



BRIEF ANALYSIS

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Private Wildlife Conservation

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Government land use regulations in the United States discourage landowners from protecting wildlife. This is unfortunate, since private landowners control approximately 60 percent of the land base, and at least 80 percent of wildlife in the 48 contiguous states is dependent in whole or in part upon private land. The biggest threat to wildlife is loss of habitat. Without the cooperation of the private sector, public parks and wildlife refuges will become island ecosystems, and the future of animals existing on these lands will be in jeopardy.

Problems with Government Wildlife Protection.

Public efforts at wildlife conservation often are less effective than private efforts for several reasons.

- The government must satisfy competing interests and often seeks to provide recreational activities on public land, resulting in very little privacy for wildlife.
- It is easier for private property owners to restrict access to their land than for government to limit public land use.
- The private sector is more flexible than the government and can more easily implement immediate policy and administrative changes.

Command-and-control regulations like the Endangered Species Act (ESA), with their severe restrictions on private land use where listed species are found, encourage illegal habitat destruction. Under the ESA, the landowner bears the costs of preserving wildlife habitat, while the public receives the benefits. To successfully conserve wildlife, the landowner's well-being must be tied to the wildlife's survival. If property owners were permitted to own or at least manage the wild animals on their land, the animals would add value to the land instead of taking it away — and landowners would have an incentive to practice conservation.

Another problem for conservation is that wildlife is considered common property. According to Robert J. Smith of the Center for Private Conservation, public ownership results in overexploitation of the land's natu-

ral resources, while private ownership results in sustainable use and preservation.

Private Property Rights in Other Countries. In several other countries, private landowners have the right to regulate the use of wildlife on their property.

- In the *United Kingdom*, wildlife either belongs to property owners or is regulated through a combination of private and public management. In addition, public funds are often used to compensate landowners who modify their land to benefit the environment.
- In *Australia*, Earth Sanctuaries, an innovative environmental organization listed on the Australian Stock Exchange, includes the value of rare animals in its balance sheet so that shareholders will know if the company is really meeting its goal of conservation.
- In *South Africa*, private game reserves compete with

government reserves to provide the best habitat for wild animals. Because of this approach, South African local communities now view wild animals as valuable assets worth preserving.

Black Rhinos in Zimbabwe. The 1975 Zimbabwe Parks and Wildlife Act abolished state controls on hunting, giving property owners the right to manage wildlife on their land, even if they did not own the wildlife. Unfortunately, most

black rhinos were located on public land when the act was passed. The Zimbabwe government attempted to protect the rhinos but was largely unsuccessful. Between 1970 and 1994 the black rhino population declined by 95 percent, and by the early 1990s the number had dropped to under 300.

In the mid-1990s, with the help of several private environmental groups, the remaining black rhinos were placed on private cattle ranches. At the time, cattle ranchers were being hurt financially by a severe drought and were seeking alternate sources of income. Some chose to switch to wildlife preservation, ecotourism and hunting. They eventually formed large private conservancies, since the black rhinos tend to roam from one property to another.

At least one armed guard tracks each rhino during daylight hours, and no rhinos have been poached since

Five Largest U.S. Land Trusts

Organization	Acres Protected
The Nature Conservancy	10,484,000
The Conservation Fund	1,496,700
The Trust for Public Land	1,000,000
Society for the Protection of New Hampshire Forests	852,366
Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation	488,459

Source: Land Trust Alliance, 1997.

the conservancies were formed. Habitat conservation also benefits nontargeted animals that live on the reserve.

Even those who don't support hunting must recognize that trophy hunting is the main source of income for the conservancies, providing incentives to preserve wildlife in Zimbabwe and in other poverty-stricken African countries. In Africa the motto is; *If it pays, it stays*. Although such activities as game viewing and photography can be quite profitable, they take a great deal of time and investment to set up. Hunters can be accommodated with fewer staff and amenities and require less initial investment — a key point in poor African communities.

The conservancies in Zimbabwe work to develop relationships with and to improve the local economy of nearby communities. Conservancies get locals directly involved in wildlife management as trackers to guide hunters and as guards to ward off poachers. One conservancy also has set up a trust on behalf of the local communities. To establish an annual income, the trust will purchase wildlife to be released in the conservancy, and the conservancy will later pay the trust for any increases in population over the original number of animals.

Private Conservation Efforts in the U.S. Many private U.S. environmental organizations are taking an active role in wildlife conservation. The Political Economy Research Center (PERC) refers to these environmental entrepreneurs as “enviro-capitalists” because they apply creative, free-market solutions to environmental problems. PERC notes that enviro-capitalists often succeed in protecting biodiversity, whereas government regulations fail. The five largest national and state land trusts (nonprofit organizations directly involved in protecting environmentally significant lands) protect over 14 million acres of land in the United States.

The Nature Conservancy (TNC) is the largest private nonprofit conservation organization. With over one million members, it manages the largest system of private sanctuaries in the world, protecting over 70 million acres worldwide. TNC partners with private landowners, corporations, government agencies and communities to preserve ecologically significant lands. TNC achieves its goals through a results-oriented and nonconfrontational approach. For instance:

- TNC gives money to farmers in Indiana to help purchase equipment for low-erosion tilling.

- In the fall of 1999 TNC purchased an 830,000 acre conservation easement in California to ensure that the habitat of a privately owned cattle ranch will be preserved for future generations.

Operation Stronghold, a privately financed nonprofit organization, has preserved more than four million acres of wildlife habitat on private lands. Operation Stronghold accepts membership in return for a personal commitment to wildlife and habitat preservation by property owners. The organization provides members with liability insurance and technical assistance to help them maintain agricultural productivity while they implement conservation values.

Defenders of Wildlife, an organization dedicated to protecting native plants and animals, is cooperating with several other private conservation organizations to promote The Citizens' Plan to Save Yellowstone Buffalo. The Citizens' Plan, supported by sportsmen, park visitors, ranchers, conservationists and other key groups, seeks to protect the buffalo in Yellowstone Park through cooperation between the private and public sectors. The Citizens' Plan provides an alternative to the Interim Management Plan proposed by the U.S. government, which allows the slaughter of Yellowstone bison both inside and outside the park to prevent the spread of disease between cattle and bison. Defenders of Wildlife also pays ranchers near Yellowstone fair market value for livestock killed by wolves that have been reintroduced into the park. While the ranchers would prefer not to have their livestock killed, the payments increase their tolerance of wolf reintroduction.

Similarly, *Oregon Water Trust (OWT)* pays ranchers to not divert water from some streams in order to improve habitat for spawning salmon and steelhead trout. OWT's market-based approach encourages water rights holders to convert some of their water rights from consumption to instream use.

Conclusion. Private wildlife conservation activities complement and often surpass government efforts. The record of private conservation in the U.S. and in other countries shows that free enterprise can successfully preserve habitat and benefit wildlife. Environmental groups have discovered that in the U.S. as in Africa: *If wildlife pays, it stays*.

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