

LAW ENFORCEMENT SESSION

A GAME AND FISH COMMISSION ADMINISTRATOR'S VIEW OF WILDLIFE LAW ENFORCEMENT

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Having worked closely with wildlife officers throughout a period of over 35 years, I would like to make some observations on this often taken for granted field of game and fish management we call enforcement. Enforcement is a form of fish and wildlife management and the foundation of any successful wildlife management program.

The wildlife resources of Arkansas were once without protection or management and by the early 1900's there was only a remnant of most major game and furbearing species. Small game species held up fairly well, but deer, turkey, bear, buffalo, elk, wolf, panther, beaver, otter, prairie chicken and ruffed grouse were reduced to a small fraction of former numbers or entirely eliminated. Habitat change has its effects also, but the turning point from sharp decline to gradual improvement came about 1915. In that year the Arkansas Game and Fish Commission was established. For a period of many years after this enforcement carried the load and started the comeback of many of these species. I believe that the story is much the same in most of the southeastern states. I also believe that most of us would agree that if all protection were removed we would return to this early situation—and at a much faster rate than before.

Counties, areas and land holdings that are properly protected have better wildlife populations. Harvest records from adjacent counties or local areas show this. We can all name situations and people involved who have made such differences.

When deer restocking efforts began in earnest in the early 1940's in Arkansas, the only herds of sufficient size to support large scale operations were in the few refuges that had afforded protection from the dog and the outlaw hunter for a period of several years. At this time, trap lines more than 1½ miles from these refuges would have failed miserably in spite of the fact that the habitat was the same.

Large numbers of deer were released in refuges and other protected areas where they once flourished. I was a wildlife biologist working on the trapping and restocking program at this time, and I believe the Enforcement Division should get at least 50 percent of the credit for bringing the deer back to Arkansas.

During the 1960's and 70's I managed a large farming operation and private hunting preserve in the delta lands of eastern Arkansas. The owner was interested in building up a large deer herd on the 3,000 acre preserve portion of his holdings. After establishing tight control and almost complete elimination of illegal hunting and free running dogs with the help of local wildlife officers, the herd peaked at very near 1,000 or 1 deer to 3 acres. There was nothing unique about the habitat. There are dozens of similar tracts of woodlands surrounded by agricultural land in the eastern part of the state.

The first large hunt was an antlerless deer hunt by permit aimed at removing 500 animals or half of the herd. Controlled check stations and sustained hunter density control by regulated permit issuance enabled 487 deer to be harvested in 6 days with a 73 percent hunter success.

The Enforcement Division may deserve more than 50 percent of the credit for the successful restoration of the wild turkey in Arkansas. Many of the releases have been made

in areas without any special protection other than that afforded by the wildlife officer in his county or territory. This would have been impossible in earlier years.

Counties, areas and lakes have to be under reasonable control for any wildlife or fisheries program to work. Enforcement is the foundation for these programs. Wildlife officers are also needed to help conduct the surveys and inventories that are needed to set up management programs. In conducting our statewide wildlife inventory of the 1940's, on which most of our game management programs are based, the wildlife officer was the key individual we worked with on the county by county coverage.

We find that some biologists are choosing the enforcement field because this is still the best opportunity for actual wildlife production. Our wildlife officers are wildlife managers either by education or experience, or both.

A wildlife officer's presence in the county results in his paying his own way through the generation of the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. I think we could make a clear example of the value of enforcement by removing officers from a county or group of counties and announcing that they would not be replaced. I think we all know what would happen. Not only would the sale of licenses decline, but the wildlife population would soon revert to the status of the early 1900's.

Enforcement of the regulations helps provide an equitable harvest of fish and wildlife resources among various types of sportsmen. Even if seasons and bag limits were not necessary for the welfare of wildlife species, this would still be the best system for their use by the public.

Our wildlife officers are the most highly trained law officers in the state. Twelve to fourteen weeks of specialized training is now required in addition to a training period with an experienced officer. I think they have the most difficult law enforcement job. They deal with more armed people over a longer period of time and usually in isolated situations.

The officers are the people who see the public. They do much of our public relations work, and our politics as well.

The arrest records do not tell the whole story; however, they do show the large volume of work that is being done. These records and our radio system show the large amount of night work and week-end work that is being done. This is increasing in our state at this time. Long hours and using much of their own equipment are common practices.

Improvements that have been made in our Enforcement Division in the last few months include: 1) a divisional personnel evaluation aimed specifically at enforcement duties; 2) an enforcement division policy handbook; 3) complete revision of the hunting and fishing enforcement codes; 4) complete revision of the hunting, fishing and wildlife management Area regulations.

Wildlife officers as a group have a wide variety of background experience and thus are usually good at watching expenditures and operating economically. There is considerable longevity of employment in the law enforcement field which develops experienced leadership.

There is at present an almost emergency situation in regard to beaver overpopulation and related drainage problems in most, if not all, of the southeastern states. In Arkansas a legislative committee has become involved in this problem and we have worked closely with them to develop a statewide information, education and demonstration type program. In each county the county agents of the Cooperative Extension Service and the wildlife officers will be the contact people to catalog damaged areas and to demonstrate control methods. This is an involved program and the wildlife officers will have a major role in making it work. The wildlife officers also issue depredation permits for control of damage caused by other species.

Our Acres for Wildlife program, which is a cooperative program with private landowners, has had a shot in the arm from the Enforcement Division's enrollment of more acreage in the past 3 months (approximately 70,000 acres) than that signed up in the entire fiscal year of 1979-80.

Our Hunter Safety program, which has had tremendous success, operates under the Enforcement Division.

The past year or so has seen more than the usual number of emergencies due to fire, flood, drownings, nuclear reactor leaks, etc. In the case of a recent flood in the city of Little Rock, it was obvious who had the boats, motors and other equipment and the know-how to use it. Out in the counties other law enforcement personnel look to us first for help.

Finally, the wildlife officer is now a better trained, better educated and more skilled individual than ever before. More technical and scientific procedures are being used such as animal blood identification, underwater scanners, etc. Law enforcement work, just as many other fields, has become more specialized and exacting. Certification as a law enforcement officer by a state board is now a requirement for employment as a wildlife officer. Improper arrests and court procedures can be a serious detriment to a game and fish agency operation.