



75 *Years*
IT'S YOUR NATURE

The Greatest Conservation Story Never Told

75th Anniversary: Commemorating the PR and DJ acts

By Mike Schlegel, Pope & Young Club Conservation Chairman

HUNTING

is a way of life

for those who understand

that wildlife is here now

because hunters past have cared.

Those who argue against hunting—

The unknowing who hunt unwisely—

Those that do not nurture habitat—

All are guilty, if we lose this gift of wildlife.

The hunting and fishing opportunities we enjoy today did not just happen. Today's hunters and anglers, as well as wildlife enthusiasts, are deeply indebted to the foresight of legislators 75 years ago. This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act. The Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act was passed 13 years later. These two pieces of legislation established the hunters and anglers as the true conservationists in America. Collectively these two acts have generated over \$12 billion dollars dedicated to fish and wildlife since their authorization.

A fellow by the name of Carl Shoemaker, who had been a lawyer in Ohio and then a newspaper publisher in Oregon, is really the "father" of what became the Pittman-Robertson law. He wrote the original bill and then went out and convinced legislators to sponsor and support it. He had served as the head of the Oregon Fish & Game Commission and later moved to Washington, D.C. to work in the field.

At the urging of organized sportsmen, state wildlife agencies, the firearms and the ammunition industries, Congress extended the life of an existing 10 percent tax on ammunition and firearms used for sport hunting, and earmarked the proceeds to be distributed to the states for wildlife restoration. The Pittman-Robertson (or "P-R") Act was named after its principal sponsors, Senator Key Pittman of Nevada, and Representative A. Willis Robertson of Virginia. The measure was signed into law by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on September 2, 1937.

Congressman John D. Dingell of Michigan introduced a bill in 1969 adding the excise tax to handguns, ammunition components. President Nixon signed the handgun tax in 1970. While this was going on, Congressman George Goodling of Pennsylvania introduced legislation to include an 11 percent federal excise tax on archery equipment. Sen. Frank Moss-Utah introduced an identical bill in the Senate. Consequently, the archery gear tax amendment was signed by President Nixon during the closing hours of the 92nd

Congress in October 1972. Although approved in 1972 this amendment did not go into effect until 1975.

Currently the P-R Act authorizes an 11 percent federal excise tax on sporting arms, ammunition and archery equipment, and a 10 percent tax on handguns. Each time a hunter purchases one of these items, the retail price includes the federal excise tax. This tax, supported and paid by the manufacturers, is available to state fish and wildlife agencies through grants-in-aid administered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The grant money is dispersed to the states based on a formula. Basically the dispersal of funds shall be adjusted equitably so that no state shall receive less than one-half of 1 per centum nor more than 5 per centum of the total amount apportioned.

Additionally no money collected under the P-R Act may be dispersed to any state until the state has passed laws for the conservation of wildlife, which includes a prohibition against the diversion of license fees paid by hunters for any other purpose than the administration of said state's fish and game department. The Act also provides for grants for hunter education programs and a mechanism for a multi-state conservation grant program. Numerous non-game species enjoy benefits of the Pittman-Robertson Act as it does not restrict use of funds to game species, but instead allows their use for any species of wild bird or mammal. States are also required to provide at least a 25 percent share of the project cost from non-federal funds. The money collected under the P-R Act cannot, however, be used for enforcement programs. As a result, hunters and shooting sports enthusiasts directly fund wildlife management and restoration - making this one of the first and most successful "user-pay / user-benefit" programs.

Although Pittman-Robertson is financed wholly by firearms users and archery enthusiasts, its benefits cover a much larger number of people who never hunt but do enjoy such wildlife pastimes as bird watching, nature photography, painting and sketching, and a wide variety of other outdoor pursuits. Almost all the lands purchased with P-R money are managed both for wildlife production and for other public uses.

Please join your Club in commemorating this historic event. Share your copy of the Journal. Tell the "Greatest Conservation Story Never Told" to your uninformed hunting friends, plus your non hunting friends and relatives. Spread the word that HUNTERS are the CONSERVATIONISTS! Explain that hunters and anglers, through these "user pay" programs, are responsible for the diverse fish and wildlife populations and habitats we enjoy today.



Representative Absalom Willis Robertson



President Franklin D. Roosevelt



Senator Key Pittman

***“Reforms are attained by evolution, not by prescription, of ideas. Real reforms are always home-made.”
Aldo Leopold, 1930***

It was a close call. So close it makes you catch your breath. By 1862, 32 million Americans had hopped aboard a runaway train barreling toward a natural resources disaster—and most of them didn’t even know it. While they were busy creating the richest and most powerful nation in the world, they were also laying waste to its very foundation: the 4 million square miles of some of the richest fish and wildlife habitat on Earth.

By the time the first Transcontinental railway system broke open the West in 1869, vast herds of 100 million bison and 40 million pronghorn antelope pounding across the plains had vanished. An estimated 60 million beavers had been reduced to 100,000. Thirty to 40 million passenger pigeons, so dense in numbers that reports said it took literally hours for the skies to clear during their migrations, had disappeared. Waterfowl populations had plummeted. Swamps had been drained, prime habitat converted to agriculture, and market hunting continued unabated. Women in America and in Europe were parading the street in hats festooned with the feathers of egrets, herons, and 40 varieties of native birds. They would soon be wearing the entire bodies of birds on their heads. We were plucking America bare.

Nevertheless, most Americans at the time were not parading the streets with placards demanding conservation reform from their legislatures. Rather, they were toasting their good fortune built on the incalculable wealth of their land’s rich soil, their free access to the silver and gold veins to be mined just under America’s skin, and the seemingly limitless forests thrown over the country’s mountains and lowlands like a cloak hiding a treasure of wildlife. America was just too vast, too fabulously abundant a landscape to succumb to the pinprick of mere mortals—or so we believed. We couldn’t have been more wrong.

It was a matter of taking too much with too little knowledge of the consequences—and far too little restraint. From New York to California, from North Dakota to Florida, we all were to blame. But as history has proved so often, it would be the incremental steps of the few, committed for a lifetime, to wake the conservation consciousness of a slumbering nation. And it would take 75 years—nearly a century—to secure the restoration and future of America’s

fish and wildlife.

Awakening America to the need for conservation was a painfully slow process, with a monumental learning curve. We simply did not understand the intricate workings of the natural systems we were destroying. We did not understand predator/prey relationships, or habitat or range requirements. We did not understand the interrelatedness of all living things.

Nevertheless, by the late 1800s and early 1900s, a handful of unorthodox and strong-minded free-thinkers emerged with the political will and commitment to save what they recognized as America’s greatest treasure. They were, by and large, America’s sportsmen. In the first half of the 20th century, near total responsibility for natural resources fell directly on their shoulders. That’s because state hunting and fishing license revenue provided the one stable funding source to protect, restore, and manage fish and wildlife resources. With the creation of state fish and game agencies in the early 20th century, fish and wildlife were given a legislative voice—and a bank account. But it was not enough. Underfunded, understaffed, and prone to political interference, these fledgling wildlife agencies more often than not confronted frustration and failure rather than success. The science of fish and wildlife management simply did not exist, and funds to better understand the principles of fish and wildlife restoration were non-existent. Little money was available to acquire land or pursue informed re-stocking schemes. Law enforcement was a slipshod ineffective affair, often the work of ill-equipped, political appointees.

Nevertheless, like it or not, fish and game agencies were the sole stewards and watchdogs of their state’s natural resources, operating in an unrestricted free-for-all, where horrific fish kills from industrial runoff were commonplace and protective environmental legislation an affront to a free-market economy. To top it off, agencies’ precious hunting and fishing license revenues were perpetually threatened by cash-strapped state legislatures for diversion to other projects. As fish and wildlife populations continued their nosedive, there seemed very little those who cared most deeply about our country’s fish and wildlife legacy could do about it. In 1929, a weary A. Willis Robertson, then director of Virginia’s state



fish and game agency, wrote to his good friend Billy Reed: “I have been rushed to death all of the summer and owing to the unsettled political conditions, or the inactivity of our wardens, or a growing consciousness of the value of wild life, I have gotten more kicks recently concerning various and sundry matters than at any time during the past three years and it has kept me busy trying to keep the various complainers and criticizers satisfied.

“Anyone who has an idea that a public job is a bed of roses should just lie on it for a few months and he will so find that the thorns are more prominent than the perfume.”

But such men did not give up. All across the country, men like Robertson dug in, put their heads down, and pushed forward. It took decades of persistence, of patience, and the certain cultivated wiliness of born sportsmen, because the problem of developing an effective program to restore our failing fish and wildlife populations was not only ecologically complex, it was politically complicated as well. Unlike our European counterparts, the United States had embraced a bold philosophy concerning its wildlife resources. We claimed our wildlife heritage as a public treasure, not a private one. Our unique North American Model of Wildlife Conservation designated the country’s wildlife legacy a public responsibility owned by all, not by the few. But...if America’s wildlife belonged to the people, and not to the landowners on whose land it might be found, then under whose jurisdiction did fish and wildlife governance fall? Was it a state or federal responsibility? And who then should foot the bill?

It was during the years of 1900 to 1937 that such questions were ironed out and the most effective program of fish and wildlife conservation in the world emerged. When Teddy Roosevelt was ushered into the White House in 1901, federal legislation got a Presidential jumpstart. Emergency protective measures were launched, designed to secure great swathes of land as refuges for beleaguered wildlife. By 1913, the federal government had claimed custody of the migratory birds of the nation, establishing waterfowl hunting seasons in every state, and soon established protec-

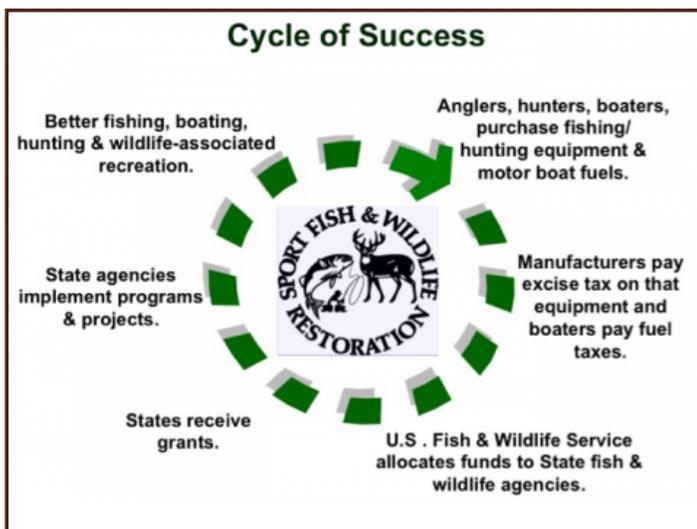


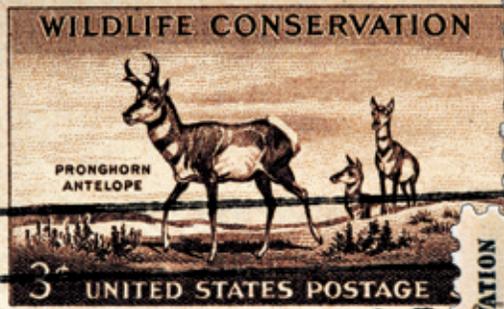
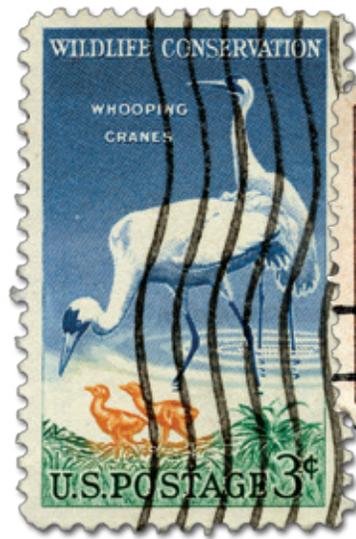
John Dingell and his hunting and fishing buddy Carl “Skeet” Reidel.

tive international treaties. State fish and game agencies assumed responsibility for virtually all non-migratory fish and wildlife.

Nevertheless, the essential funding mechanisms necessary to fund long-term wildlife restoration programs on both state and federal levels was lacking. There simply wasn’t enough money available to implement what people were beginning to realize would be a long-term and monumental task involving close state and federal cooperation and organizational partnerships. It took more than thirty years of coalition building, endless proposals and defeated legislation, bitter disappointment and deteriorating land use before an unusual opportunity arose, and the conditions miraculously right to grab it.

In 1936, a 10% federal excise tax on sporting guns and ammunition existed on the books. Congress at the time was in the process of abolishing such excise taxes, but sportsmen groups and other conservationists saw instead an opportunity to propose a diversion rather than a repeal of the tax. The idea was to divert the proceeds from the tax to the states for wildlife restoration projects to be matched on a 3:1 basis with state hunting and fishing license revenue. The ammunition companies supported the proposal, and Carl Shoemaker, former chief of the Oregon Department of Fish and Game, drafted the legislation. Shoemaker enlisted the support of Senator Key Pittman of Nevada to introduce the bill in the Senate. On the House side, Shoemaker approached Congressman A. Willis Robertson, who had moved to Congress from the Virginia Game Department four years earlier. When Shoemaker sat down with Robertson and handed him the bill, Robertson penciled in 29 words: “...and which shall include a prohibition against the diversion of license fees paid by hunters for any other purpose than the administration of said State fish and game department.” With those words, Robertson secured the future of our fish and wildlife legacy. Robertson’s work in Virginia had taught him how capricious state





legislatures could be with its income, and he wanted to make sure that the science of fish and wildlife manage-

ment was taken out of the political arena. If a state wanted federal money to help them restore their wildlife, they had to guarantee their fish and game department's right to use every dime of hunting and fishing license revenue to support it. Period.

The Pittman-Robertson (P-R) Federal Aid to Wildlife Restoration Act sailed through Congress. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the bill into law on September 2, 1937 turning a deaf ear to protests from his budget office insisting that earmarking funds from excise taxes were not in the country's best interest. Today, on its 75th anniversary, the program has proved without a doubt that it has been in the very best of its country's interest. Its success has been nothing short of astounding.

From the outset, approved P-R projects included the purchase of land for wildlife restoration purposes; improvement of land for wildlife; and research projects directed at solving wildlife restoration problems. Alabama used P-R funds to re-establish white-tailed deer on nearly 30 million acres of range, and wild turkey on 20 million acres. Alaska used P-R money to learn about the habitat requirements, reproductive biology, and interrelationships between species of Dall sheep, grizzly bear, moose, caribou and wolves. Connecticut acquired nearly 10,000 acres of land, including key wetlands along Long Island Sound and the Connecticut River. Kansas purchased 57,000 acres of wildlife habitat. Maine's first P-R project live-trapped and banded waterfowl in order to learn more about migration routes, age and sex ratios, and the numbers of local nesting species.

And that was just the beginning. The list goes on and on. The P-R program birthed the science of scientific wildlife management in this country. The program has always focused on "can-do" projects, like making white-tailed deer restoration possible by funding research on how to trap and transport deer to repopulate their historic range. And it has made partnering with sportsmen's groups like the National Wild Turkey Federation and Ducks Unlimited a priority; partnerships which provide matching funds and support for research projects which embody the North American Model's philosophy of "public responsibility" for wildlife. Since 1937, more than \$6.4 billion has been invested in wildlife restoration through the P-R program. It has turned into one of the most successful federal-state-conservationist-sportsmen partnerships in history.

With the passage of the P-R Act in 1937, sportsmen and other conservationists had built up a head of steam they were bound and

determined to keep using. A companion bill to establish a stable and secure mechanism to fund the restoration of America's fisheries was the next goal. In California, Congressman Frank H. Buck introduced legislation in 1939 designed along the lines of the P-R Act to impose a 10% manufacturers' excise tax on fishing equipment and lures used for recreational fishing. Unfortunately, the bill died in committee. Undaunted, Congressman Buck introduced a similar bill two years later, but World War II halted its progress. Six years later in 1947, Congressman John Dingell, Sr. of Michigan





revived the fisheries restoration bill, but it failed again to pass. Senator Edwin Johnson of Colorado introduced an identical bill the following year. Still, it would not be until 1950 that the United States finally had a Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act that would be the genesis of a reliable funding source that has generated more than \$5.4 billion for fisheries research, habitat restoration, recreational boating access, construction of fish hatcheries, and aquatic education.

Through excise taxes and license revenues, sportsmen have contributed more than \$12 billion to conservation through the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Programs (WSFR), and annually provide more than 80% of the funding for most state fish and wildlife agencies.

For 75 years, WSFR has been the engine driving the restoration and management of our fish and wildlife resources. It has been justly called the most successful conservation management program in the world. America's hunters, shooters, anglers and boater should be proud that they have held the program on their shoulders for 75 years. But WSFR is not the exclusive club of the sporting community. As Aldo Leopold, one of our country's greatest conservationists and crafters of the P-R Act reminds us: "One cannot divorce esthetics from utility, quality from quantity, present from future, either in deciding what is done to or for soil, or in educating the persons delegated to do it. All land-uses and land-users are interdependent, and the forces which connect them follow channels still largely unknown."

So, buy a hunting license even if you don't hunt. Buy a fishing license not because you fish, but as an affirmation of what is worth saving in this great country of ours. WSFR is an American legacy, fought for by sportsmen, supported by sportsmen, but open to all.

And if you are hunter, shooter, angler or boater? Well, A. Willis Robertson would pipe up just about now that you ought to stop everything and march yourself right out into the great outdoors. In 1932, he wrote "...I feel that the high tension at which the average man has been living is wrecking entirely too many nervous systems. Hunting and fishing is the best nerve tonic I know, and I believe that a greater opportunity for the average citizen to engage in this type of outdoor recreation would greatly promote both the health and happiness of our people."

Join us and you will see why "it's your nature" to help preserve our nation's wildlife resources.

