

He Who Pays the Piper Calls the Tune — Maybe

WHY MORE CITIZENS SHOULD HAVE A VOICE IN STATE AGENCY DECISIONS

By John A. Litvaitis

For the most part, when it comes to conservation, state fish and wildlife agencies share governance with hunters, anglers and trappers. However, there appears to be a growing need for agencies to expand that relationship to other groups and members of the public (Jacobson et al. 2010; Smith 2011; Decker et al. 2016).

That need was recently illustrated in my home state of New Hampshire. In February 2016, the New Hampshire Fish and Game Commission — an 11-member governing body of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department (NHFG) — went against substantial public opposition and voted to endorse a trapping and hunting season on bobcats (*Lynx rufus*). The Commission, whose basic structure dates back to the 1930s, includes a representative from each of the 10 counties plus one representative from the seacoast region of the state. Commission members are required to have held a hunting, fishing or trapping license for five of the last 10 years. As political appointees, they are responsible for establishing policy; approving hunting, fishing and trapping regulations; approving some financial transactions; and nominating the Executive Director of NHFG. This structure hasn't been free of criticism, however, and over time, some state residents have come

to feel that the Commission only considers the input of a limited number of hunters and trappers.

Prior to the Commission's vote to re-open the bobcat season, extensive public opposition emerged to hunting and trapping of bobcats. Standing-room-only public hearings, editorials and opinion pieces in local papers, plus a credible statewide survey indicated that a majority of New Hampshire residents were opposed to a bobcat harvest. In spite of that opposition, the Commission endorsed the harvest season. However, two months later, a legislative committee questioned the Commission's decision and the planned bobcat season was subsequently withdrawn. It seems unlikely that there will be any serious consideration to re-open the bobcat season in the immediate future.

Seeking a more inclusive approach

As the bobcat debate was heating up, a diverse group of citizens came together and formed the New Hampshire Wildlife Coalition in an effort to improve public involvement with fish and wildlife policy. As a member of that group, I and approximately 15 others are advocating to replace the Commission with an Advisory Council, broaden representation on the Council by including a greater diversity of stakeholders, and use this broader-based constituency to press for secure, sustainable funding for NHFG.

At a recent meeting with leaders of a statewide hunter and angler organization, our coalition was told that most of NHFG's operating funds come from sportsmen and women. And, as a result, interests of consumptive users should be the primary focus of NHFG. Similar to other states, the budget of NHFG is largely derived from dedicated revenue that includes hunting and fishing license sales and a combination of federal-aid programs, especially those associated with the Pittman-Robertson (PR) and Dingell-Johnson (DJ) Acts. However, for several years those revenues have been insufficient and general funds were added to offset budgetary shortfalls. Efforts to obtain

▼ A bobcat walks through a snowy neighborhood in the New Hampshire town of Bow where the animal frequently hunted gray squirrels. Bobcat populations have rebounded in the state, which recently led the state fish and wildlife commission to consider re-opening a bobcat hunting season.



Credit: Diane Lowe



contributions from non-consumptive users in New Hampshire through registration fees for non-motorized watercraft, such as kayaks and canoes, have failed to gain sufficient support. Although the lack of direct funding by non-consumptive stakeholders is not sufficient reason to ignore their opinions, I understand the perception that non-consumptive users are not paying for wildlife conservation. “Put up or shut up” can be a powerful argument, if indeed it’s true.

To better understand where NHFG funds come from, I began to disentangle revenues generated by PR and DJ programs, relying on an earlier approach to determine the source of wildlife funding in the United States (Smith and Molde 2014). As part of my effort, I tallied only those revenue sources in both programs that could be tied directly to hunters or anglers. For example, few hand guns or tactical rifles are used in hunting. As a result, sales of those guns and their ammunition could not be attributed to hunters and were, therefore, not included in my tally. Likewise, only a portion of the taxes associated with motorboats and their fuel can be connected to recreational fishing. Based on my analysis, only 23 percent of PR funds were directly tied to hunters and anglers contributed an estimated 45 percent of DJ funds.

Using the 2015 NHFG budget published on the Department’s website, I combined the major sources of revenues that can be directly tied to consumptive users including license sales, dedicated fees (such as pheasant hunting stamps), and their estimated contributions to PR and DJ programs. Totaled, these monies were less than 30 percent of the 2015 NHFG budget of \$30 million. Other revenue sources that are not linked to consumptive users provided the remainder of the funds. These included OHRV and snowmobile registrations, federal grants from NOAA, and state wildlife grants provided by congressional appropriation. We can debate the finer points of my estimates, but it turns out that there are many people — and interests — “paying the piper.” Shouldn’t they have input on “selecting the tunes?”

The financial contributions made by hunters, anglers, and trappers have been and will continue to be essential to the operations of fish and wildlife



Credit: New Hampshire Public Radio

agencies. Their interests should be a concern for agency leaders. However, the complexity of issues facing state wildlife biologists — from habitat fragmentation, to invasive species, to climate change — will require additional funds from a broader base of support. A recently introduced bill in the U.S. House of Representative (H.R. 5650), entitled *Recovering America’s Wildlife Act*, aims to increase funds to help enhance populations of fish and wildlife designated in state wildlife action plans as those of greatest conservation need. If enacted, this legislation will provide \$1.3 billion annually in federal funds to state fish and wildlife agencies. These funds will require states to provide a 25 percent match. Based on current projections, NHFG could receive \$12 million annually, but only if the needed matching funds are available.

The time has come for consumptive and non-consumptive advocates for wildlife to engage as partners. The challenges of the future will be daunting. A unified public is essential if we are to develop new initiatives and secure the additional funds needed to support our shared fish and wildlife resources. It should be clear to all citizens that we all have skin in the game. ■

▲ On a fall day at the New Hampshire Fish and Game Headquarters in Concord, protesters hold up signs expressing their opposition to the state agency’s proposal to open a bobcat hunting and trapping season. The commission ultimately withdrew its decision after much debate and deliberation.



John Litvaitis, PhD, is an emeritus professor of wildlife ecology at the University of New Hampshire and is a member of the New Hampshire Wildlife Coalition.

TWS MEMBER