

The Perfect Storm

- Bob Carmichael

Those who remember the movie of this title will recall how a terrible convergence of weather factors brought tragedy to a New England fishing town. The fishermen who were lost at sea didn't see it coming, and died because of that.

A "perfect storm" similar to the one that did in the fishermen is now brewing, and wildlife management lies squarely in its path. This storm is not about weather, but about economics, climate, and demographics...and money. Things are beginning to happen that will land a terrible flurry of punches on wildlife services. ...unlike anything we have ever seen. Wildlife uses and programs as we know them will, quite simply, not survive this storm...unless the custodian of our precious wildlife - governments - can be persuaded to completely re-think the way in which their conservation obligations are funded.

Our system of government is based on "general revenue", where there is no "dedicated funding". The government of the day decides on priorities for investment. Overall, it has worked very well. So well that it has become entrenched as an article of faith with many politicians and senior civil servants, and tampering with it is heresy of the highest order. However, the general revenue system took shape long ago, when a much different set of circumstances pertained. There was no medicare, no universal access to education, no social safety net. We now expect much more of government, and there is never enough tax money to go around. And as I learned repeatedly when working for the Wildlife Branch, wildlife is near the bottom of the priority list. In other provinces, and here with fish programs, it has been recognized that new circumstances require new funding arrangements if programs are to be maintained, and a strict "no exceptions" rule to the system no longer applies. So why is wildlife in Manitoba languishing in yesterday country and facing drastic cuts in service?

It's already very bad, and it's about to get a whole lot worse. Consider the following:

The Baby Boom generation is about to enter older age, and calls on the medicare system, which already consumes over 50% of government revenues, are going to skyrocket. Then

there is climate change. Challenges to wildlife posed by global warming are of a magnitude we have scarcely begun to understand. The costs of dealing with climate-induced human catastrophe, let alone think about managing wildlife, will be huge. The war, alas, will not end any time soon. Massive deficits from the recession must be covered. There is balanced budget legislation. And more bad news: as our population ages, the ratio of people paying into the system to those drawing from it is falling significantly. All of these factors will come to bear at the same time, creating an awful synergy. A very nasty flock of chickens is coming home to roost.

Public wildlife agencies, both provincial and federal, are going to be decimated. Program budgets, already slashed beyond the point of effectiveness, will continue to decline, some to nothing. Critical staff will be sent packing.

Especially huge cuts loom for hunting programs. Words like "green", "ecology", "preserve" and "endangered" hold sway in much of the upper political circle, and hunting doesn't fit in. Hunters just don't swing a big bat at Treasury Board. However, support for hunting programs depends on Treasury Board, which continues to cut, cut, cut. *Without scientific and administrative support, your access to hunting will change dramatically, and that support is being taken away.* Hunting opportunities we now take for granted just won't be there.

There is a way to meet this challenge and preserve our hunting heritage. The answer lies in raising *new* money that is to be devoted to wildlife management. I am not saying we should cut needed medical, education, or social programs to pay for hunting. We shouldn't. And we don't have to. We can raise our own money, and make more for government in the process. It has been proven that the wildlife community will gladly pay for the services it desires. There are many means available to raise funds, such as conservation licence plates, high-ticket combination hunts, and merchandising agreements. It doesn't take a lot for an effective provincial wildlife program... a commitment by the government to spend a minimum of 3 million dollars a year on wildlife (it now spends about that) augmented by another two to three million raised through the sale

of products, is enough to deliver a sound conservation and management program in all areas - hunting, trapping, habitat, problem wildlife, and species at risk. *And*, where hunting is concerned, government already takes in more than it spends on hunting in licence fees alone...never mind the tax revenues generated. We can make even more money for the province.....if it will let us.

Government could be persuaded that wildlife makes a profit for Manitoba in many ways, and that grabbing every wildlife dollar that comes in for other purposes is not wise. An agreement can be struck with private conservation organizations to raise and manage the funds we need, and perhaps even participate in delivering the provincial program. *But*, for this to happen, politicians must be convinced that we are real, we are not going away, and they ignore us at their peril.

At the same time as we raise new money for wildlife, we have to be sure that what we have is being invested as productively as possible. We should request that all wildlife programs be thoroughly audited for what they produce relative to investment. Cutbacks there have indeed been, but there is still room in some areas to re-direct money productively.

If we can - and if we care, we had better - forge an alliance of private wildlife groups in this province and approach folks in government with our facts in place and with determination - and the courtesy an elected government deserves - if we can convince them that we are for real and have a plan that will work - we can turn this looming disaster around, and much better days - for the province and the entire wildlife community - will lie ahead. If we continue to just trust Treasury Board, get ready for a ride into depths we haven't imagined, and get ready to put your shotguns away. It's that serious. Or, more simply, stick to Treasury Board funding and we lose. Create a new wildlife funding system, in tune with the realities of today and tomorrow, and we win. In both cases, big time.

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