

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES
Wildlife Division Report No. 2977
May 1984

WILDLIFE DIVISION'S LAND ACQUISITION PROGRAM, 1984*

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1. Philosophy of Public Land Ownership and Administration

All lands have wildlife values. The complex mix of habitat types determines what wildlife species are found on specific sites. Wildlife biologists have done exhaustive research on the relationship between animal numbers and their habitat. We know that several wildlife species receive spin-off benefits from land treatment measures designed to produce preferred habitat for the intensely managed species, such as the white-tailed deer.

Public ownership of an adequate land base is essential if we are to manage wildlife habitat to provide for the recreational needs and products desired by Michigan residents. Although private land is highly important to our management programs, it is costly and difficult for the state to carry out management programs on lands controlled by others. Fortunately, in much of Michigan most private landowners desire wildlife on their property. Surveys by the U. S. Forest Service, by the Forest Management Division, and by wildlife biologists all show that a large portion of the non-industrial private landowners own those lands for wildlife-related recreation. By responding to that desire with management advice and information, we can get those lands into better production of both wood fiber and wildlife, both of which contribute to economic activity.

The foundation for the Wildlife Division's acquisition and land management programs was put in place during the 1930's. From 1931 to 1949, \$1.50 from each deer license sold was ear-marked for land acquisition. Some 700,000 acres of the 3.8 million acres state forest system were purchased with funds derived from hunting license fees. In 1937, the U. S. Congress passed the Pittman-Robertson Act (P-R). It has become the most important legislation ever enacted to benefit wildlife restoration. In the early years of the program, Michigan spent a large share of its federal revenues to acquire wildlife restoration and public hunting lands in the southern third of the state.

In 1971, the Michigan Legislature reestablished the \$1.50 deer fund, and broadened it to provide for a habitat improvement program for deer in northern Michigan. Only \$1 million of about \$14 million collected since 1971 has been used for land acquisition, with the remainder financing the range management program.

*Comments to the Governor's Public Lands Task Force, January 30, 1984.

In 1976, the Michigan Legislature passed legislation requiring hunters to purchase a state duck stamp to hunt migratory waterfowl. Duck stamp revenues are ear-marked for acquisition of wetlands. Through the 1982 hunting season, \$1.2 million has been collected.

In recent years, the public's interest and concern for nongame wildlife has increased. We have responded to these concerns by developing programs to benefit nongame species, especially those that are endangered or threatened. Lack of funds for nongame programs has been a problem, but we expect the newly enacted income tax write-off program will greatly improve our efforts.

The DNR decision makers are now demanding an answer to "How much public land is enough?" We doubt if two people can agree on the amount, or even if there is a meaningful answer. The public trust is an important element in any equation concerning "How Much," as well as future social and economic needs of Michigan citizens. From our perspective, we should maintain the existing state-land ownership and use it to provide these needs for future generations.

We believe our clientele can best be served by increasing the public land base, where needed, according to the following priorities:

- 1) Highest priority must be to protect, by public ownership, those lands possessing unique values that are threatened with destruction under private ownership. For example, the remaining Great Lakes marshes and some inland marshes deserve public protection.
- 2) The second priority is an acquisition program to block-in ownership of the 60+ southern Michigan game and wildlife areas. We recently established realistic boundaries for each area, and have made good acquisition progress with financial assistance from the Michigan Recreational Land Acquisition Trust Fund. Most of the wildlife area purchases are matched with 75 percent P-R monies.
- 3) Our third priority is to continue to block-in and enlarge state ownership of forest land in the ecological transition zone, just north of the southern agricultural portion of the state. The zone between farm land and forest land usually provides excellent wildlife habitat. Tracts of land with deeryards and deeryard margins are preferred. Priority counties are: Clare, Gladwin, Midland, Isabella, Osceola, Mecosta, and Lake. To date, we have financed this phase of our acquisition program with the \$1.50 deer fund, matched with 75 percent P-R monies. Within this program, we give priority to providing better access to existing state ownership.
- 4) The division's fourth priority is the acquisition of what we call "mini-game areas" in the southern third of the state. These are small areas, usually less than 400 acres in size, that offer unique opportunities for wildlife restoration and public hunting. We do not anticipate a large mini-game area acquisition program. These small areas are more costly to administer, so they must present unique wildlife management opportunities.

2. Legislative Needs. We are concerned with the rapid growth of "payments in lieu of taxes" that are assessed against the Game and Fish Protection Fund. This liability has now reached a \$5,000,000 annual liability. There is some justification for the General Fund to share a portion of this tax burden. For example, user surveys of southern Michigan game areas show that about 50 percent of the recreational use of these areas is for other than hunting and fishing. We would favor an alternative to the present tax system that would reduce reliance on the property tax as a source of revenue for local units of government. Efforts to do this have been largely unsuccessful, but we note that most proposals exclude tax relief for state government. A recent survey of other states reveals that many consider state-owned lands as a valuable public trust. Consequently, the tax base is considerably less than that imposed on public lands in Michigan.

Perhaps tax assessments could be levied according to property use, rather than value based on "highest and best" use. The "highest and best use" concept is often counter productive to the public good over a long period of time. We view the loss of agricultural lands and the 10-acre subdivisions in the north with considerable alarm! Both problems are related to tax problems, but P. A. 116 has given some relief to owners of agricultural land. There is no easy solution to our tax problem, but we should not stop buying land for the public trust just because we have a tax problem. It just means that taxes have to be considered in long-range plans.

Some DNR employees believe we should ask for legislation to change the three-way exchange procedure. "Surplus" land would be sold to create a trust fund to be used to buy more suitable land. The Wildlife Division is opposed to any substantial change in the three-way exchange procedure. The DNR's land exchange review committee has worked to streamline procedures, resulting in reduced time lag between application and approval. We favor the present procedure, because all land management divisions are represented on the committee. Both staff and field have an opportunity to consider and debate every land transaction.

We have a deep concern about the proposed sale of "surplus" lands. We firmly believe that the Wildlife Division must have equal opportunity to assist with the development of procedures to protect our investments. The Game and Fish Protection Fund has purchased nearly a million acres of land to support wildlife programs, and at one time, we administered large blocks of land in the north, including tax-reverted parcels. Nearly 700,000 acres of Game and Fish Protection Fund lands are now part of dedicated state forests. We believe that wildlife interests must be protected by continuing the long established policy of co-management of the state forest system. The 1979 Forest Management Policy needs to be revised to clearly spell out this relationship.

3. Program and Budget Needs. We need to address wildlife management needs on private land. Almost two-thirds of the deer hunting effort takes place on private land. Private land also contributes about 70 percent of the small game hunting effort and 60 percent of the waterfowl hunting. Yet, we do very little to help private landowners manage wildlife on their ownerships. We believe the department should establish an extension-type program working with the Cooperative Extension Service and federal agricultural agencies. We have done some preliminary work to initiate a private land program.

4. Accomplishments and Future Benefits. The Wildlife Division and Michigan's hunters are proud of their tremendous contribution to Michigan's public land base. The vast ownerships in the north and almost 100 wildlife management units in southern Michigan are invaluable resources which can be used to insure Michigan's economic and recreational future. We cannot forget that recent studies place the economic impact of hunting and trapping in Michigan at a staggering \$318,150,000 and this is an annual year-after-year happening! Also, we must consider the over 6,000,000 Michigan residents who enjoy viewing, feeding, or photographing wildlife!

We will constantly strive to do a better job. Acquisition priorities are revised annually in order to keep up-to-date with new problems and service new programs when necessary.

The Wildlife Division stands ready and willing to continue its management role in acquiring, administering, and managing Michigan's public land trust.