THE QUESTION OF CONSERVATION As biodiversity loss, climate change stretch WDFW's resources, commission considers what conservation means

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Body

In mid-September, a subset of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife commission wrestled with a deceitfully existential question: What does conservation mean?

"We use the word conservation in our strategic plan," said Barbara Baker, the vice-chair of the commission during the Big Tent Committee Meeting. "But the term is never defined. As we all know,terms like that can lead to people defining them however it suits them."

In an effort to fill in that etymological gap, Baker and Commissioner Fred Koontz presented a draft document titled "Conservation: A Commission and Department Policy Guide," in which they defined conservation as: "Science-informed actions to preserve the health and resiliency of natural environments, safeguard the intrinsic values of non-human nature, and provide equitable benefits to current and future generations of people and species. These actions include protecting and restoring air, soil, water, biological diversity, ecosystem processes and evolutionary potential."

One portion of that definition bothered commissioner Kim Thorburn, from Spokane. Namely, the "intrinsic values of non-human nature."

"Talking about nonhuman nature, excluding people from this formula of conservation is how I read that," she said during the meeting. "And I suspect if I'm reading it that way then other people are reading it that way. I'm very sensitive to language and particularly rhetoric and there is quite a bit in here."

Koontz, who was the primary author of the draft and one of the commission's newest members, said he included that language to "broaden the mission" of WDFW and wasn't married to the phrase. He argued, however, that conservation has "been conflated with purpose and value," a way of thinking about animals and ecosystems that needs to ***change***, he believes.

"This has actually been going on for years now," he said during an interview last week. "There have been different efforts to increase funding for nongame (work) and really broaden the mission for state wildlife agencies."

The debate highlights a question fish and wildlife agencies are wrestling with across the country. Namely, how to address widespread habitat degradation, ***climate change***, biodiversity loss and a host of other problems while a main source of funding - hunting and angling fees - decreases.

"***Climate change***. Habitat loss," said Nate Pamplin, WDFW's policy director. "Those are immense challenges and to rely on revenue from hunters and fishers to address those broader wildlife conservation challenges would be a mistake."

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN NORTH AMERICA

Understanding where things stand today requires some understanding of the history of fish and game agencies in North America.

In 1820, 5% of the U.S. population lived in cities and Thomas Jefferson's agrarian vision for the U.S. was a reality. By 1860, 20% of the U.S. population had moved to urban areas, a ***change*** one historian called "the greatest demographic shift ever to have occurred in America."

To feed this growing urban population, market hunters and anglers decimated game populations, driving now common species like deer and elk nearly to the brink of extinction (and wiping out other species, the passenger pigeon for instance).

At the same time, newly minted urban elites suddenly had free time on their hands, and a desire to hunt for the "rigors and challenges of the chase under conditions of fair play." This "became a favored pastime of many, particularly among those of means," states a Wildlife Society review of the North American Model. Recreational hunting had powerful champions, namely Theodore Roosevelt and Gifford Pinochet. State's formed fish and game agencies which set seasons, bag limits and outlawed most commercial forms of hunting. That work was almost entirely funded by anglers and hunters via license fees.

Restricting when and where people could hunt didn't fully solve the issue and by the early 1900s, animal numbers were still declining. In 1930, Aldo Leopold, A. Willis Robertson, and other conservationists published an "American Game Policy" which called for professional biologists, university training and stable funding. Within a decade, universities were pumping out wildlife biologists and the federal government had established several excise taxes that poured money into state game management.

Harnessing the passion and interest of recreational hunters and anglers boosted habitat and conservation work and brought numerous species back from the brink of extinction. Over the years, this organically developing system became codified, and was defined in detail in the early 2000s by Valerius Geist, a Canadian biologist and author.

A key tenant of the system was the intentional separation of politics and biology. With state fish and game departments receiving the majority of their funding from hunters and anglers, they were not beholden to the oft-***changing*** political winds.

"There is a reason there is a distance between elected officials and state wildlife agencies," said Dave Ausband, a professor at the University of Idaho.

But in the 1970s, as environmental degradation became increasingly obvious and books like Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" (published in 1962) concentrated public concern, a question started arising: What about nongame species? In response, new environmental laws soon followed, like the Endangered Species Act, but these laws didn't provide dedicated funding.

"The need for other species (conservation) has grown with no really clear funding mechanisms and no really clear mandate," Koontz said.

At the same time, the number of hunters and anglers was slowly declining throughout the U.S., reducing the amount of revenue available to state fish and game agencies. Now, roughly 5% of Washingtonians hunt, although hunting and angling fees account for some 30% of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's budget. Nationwide, a "combination of sportsmen-derived funds" comprise between "60 and 90% of the typical state fish and wildlife agency budget," according to unpublished U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service data.

A QUESTION OF ETHICS

Some argue that the ethical and philosophical framework underpinning the model, namely that animals and nature are resources to be used by humans, has ***changed***. That's partly why Koontz included the "nonhuman nature" language.

Few if any argue that state fish and wildlife agencies should solely focus on game species. When questions of value and utility come up, things get more heated and complex. Following the committee discussion about the definition of conservation, Marie Neumiller, the Spokane-based Inland Northwest Wildlife Council's executive director, pushed against the proposed language.

"This document divides and fails to recognize that we all play a large role in conservation. We impact nature when we; drive down the road, build a house, farm foods, buy food, use paper products, purchase electronics, fertilize our lawns, turn on the lights at home, or even turn on the heat," she said during public testimony to the commission. "Every action we take consumes our natural resources, impacting wildlife and their habitats. We are a part of nature, so we need to stop separating humans from nature and conservation policies. The preservationist ideal does not work because every move we make every day, even from within a city, impacts the natural world."

Thorburn agrees with this assessment and thinks hunting writ large is under attack in Washington and that some of the efforts to broaden who WDFW is relevant to - while well intentioned - will alienate hunters and anglers. She believes abandoning that constituency is a mistake, not only because it provides money and passion but because it's WDFW's mandate to provide hunting and fishing opportunities.

As for ethical and philosophical considerations, she doesn't believe it is WDFW's job to legislate and worries that focusing too much on individual animals will harm overall conservation efforts.

"Look at what we're pouring into wolves," she said. "Compared to what we dedicate to so many of our state list (endangered) species. The western gray squirrel. The butterfly. Or some of our native fish species."

Koontz is sympathetic to these concerns. Working with animals, whether in the wild or in captivity - as he did while the vice president of field conservation at the Woodland Park Zoo in Seattle - requires a balance between what is good for the individual and what is good for the population.

He said research increasingly shows that individual animals are far more complex than previously thought. Combined with widespread biodiversity loss and global ***climate change***, he argues that the mandate of fish and wildlife agencies needs to be reworked, although he said he's not anti-hunting or angling.

"If we could break some new ground on how we talk about conservation ... it might be a model that other states could build their discussion on," he said. "It behooves the department to ***change*** in a way that is adaptive."

WHAT IS NEXT?

Following feedback during the committee meeting in September, Koontz and others will edit the definition of conservation.

At some point, the entire commission will consider the language and vote on whether to approve a ***change*** or not.

Regardless of how that proceeds, all involved are aware that more funding is needed as the scope of WDFW's work increases. Koontz and Thorburn hope that the Recovering America's Wildlife Act will be passed by Congress. If approved, it would provide state's with $1.39 billion. In 2020, the agency received more funding from the state's general fund, a much needed financial commitment, Pamplin said.

Still, that is a far cry from what the agency needs to "be successful," he said. If Congress passes the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, Washington would receive $20 million a year for biodiversity conservation, Pamplin said.

"We have our fingers crossed," Thorburn said.

Notes

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