

THIRD EDITION 2003 – 2004

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Contributions

Thanks very much to WHC member Jeremy Maestas for providing the cover article for this addition of the newsletter. Jeremy is a Wildlife Biologist with the USDA-NRCS in Provo, UT. Thanks also to Wendell Gilgert for his latest "Notes from the Chair" installment and to Chris Miller for keeping us up-to-date on "Meetings of Interest". This will be my last newsletter as I am resigning from the WHC Communications Director position following the SLC meeting. I appreciate everyone who has taken the time to contribute to the WHC newsletter effort, and I hope it has been and will be of benefit to the committee.

Chad

United we Stand, Subdivided we Fall... Apart

Jeremy Maestas

For those of you attending SRM's Annual Conference in Salt Lake, I welcome you to my new home state. Utah is unique from

other states in the Rocky Mountain region in a few ways. For example, in recent geologic times much of the western half of our state was covered by Pleistocene Lake Bonneville. This ancient lake has now subsided, leaving behind vast areas of salt-desert scrub, playas, sagebrush, and its remnant, the Great Salt Lake.

Culturally, Utah has a rich human history with long-term habitation by Native American tribes such as the Utes and Paiutes. Within the last 150 years, of course, Latter Day Saints have come from around the world to build their new Zion. In other respects, though, Utah is much like its western neighbors. Rapid population

growth and subsequent development are forever changing its character and ecology.



Utah is the second driest state in the nation, but our number one crop is quickly becoming Kentucky bluegrass. Private lands in the region are increasingly being converted from rural areas to urban, suburban, and ex-urban areas with dire consequences for native species and functioning ecosystems. *Urbanization* is the term used to describe the subdivi-

sion of land into smaller parcels for commercial or residential development, and it encompasses high-density urban areas and associated suburbs, as well as low-density ex-urban developments that occur outside the city limits.

Urbanization homogenizes wildlife and plant communities, such that the

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biota you find in Salt Lake City and its suburbs looks much like that you would find in the sprawling cities of Denver, Phoenix, and Reno. Research consistently shows that ubiquitous species, such as starlings and raccoons, proliferate with urbanization while native and more specialized fauna exist mainly in rural, undeveloped areas.

Wildlife appear to respond predictably along the development gradient from rural to urban. Properly managed rural landscapes contain the assemblage of species native to the area. Species richness, though, is usually highest at intermediate levels of development and lower at either end of the development spectrum.

However, higher species richness is not always better because the species that start showing up with development are often non-native or generalist species that compete with and prey on the local fauna. Black-billed magpies, for example, do quite well in subdivisions but they are an aggressive nest predator and may reduce the nest-

ing success of other species. At the urban end of the gradient, species richness is low and characterized by ubiquitous animals like pigeons and house mice. In other words, as lands are subdivided we lose our unique natural heritage and begin to look like Anytown, USA.

Recently, the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food, Utah Beef Council, and Utah Cattlemen's Association launched a campaign to remind residents of the value of undeveloped lands. The slogan on billboards read, "Utah Farmers and Ranchers Still Provide Habitat for Wildlife and Livestock." For the most part, these folks were right. Ranches often provide habitat for the native species that define our natural heritage and, at the very least, they provide the opportunity for restoration.

Perhaps even more important is that keeping land from being subdivided allows the opportunity for ecological processes to remain functional. Water and nutrient cycles are processes that are severely disrupted with development. Roads and rooftops in subdivisions decrease infiltration and increase runoff during storm events. Fires are prohibited at all costs – even human lives – to

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save houses built along the wildland-urban interface. Suppressing these fires decreases nutrient cycling, builds up fuel loads, and prepares the area for a catastrophic fire that may take centuries to recover from.

As natural resource stewards, perhaps our most immediate challenge is this: to convey the ecological value of keeping lands intact to the rest of society. These ecological services become easier to demonstrate with each natural catastrophe, unfortunately. Extended drought has brought the development issue to the forefront in a number of ways. For one, it has caused water shortages and forced municipalities to rethink the idea of planting bluegrass lawns in the desert. Drought has also created prime conditions for wildfires. In recent summers, communities throughout the West have learned the hard way where subdivisions should not be placed.

Preserving the unique natural heritage of our western landscapes is an important function of open lands but it is a difficult concept to sell in a region with seemingly endless public land. Therefore, we must find a way to package all of these ecological services and present the true cost to society of rampant urban sprawl.

NOTES FROM THE CHAIR

WENDELL GILLGERT

Happy New Year, to one and all! Now that we have, hopefully, taken a little rest and relaxation over the holidays, it's time to ramp up and

charge into the new year. What better way to build a successful foundation for a productive year than to actively participate in your Society's Annual Conference?

If you have not had an opportunity to peruse the final program, as appears on the SRM web page, I encourage you to do so. You will find that the Program Committee has done an outstanding job of organizing, what is sure to be, one of the best ever annual conferences.

Two of the three Technical Field Tours are focused on Fish and Wildlife Resources. They include trips to Antelope Island and the Bear River National Wildlife Refuge. I am not certain if those trips are full, but if you have not visited those areas, both are well worth the trip, even on a cold January day!

During the Plenary Session, we will be greeted by Utah Governor Olene Walker, will continue our education with Fred Provenza and Plant-Herbivore interactions, and will conclude the session with Thad Box's reflections on 25 years of Change in the Rangeland discipline. (In case you have not read the most recent edition of Rangelands, Thad Box's article that outlines skills desired for freshman 1972 Range Students at Utah State University is very enlightening.)

Later, Directors for the Bureau of Land Management, USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service, US Forest Service, USDA-Agricultural Research Service, US Fish and Wildlife Service, National Park Service, and Utah Department of Wildlife are scheduled to provide insight into future direction of those agencies.

Further study of the program reveals that there is at least one fish and wildlife presentation in no less than 20 of the poster and symposium sessions. Of those sessions, the Wildlife Habitat Committee (WHC) is represented with presentations by a minimum of a dozen-committee members! No

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wonder the WHC is viewed as one of the most active and vibrant committees in the Society! Hats off to you all for your participation!

One additional note, WHC has scheduled an Ad Hoc meeting on Monday to address concerns related to making livestock watering troughs more wildlife friendly. Representatives from Bat Conservation International, Partners in Flight, several federal agencies, The Nature Conservancy, the Wildlife Management Institute, and Powder River Livestock Handling Equipment, have been invited to explore how watering troughs and tanks can be equipped to be less of a hazard to wildlife and provide cleaner drinking water for livestock. More information will be available at the committee meeting on Sunday related to that meeting.

As a reminder, the WHC committee meeting will be held on Sunday afternoon, January 25th from 1-5p.m. on the first floor, in the IDAHO ROOM at the Little America Hotel.

I will look forward to seeing you there!

MEETINGS OF INTEREST

CHRIS MILLER

Feb. 26-29

7th Prairie Conservation and Endangered
Species Conference
Calgary, AB, Canada
www.PCESC.ca

March 3-5

7th National Mitigation & Conservation
Banking Conference: Practice, Policy &
New Emerging Markets
New Orleans, LA
www.bankingconference.com
703-548-5473

March 16-20

69th North American Wildlife and Natural
Resources Conference
Doubletree Hotel
Spokane, WA
www.wildlifemanagementinstitute.org

May 1-4

21st Biennial Pronghorn Workshop
Radisson Hotel
Bismarck, ND
www.discovernd.com/gnf
701-328-6637