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Milo J. Shult
Texas Agricultural Extension Service, College Station, TX

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WILDLIFE IN TEXAS: MARKETING POTENTIAL

AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE

Milo J. Shult, Associate Director, Texas Agricultural Extension Service, College Station, TX 77843

This is a challenging topic to discuss, and I would first like to review some things which are unique to Texas with respect to wildlife populations. These concern the importance of wildlife from a commodity standpoint Then I would like to delve into some areas which tend to be a little more philosophical and focus on the impacts of total wildlife management, including wildlife damage control.

Historically in our nation, wildlife has had ups and downs; there are a number of success stories in terms of management but also some obvious failures. I would like to be positive today concerning wildlife management and still point out the areas where we need to be a bit more astute in our management.

Its important in our state and nation to recognize that food and fiber production is critical to the maintenance of our expanding population. Regionally, we have a tremendous increase in the number of people coming into Texas. By the year 2000, 1 out of 12 Americans will live in Texas.

There is currently a great deal of pressure that is placed on our willdife and other natural resources because of the recent increase in human populations and the differing interests which people have in regard to wildlife.

We have a generation of young people who are not tied to the land and who do not recognize the production that comes from the land.

One of my favorite philosophies is that one of the things wrong with this country today is that people do not kill their own chickens. We tend to think that they come wrapped in cellophane and that milk comes from cartons. We have some changing attitudes in Texas and around the nation with respect to wildlife.

Wildlife biology, therefore, is an interesting field because of the different types of value systems pedple have when considering wild populations.

I would like to give you an overview of Texas in terms of wildlife and wildlife habitats and describe the situation here wherein wildlife has a very important economic impact.

Texas is complex and has diverse climates and vegetative patterns. The state is about 800 miles long and 800 miles wide; that is about 270,000 mi=. It varies in rainfall from less than 8 inches on the western side of the state to greater than 50 inches on the eastern side. There is citrus production at the southern tip of the state along the Rio Grande river to agriculture in the Panhandle which is similar to that which you have in other midwestern states. In the middle is a whole variety of major ecosystems.

The Pineywoods are similar to southeastern pine forests. The Postoak Savanna is an extension of oak-hickory forests with grassland understory. The Gulf Prairies stretch along the 600 miles of Texas coastline and include extensive wetlands. The Blacklands are now heavily cultivated, and are comprised of older prairies but with little native vegetation now,

mostly row crops.

The Cross Timbers and Prairies is a catch-all vegetative area, predominantly an oakgrassland-savanna. The Rolling Plains region includes a great deal of rangeland with some production agriculture. The High Plains, thanks to extensive irrigation. is is in intensive production and introduced wildlife species are important to landowners there. The Edwards Plateau in central Texas, the heart of the sheep and. goat industry, is dominated by cedar. live oak, and grassland savanna. It also has some of the highest white-tailed deer populations in the state, often as high as 1 deer to Z acres.

Next, there is the Trans-Pews, one of the most diverse areas of the state. It has very low rainfall but some of the state's heaviest agricultural production areas are near El Paso with vegetables and pecans as important crops and a growing dairy industry. However, a great deal of the Trans-Pecos is composed of creosote bush flats and a series of high mountains extending down from the Rocky Mountains. Livestock and wildlife production are very important in this region.

Lastly, there is the South Texas Plains or Rio Grande Plains. The southern tip is intensively cultivated but the bulk of this region is in native rangeland. Many brushy species have invaded the region. Grazing has been enhanced by various brush manipulations to allow more grass but still provide desirable wildlife habitat

With this background of Texas' diversity in habitats and people, we can look at how wildlife fits in.

Wildlife is very important in Texas historically. Hunting is a very longstanding tradition and figures prominantly in the culture. Because 97% of the land is privately owned, however, access is controlled by private individuals. In fact, Texas has very strong trespass laws. As a result, we have established an industry based on the strength of those laws and the ability of people to restrict access to lands to harvest wildlife.

In Texas, we are talking about a fairly well-established industry to sell the right of ingress to pursue game for recreational purposes. This tradition dates back to the 1930s. It's taking on greater significance today than it ever has in the past Many producers used to view hunting leases as "cookie jar" money. They do not have that luxury anymore. Nationally, agricultural producers currently have a number of serious problems economically. As a result, the management of wildlife has become more and more important to farmers and ranchers. Ranching and farming today is changing. Those people that adapt to change and utilize ALL their ranch resources, will be the ones to turn a profit from their endeavors.

Wildlife management is viewed more and more as a business venture and more and more often it is having business management practices applied to it. It is a myth to assume that no costs are associatgd with wildlife production. You do not have to pay for breeding animals, veterinary costs, or feeding bills but you do have to forego grazing some other livestock and to manipulate your vegetation. However, wildlife can and does provide a good return on the costs associated with them.

Wildlife production is extremely important to ranch cash flow. This is one of its most important attributes. Often it is all that helps producers stay in business during times of depressed cattle prices or depressed sheep and goat prices. Some things are cyclic but wildlife as a commodity has not shown such cyclic patterns. It runs with the cost-of-living index and so does not price itself out of the market. More producers must take a business approach to total ranch management systems.

There is recognition here that what. we are marketing is not wildlife but a total recreational experience. Producers across the state are looking at the goods and services that go along with the production of wildlife to make sure that the consumer has that ideal recreational experience that they are willing to compensate the rancher for. We never would have thought 10-15 years ago that ranchers would be saying things like "We've got to look at target audiences, defining what our product is, and determining how and where we are going to market that product". Those are the types of discussions you do hear today as opposed to a few years ago when ranchers were saying "We really shouldn't be shooting does and spikes".

I mentioned goods and services. There is no such thing as the "Texas Lease Hunting System"; there is a whole variety of types of lease systems. These vary from "show-themthe-gate" to very sophisiticated hunting operations.

Ranchers today are taking a business-like approach. They rarely say "I want to eradicate my brush". Now they are saying "I want to manage my brush to increase my profit from livestock but I don't want to damage my wildlife populations". So wildlife management has become an integral part of production agriculture in many parts of the state. Management is looked at in terms of impacts on wildlife populations.

Some trends are relatively new. Ranchers are taking as keen an interest in record keeping to track their wildlife production as they are their livestock operation. As a result, they are much more astute managers; they are starting to recognize more of what is happening in natural populations.

Although I have been talking mostly about game animals, the day will come when management of nongame species for recreational experience will come about and will generate income for private landowners.

Profit is not the only motive for management. Although the ranch manager must be attentive to profit, there are a number of social, cultural, and historical impacts on the view taken toward the wildlife resource and the income derived from it.

Leasing, for instance, has not been popular in eastern Texas where the historical background has been more similar to the southeastern U.S.

On the other hand, ranchers in the Edwards Plateau have a longer history of leasing and are looking at optimizing their income and take a long range management view as well. '

The major species supporting leasing is white-tailed deer. Each year over 300,000 are harvested. The state herd is estimated at well over 3 million animals. This resource creates markets which can cater to a number of types of hunters. On the western side of the state, mule deer are a valuable resource. Gross income may reach $750-1000 per gun slot: For pronghorn antelope, $500 is a reasonable fee.

In south Texas, bobwhite quail management is big business. Large acreages are leased for $5-10 per acre for quail hunting. Turkey is a very popular and important game bird. Spring seasons have expanded the opportunities to derive income from management.

Exotics, introduced in 1930's, are in the same category as domesitc livestock. Landowners can legally harvest these animals anytime during the year. Management of exotic species creates a variety of unique problems and opportunities.

This brings me to the implications of wildlife production for wildlife damage control. It is my opinion that, for many years, the wildlife profession has not viewed wildlife damage control as an integral part of the total wildlife management program. That is not appropriate. We must recognize that the management of wildlife in pest situations is just as much a part of wildlife management as the production of wildlife for the consuming public.

We know that predators can have impacts on some game populations and therefore, just as other classes of livestock, be competitive. They prey on domestic livestock also. Coyotes have had a very significant impact on pronghorn populations in the Trans-Pecos. There is strong evidence that the mule deer decline in the Trans-Pecos may be due not only to harvest and range management but also to a combination of predation with these factors. If we are going to retain significant numbers of those animal we are going to have to do some wildlife damage control.

Blackbuck antelope is very susceptible to predation, perhaps even more so than our native wildlife species. If you are an owner of such an exotic and have significant capital and management effort tied up in it, you can imagine that you will have the same feelings as when a sheep or goat producer loses his animal to predators since it is your private property and not an animal owned by the state.

We are going to have to be realistic at some point in time if we want to harvest higher numbers of some of the animals that predation does impact. Competition between man and some other species must be resolved through some management programs.

Some research in South Texas suggests that predation may have a positive effect on deer because there is high mortality on fawns during dry years and during better years, there are enough buffer species to reduce the level of predation on the fawns.

The question is: Where do the lines cross in terms of the animals that man wants to harvest and those taken by predation? The other real question in wildlife damage control is whether the value of the predator itself is important as a potential income generator. There are places in the state where these animals are hunted for harvest and for a fee. So it is yet another part of the puzzle in wildlife management for those who need to manage populations of predators as well as the prey species.

Our state is unique in many ways. The Texas situation may not be appropriate elsewhere. Every state has a unique set of constraints and many of the things that work here would not work in other states. But I thought you would be interested in seeing some of the relationships that we have in Texas between production agriculture, wildlife resource management and impacts of predators. This raises the question of the use of wildlife damage control techniques not only for the protection of domestic livestock but also as part of the total wildlife management program and as an integral part of the agricultural picture in our state today.