

Adaptive Wildlife Management: Merging the Then with the Now

By VDGIF Acting Director Mike Bise

The history of hunting in Virginia is as old as the history of Virginia herself and can clearly be traced back to the first English settlers in the New World. Turns out these newcomers were only doing what the native Virginians had done for thousands of years, that is, use the bounty of Virginia's wildlife for food, shelter, tools, clothes, and indeed, recreation. These early hunters, both native and come-here, valued wildlife and the opportunities it provided. It was only hundreds of year later, after the face of Virginia had changed dramatically, that this long accepted practice of using wildlife for personal benefit changed.

That change occurred in 1916, with the creation of what is now the Department of Game and Inland Fisheries. The unrestricted harvest of wildlife and the market hunting of certain species had driven the populations of some animals to a dangerously low level. Deer and wild turkey, those species so common and important when the English arrived, and so abundant today, were virtually non-existent in some areas of the Commonwealth.

With this new department came new laws governing the way we interact with wildlife, particularly on the consumptive use side of the equation, resulting in a new way to look at hunting. The key to the success of this new way of managing wildlife was the end user - the hunter, angler, and trapper. It just so happened that the value of wildlife so apparent to the early hunters was shared just as fervently by the hunters in the "new" Virginia. These folks willingly bought licenses, and a bit later paid excise taxes on firearms, ammunition and other similar gear. The revenue generated by this new way of doing business provided the desperately needed funds to begin the intense wildlife management practices that have brought the results we value and enjoy in Virginia.

Anyone who appreciates the wildlife abundance we have today, whether your interest is hunting, fishing, trapping, wildlife watching in all its forms, or simply knowing that the "wild" Virginia is alive and well, owes a big thank you to the proud tradition of hunting in Virginia, and to those passionate, dedicated folks who continue this tradition.

But as we know they will, things continue to change. In 2006, the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries hosted the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA) Conference. SEAFWA is made up of all the states in the southeastern U.S. and is one of the longest serving such organizations of its kind. The focus of this group is to seek common solutions to common problems related to all the variables of managing wildlife resources. The theme of the SEAFWA conference was "Managing Wildlife in the Next New World." The one recognition by all the participants in the conference was that the faces of all our states have changed. Consequently, the way we manage wildlife, and the activities so vital to this management, such as hunting,

fishing and trapping, need to be in tune with this new world and must be preserved. Now, just as in 1916, we need to carefully balance the new Virginia and all the issues and concerns that Virginians, now some seven and a half million people, have regarding wildlife management.

The Department of Game and Inland Fisheries is once again at the forefront of these new challenges. Loss of critical habitat, environmental degradation, human/wildlife conflicts, and a decline in areas available to hunt, fish, trap and otherwise enjoy wildlife are some of the apparent issues in the new Virginia that must be addressed.

Less obvious, but equally critical, are issues we as an agency deal with every day. We all remember the concerns in recent years related to the potential for a pandemic flu outbreak. Recall that the overriding concern was the mobility of people and how that contributes to the spreading of disease. Translate that concern to wildlife and you get an idea of one of the major challenges facing wildlife professionals today. Never in the history of the profession of wildlife management has the concern been so great related to well-intended and not so well-intended people moving wildlife.

The interstate trade in wildlife is significant, driven by any number of markets for the animals. This Department has taken a hard line on the illegal possession and movement of wildlife, specifically due to the disease concerns. This concern was virtually unheard of in the "old" Virginia. So far, as indicated by frequent monitoring, none of the wildlife diseases so problematic in other states have been found in Virginia. We certainly will continue to do all we can to keep it that way.

Along these same proactive lines, the Department has launched a study regarding the use of hounds in certain types of hunting in Virginia. Hunting with hounds is a long and time-honored tradition in many states, but probably nowhere any stronger than Virginia. Our interest, as the Agency charged with matters related to hunting, is to protect this heritage and the role it plays in managing wildlife. As with all hunters, hunters who work with hounds are passionate about wildlife, about hunting in general and in particular about their love for and use of dogs in pursuing their sport. No one recognizes and appreciates that more than we at the Department.

Issues related to hunting with hounds that we are hearing about today were largely unheard of in a more rural Virginia. Our approach in this study is to involve stakeholders and, because the face of Virginia has changed, the list of stakeholders is larger and more diverse than it may have been in 1916. Hunters who use dogs, other hunters, private landowners, corporate landowners, rural homeowners, local government officials, law enforcement, wildlife managers and of course many other groups who enjoy wildlife are all important to this process. By participation in local focus groups, all these stakeholders can have the input we feel is so important to getting the full perspective.

It is worth noting that this is the same approach we took in developing long-term management plans for deer and bear. In a simplified description of this process, we asked stakeholders at the local level what they thought the management philosophy should be

regarding regional populations of these species. The results of that process are now paying dividends in the management decisions we make.

In managing Virginia's wildlife for all to enjoy, we must be diligent in staying on top of threats to these invaluable resources. We must also be in tune with what our citizens want from these resources and with their expectations of those who use these resources. Some folks are uncomfortable with the hunting with hounds study process but clearly the information gained in the study will prove invaluable. Just as hunting not only survived but thrived after the significant changes in the early 1900s, we feel it can and will continue to do so as we face today's challenges.

This is not about abandoning our heritage related to wildlife resources and hunting. Rather, it is all about protecting them in an ever changing environment.