

Why Buy a License, Even If You Don't Hunt? The Role of Hunters in Wildlife Conservation

by Mark Lange, TPWD

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As an employee for the State of Texas, when I ask folks where they think the money comes from to pay our salaries, pay for the trucks we drive, and all the other equipment needed to do our jobs effectively. The answer is typically "I don't know" or "from the state". While "from the state" is obviously correct, that money must come from somewhere, and as a taxpayer, I am sure you understand that. However, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) is not funded solely by any "general everyday tax".

The TPWD mission statement is "To manage and conserve the natural and cultural resources of Texas and to provide hunting, fishing, and outdoor recreation opportunities for the use and enjoyment of present and future generations." From that statement, it should be understood that hunters, fisherman, as well as many forms of outdoor recreation are who we work directly for and what primarily funds TPWD.

Texas is not unique in how its state wildlife agency is funded. While there may be minor differences in the way other states fund their state wildlife agencies, the bulk of funding for them comes from the people they work for directly, and that is the people who get out and enjoy the outdoors and state resources. Outdoorsmen purchase annual permits/licenses that make up a considerable portion of the funding for wildlife agencies, but they also purchase equipment.

The Pittman Robertson Act (hunting equipment) was passed in 1937, and the Dingell-Johnson Act (fishing equipment) was passed in 1950. Those acts authorized a federal excise tax on guns, ammunition, archery equipment, fishing tackle, and other outdoor recreation equipment, and a portion of that money is directed back to the states annually by the federal government. These funds are often referred to as 'PR Funds' and are allocated to the states by two factors: 1) total land mass of the state (acres), and 2) number of hunting and fishing licenses sold. These funds are matched by the federal government at a 3:1 rate, so for approved PR projects, for every \$1 the state spends, the federal government matches \$3. One kicker, though, is that the states must spend the money upfront; they are then reimbursed.

It's important to understand that the money generated from all these sources goes into the conservation of wildlife and fisheries. Wildlife populations face ever-increasing challenges. While the amount of land will never increase, the demand for using it is constantly increasing. Land is used for a variety of purposes, but unfortunately, unless the landowner prioritizes wildlife habitat, the use of the land is often not supportive of healthy wildlife habitat.

The list of threats to wildlife habitat is lengthy. Still, the more common issues we see locally are fragmentation, urban development, the spread of invasive plants and animals, and conversion to various other practices (wind and solar farms, large-scale agriculture, etc.). TPWD staff spend much of their time educating private landowners on how to maximize wildlife benefits on their properties to meet their goals and ultimately add or sustain quality habitat to the landscape. With hunter dollars, many game species that are common now in many areas of the state have rebounded over decades from very low or extirpated populations, including but not limited to white-tailed deer, wild turkey, pronghorn, and desert bighorn sheep.

While most landowners have an interest in game species and much of TPWD staff time is spent on those species, it is important to understand that sportsman dollars also help restore habitat for non-game species. It is also important to realize that the habitats needed for many game species are the same habitats needed by many non-game species. The most iconic bird in the United States, the bald eagle, is one of the species that was brought back from near extinction, and that nationwide effort would not be possible without sportsman-backed funding.

At the federal level, money from your purchase of waterfowl stamps funds National Wildlife Refuges across the nation that are critical habitats for species, including a couple we see locally, which are whooping cranes and Attwater prairie chickens.

Hunting is part of rural Texas culture, and our beloved state is known worldwide for its hunting opportunities. With over a million licensed hunters annually, Texas leads the nation in both license sales and Pittman-Robertson funds received. While that sounds good, and we are certainly proud to hold that title, Texas's population is growing quickly, but the number of hunting licenses sold is not.

So, while you yourself may have little to no interest in the take of game species, understand how the investment in wildlife conservation is backed in large part by those who do. As the interest in outdoor recreation shifts with the interest of the public, consider ways you could be a part of the effort in contributing to the cause, even if it doesn't include the harvest of an animal. Visit a state park, take up target shooting, or buy a hunting/fishing license, even if you have no interest in using it. With access to hunting and fishing opportunities limited in a state that is largely privately owned and increasingly developed, it will become increasingly crucial that rural lands provide quality habitat for wildlife, and the only way to make that possible is to have the backing of sportsmen.

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