

Conservation: A Commission and Department Policy Guide

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Signed by: Larry Carpenter, Fish and Wildlife Commission Chair

The mandate of the Department of Fish and Wildlife is to preserve, protect and manage fish and wildlife. Further, state law is clear that these resources are property of the state. We believe that we, the commission, hold these resources in trust for both current and future residents. The task of managing fish and wildlife is becoming increasingly difficult with the amplified effects of climate change, increasing population and further fragmentation and loss of habitat. Understanding that this task includes the important goal of ensuring access to residents who wish to hunt, fish, recreate and simply enjoy this beautiful state if such actions do not impair the resource, we find it necessary to set out, in policy, the guidance provided by the recently adopted WDFW Strategic Plan.

For these reasons, the purpose of this policy is to establish an operational guide for the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission (Commission) and the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (Department) to best preserve and protect our state's diverse fish and wildlife resources by clarifying strategies for the Commission and Department's conservation decisions and actions.

The Commission recognizes that humankind is challenged by an accelerating loss of biodiversity, globally and locally, both in terms of the growing number of endangered species and the decreasing abundances of many animals and plants, even common ones. With biodiversity loss is the simultaneous decline of its ecological and social benefits, ranging from clean air and water, healthy soils and carbon storage to the many uses for sustainable natural resources and recreational opportunities. Protecting biodiversity is essential because in many ways it provides the foundation for our economy, health, prosperity and well-being.

Conservation at the Commission and Department

Our intent in this policy is to adopt an inclusive, up-to-date definition of conservation that can guide the Department's purpose, and work moving forward while incorporating the diverse, relevant values of Washingtonians. We fully expect our definition to flexibly evolve in time with new knowledge and experience.

Conservation: Science-informed actions to preserve the health and resiliency of natural environments, safeguard the intrinsic values of non-human nature, and provide equitable benefits to current and future generations of people and species. These actions include protecting and restoring air, soil, water, biological diversity, ecosystem processes and evolutionary potential.

Washington's Wildlife Trust and Public Engagement

Natural resources, including fish, shellfish and wildlife, in Washington are held in trust (wildlife trust) for current and future residents. The Commission and Department recognize managing the conservation of that trust is dependent on both sound science and applying shared values for the common good. To that end, public engagement with the Commission and Department is sought to understand the current values of Washington residents, which we believe is a key to our success in protecting Washington's natural heritage and its public wildlife trust for today and tomorrow. Thus, we commit to seek ample opportunities for public input regarding Commission and Department programs, policies and decisions. We take the role of Department Advisory Groups seriously and appreciate the importance of their contribution.

Guidelines for Commission and Department Conservation

Being mindful of our challenging environmental context, definition of conservation, and deep responsibility for safeguarding Washington's public wildlife trust, the Commission sets the following guiding principles and strategies for the Commission and Department:

1)Conservation first. Our top priority is the preservation of Washington's native fish, shellfish and wildlife for the benefit of all state residents and future generations. Successful conservation is the foundation for providing sustainable recreational and commercial opportunities, including hunting, fishing and wildlife recreation.

2)All species, habitats and ecosystems are important. Our work must strive to protect all native fish and wildlife, even common species, because we understand the value of preserving functional ecosystems. Species conservation is of primary importance, but so is protecting the abundances of our biota; each living individual provides ecological benefit toward ecosystem health.

3)Conservation complexity requires partnerships. Our work focuses on fish, shellfish and wildlife, but a systems approach and strong coordination with all state natural resource agencies and government jurisdictions is essential. Wildlife ignores state boundaries: we should look toward increasing collaborations with our neighboring states and Canada. We actively collaborate with our tribal co-managers to coordinate decisions for best management options. We value and seek to increase our joint work with academia, business and non-profit partners.

4)Take precautionary approaches in turbulent times. Climate change and rapid human development (habitat loss) when coupled with a relatively limited understanding of the working of ecosystems and mechanisms of long-term biodiversity health and resiliency -- and considering our deep responsibility for future generations -- suggests taking more precautionary approaches in coming months and years.

5) Bold, innovative leadership and solutions are necessary. Status quo wildlife management has not kept pace with a rapidly changing world. Increasing occurrence of fire, drought and warming water present new and serious challenges to our ability to achieve our mandate. Our environmental context (health) is degrading, and as a result, conservation priorities and values must shift. The Commission understands that innovative projects do not always work; we must be willing to fail on occasion to succeed. We need to strengthen our work in habitat/ecosystem protection, land connectivity, and expand our ability to restore degraded lands and waters, both private and public.

6) Modern conservation requires an aligned vision, strategy and funding level. A rapidly changing world that is threatening our living environment requires the Commission and Department to adapt. The challenge is to continue both our traditional work and expand our efforts to meet to many new conservation needs, required to meet our mandate to protect the full diversity of Washington's fish, shellfish and wildlife. The Commission and Department must strengthen our communication to the public, legislature and Governor to convince them of this needed additional support, needed partnerships and need for growth.

The foregoing conservation principles shall be incorporated by the Department of Fish and Wildlife in the development and approval of the budget, planning and decision-making processes.