



WDFW Strategic Initiative –

Caring for

Washington's wildlife lands

The much-treasured quality of life found in Washington state is strongly rooted in the natural beauty of its landscapes, habitats and open spaces. Its geography includes some of the most diverse ecosystems in North America, including estuaries and marine waters, lowland and mountain forests, grasslands, prairies and shrub steppe habitats.

Today, when the loss of natural habitat poses the greatest single threat to Washington's native fish and wildlife, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife lands play a critical role in maintaining the state's natural heritage.

This ecological diversity supports a remarkable variety of fish and wildlife species, which contribute to the economic, recreational and cultural life of the state.

However, these once plentiful and sustainable natural resources are in jeopardy. Population growth, residential and commercial development, water resource demands, the effects of climate change, land-use practices, and the spread of invasive species are disrupting vital habitat and damaging wildlife populations.

The stakes are high in the effort to preserve Washington state's unique biodiversity. As we tackle this task it is even more critical to effectively manage Washington's wildlife lands.



WDFW's dual mission and lands strategy

WDFW's wildlife land legacy began in 1939 when hunters, fishers and state biologists recognized that some lands should be permanently placed in public ownership for wildlife uses.

Today, the department owns and / or manages 900,000 acres of land divided into 32 designated wildlife areas across the state.

WDFW manages 686 sites that provide public access to many of the state's lakes, rivers and marine areas.

Under state law, Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) is charged with "preserving, protecting and perpetuating" the state's fish and wildlife species, while also "maximizing" outdoor recreational opportunities. This unique mandate allows WDFW to acquire and maintain a full diversity of landscapes that benefit fish and wildlife species and habitats, and provide recreational opportunities for Washington's citizens.

Currently Washington's wildlife lands make up just 1.4 percent of all the land in the state. This small set of lands is dedicated to the perpetual protection of habitats that support federal and state listed species. Maintained in their natural state, these lands also provide key ecological functions such as water delivery, groundwater replenishment and migratory passage for wildlife.

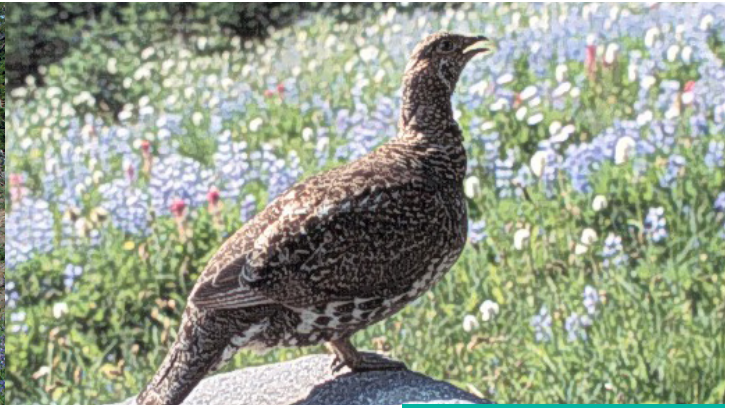
These wildlife lands are outdoor classrooms for our children and are places that will be available in perpetuity to hike, watch wildlife, hunt and fish. They are economically important to small rural communities and are responsible for more than 21,000 jobs. Each year, visitors to these areas spend over \$1.7 billion on wildlife watching activities alone.

Strategic approach: Under the guidance of Lands 20/20: A Vision for the Future, an evaluation tool developed with public input, WDFW uses a strategic approach in acquiring public lands. The department purchases lands that provide the highest benefit to fish, wildlife and the public, and only from willing sellers at fair market value.

In addition, when WDFW purchases a property, the affected county can choose to receive payments in lieu of property tax on that land. For 2008, WDFW paid \$467,136 to Washington counties plus an additional \$280,562 in assessments for activities such as weed control, storm water and lake management, and diking.

Land Management Advisory Council: Formed in 2002, the council involves citizens as advisors and co-stewards of the state's fish, wildlife and recreational resources. Up to 20 members, who serve four-year terms, meet quarterly with WDFW Lands Division managers and other staff to review management of WDFW wildlife areas, water access sites and private lands enrolled in cooperative programs.





Challenges

Habitat loss: WDFW has identified habitat loss as the most serious threat to Washington's native fish and wildlife resources. When natural habitats disappear, plants and wildlife are displaced or destroyed, which leads to the loss of biodiversity and eventual extinction.

For instance, currently, 26 fish and wildlife species are federally listed as threatened or endangered in Washington state and more than 30 species qualify for state listing as threatened or endangered.

Much of the habitat loss is due to human activity. With an expanding state population expected to double in the next 50 years, the state will see more land conversion, fragmentation and habitat destruction.

Land stewardship resources: Funding for land stewardship and maintenance have not kept pace with need. WDFW has received over \$100 million to acquire 100,000 acres of land over the last decade, but has not received funds to take care of this valuable habitat. These lands were acquired with Legislature-approved capital funds, which cannot be used for maintenance once the land is acquired. The lack of operating funds, along with the rising cost of staff and materials, is hindering WDFW's ability to fulfill its responsibilities for managing these public resources.

Maintaining a citizen-supported portfolio of public lands will sustain Washington's diverse fish and wildlife and their habitats into the next century.

— Jeff Koenings, WDFW Director

Progress on wildlife lands

Over the years, WDFW has worked to improve habitat conditions and ecosystem function on department lands, and at times has reintroduced or augmented wildlife populations when their numbers drop to critical levels. **Examples of recent successes:**

Spartina control: Spartina is an aggressive, non-native estuarine grass that acts as a barrier to foraging shorebirds and raises the intertidal elevation. Since 1995, WDFW has reduced the spartina infestation on department lands by over 90 percent. In Willapa Bay, one of the worst infestations in the state, WDFW's partnership with federal, state, county, tribal and local entities has reduced the area infested with spartina from 8,500 acres in 2003 to less than 1,000 acres in 2008.

Western pond turtles: In 1990, an estimated 80 endangered western pond turtles remained in Klickitat Pond on the Klickitat Wildlife Area, one of the last native habitats for the turtle. Since then, that population has increased to 355 turtles with the introduction of 294 turtles under the "Head Start" program. Partners in that effort include WDFW, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Oregon Zoo.

Sharp-tailed grouse: In the 1990s, the sharp-tailed grouse population on Scotch Creek Wildlife Area plummeted to fewer than 10 birds. To address this decline, 50 acres of riparian winter habitat were restored and 63 birds were introduced from out of state. By 2007, the count increased to 116 birds.

Correction of problem culverts: Since 2003, forty-nine culverts posing problems for fish passage have been corrected, opening up 73 miles of potential spawning and rearing habitat for adult and juvenile salmonids.

Purple loosestrife control: A biological control program funded by WDFW has proven effective in reducing purple loosestrife, another invasive wetland plant that overwhelms native plants to the detriment of wildlife. In the early 1990s, this effort reduced 20,000 acres of loosestrife to a small population of scattered plants on Winchester Wasteway in the Columbia Basin. Those biological controls remain active today.



Protecting habitats and species

Washington's wildlife lands are as diverse as the state's natural landscape, offering a variety of recreational opportunities 365 days a year. Noteworthy for their environmental benefits, these lands are also economically important for local communities.

More than four million people visit WDFW lands each year to enjoy the many recreational opportunities they provide, contributing to a \$2.5 billion wildlife-related industry in Washington.

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- WDFW is developing a **Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP)** for all of its state-owned and managed wildlife areas. The HCP will provide assurances that management, operations and recreational activities on state wildlife lands comply with provisions of the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) and thereby contribute to the conservation and recovery of federally listed species and their habitats. In accordance with WDFW's *Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation Strategy*, the plan will incorporate a landscape approach to managing at-risk species.

- WDFW established **public-use rules** for state wildlife areas and water access sites to reduce vandalism and other activities that damage habitat, disturb wildlife or prevent others from enjoying fish and wildlife recreational opportunities.

- An **Adopt-an-Access Program** engages volunteers in helping provide safe and clean boating and fishing at state access sites. WDFW provides tools and training to individuals and civic organizations to maintain local water access sites, greatly minimizing vandalism on department access areas.

- WDFW is one of 12 public and private entities that cooperate in **Coordinated Resource Management (CRM)** activities throughout Washington to improve communications, find solutions to problems and reduce conflicts when managing natural resources. This effort extends across ownerships at a landscape level and considers agricultural needs along with fish and wildlife. This benefits many species that require large landscapes to survive. WDFW currently participates in 17 CRM projects involving 73,000 acres of WDFW-managed lands.

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