Blinkers on the NAM Write Up

Caleb Landry

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Our project discovers what changes could be made to an existing system of wildlife management, and what effects that may have. The official thesis statement is as follows:

*How must we broaden the perspective and inclusivity of the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation (NAM[WC]) on an individual to global scale of wildlife management? Only by taking a thorough and diversified look at the preexisting protocols and guidelines provided for the management of wildlife by the NAM can we then seize the wide-open opportunity to improve and modernize an outdated and narrow-minded model and create a novel example of how change can be applied with political and social action.*

The NAM claims to have laws and policies that have shown globally superior success in safeguarding and restoring fish and wildlife populations and their habitats through “sound science and active management” (“North American Model of Wildlife Conservation :: Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies” n.d.). It contains 7 interdependent tenets which it uses for decision-making. The tenets are listed as follows:

1. Wildlife resources are conserved and held in trust for all citizens.
2. Commerce in dead wildlife is eliminated.
3. Wildlife is allocated according to democratic rule of law.
4. Wildlife may only be killed for a legitimate, non-frivolous purpose.
5. Wildlife is an international resource.
6. Every person has an equal opportunity under the law to participate in hunting and fishing.
7. Scientific management is the proper means for wildlife conservation.

Later we will add an eighth tenet for consideration. But first, it is important to discuss why the model needs changing. “North American” is used in respect to the boundaries of the United States and Canada. However, the model does not represent true American values, particularly those of Native Americans. The NAM was written by colonizers from Europe – essentially all white men and, more importantly, hunters. The model has a very hunter-centric view, and unfortunately it lacks proper consideration of the traditional values held by natives. The attitudes of the people who wrote the NAM are in contrast to the diverse culture of today’s America. Many more people from around the world now live here and with them they bring their own views on environmental issues and policies. This is the individual-global gradient on which we believe we can lean on for improvement. Of course, there are still many hunters and the economy of hunting is nothing short of influentially vast. The hunter view is not necessarily bad, but it has the potential to work better when combined with others. So, we mention three main classes of perspectives that make up the foundation of the NAM’s body of thinking for: cultural, socioeconomic, and political. Each perspective sheds light on the issues with the current system in place and it allows a case to be opened for change. A good thought to summarize this idea comes from an environmental justice critique of the NAM: “The denial of Indigenous peoples’ ability to cultivate ecosystems through hunting, foraging, and fire stewardship under settler-colonial governance has fractured time-tested socioecological relationships and resulted in severe environmental mismanagement” (“Fair Chase Colonialism” 2020).

**The Cultural Perspective**

We asked Nate Wehr, a Research Assistant at SUNY ESF and expert in the field of wildlife ecology and management, about his view on the consideration of both indigenous and non-indigenous values when taking management action. He replied, “ I certainly try to consider both sides' values when making management recommendations (as a scientist, I typically don't take management actions, I just recommend which one should be implemented)” (Wehr 2022). Nate went on to mention the results of his research on feral pigs in Hawaii. He claims his findings are largely representative of how bad feral pigs are for the environment. In the view of non-indigenous citizens it would make sense to eliminate the pigs so they no longer pose any threat to their communities. However, “the native Hawaiians have a cultural connection to the feral pigs and value them as a game species” (Wehr 2022). Based on this, Nate recommended that managers should not focus on entirely eradicating the pigs despite it potentially providing the greatest benefit to the environment and the non-indigenous citizens, but rather eradicating the pigs in only select areas with rare species and areas that are difficult for feral pig hunters to access. So, there are two sides to this matter and, with inclusive management decisions, it can be possible to achieve a healthy balance. This covers just one way that the NAM’s rudimentary system can be improved upon.

**The Socioeconomic Perspective**

It is not only hunters, scientists, and researchers that interact with wildlife, but the average American citizen as well. People love nature and they love to look at wildlife, and this pairs with economics too. There are many who spend their time with non-consumptive hobbies like bird-watching, going to zoos (if zoos could be considered “wildlife” – in this regard, zoos are economically important and they are also involved in conservation and preservation) and eco-tourism activities like hiking and exploration, and the observing rare species or the better known charismatic megafauna (going back to zoos, many charismatic megafauna and some rarer species are found there). Hunting is a large and expensive industry, but according to the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, “The 215 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums in the U.S. serve more than 183 million annual visitors and support over 212,000 jobs, generating $24 billion in the total value of goods and services generated directly and indirectly as a result of annual outlays by AZA members and their visitors” (“AZA Zoos and Aquariums Contribute $24 Billion to U.S. Economy” n.d.). People contribute to a large portion of wildlife-related economics and it would make more sense to put these nature-loving participants into consideration for the NAM.

Going back to Nate Wehr, we asked him how he could see non-consumptive wildlife enjoyers being integrated into active management. He responded that a way to do this would be to implement a tax on equipment and materials that are used exclusively for outdoor recreation, such as tents, binoculars, etc. Another idea is to require people to purchase hiking passes or some other form of ticket that would give them access to the areas hunters share. That being said, he mentioned it is still important that we keep outdoor activities accessible to all economic classes. Thus, perhaps a more nuanced approach to the situation would be necessary to truly ‘solve’ it (Wehr 2022). Returning to taxation on equipment, I believe this is actually a good idea, because it recommends the same thing to non-hunters as it does to hunters, and that is how you treat wildlife and the environment matters when you’re paying to utilize it. And the same thing could technically be said for purchasing a hiking pass, just like people need licenses for hunting.

Moving closer to the economic side, it is important to know of horizontal equity. The sustainability of the user-pay and public benefit model is threatened by a decline in hunting participation. As modernization occurs and sociodemographic changes take place, less people are becoming interested in hunting and younger generations are not keeping up with it. This is a problem for wildlife management because hunting is a huge provider of the profit towards conservation efforts worldwide. A study found that broadening where funding support comes from and considering the perspectives of young adults and other diverse beneficiaries (one of our goals is to diversify the NAMs policies) may be critical to upkeep conservation. “From 2018 to 2020, we surveyed 17,203 undergraduate students at public universities across 22 states. Students preferred innovative approaches to conservation funding, with 72% supporting funding derived from industry sources (e.g., natural resource extraction companies), 63% supporting state sources (e.g., general sales tax), and 43% supporting conventional user-based sources such as license fees and excise taxes associated with outdoor recreation activities (e.g., hunting)” (Larson et al. 2021). This study also brings up the aforementioned idea of putting taxes on outdoor recreation.

**The Political Perspective**

At the top of everything, true law and policy making lies in the hands of politics. And politics is what enforces the laws we make for ourselves. Wildlife is more often managed independently at a species level, juxtaposed with fitting them together within the larger context of the ecology of their interactions and ecosystems. Nate Wehr shared his thoughts on the limitations of application of the NAM to being oriented towards game animals that are deemed economic and politically important. He expressed that this question can be argued from two sides. “By focusing on a handful of important game species, we may be taking away funding or other resources from conservation efforts that could benefit non-game species. However, game species often require large tracts of land to support them, and these large tracts can indirectly benefit non-game species. So, does it matter if our management for non-game is indirect via species deemed economically/politically important? If we protect a canyon with an endangered salamander living in it, does it matter whether we protected it because bighorn sheep live there or because the salamander lives there? I don't think there's one right answer to this as both arguments are valid” (Wehr 2022). This is a good example of why involving more perspectives is important because at times, multiple sides can boast equally good arguments. Is it not just good to be on the ‘winning’ team, whether morally or democratically, but to have several of the participating groups all agree on a similar thought. Where we allocate funding and resources (think of Tenet 3) is important, and a major concern for conservationists is where our efforts and money should go. So, it is vital that we include alternate views when making decisions for management. Speaking of which, I will next talk about one of the most unfairly represented groups.

**Political And Cultural - Indigenous Values**

It is no subtle fact that indigenous peoples are poorly represented in the policies of the model. There are many political, social, and economic, boundaries drawn between native tribes and non-indigenous citizens. The traditional values of natives might be the most unfortunate lack of inclusion, as they have lived for centuries here in America and have been dealing with wildlife for a long, long time. But where these two groups clash is in how they value wildlife. On the (preexisting) NAM side, wildlife is viewed more like a resource that can be extracted for use by hunting (Eichler & Baumeister, 2018). Yet natives culturally value wildlife in a more holistic and spiritual way. They feel an intimate relationship to wildlife and the environment. They respect wildlife and view it as not just a resource for extraction, but one provided by God and Mother Nature for their benefit; in return, they understand that they can also benefit nature too by planting crops and giving back to the ecosystem. These values can be applied to the management direction of expanding our horizons and understanding less recognized groups of people for the better. We can allow ourselves to be inspired by the indigenous people’s intimacy with nature, and gain insight from their longstanding knowledge gained by such a long history of that relationship in this country’s natural regions. We can then implement that insight to the science we use to make decisions (think of Tenet 7). And we need to understand that these people directly feel the consequences of bad management and are easily overlooked by those who live a more expensive way of life. Plus, the inclusion of traditional values can be passed onto the up-and-coming generations of individuals in society, just as they do to their successors (Artelle 2019).

**The New Tenet and What is Next**

Going back to the beginning, I expressed that we added a new tenet for consideration. I have explained the potential for change and improvement, and this is a working example of such. The unofficial 8th tenet is as follows:

*“Wildlife should not be viewed as resources, but as valued assets to social, political, cultural and economic systems.”*

This tenet acts as a summary of everything we have discussed in our project. Looking past what we have to gain from wildlife solely from profit and personal use, we can bring a deeper, more ‘human’ meaning to what wildlife is and how it can be managed. Wildlife is a beautiful, important asset to our society locally and globally, and it has been for as long as time has allowed it to. It influences how we make decisions for the better of the Earth, and it plays a vital role in our social, political, cultural, and economic systems.

A blinkered NAM will come with its share of consequences. It will take a lot of political power to change the minds of people who are set in their ways. It will also consume a lot of money, effort, and time to implement new practices and outreach to the public. But we must ask ourselves, is this worth it? Whether or not it is depends on who you are and what you’ve experienced, but if we are to work together for the greater good, we should open our minds to a more inclusive and diverse model for management in North America.

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