

Wildlife-management reform is long overdue

Posted by Joan Russow

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The underpinnings of contemporary wildlife management are political and ideological, largely at the expense of wildlife for the presumed benefit of people.

Unsurprisingly, wildlife management in British Columbia is marked by an outdated mindset that primarily views wild animals as a “resource” to be exploited by recreational hunting or as troublesome creatures that need to be killed because their existence conflicts with human endeavours. Saddled by a myopic adherence to the debunked and inaptly named North American model of wildlife conservation, wildlife policy in B.C. is mired in a philosophically and structurally faulty approach.

Simply, wildlife policies are focused on consumption and control, rather than conservation.

As ethicist Michael Nelson and wildlife ecologists John Vucetich, Paul C. Paquet and Joseph Bump note in their critique, *North American Model: What's Flawed, What's Missing, What's Needed*, the model's primary tenet, i.e. recreational hunting being central to wildlife conservation, is based upon an inadequate account of history and an inadequate ethic.

Largely ignoring the biology and intrinsic value of all species, the model reinforces the narrow idea that nature is a commodity — a “resource” — owned and used by humans in pursuit of personal interests. This “management” perspective draws its support from — and sustains — the view that humans exist outside of nature, and that other species, apart from their utility for humans, are of little importance in the larger scheme of things. Human dominion and domination over nature are deemed to be the natural order.

Predominantly driven by a recreational hunting agenda, the North American model is informed

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largely by values, attitudes and atavistic beliefs entrenched in the self-serving fallacy that killing wild animals for sport and control is essential to wildlife conservation.

As explained in the critique, the model relies on a misinterpretation of history in which recreational hunting is disproportionately, and inaccurately, seen as the driver of North American wildlife conservation, while downplaying the contributions of monumental figures such as John Muir and Aldo Leopold, who pioneered broad-based approaches to conservation without focusing on hunting as its primary tool.

The province's recent proposal to privatize wildlife management illustrates the pernicious effect of the North American model on the mindset of government bureaucrats and politicians. In the run-up to the election, the B.C. Liberals announced plans to implement an extra-governmental agency that would be controlled by recreational hunting groups.

This perverse scheme is the culmination of decades of undue influence by the recreational hunting lobby on the B.C. government; it was also inevitable under the model, where science and ethics are ignored in favour of self-perpetuating myth and anecdote.

With its philosophical roots in the model, the grizzly-bear hunt is an egregious and persistent example of how B.C. wildlife management fails to address ecological, economic and ethical considerations. Using the province's kill data to determine if B.C.'s grizzly management meets its own objectives, Raincoast Conservation Foundation scientists have found that total kills commonly exceed limits determined by provincial policy. Financial analyses have shown that grizzlies are worth far more alive than dead, and poll after poll indicates a clear majority of British Columbians have judged the recreational hunting of these large carnivores an abhorrent activity.

Considering centuries of human privilege over the needs of the environment, what we need to manage is not wildlife but ourselves. Recognizing that many human activities have damaging effects on biodiversity and ecological communities, what should wildlife management in B.C. look like?

Briefly, Raincoast envisions a compassionate conservation policy based on management for wildlife, as opposed to management of wildlife — a policy that takes into account the health and

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well-being of individuals and populations. Furthermore, we envision substantially more consideration given to maintaining the integrity of ecological systems upon which species depend.

Although species might continue to exist and suffer long after natural ecological relationships have been altered or destroyed, such impoverished conditions are not sustainable and do not typify healthy environments. Finally, wildlife management needs to emerge from the shadows and adopt practices in keeping with modern science, as well as principles regarding the ethical treatment of animals.

Without a significant shift in how we relate to and interact with wildlife, future generations will look back with stunned dismay at how our society could be so divorced from reality and morality. The hopeful news in B.C. is that with a new government there is the opportunity for positive change and a much more ecologically and ethically informed approach to wildlife management.

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