

## [Isthmus Opinion \(Madison, WI\)](#)

# Conserving — not killing — wildlife should drive Wisconsin's natural resources strategy

The Department of Natural Resources needs to shift its priorities

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**State law and state Supreme Court decisions offer mixed messages on wildlife management, producing conflict around such things as wolf policy.**

Wisconsin residents should rethink the purpose of the bureaus that govern wildlife management and endangered resources at the Department of Natural Resources. Threats to biodiversity and shifting human values challenge the underpinnings of these bureaus and the commission that directs policy at the department, the Natural Resources Board. The department must evolve from its traditional game and fish emphasis to a more ecologically focused, democratically inclusive agency protecting all Wisconsin's animal and plant diversity.

Unfortunately, the department, the board, and our political leaders are stuck in a political quagmire.

The board struggles to address growing disharmony surrounding its decisions, most recently over [wolf management](#). Perennial fireworks erupt over deer management policy. Beaver eradication to stock non-native fish is likely the next battlefield.

Conflicts at meetings typically emerge when testimony divides into two camps: preservation (those who want to save animals in the wild for future generations) and harvest (those who want to hunt wildlife). Arguments erupt over the perceived benefits and risks that harvesting fish and game or lethally managing predators pose to wildlife populations, ecosystem health, and animal well-being. Each side spars with "best available science."

Board decisions about wildlife are legally supposed to rely on a combination of science and values. And here lies the problem: Whose values count most in determining Wisconsin's fish and wildlife priorities, regulations and policies? Interest groups promote their values by pressuring the governor over board appointments and lobbying on pending votes. DNR staff also have a habit of listening to some interest groups and not others. For many, this is an existential battle, driving passionate and at times uncivil behavior.

The board has [allowed](#) its ex-chairman, Fred Prehn, to remain past his allotted term and thumb his nose at the state's voters. At the same time, the

Legislature has refused to approve Gov. Tony Evers' appointments. The Wisconsin Supreme Court is still deliberating Prehn's fate.

State law and state Supreme Court precedent charge the board and DNR with "regulating the enjoyment, use, disposition, and conservation of wildlife." State statute and the state Supreme Court 2013 ruling in *Rock-Koshkonong Lake District v. DNR* also charge the department and its board with protecting and preserving the state's "waters for fishing, hunting, recreation, and scenic beauty."

These mixed messages produce conflict. Look at the state's policy with respect to wolves. As soon as wolves were removed from the federal list of endangered species, and authority for management was returned to the DNR and board, a group sued to force a wolf hunt in February 2021. That hunt violated a fundamental principle of preservation and wildlife management: Don't destroy breeders and young.

The board later that year approved another hunt that could have severely threatened the remaining population. No surprise that another state court stepped in to stop the second hunt and a federal court ordered the authority for wolves be taken back from our DNR and board.

### **Priorities need to be changed**

What 2021 showed us is that preservation should be prioritized by the department and board. We should, for example, stop stocking our waters with non-native fish and instead prioritize the restoration of native species.

We also need to follow the money.

The budget of the Wildlife Management Bureau that manages hunted animals dwarfs the budget of the Endangered Resources Bureau. Yet the number of hunters continues to dwindle while the number of those who enjoy other recreational opportunities in the state's natural areas continues to grow.

The state needs to start directing a significant portion of state park revenues toward the Endangered Resources Bureau budget to advance

nongame protections and endangered species preservation activities. The bureau, by its own admission, “lacks a stable, dedicated source of funding.”

This will require a rethinking of how the DNR raises money. Park revenues are not counted as wildlife revenues. But the permits hunters and anglers pay to claim wild animals are. So the DNR goes into business for itself, stocking rivers with non-native fish, killing native animals that do not pay the DNR’s bills, and generally ignoring the will of the broad majority. They also ignore the science showing a biodiversity crisis is upon us.

Science tells us that biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate. Soaring species extinctions coupled with climate change threaten Wisconsin public well-being and imperil future generations.

Today’s poor wildlife prognosis was not present 100 years ago when wildlife agencies were established to sustain fish and game harvest. Their “wise use, without waste” purpose made sense in that earlier era. Times are different, ecological understanding has grown, and public needs have changed. In response to the strife, the government has an opportunity to revise the DNR’s mandate.

States are obligated to protect wildlife as a trust for current and future generations. Following U.S. Supreme Court decisions since 1842, the Wisconsin Supreme Court as recently as 1962 envisioned wildlife as a public trust. That means the DNR has the duties of a trustee. Trustee duties are well-established in financial law. Trustees must act fairly, transparently and selflessly for all beneficiaries, not just hunters and fishers.

The sad truth is that we are failing. The DNR’s historic focus remains on sustaining only a modest number of wildlife for food or trophies, despite knowing that hundreds of other species are in conservation need and that common animals also require care and compassion. The inconvenient truth is that the current mandate is weighted heavily toward recreationally and

commercially valuable animals. Consequently, long-term biodiversity health is jeopardized.

Clarifying the DNR's mandate around a top priority of conserving all wildlife for all people will provide a unifying direction for the floundering board and strengthen the department's biodiversity mission.

Changing the department's purpose recognizes that government agencies require modifications as society's needs and public values change.

The shift of the DNR toward a more ecologically focused agency protecting Wisconsin's animal diversity does not mean eliminating hunting or fishing — simply that our relationship with animals and nature is evolving. Some unpopular decisions might be needed when those decisions repair damage to ecosystem diversity and health.

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