

Getting stoked on conservation BY TOM DICKSON

Who will pay to manage and conserve fish and wildlife 25, 50, or 100 years from now?

For the past half century, anglers and hunters have funded most of that work. Money they spend on fishing and hunting licenses goes to state agencies like FWP to hire biologists, acquire and protect habitat, and monitor species and populations. Anglers and hunters also pony up through federal excise taxes on shooting, fishing, and boating gear. The money goes to state fish and wildlife projects.

The results of this arrangement, the North American Model of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, have been astounding. Populations of elk, pronghorn, deer, wild turkeys, and many fish species today far exceed what they were in the early 20th century. What's more, restoring these populations has required state and federal wildlife agencies to identify and safeguard critical habitats. Along with environmental laws protecting land and water, that work has restored and sustained wild places such as national wildlife refuges, state wildlife lands, federal wilderness areas, intra-continental migration routes, wild and scenic rivers, and blue ribbon trout streams.

But the North American Model has some shortcomings. A big one is that it's based on hunter and angler numbers at least keeping pace with overall population growth. That isn't happening. Even in a hunting and fishing-obsessed state like Mon-

tana, those numbers are slipping per capita. Elsewhere, the decline is alarming. State and federal agencies are working with industry and nonprofits to stem or even reverse that trend. But for now, the combination of fewer licenses sold and less hunting and fishing gear purchased means a declining revenue stream for management and conservation.

Meanwhile, participation in other outdoor sports is flying high. Mountain biking, hiking, kayaking, off-roading, camping, skiing, rock climbing, RVing, stand-up paddleboarding, and other activities have seen steady and in some cases explosive growth, according to the Outdoor Industry Association.

This new dynamic—fewer duck hunters but more trail runners—creates a challenge for traditional fish and wildlife conservationists. Can we instill in those other outdoor adventurers a conservation ethic resulting in conservation funding and advocacy? If so, what would be the process through which a mountain biker or kayaker pays to protect and manage trout streams and elk winter range? (Almost no state or federal tax dollars go to fish and wildlife conservation.)

Adding to the dilemma is the possibility that outdoor recreationists think they already do enough. That's the concern of Ethan Linck in a 2018 essay in *High Country News* (“Your Stoke Won't Save Us”).

Linck maintains that many outdoor adventurers mistakenly believe their passion itself is an act of conservation. That just getting “stoked”—being enthusiastic or exhilarated—about bouldering, whitewater rafting, or backcountry skiing is an act of moral goodness that somehow

helps land, water, and wildlife.

But stoke doesn't necessarily translate into caring about, much less fighting for, the natural resources that support outdoor recreation. Instead, it “centers on the self and the quality of human experience, and thus has no intrinsic stake in biodiversity or ecosystem stability,” Linck writes.

In coming years, converting stoke into conservation funding and political action will challenge agencies like FWP. Kayaking and rock climbing don't need fish and wildlife. Even if every elk, deer, mountain goat, walleye, and trout disappeared overnight, a person could still Jet Ski, canoe, or mountain bike. Those activities might not be as much fun, but the absence of fish and wildlife wouldn't render them meaningless in the same way it would angling and hunting.

And if some members of the growing outdoor recreation community don't value wildlife and fish as much as hunters and anglers do, convincing them to pay to conserve and manage moose, sauger, and the places where those and other species live could be especially difficult.

One solution may be for agencies like FWP to help more people develop what sociologists call “place attachment”: a sense of identity with and dependence on healthy local landscapes and the ways those places enrich our lives. This new perspective could produce “a different outdoor recreation culture, one that emphasizes the pleasure of knowing the wild that comes from daily practices that form bonds with places that are the backdrops to our lives,” Linck writes.

In other words, we learn to view the natural world less as a playground and more as a home, or even a temple: a sacred place made of precious, irreplaceable materials. That perspective, in turn, would open hearts and wallets to help conserve and protect the places where wild things live and thrive.

Getting stoked about mountain biking, hunting, skiing, fly-fishing, or rock climbing produces a definite high. But knowing we are helping conserve the lands, waters, and wildlife that make those outdoor activities possible? That may be the best feeling of all. 🐾

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