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Policy and Goals of the State of South Dakota¹

Gay Simpson²

I am to address the policy of the Department of Game, Fish and Parks toward predator control and management in relation to waterfowl. Waterfowl has always had a high priority with the state of South Dakota. As a state agency, we could have said "let the Feds do it," but we did not take that approach (1) because South Dakota is a production state, lying where it does on the northern end of the Central Flyway, and (2) because we have a healthy population of waterfowl hunters. We sell about 40,000 duck stamps annually. The Department has recognized the importance of waterfowl to the state and its hunters and consequently has given waterfowl a higher priority than it might otherwise have had.

This priority for waterfowl in the state of South Dakota has recently been reinforced, primarily through participation in the Central Flyway. The Central Flyway Council adopted the Central Flyway Mallard Management Plan in July of 1984. By vote in Council, the state of South Dakota endorsed that plan. The plan's primary goal is to increase mallard recruitment. Clearly, the state has committed itself along these lines.

What are we doing and what is the policy? There is no Department-wide policy at this time. As a state agency we are somewhat committed to multiple species management, as is reflected on the lands we manage. They contain a variety of habitat manipulations that are not beneficial to waterfowl. A good example is the tree plantings undertaken in our pheasant restoration effort. We go out onto a native prairie and plant tree belts that may be very good winter cover for pheasants but are also handy dandy homes for some very effective duck predators. We are adding a new element to that part of the landscape, changing the odds for nesting ducks by providing habitat for new members of the community. Thus we have programs within the Department of Game, Fish and Parks that are nearly at cross-purposes with the fairly narrow goal of increasing waterfowl recruitment.

I was requested to write a five-year program plan when I was hired by the Department of Game, Fish and Parks. In that plan, I recommended the following approach to meet our objectives with waterfowl: Choose those game production areas (GPA's) where waterfowl production potential is extremely

high and maximize (not merely optimize) duck production on those areas, while optimizing elsewhere. Predator exclusion or control would be one element in management to maximize waterfowl production. This approach would not have to be all-encompassing, and would allow continued multi-species management on many areas. To date the five-year plan has received no endorsement or implementation authority from the Department.

The approach of the state with regard to managing furbearers (predators) is through its hunters and trappers. I'm not certain what the past situation was in South Dakota, but I get the impression from Conservation Officers that it hasn't been very long since these "critters" were called varmints in the state, and attempts to manage them as furbearers have been recent. We currently have furbearer seasons that are not what you would expect if the aim were to increase duck nest success in general. We have greater expanses of nesting cover that allow the birds to disperse. West River, the fox, raccoon and badger seasons are open year-round. East River, where those predators are a problem, those seasons are not year-round. In fact, the fox season ends February 28, the raccoon and badger on March 31, just prior, of course, to the time when taking those animals from GPA's might be beneficial for hen survival and nest success. At present, because we do have strong recreational and economic interests in furbearers (trappers and predator hunters), the Department of Game, Fish and Parks has a "de facto" policy of not controlling predators on state lands in spring to increase duck nest success, except behind predator-exclusion fences and on Lake Albert Island. Of course, there aren't too many people who are going to be interested in trapping fox after the value of the fur decreases.

We at Game, Fish and Parks are clearly not on track with a cohesive policy from the Secretary or the Division Director toward controlling predators. Our ADC group program, which you heard quite a bit about yesterday, has a comprehensive approach, but it is one that is not integrated with the duck recruitment program within the state. So we have some progress to make. There are some connections yet to be made. While recreational trapping during prime fur seasons will do little to make our GPA's safer for nesting hens in spring, we can utilize our own Department's ADC expertise in applying predator control on selected GPA's where we have reason to believe it will be effective. Such an integrated approach will be absolutely necessary if South Dakota is to meet its objectives under the Central Flyway Mallard Management Plan.

¹Talk presented at the 8th Great Plains Damage Control Workshop. (Rapid City, SD, April 28-30, 1987).

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