

The Board not only has authority over hunting, fishing, and trapping rules, but is also responsible for, “... *the conservation of fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont and to protect the integrity, vitality and diversity of all natural systems...*”

Thank you, Chairman Bray, and members of the Committee.

I am Rob Mullen of West Bolton. I am the Chair of the Vermont Wildlife Coalition.

The big wildlife controversy shortly after I started deer hunting in the 1960s was over doe permits. My grandfather in Proctor was disgusted with the Fish and Game Department biologists sullyng the time-honored tradition of pursuing the “mighty stag.” My father taught high school biology in Jericho and Burlington, and worked to convince Grandpa that the overpopulated deer herd of the time could only be brought closer to the carrying capacity of our environment by killing does. On a statewide basis, the Department did the same with the wider hunting community, continued the program and the deer herd is at a healthier population level now.

With my UVM biology degree, I moved away for work, but I returned almost 20 years later, in time for another wildlife controversy. Around 1996, the Department proposed rules against the wanton waste of wildlife. Who could object to that? Well, “sportsmen’s” organizations did, and the Department’s proposal was torpedoed by something called the Fish and Wildlife *Board*. It was the first time that I had heard of it, and I was surprised to learn that this board was composed entirely of sportsmen making their own rules for the utilization of wildlife, a public trust, not the trained professionals in the Department, nor the legislature which has the Constitutional duty to do so.

It would be one thing for a representative group of citizens with a focused interest in wildlife to advise the Department, but this is not good governance. Conflict of interest and a focus on one special interest group instead of “...the people of Vermont...” is baked in. That has been evidenced in the past few years several times and was on full display in the “new and improved” furbearer rule mandated by Act 159 that led to the head-on collision between the Board and the Legislature in LCAR when the Legislature tried to exercise its Constitutional duty.

The Department crafted this flawed rule, but one must wonder how much less work it would take, and how much better the rule might have been if the Department pros didn’t have to tailor it to pass muster with the Board and then spend time, fruitlessly in this case, trying to convince them to at least compromise with the General Assembly. As it was, when the Department suggested that the Board cede two of LCAR’s four objections, the Board refused, voting to enact the entire rule despite its failure to follow the law. In doing so, the Board has thumbed its nose at the General Assembly and by extension, many if not most Vermonters.

This is an unnecessary mess created by a special interest group that has a disproportionate influence on wildlife policy. This latest and most obvious display of intransigence is a clear sign of the need to update our wildlife governance. The expertise of hunters, trappers, and anglers is obviously valuable in crafting hunting, trapping, and fishing rules. However, their input should be in an advisory capacity only and the Board’s membership should more inclusively represent the “...people of Vermont...” that the Board is supposed to serve.

Finally, in many of these discussions, on the FWD website and even the websites of wildlife advocacy groups, the value of wildlife is typically summarized within the context of how we use

wildlife species, not how we need them. Consumptive use, sport, and "wildlife watching." It is as though we only value wildlife to kill it and (sometimes) eat it or watch it. To help dispel that simplistic misconception, I recommend UVM researcher Joe Roman's book, "Eat, Poop, Die" in which he explains the essential environmental services that wildlife provides which make and keep our world livable. Valuing wildlife for its flavor, aesthetics, and entertainment value is absurdly missing the big picture.

Thank you,

Rob Mullen

West Bolton, Vermont