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THE INFLUENCE OF LEASING UPON WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AND HUNTING OPPORTUNITY

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Abstract: Leasing can stimulate better wildlife management on private land. Thus wildlife professionals should support leasing. Private landowners provide most hunting opportunity but receive a disproportionately small share of the revenue generated by hunting. Leasing is a just system that pays the person producing wildlife and charges the person using it. Leasing is not always detrimental to hunting opportunity. Considerations concerning the effect of leasing upon hunting opportunity are less important than considerations concerning the effect of leasing upon wildlife management.

Leasing of private land for hunting is a controversial topic among wildlife professionals; some actively support it, some passively accept it, and some aggressively oppose it. Here in Oklahoma, I have met several wildlife biologists who oppose the concept of leasing for hunting. It is unfortunate that wildlife professionals are divided on this issue. I believe leasing promotes better management of wildlife species that are deemed economically valuable, especially the game species. In an effort to reconcile these differences of opinion, this paper discusses the influence of leasing upon wildlife management and hunting opportunity.

I believe the fundamental relationships between leasing, wildlife management, and hunting opportunity are essentially the same for most game species. Therefore, much of the discussion in this presentation refers to game species in general instead of only bobwhite.

Leasing for hunting is a common form of the broader concept, recreational leasing. I define a recreational lease as an agreement between a property owner or manager and a sportsman whereby the right to participate in specified recreation on a specific tract of property is granted for a certain time and fee. The primary thing that is leased in such an agreement is the right to use the land for certain activities. Wildlife cannot be leased by a landowner because it is publicly owned by the citizens of a state.

The relationship between ownership of wildlife and control of it on private land is a paradox in our society. The public owns it, but individual landowners control it. Private landowners control wildlife populations because landowners control the existence and quality of wildlife habitats. Wildlife cannot exist naturally without proper habitat.

Most land in the United States is private land (Anon. 1958); therefore, the greatest potential for managing wildlife occurs on private land. One of the primary tasks of wildlife professionals should be to convince landowners that wildlife is a resource worth conserving and improving. To effectively sell this idea to landowners, wildlife professionals must recognize how society functions.

American society functions basically as a capitalistic economy. McConnell (1975) explains that capitalism is characterized by the following basic features: 1) private property, 2) freedom of enterprise and choice, 3) self-interest as the dominant motive, 4) competition, 5) reliance upon the price system, and 6) limited role of government. He further states that the price system is the basic coordinating mechanism of capitalism. In our society, the price system strongly influences the fate of resources. I believe recognizing this basic fact is an important step toward improving the future of wildlife on private land.

The aesthetic and ecological values of wildlife are more important to me than any economic or monetary value that could be assigned to it. However, I realize we do not live in a utopian society. We live and function in a capitalistic society where economic considerations direct the future of resources. We must use tools that our society responds to, such as money. Without tangible values for wildlife resources, I doubt we will change many landowner attitudes. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has recognized the importance of assigning economic values to wildlife. In the 1975 National Survey of Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (Fish and Wildlife Service 1977), tables and figures concerning expenditures of outdoor recreationists

and economic values of various outdoor activities comprise about 18 percent of the data presented.

Leasing may somewhat bastardize a few wildlife resources, but without leasing, I fear habitat and corresponding wildlife will continue to disappear at a high rate in the future. Leasing can help reduce habitat loss and even encourage habitat improvements (Berryman 1957). So what is the lesser of the evils, leasing or habitat loss?

Wildlife competes with livestock, crops, and timber for space and food. If wildlife is viewed as a liability due to the inconvenience and damage caused by hunters, fishermen, trespassers, and wild animals, property owners will be inclined to destroy wildlife and its habitat. However, if property owners see their wildlife as an asset, since it can be a source of income, they will be encouraged to manage for it. If we expect landowners to sacrifice their time, labor, money, property, and agricultural production efficiency to produce wildlife, we should compensate them for their efforts. In my opinion, one of the best ways to reward landowners for producing wildlife is through recreational leasing.

Leasing will stimulate better wildlife management on private land (Burr 1930, Trippensee 1948, Howard and Longhurst 1956, Teer and Forrest 1969). When landowners receive income from a product of their land, they often develop the desire to further improve the resource. The situation in Texas supports this statement. Recreational leasing is probably better established in Texas than other states. I have met several private landowners in Texas who now hire wildlife biologists because they realize that better managed wildlife resources can mean better income.

Wildlife is a product of the land. Therefore, it follows that a landowner produces wildlife with his land. He owns and controls the habitat which allows the very existence of wildlife. Should not a landowner be compensated when people take his product? If hunters take it for free and cause him an inconvenience by their presence, what incentive does a landowner have to produce more wildlife? I have met some landowners who decided to destroy most of their game habitat to minimize trespassing and reduce hunter related property damage. The same landowners tell me they enjoy wildlife, but they cannot tolerate the problems its presence causes. If we expect landowners to produce wildlife for the public benefit, we should provide them an incentive.

The landowner is producing something that automatically belongs to someone else due to public ownership of wildlife. Yet, the public cannot hunt or observe this wildlife without also using his land. The landowner owns the habitat and the right to use the land. We should not expect him to give his rights away for nothing. I prefer to hunt for free, rather than pay, but I realize the landowner should get some return for providing game habitat for me to hunt in. Leasing provides a system for the person producing

wildlife to get paid and the person using it to pay for it.

Leasing will increase the cost of hunting for some hunters, but it cannot be blamed for destroying free hunting. Hunting is not free now. Hunters must pay license fees, special excise taxes on sporting goods, special stamp fees (i.e., waterfowl stamps, bowhunting stamp, white-winged dove stamp, etc.), and public hunting area permit fees. These hunting fees are paid to state and federal agencies to perform research, gather biological data, make and enforce regulations, educate the public, and manage some public lands; however, they can produce only a limited amount of wildlife without cooperation from the private landowners. I feel a landowner is less likely to cooperate when he does not get a share of the funds.

According to the 1980 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, over \$8.5 billion was spent on hunting expenditures in the United States in 1980, but less than 3.7 percent of this amount was spent for leasing hunting land, purchasing hunting land, and private land use fees. Yet, hunters pursued their sport on private land 68 percent of the days they hunted in the United States during 1980 (Fish and Wildlife Service and Bureau of the Census 1982). This national average includes all states, even those western states that have large acreages of public land available to sportsmen. Therefore, the people that produce a large percentage of the game animals and hunting opportunity get a small percentage of the income generated by wildlife and hunting.

It is fundamental that a resource must exist before it can be used. The primary responsibility of wildlife professionals should be to the wildlife resources (i.e., bobwhite populations and bobwhite habitat). Our responsibility to the users of wildlife resources (i.e., quail hunters and bird watchers) should always come second to this primary responsibility. Considerations about the effect of leasing upon hunting opportunity are important, but they are overshadowed by considerations concerning the effect of leasing upon wildlife resources.

Leasing is not as detrimental to hunting opportunity as many people imagine. Currently, most private landowners allow only limited access to their land for hunting in Oklahoma (Thorwardson 1979). A reduction in hunting opportunity caused by leasing (i.e., landowners who reduce hunter numbers to accommodate lessees) may be counteracted by landowners who open closed lands to lease hunting. I doubt leasing will decrease the total number of people hunting on private land. However, leasing will probably reapportion the hunting pressure; that is, individual lessees would not necessarily hunt on the same lands they hunted for free. Also, individual hunters may not have the opportunity to hunt on as many private lands as they did when hunting access was free.

Leasing may even provide more hunting opportunity than it suppresses. Leasing should

help maintain game habitat; with leasing, there should be more quality places to hunt than there would be without it.

If all land became leased someday, it would reduce hunting opportunity--primarily because there is a finite quantity of land and a continually increasing number of hunters. However, as long as there are open public hunting lands available in our country, there will always be opportunity for hunting. In addition, I believe there will always be private lands which are not leased. There is a place in this country for public hunting land, private land leased for hunting, private land hunted for free, and private and public lands closed to hunting. This country can manage many diverse needs.

Some of my friends argue that leasing will make hunting too expensive for the average hunter. This would be true if all land became leased. But as long as there are public hunting lands, there will be inexpensive places to hunt. For this reason, I feel that recreational leasing must be restricted to private land. Also in accordance with our responsibility to hunters, wildlife biologists should support the use, maintenance, and increase of public hunting areas.

I agree that leasing may make many quality hunting places more expensive. However, without leasing, there will probably be less quality game habitat in the future and therefore fewer quality hunting places available. At least, leasing should give more hunters a choice of good quality hunting.

I believe leasing will benefit certain wildlife species more than others. The primary emphases of most hunting leases that I am familiar with in Texas and Oklahoma are white-tailed deer, bobwhite, or waterfowl. There also exist hunting leases which stress mule deer, pronghorn antelope, pheasant, turkey, mourning dove, fox squirrel, or other animals; but in my experience, these types of leases are not as common in Texas and Oklahoma. Since bobwhite is one of the "big three" mentioned above, the economic influence of leasing is likely to significantly benefit quail management.

Overall, this discussion explains that leasing can stimulate better wildlife management on private land. Leasing is not a panacea to our wildlife habitat problems (Hines 1953), but it is another tool we can use to maintain and improve wildlife habitat. To encourage more landowners to improve their wildlife management, we should encourage the pricing of wildlife resources on private land.

Leasing will evolve to satisfy the desires of the people involved with it. Wildlife professionals should become involved now during its early stages.

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