you do.

We have, collectively, helped improve the environment for wildlife and have contributed significantly to providing compatible recreation vital to quality of life. Your individual efforts remain vital for sustaining the profession and wildlife conservation in the years to come.

The people of Wisconsin may not always appear supportive, but they are very dependent upon you to do the right thing… do it!

Dave Gjestson

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