



# The Undemocratic Nature of Wildlife Governance Today

*And how to fix it*


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Good morning. My name is Kevin Bixby, executive director of Wildlife for All, a nonprofit dedicated to transforming wildlife management in the U.S. to be more democratic, just, compassionate and focused on protecting native species and ecosystems.

I have an undergraduate degree in biology, a masters in NR Policy from the U of Michigan. I eat meat and I occasionally hunt. I say that because some recent articles have accused me and my organization as being anti-hunting, which is simply not true.

But that's beside the point. I'm not here to discuss the pros and cons of hunting.

I'm going to talk about some of the ways wildlife governance today— how decisions are made about wildlife and who gets to make them—is undemocratic, and offer some ideas about how to remedy that.



“Democracy is the worst  
form of government, except  
for all the others that have  
been tried.”

—*Winston Churchill*

One of the fundamental tenets of democracy is that everyone has an equal right to express their views and be represented when governance decisions are made.

- U.S. population (USFWS, 2020):
  - Hunters = 5%
  - Anglers = 9%
- 46 state wildlife commissions:
  - ~411 seats total
  - Hunters or anglers  $\geq$  70%



And that is the first and most obvious way wildlife governance today is not democratic. Most Americans are excluded from wildlife policy making, because they are not represented by the bodies that play a major role in setting wildlife policy in the U.S., namely state wildlife commissions.

46 states have commissions that set policy or advise their SWA. Almost all commissioners are appointed by governors. In most states no particular expertise is required to serve on a commission. A handful of states, 8 to be exact, reserve some or all of their commission seats for license buyers, but most don't. More than 90% of commission seats are open to hunters and nonhunters alike.

And yet, despite the door being open in theory for nonconsumptive users to have a seat at the table, they mostly don't. Hunters and anglers make up less than 20% of the American public, but occupy at least 70% of commission seats, and probably more, based on their online bios.

	Hunters	Anglers	Public
% Male <sup>1</sup>	89	68	48
% White <sup>1</sup>	99	84	78
% Hispanic <sup>1</sup>		10	17
% ≥ 45 years old <sup>1</sup>	57	58	52
% Traditionalists <sup>2</sup>	38	79	28

The issue is not whether a particular commissioner likes to hunt or fish. It's who they represent, statistically, and who they don't.

As you can see by this chart, hunters and anglers tend to be older, white men, according to the FWS (2016). They tend to be traditionalists in their value orientation, according to America's Wildlife Values Report, meaning they view wild animals mainly as resources intended for human use.

Another way of saying this is that commissions disproportionately exclude women, youth, people of color, and the growing number of Americans that are mutualists and do not see wild animals primarily as resources for human use. And I think most of us can agree that that is fundamentally undemocratic.

# Public Trust Principles

“Arguably, wildlife professionals could not fulfill their public trust responsibilities if they did not acknowledge public trust beneficiaries’ values, interests and ethical positions.”

–Dan Decker et al, 2019. “An Eye Towards Ethics.” *The Wildlife Professional*.

This lack of representation on commissions is in conflict with public trust principles. As you know, wildlife is a public trust, which means:

- Government is the trustee
- Trustees have a duty to manage the trust for all beneficiaries

If the beneficiaries include all people living and yet to be born, which many of us believe, then as trustees commissioners have a duty to try to understand, consider and represent the full range of public views on wildlife, as argued by Dan Decker and his coauthors in this excellent article in *The Wildlife Professional*.



- Outdated statutory mandates
- Statutory commission requirements

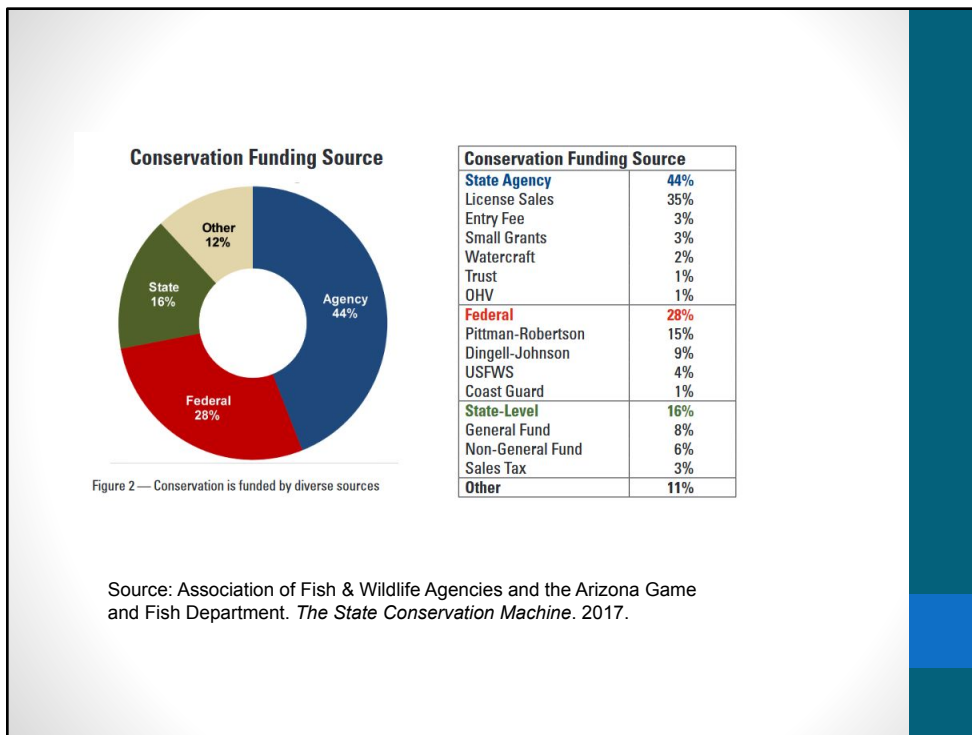
So why are commissions so unrepresentative?

One reason are outdated mandates in state statutes that set the context for wildlife management. NM's policy declaration, for example, was written more than a century ago and has never been changed. It talks about the need "to provide and maintain an adequate **supply** of game and fish." No mention of public trust, ecological or intrinsic values. It's very utilitarian, consumption oriented, reflecting the prevailing attitude towards wildlife when it was written in 1921. These old mandates need to be updated.

Another reason are the statutes in a handful of states that restrict who can serve on commissions, as I mentioned, and I think those need to be changed as well.

But if more than 90% of commission seats across all 50 states are open to non hunters and anglers, why do governors persist in appointing hunters and anglers to these positions?

Part of it I think is patronage. Governors of both parties see commission appointments as a good way to reward campaign donors who like to hunt or fish. Part of it is politics. I don't think most governors care enough about wildlife to get into fights with hunters and anglers over wildlife issues, so they just stack commissions with them.



But part of it based on the current funding model. How many of you agree with the statement that hunters and anglers **deserve** a greater role in wildlife matters because they contribute more financially to wildlife conservation than the general public.

This narrative gets repeated often.

But, is this true? Do hunters and anglers “pay” for wildlife conservation? That depends on how you define conservation, but that’s another discussion.

A more useful way to frame the question is, do hunters and anglers contribute more to agency revenues than non-license buyers? The answer is absolutely yes, but not as much as often stated.

License sales account for about 35% of agency revenues on average, according to this 2017 report by AFWA. That’s all from hunters, anglers and trappers. But of course, that means 65% is coming from other sources.

Hunter and anglers are often credited with another major source of agency funding, federal grants under PR and DJ, which account for a combined 24% of agency budgets on average. However, with the decline in hunting that has been going on for decades and the growth in gun sales over the past 20 years, most PR funds (about 75% of taxes on guns and ammo) are generated by nonhunters.

Similarly, a portion of DJ comes from the purchase of items not used for fishing, such as fuel for lawnmowers and jetskis.



Source of Agency Funds	% Agency Revenues (avg. across 50 states) <sup>[1]</sup>	% Contribution of Hunters & Anglers (est.)	% Contribution of General Public (est.)
License Fees	35	100	0
Federal Grants (PR)	15	27 <sup>[2][3]</sup>	73
Federal Grants (DJ)	9	67 <sup>[2][4]</sup>	33
Other	41	18 <sup>[5]</sup>	82
<b>Total %</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>48</b>

Source: Wildlife for All, 2022.

When you do all the math, as we did, it turns out hunters and anglers contribute slightly more than half of agency revenues—52% on average--and that's a generous estimate.

Still, it does confirm that hunters and anglers contribute more than their share to the revenues of state wildlife agencies. I don't think that is fair, by the way, but many hunters and anglers seem happy with the arrangement.

But the question has to be asked so what? Should that give them a greater voice in wildlife matters? I don't think so.

Going back to public trust principles, if you agree that wildlife is a public trust and the beneficiaries include all people whether they buy licenses or not, then the trustees, including wildlife commissioners, has a duty to consider the interests of all beneficiaries, regardless of how much they pay to manage the trust.

Think about other public goods such as libraries, schools, fire services and public lands. We don't make access to these goods contingent upon ability to pay, or give preferential access to those who pay more in taxes. Why should we do so in the case of wildlife?

I am often asked how should we fund wildlife conservation. My personal opinion is that funding should be as broad as possible and not based on any kind of "user pay" model like a backpack tax that is often proposed. We all benefit from

wildlife, whether we hunt, fish, like to watch wildlife or simply enjoy the life sustaining services provided by healthy ecosystems. In that sense, we are all “users” of wildlife and we should all contribute financially to preservation of the wildlife trust.

And i think that would lead to more democratic governance.



Now this might be controversial but here goes. Another undemocratic aspect of wildlife governance is the reluctance to consider the interests of individual animals and their family groups. This blind spot leads commissioners and managers to condone practices that many people find abhorrent but which might not have a significant impact on wildlife populations, such as killing contests.

This is a photo of 39 coyotes killed in a contest and dumped outside of Las Cruces, NM.

From someone outside the wildlife management establishment, the idea that populations and species are the only aggregations of wild animals that matter, is inherently a value decision that out of synch with the views of a growing segment of the public that views wild animals as sentient beings worthy of moral consideration, and the growing body of science that supports that viewpoint.

- Resource
- Harvest
- Management
- Anti-hunting
- Animal extremists
- Emotional
- Anti-science



#### Animal Extremists Allowed Seat at Scientific Conference

Posted on October 24, 2022

0 tweets 0 likes 0 shares

The Wildlife Society to allow Humane Society of United States, Center for Biological Diversity, Defenders of Wildlife, Wildlife For All and Others to Host Panel Discussion at National Convention Nov. 5-10

Finally, I wanted to call attention to the effect that language can have in discouraging or encouraging participation in wildlife governance.

Using words like “resource” to describe a living creature, or “harvest” meaning kill, or even “management” and its implication that wild animals always need to be controlled by humans reflect a value orientation that a growing segment of the public just doesn’t share.

I went to a SNR, and I know this is the language of the profession, and its not used deliberately to exclude, but it can send a subtle message that is not welcoming.

And then some language is intentionally used to silence and disenfranchise. Anyone who questions the current status quo in wildlife governance is guaranteed to be labeled “anti-hunting” extremists who reject science, as in this article about us by our friends at the Sportsmen’s Alliance. Besides being based on a lie, this type of inflammatory rhetoric is dangerous in our current political climate.

I’ll end by giving a shout out to TWS leadership for continuing to affirm in their public messaging that all viewpoints were welcome at this conference. And thank you for listening.

# Thank you



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