

Appendix J

Wildlife Recreation and Tourism Considerations

The conservation of Minnesota's wildlife is a long-term comprehensive process of both land and people management that results in enhanced diversity and abundance of the state's wildlife. This can provide ecological, economic, and recreational benefits within the state. In many cases the recreational wildlife benefits are considered primarily in terms of traditional license-holding stakeholders like hunters.

However, the sociological and recreational landscape is changing. Recent trends in outdoor recreation are shifting the dynamics among traditional stakeholders and are creating a significant new public that builds its recreation around the activities of enjoying wildlife through wildlife watching, bird watching, outdoor photography, nature study, bird feeding, and general wildlife observation.

Any conservation strategy of the future will require significant financial investment to preserve Minnesota wildlife and their respective habitats, and the support for that investment must come from a new alliance of stakeholders who represent both traditional license-holders and wildlife watchers who share the commitment to preserve wildlife for its intrinsic ecological benefits and for future generations to enjoy.

A comprehensive wildlife conservation strategy must involve understanding some of the basic facts about current trends in wildlife recreation that are essential if habitat-based conservation initiatives are to succeed financially and successfully compete with all the other potential uses of public dollars.

National Trends

Nationwide, in 2001 there were about 66.1 million people who spent about \$38.4 billion per year to enjoy wildlife. This generated over 1,027,000 jobs, \$3.3 billion in federal income tax revenue, \$712 million in state income tax, and \$2.1 billion in state sales tax revenue. There are several significant factors related to this phenomenon. First, healthy, diverse wildlife populations contribute to the creation of wildlife tourism opportunities in small rural communities as well as in metropolitan areas. Wildlife tourism provides memorable and healthy outdoor experiences, diversifies the economic bases of the communities involved, and can help extend the length of the tourism season in favorable destinations by providing business opportunities in the so-called "shoulder seasons" when tourism business is slack. Good wildlife experiences also solidify the support base from the public to endorse and fund additional wildlife conservation and habitat initiatives.

One of the important features of this "wildlife watching" segment of the public is that it is popular among a broad range of age groups who specifically enjoy or pursue birds for viewing or photography. Surveys in 2001 estimated that there were 46 million birders in the US and that 18 million of those birders traveled away from their home to see and enjoy birds. The US average for participation rates in wildlife watching is 22%. These people tend to be affluent and well educated, and there is good participation by both men and women. Among

all wildlife watchers, 46 percent are men and 54 percent are women (2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, USFWS).

Minnesota Trends

In Minnesota, the 2001 data revealed that there were 2,155,000 people who participated in wildlife watching. This included 171,000 residents from other states who came to Minnesota for their wildlife watching experience. The other 1,984,000 participants were from Minnesota.

Expenditures for wildlife-watching experiences in 2001 were \$531,100,000. This industry created 12,730 jobs in the state. Those jobs resulted in people earning \$296,300,000 in income and that income resulted in the payment of \$10,900,000 in state income tax revenue and \$32,700,000 in federal income tax revenue. The sales taxes paid for the equipment and products used for enjoying wildlife totaled \$21,000,000. Nonresidents who came to Minnesota to enjoy the wildlife spent \$57,700,000 in 2001.

If you consider that component of wildlife watching comprised of “birdwatching,” the statistics are still impressive. The average participation rate for birding/bird watching nationally is 22 %, but the rate for Minnesota is 5th highest in the nation, at 36%. Wildlife watchers are almost evenly split along gender lines, with 50.7% being men and 49.3% being women (2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, USFWS).

Comparisons with Hunting and Fishing Statistics

There are some interesting comparisons that can be made between hunters/anglers and wildlife watchers. First of all, these activities are not mutually exclusive. Many of the individuals participating in hunting and fishing also are active wildlife watchers.

The number of Minnesota hunters in 2001 was estimated at 597,000. There were an estimated 1,624,000 anglers. The hunters spent a total of \$482,614,000, for an average expense of \$783 per hunter per year, while the anglers spent \$1,284,522,000, for an average expense of \$790. The number of wildlife-watching participants was 2,155,000 in 2001. They spent a total of \$531,057,000. Wildlife watchers spent about \$246 per person, or about one-third the amount for hunters. The total expenditure by wildlife watchers exceeded the expenditures of hunters for the first time in the history of this survey. All three of these activities contribute significantly to the Minnesota economy (2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation, USFWS).

Future opportunities for Stakeholder Cooperation and Conservation

Together, these constituencies should be looked upon as a significant group of stakeholders and voters who care about Minnesota's natural resources and who can play a significant role in crafting visionary legislation that will help preserve and manage natural resources into the future and provide a rich diversity of outdoor experiences for all of those stakeholders.

The national legislation that originally started as "Teaming with Wildlife," evolved into the Conservation and Restoration Act (CARA) effort, and then into the State Wildlife Grants program, has the potential to help blend the interests and support for conservation among a broader constituency than ever before possible. It brings in wildlife watchers who do not hunt, wildlife tourism outfitters, chambers of commerce, convention and visitor's bureaus, the hospitality industry, and the optics industry. They all benefit from a diverse landscape with many opportunities for hunting, fishing, as well as wildlife watching and nature tourism.

For that reason, it is worthwhile to maintain a connection between basic wildlife conservation efforts carried out through SWG grants and through the wildlife-tourism-related publics who stand to benefit through the preservation and management of species in greatest conservation need.

One way to maintain these connections is to carry out an assessment of the wildlife tourism potential within a state so that tourism related businesses can enhance wildlife tourism activities by building upon the existing base of public lands and SGCN species which have potential for wildlife tourism experiences.

Reason for Concern: Declining Participation Rates

From 1991 to 2001, all of the U.S. and Minnesota participation rates fell for fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching. Wildlife watching is broken into two types: first is away from home viewing (over one mile from home), and second is total wildlife watching, which includes away from home plus near-home activity.

The U.S. and Minnesota participation declines for fishing and away-from-home wildlife watching are close in size, while the Minnesota hunting decline is smaller than the national average. The Minnesota decline in total wildlife watching participants is smaller than the U.S. decline, and it is not significantly different than zero (Minnesota DNR Report, July 2005). These declining trends are troubling. It will be important to watch these declines closely to better understand why participation rates are falling and what can be done to turn this trend around.

The Grackle Junction Model for Wildlife Tourism Resource Assessments

In 2002, the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources created a curriculum entitled "The Saga of Grackle Junction" to create a process for evaluating tourism potential in an area through a ten-step resource assessment process and to develop a plan that provides for

adequate networking of interested publics and development and enhancement of wildlife tourism opportunities. The first training class for implementation of this process was given at the 2002 national Watchable Wildlife conference in St. Paul, MN.

The ten-step resource assessment process has been applied to all 25 of Minnesota's ecological subsections and scored on a fifty-point scale. The information will be summarized on the DNR CWCS Website for all 25 subsections in the near future. This information can be used by the respective tourism entities within each subsection to promote wildlife tourism—and hopefully create a case for preservation and management of the unique and rare wildlife resources that create the backbone of wildlife recreation industry for each respective subsection.

Minnesota's Million Dollar Owl: The Great Gray Owl A Grackle Junction Case Study in 2005

Minnesota is home to one of the nation's most sought-after birding treasures: the great gray Owl. This imposing owl made national headlines in the fall and winter of 2004-2005 when thousands of these owls moved from Canada into Minnesota's Northwoods and nearly one million dollars were spent by birders to see the owl. The local communities of Meadowlands, Cotton, Duluth, and Cloquet had perhaps known of the reputation of the local "Sax-Zim Bog" as a nationally publicized birding destination for boreal birds, but there were never enough visitors to capture their imagination from a tourism promotion standpoint.

The owl invasion of 2004-2005 is an excellent example of the potential wildlife watching has for tourism in Minnesota. It was enough to capture the imagination of even casual nature lovers with the prospect of seeing more than 10 or 20 great gray owls, northern hawk-owls, and even boreal owls with a simple trip north along the North Shore of Lake Superior or into the bog country near Cotton and Meadowlands. Literally thousands of people came throughout the winter- from throughout the United States and even other countries.

The great gray owl is good at what it does—it catches and eats voles. It hunts by perching on a tree branch or roadside sign. It listens for the sound of rodents moving in the ground litter or under the snow. The owl will drop from its perch and glide silently towards its prey. Life is good for great gray owls, as long as there are lots of voles. Unfortunately, Mother Nature puts both the owls and the voles on a roller coaster ride of population booms and busts that follow a frequency of about ten years.

In 2004, populations of red-backed Voles in Canadian forests crashed. Great gray owls nesting failed in their nesting efforts and began a nomadic movement (not a true migration) into northern Minnesota. They discovered a mother lode of rodents living in roadside rights-of-way: lots of Meadow Voles. There were perhaps more than 10,000 great gray owls in northeastern Minnesota last winter.

About two years ago, the Department of Natural Resources teamed up with avid birders from Duluth and the Minnesota Ornithologists' Union, county foresters, DNR wildlife managers, and local citizens to form a Sax-Zim working group to help deal with the infrastructure of

accommodating nature tourism in this sparsely settled area. It was the Grackle Junction model in action.

On July 29, 2005, a town meeting was held in the tiny community of Meadowlands and over 70 people showed up to learn about nature tourism and how to provide the goods and services for owl enthusiasts in future years. There were local mayors, county commissioners, county foresters, birds, local citizens, Minnesota Ornithologists' Union members, Duluth Audubon Club members, and biologists from the Department of Natural Resources. The Grackle Junction model for developing wildlife tourism was reaching critical mass and many improvements are anticipated for helping visitors in the future enjoy a lifetime experience as they come to view the area's "million dollar owls."