

## Big Game Management: A Reckoning

As another hunting season comes to an end we are pressed to ask government why it has been just as deplorable as the last one, and too many of the others over the past three decades. This question, **“What’s Happened to our Big Game”** was posed this past spring by members of the Kootenay Wildlife Heritage Fund Society (KWHFS) who sponsored a symposium on April 13, 2019 in Cranbrook B.C. to seek explanations for the decrease in regional Game populations that include moose, elk, deer, bighorn sheep and caribou, the woodland sub species that is scarce to the point of becoming extinct. Presenters included Dr. Valerius Geist, Professor Emeritus, Dr. Vince Crichton, Dr. Charles Kay, Mr. Jm Beers, Ken Sumanik, former Game, and Habitat Biologist for Northern and South eastern B.C. respectively, and Mr. Ray Demarchi a former Regional Biologist for the Kootenay district. Mortality and food supply were identified as the primary factors that determined population size and abundance for these Game species. Predation by grizzly and black bears, wolves, cougars and coyotes, and also regulated hunting were identified as major factors, but equally important was food supply, particularly during winter. Presentations are available on the KWHFS website

Predation and regulated hunting mortality are additive, and being density dependant factors, are manageable; whereas food supply and availability for ungulates are density independent factors determined by plant growth and weather conditions, and beyond human control. However, when food supplies are either scare or unavailable because of severe weather conditions, mitigation by supplementary feeding is a common Game Management practice.

Predation and supplemental feeding concerns were expressed by Mr. Carmen Purdy on behalf of the KWHFS in a letter to Premier John Horgan dated April 22, 2019. Mr. Purdy received a very belated reply on behalf of Premier Horgan from Jennifer Psyllakis, Ministry of Forests, Lands, Natural Resource Operations Wildlife Branch and Rural Development (MFLNRO) dated October 23, 2019. Copies of both letters including a response to this latest one dated November 8, 2019 are available on the KWHFS website.

This latest correspondence has initiated this attempt to deconstruct the significant changes in Game Management in B.C. over the past fifty-five years. They are partially chronological because changes varied with the different species from region to region over time and therefore are presented as a comparison of the “Good Old Days” of the past, followed by the Mediocre Days during the transition, and ending with the “Not so Good New Days” that continue without any signs of abating. This summary was considered necessary because it has become increasingly difficult to convey the short successful

history of Game Management, and the achievements of a small group of biologist-hunters, our predecessors who provided us with the great hunting and Game abundance that has become a faded memory.

#### Good Old Days:1960 to1980

Government economic development policies that included expanded use of Fish and Game resources required a management agency with expertise to facilitate production and efficient allocation for resident and non-residents alike.

**Ecological knowledge and understanding was required to effectively manage Game: Species that human survival has been historically dependant on for consumption and other purposes, and achieved only by hunting and trapping.** Game species included fur-bearers, waterfowl, gallinaceous birds (grouse), large carnivores, bears, cougars, wolves and coyotes, and all indigenous ungulates. Biologists were deployed in specific regions for this purpose.

A predator control program devised to protect both livestock and Game species was in effect from 1948 to 1962 and resulted in ungulate abundance that lasted until the mid 1970s. In 1968 B.C. resident, and non-resident hunters killed 23,450 moose, the best harvest ever but very low in comparison with Norway where harvests have been consistently high for the past 50 years. In 2017-18, Norwegian hunters killed 31,000 moose, 42,000 Red Deer, 33,000 Roe deer and 4100 Wild Reindeer, and in 1982 Swedish hunters killed 172,000 moose. Game harvests like these are almost beyond belief.

When timber harvesting in Fenno-Scandanavia was changed from tree selection to stand management in mid 1950s this produced an abundant food supply for moose. Using selective sex and age management, whereby calves and two and a half year old animals comprised 70% of the harvest, moose populations increased and were only held in check by hunting! Predation was not a factor as Wolves and Brown Bears were effectively controlled to protect livestock and all wild ungulates. Jon Lykke, Pers. comm. This forest-moose management practice was also related to me by another Norwegian, Dr. Per Wegge during a moose hunt in 1969, commenting, "It's a meat market with great social and economic benefits". British Columbians are as dependant on forest resources as they are and by applying the same basic timber harvesting methods we should be able to achieve comparable results. Why can't we?

Changes in land use resulting from industrialization that began in the early 1950s had a major impact on Game production. Hydro-electricity developments on the Nechako and Peace Rivers, in central B.C. and the Columbia, Kootenay and Duncan Rivers in southern B.C. precluded Game production.

Agricultural development was also promoted by governments. Parkland and Boreal forests were being converted to hay and cereal crop production where soil and climate conditions were favourable. This resulted in changes to ungulate populations, from moose to elk and deer and the mix is considered a net neutral trade-off.

Integration of the forest industry and the changes in harvesting, silviculture and processing also had a major positive impact on ungulates across most of the province. This required a greater understanding and knowledge of ecosystem use, and our Universities and Colleges were able to provide it. Professional foresters, agriculturists and Game biologists began to integrate managing their respective resources in response to increasing public concerns, demanding all resource agencies perform to higher standards. A Resource Analysis Branch was established to assess the productive capabilities of provincial lands to facilitate decision-making.

Co-ordinated Resource Management Planning was a method developed by managers and users that improved game and livestock production in the East Kootenay and South Chilcotin from 1975 to 1982. Forest and Game Folio-Planning in the Nechako and McGregor Plateaus, 1968 -1975 resulted in moose population abundance and great hunting that has not been attained since then. The metamorphosis of Game Scarcity in the early 1900s to the Good Old Days of abundance by mid-century in B.C. also occurred in Fenno-Scandinavia. The moose population then was estimated at approximately 10,000 animals, and is presently estimated at 550,000 or more.

#### The Transition from Good to Mediocre, 1980 to 1990

An early sign of attrition in Game Management was the closure of the Cache Creek Game Check Station, and its data gathering function by direct contact with hunters. While this may have been a cost control measure, the alienation of users and a simple but efficient means of essential data collection were casualties.

The most significant change however, was establishing the Habitat Protection Division of the Ministry of Environment in 1973. The dependence on ecosystem use essential to Game production was subsumed by non-use that became its primary purpose, and "Protecting the Environment", its mantra! All indigenous B.C. species in the Animal Kingdom were placed in their charge and colour-coded according to relative abundance, and the eight ungulate, and four predator species that were once managed as Game were all but forgotten. Prior to this administrative misdirection, a successful Bison transplant in the Halfway River

Valley established a population that continues to increase providing meat and memories for both B.C. and Yukon hunters.

In 1981, B.C. hunters, trappers, guide-outfitters and the BC Wildlife Federation established a Habitat Conservation Trust Fund through a levy on licences for monies to be used to maintain productive game and fish habitats. To date, approximately \$181,000,000 has been raised and spent on 2400 projects, yet Game populations are decreasing throughout the province despite this investment in Habitat.

Except for a brief wolf cull during the early mid 1980s in the Muskwa/Kechika Wilderness Area that ended due to opposition from urban "Environmental" activists, predator control was limited only to attending livestock depredations. Wolf populations increased throughout the province. The extent of their dispersal became obvious when they reached and populated Vancouver Island. Hunters' concerns for Game shortages and reduced success were increasing across much of the province, and all but ignored by an administration that began de-emphasizing Game Management, opting instead for its own environmental interests and concerns.

#### From Mediocre to Bad: 1990 and Continuing

The brief period of elk abundance during the 1980s in the Kootenay was anomalous during the decadal transition to the end of the twentieth century. Emergence of the ugly adult stage in the metamorphosis began officially with the government's "Parks and Wilderness '90" program, when it openly admitted a greater care for everything "animal, vegetable and mineral", than people. Primary industries were directly impacted by the proliferation of areas denying them access to forests, minerals, coal and petroleum-natural gas resources. This precluded access development for our traditional activities of hunting and gathering. The "Bad New Days" continued to intensify, constraining the social and economic activities of rural British Columbians.

The "Bad" got much worse when the administration unleashed its "Identified Wildlife Management Strategy", bolstered by COSEWIC support and the ESA. In 2000 I was one of only two other Non-Government members participating in the planning and management of 490 Red-listed Species comprising 148 Vertebrates, 96 Plant Communities and 246 Vascular Plants, along with 133 Government, University and Ecological Consultants. The list of Animal and Plant Kingdom concerns is too long and irrelevant to mention even if it were possible, as apparently many thousands are going extinct every day! Saving species that are scarce or possibly headed for extinction, naturally or otherwise, is far more important than managing Game species!

The Bureaucratic hegemony continues as government attempts to integrate its resource management functions. A Mega-Ministry, of Forests, Lands and Natural Resource Operations, Fish and Wildlife Branch and Rural Development that was formed for this purpose has been a failure, yet it continues to promise eventual success. For example, “A Strategy to Help Restore Moose Populations in British Columbia” was a promise prepared for government by R.A. (Al) Gorley after considerable public consultation and released on July 8, 2016. It was a typical political statement intended to express empathy instead of a numerically defined increase in moose populations that hunters had expected.

A more recent example of the hegemony in the East Kootenay was the approval of a \$40,000 “Southern Rockies Grizzly Bear Inventory” to be conducted by Garth Mowat (MFLNRO). **The B.O.D of the Habitat Conservation Foundation Trust Fund has approved this expenditure to study a species that is no longer hunted in B.C!** This audacious action is more than an affront to the hunters, trappers and guide-outfitters who established the Fund thirty-eight years ago. An immediate investigation must be done to reverse and prevent such abuse.

Animal protection issues are increasing in number and intensity and are almost too numerous to mention. The recent announcement by Queen Elizabeth to stop wearing is celebrated as a victory for PETA and radical Egalitarians but it was a terrible loss to all who are dependant wholly or in part on hunting and trapping. Equally debilitating are government policies to protect predators at the expense of people whose lives and livelihoods are impacted by them. The wolf transplant in Yellowstone National Park in 1995 has been disastrous for ranchers, farmers, hunters and their suppliers-providers, yet governments are planning to repeat the tragedy by transplanting wolves to other western states. Washington State Fish and Game is also contemplating a Grizzly Bear re-introduction. B.C. is the likely provider as its bear population is sufficiently abundant, and no longer hunted, is becoming a problem for rural residents.

Actions by government that exemplify a complete lack of moral objectivity when enacting laws and regulations victimize innocent people. We must defend against it.

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I worked 16 years for the B.C. government, 8 as a Game Biologist, and 8 as a Habitat Biologist. I also worked 21 years in the private sector as a Resource Management consultant and advisor to the forest and mining industries.

