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AGENCY AND STAKEHOLDER EVALUATIONS OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION IN DAMAGE MANAGEMENT DECISIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR DAMAGE CONTROL¹

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As in many states, wildlife managers and biologists in the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Bureau of Wildlife (BOW) set white-tailed deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) population objectives in deer management units (DMUs). BOW has authority to regulate deer harvest through a deer management permit quota system. Decisions about regulating deer population levels have a direct impact on stakeholders concerned with the degree of damage to field and vegetable crops, orchards, nurseries, tree plantations, gardens, and ornamental shrubbery. Deer densities also affect economic and recreational benefits derived by other stakeholders. Developing management strategies that address these conflicting interests is a challenge.

In 1990, BOW biologists and Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) agents developed, organized, and implemented 15 DMU Citizen Task Forces (CTFs) throughout New York State. CTF members reflected a variety of stakeholder interests (e.g., agriculturalists, sportsmen, rural nonfarm landowners, foresters, Christmas tree growers, taxidermists, motorists, environmentalists, legislators). CCE agents facilitated the meetings, and BOW provided technical information concerning deer and deer management.

Cornell University's Human Dimensions Research Unit conducted an evaluation of CTFs to: (1) describe the process and application of CTFs in deer management policy, (2) de

termine if CTF members and agency participants believe CTFs were worthwhile and effective, and (3) assess the degree to which CTFs reflected a variety of DMU stakeholder preferences and opinions about the population level of white-tailed deer. We mailed CTF members (n = 157) pre- and post-meeting questionnaires, and interviewed BOW participants (n = 14) CCE agents (n = 21) who participated in 15 CTFs. In 4 DMU stakeholder populations represented on CTFs we mailed questionnaires (n = 2,474; 72% response rate) to determine well-represented preferences of CTF members and nonmembers for the size of the deer herd.

Results from 15 CTFs show CTF members (90%), wildlife staff (100%), and CCE agents (100%) thought CTFs should continue to be used. Of the 4 pilot CTFs, members of one recommended a deer population level different from the preference of nonmembers. This implies communication and education elements of CTFs influenced the recommendation, and suggests the need for implementation of an education program for the community to improve congruence with, and insure acceptance of, the CTF recommendation. Citizen participation in wildlife population management decisions that affect damage control: (1) provides a forum for stakeholders to express opinions and influence policy decisions; (2) improves communication channels among and between agencies and stakeholders; and (3) provides CTF members an opportunity to learn about wildlife management and other viewpoints.

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