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Policy and Goals of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

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A recent memo out of our regional office says that we shall refer to this subject as seasonal predator management. You know it covers a lot of other terms; we used to call it predator control and so on. But going back to the origins of predator management in this country, we generally think of protecting domestic crops, be it trees or grains or sheep or cattle.

If you turn in another direction and look towards Europe, you can see many centuries of involvement in use of the land. There game is a product of the land and is owned by the landowner. They refer to game as their property and handle it as such. In some places it is managed out of existence, and in others it is highest on their agenda for production. Predators of game, if landowners want to raise game, are considered vermin. They are not given the time of day or words of praise. It gets down to standard approach and is not even talked about; landowners decided centuries ago that the vermin would be removed so that they could raise the pheasant or cottontail or whatever they want to raise.

I think back to the philosophy of the balance of nature, a popularized conundrum during the youth of most of us here and maybe at Northern Prairie Wildlife Research Center, where I worked from 1968 through 1984. In the early years (1960's) most of the people there had grown up with that philosophy and teachings, and it was rather a shock to see what was occurring with duck nesting out there in the real world. It was a significant shock to see the overall effects on nesting. By 1973 there was a consensus at that station that it was something that had to be reckoned with in one way or another if we were going to preserve or enhance waterfowl production. We have not come to the point of European game management, although that may be arriving on the East Coast and other areas east of here.

There are some more recent papers describing our written policies in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I am just going to read a few quotes from some of these. The one April 11, 1983 states, "It shall be the policy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to appraise the effects of predation on breeding waterfowl on service lands. In those circumstances, where it is determined that waterfowl production objectives are being compromised because of predation of waterfowl, their eggs or their young and other reasonable efforts have proven unsuccessful the service may implement predator management. This policy is to be implemented as a site specific application when definite results are desired not for the rangewide reduction of predator populations." The paper I gave yesterday is an early step into that realm of working not only on our lands but neighbors' lands. We have roughly two to three farms per square mile in that western Minnesota area. So we work with a lot of private landowners.

When appropriate, improvement of waterfowl nesting habitat is to be performed before the application of predator management and shall be continued during predator management activities. Jumping ahead to June 11, 1985, our previous director in Washington, Robert Jantzen, said that predator management "...should be used to increase waterfowl production on refuges and WPAs where predators are a problem." I took that out of context, but that was his statement and it still stands. Now there is another restriction. States must be consulted on assessments in predator/waterfowl relationships and should concur with any proposed management strategy on service lands. That has led us to the environmental assessments, and I have two draft copies here. One refers to this Midcontinent Project, another refers to the Wetlands Management Districts of western Minnesota. These are still draft copies and they are not accepted. They are getting heavier each time they are rewritten. They have been reviewed and comments have come in from such groups as the Humane Society of the United States. With comments both pro and con, both sides of the question are represented, I do not know how that will be resolved, yet. The Refuge Management Manual in June, 1985, states, "The policy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is to aggressively implement predator management in those circumstances where determination has been made that waterfowl production objectives are being compromised due to predation."

A recent waterfowl nesting study out of the Northern Prairie Center dealt with the Canadian prairies during the five-year standardized hunting regulations period on waterfowl, and also some extensive examinations of breeding habitat. Twenty-seven people, divided into five crews worked for three full years and covered a lot of prairies in Canada. Ray Greenwood out of the research center and Al Sargent rode herd over this project. The end result was that predation there is almost as bad as in North Dakota and western Minnesota. The old philosophy that our ducks all come out of Canada is not going to hold up. The headline of this news

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article says, "Ducks losing shrinking habitat areas to predators." So it is the same old story wherever we have looked. Here is another one that describes the data in Canada and the United States, and finds them comparable. The overall conclusion is that the odds are against the hens hatching a successful nest. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan came out in May 1986 and was slightly vague on this predator management thing; but, if you read carefully you can, on pages 25 and 26, come up with some specifics.

Referring to Fish and Wildlife Service or Dedicated Lands for Waterfowl Production, the Plan calls for improving duck recruitment on such lands. A variety of management techniques should be considered to reduce the effects of agricultural practices and predation on nesting ducks and their eggs. The desired result is to achieve a nest hatching success of 50% by 1995. Now, I checked into that and they are not talking about just observed or apparent nest success--they are talking about May field nest success. And, if that is a goal that is stated correctly, we are really going to have to confront predators on a wide scale or at least in some good habitat areas.

It has been determined that coyotes without young pups kill fewer sheep. So possibly a fox without pups kills fewer ducks. Al Sargent's data suggest that fox do not overkill. They will kill up to a ten-day supply of meat (keep it in the larder, so to speak) cached, and after that point they know where the ducks are nesting in their home range but do not necessarily kill them. This finding is based on research done nearly 20 years ago on Arrowwood Refuge in North Dakota. Other thoughts in predator management are aversion agents, which have gone through quite a lot of research without a lot of success; scent scramblers and aromatics which Ken Higgins has suggested from time to time; and other kinds of vegetation barriers, possibly. We have not found anything yet that keeps predators away from nests effectively for a very long period of time. Here is another thought--sound barriers. Maybe it holds something for the future; we do not know. Other kinds of research dealing with the biology of the species may be important; for example, removing litters from red foxes on home ranges and maintaining a pair there without young to feed. Habitat manipulations of other kinds are also suggested. There are probably other things that could be done in the way of intensive game management. I was looking at one of these brochures just yesterday on guard dogs. It may be a wild thought, but guard dogs may be trained to protect Waterfowl Production Areas. If we could find the right kind of dog with the right attitude and train it properly, then provided dog food, water and shelter, theoretically it could take care of the place. This would keep almost all of the predator management critics happy while enhancing waterfowl production. There could be other wild thoughts but that is just one of them. I am going to let it go at that point.