

A PLAN IN NAME ONLY

By James H. Phillips

How should we judge the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the agency that under the guise of “The North American Waterfowl Management Plan” purports to guide our stewardship of ducks?

The question arises in the wake of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Dale Hall’s statement, on the occasion of the plan’s 20th birthday, that the joint American-Canadian-Mexican effort represents “a historic turning point in wildlife conservation – the creation of the world’s first continental conservation strategy.”

Hall noted the North American plan established duck population and habitat conservation goals, and that over the past two decades fostered the spending of “\$4.5 billion to conserve 15.7 million acres of waterfowl habitat.”

It is a “model ... for wildlife conservation,” he concluded.

Hall’s remarks suggest the service once again is peddling disingenuous claptrap, seeking to lull the waterfowling community into believing that all is well, when in fact the opposite is true, as the following analysis reveals.

The North American Waterfowl Management Plan came into being in 1986 and represented an effort by the service to halt the annual bickering that erupted each year during the regulations-setting process. It is largely a political document.

Its stated goals were two-fold: (1) establish breeding and fall-flight population objectives, and (2) acquire waterfowl habitat in key areas throughout the continent.

The population objectives were based on the average breeding populations and fall-flights of the 1970s, a decade when good nesting conditions and relatively abundant breeding populations produced a fall-flight of a size sufficient not only to satisfy the visual expectations of most hunters, but to allow for relatively liberal gunning seasons and generous bag limits, reducing regulatory squabbles to a minimum.

The plan might have evolved into a precedent-setting effort had the service followed its design. It might have produced meaningful management, as the following highly simplified analysis illustrates.

The mallard breeding population during the 1970s averaged 8.2 million. The age-ratio (juveniles per adults in the hunters’ bag) during the same decade averaged 1.24 juvenile mallards per adult. To keep the math simple for illustrative purposes, we can

estimate the fall flight averaged 18.4 million mallards. (8.2 million breeders x [1 + 1.24] = 18.4 million.)

The 1990s revealed a decline in juvenile productivity. Hunters bagged only .98 juvenile mallards per adult. This produced, under our aforementioned formula, a fall flight totaling only 16.3 million mallards, 11 percent below the 1970s average.

Thus, to produce a comparable fall flight, as envisioned in the plan, the service might have sought to increase the average breeding population to 9.3 million to offset the loss in juvenile productivity. But nothing of the sort occurred.

Instead, the service in the 1990s embraced a maximize-the-kill protocol known as Adaptive Harvest Management. Its ideal average mallard breeding population is 5.3 million, a total that represents the third lowest mallard breeding population ever recorded. An average breeding population of this size is calculated to produce the highest sustainable kill over the long term.

Currently, the service is seeking “to hold the population, on average, about halfway between 5.3 and 8.2 million.” This works out to 6.8 million or 18 percent below the original goal. Under our simplified formula, when the decline in productivity is taken into account, this produces a fall-flight 27 percent smaller than during the 1970s.

This is occurring with no amendment to the numeric goals of original plan. The plan’s stated breeding population goals and fall-flight objectives are ignored while proponents of Adaptive Harvest (including the service) impose ultra-liberal regulations designed to shoot-down the mallard breeding population to a level that once raised alarms in the waterfowling community. Hall makes no mention of this in his effusive praise of the plan. Does this suggest the plan, to use Hall’s words, “is a model ... for wildlife conservation?”

Then there is the matter of habitat. Hall lauds the expenditure of “\$4.5 billion to conserve 15.7 million acres of waterfowl habitat” to achieve the plan’s goals. These expenditures result from the plan’s money-raising, money-spending progeny – the North American Wetlands Conservation Act and regional joint ventures.

In a brilliant piece of journalism, Bob Marshall, the outdoor editor of the New Orleans Times-Picayune, recently exposed this claim as highly deceptive, a product of abysmally sloppy accounting practices and disingenuous language, plus dubious benefit to waterfowl production. (We have reprinted Marshall’s must-read column. See [Debacle](#), July 5, 2006.)

All of this suggests the need for an investigation of past and current practices, and a complete revamping of waterfowl management, an overhauling that would require a forthright accounting from not only the service, but affiliated nonprofit and governmental institutions.

As it stands today, the North American Waterfowl Management Plan is a plan in name only, a toothless sham that only serves to provide plausible deniability for those

who would sabotage the efforts of committed, conservation-minded waterfowlers to preserve an abundance of ducks far into the future.

If we take care of the ducks, the ducks will take care of us.
