

FWP's constant balancing acts

Everyone strives for balance. Throughout each day, we balance civic duty with home responsibilities, expenses with income, and family needs with the needs of others. It's as though we walk around all day with arms outstretched and a scale in each hand, adding and subtracting components—time, money, energy—from each side in an effort to find a fair and sustainable equilibrium.

Not surprisingly, balance is also central to how Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks manages the state's wildlife, state parks, and fisheries.

In fisheries management, for instance, we're challenged to balance dual mandates of protecting native species like westslope cutthroat trout while providing fishing recreation, often with non-native species like walleye, brook trout, brown trout, and rainbow trout. On the Madison and other rivers, we have to balance the needs of local anglers, outfitters, and landowners, all while protecting habitat and fish populations. At fishing access sites, we consider

smarter solutions to upgrade those systems. We continually balance the diverse needs of state park visitors—from people who want a quiet, no-frills getaway to those in RVs who expect amenities like concrete pads and electrical hookups. We balance park guests' desire to experience the outdoors and learn about Montana's history and geology with our responsibility to protect resources such as pictographs and subterranean caverns for future generations.

As we manage wildlife, we're constantly balancing human concerns against those of wildlife and habitat, whether it's grizzly bears, elk, deer, golden eagles, or sage-grouse. In mountain lion and wolf management, we aim to balance those predator populations with populations of elk, deer, and other prey. Whenever we set hunting seasons, we balance human requests for more hunting opportunities with the need to conserve game populations.

We also balance how much time our biologists spend on game species relative to nongame species. We balance the concerns of landowners who have overabundant elk eating crops and damaging property with the concerns of hunters who want more elk. We weigh the needs of archery hunters and rifle hunters, hunters and other recreationists, resident hunters and nonresident hunters—the list of balancing acts we perform each day is endless.

Balancing priorities means that not everyone gets everything they want. That's okay. We've found again and again that the most sustainable results come when biologists, irrigators, conservationists, loggers, hunters, ranchers, anglers, miners, land managers, and others work together to arrive at a fair balance of each others' needs and concerns. Balance requires a lot of empathy and compromise.

One example is the Three Rivers Collaborative. It began last year when FWP started working with local governments, businesses, and nonprofit groups to improve public communication about health and recreation issues on the Bitterroot, Blackfoot, and Clark Fork Rivers. The effort, based on balancing a wide range of interests, "already is building trust among the various partners and a common understanding of the various issues and wide-ranging values concerning these three rivers," Randy Arnold, FWP's regional supervisor in Missoula, recently told me.

As stewards of the public trust and so many outdoor experiences, our job is to find and create balance through sound management based on both natural and social sciences. As long as they protect the quality of what we all love about Montana, we believe that those balancing acts, hard as they may be to achieve, are ultimately in everyone's best interests.

—Martha Williams, Director, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks



One of FWP's many balancing acts involves managing native and non-native fish species. FWP needs to provide abundant fishing recreation, which often makes use of non-native species such as brook trout (lower fish in photo). Yet the department must protect the state's natural heritage by conserving native species like westslope cutthroat trout (upper fish).

what anglers want as well as the desires of other people—kayakers, rafters, dog walkers, bird watchers, school groups—who use these public recreation areas.

In our state parks, we're constantly balancing the need to do emergency stopgap electrical and sewage line repairs with more costly, but