



February 10, 2016

House Fish, Wildlife, and Water Resources Committee
Vermont State House
115 State Street
Montpelier, VT 05633-5301

Dear House Fish, Wildlife, and Water Resources Committee:

Recently, you received testimony on the matter of representation on the state Fish and Wildlife Board. As a Vermonter with deep roots in the state, as well as a senior scientist for the Center for Biological Diversity, a national organization dedicated to the protection of all wildlife, I would like to contribute my perspective on this important issue.

The protection and conservation of wildlife is a high priority for Vermonters, but for many, the ways in which they utilize and enjoy this natural heritage has changed dramatically from the past. Catching, killing, eating, and making furs and trophies of wild animals are no longer the predominant means by which most Vermonters interact with wildlife. Observing, tracking, and simply appreciating the abundant presence of native animals and plants are benefits enjoyed by a wide range of residents. It is time that the makeup of the Fish and Wildlife Board better reflect the diversity of interests Vermonters have concerning wildlife.

According to statute, Vermont's fish and wildlife are held in trust by the State for the benefit of the "citizens of Vermont."¹ Further, the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Board is the agency charged with carrying out the purposes of this law.² There is no language in the law qualifying which subset of citizens is to benefit from the State's trustee role and the work of the Board. Thus, fish and wildlife are to be regulated, protected, managed, and conserved for the benefit of *all* citizens.

Unfortunately, the process by which Board members are selected does not encourage a more representative body. While involvement with hunting, angling, or trapping is not statutorily required for appointment to the Board, the assumption that Board members should be active sportsmen or sportswomen is a longstanding tradition. The result is disenfranchisement of a large number of citizens whose views are not represented. This is particularly true as participation in hunting has declined or stayed relatively flat in the last few decades, while the popularity of non-consumptive uses of wildlife continues to grow.³

The Board needs to be in better step with the times, not only because this ensures sound policy decisions, but also because the future of the Fish and Wildlife Department depends increasingly on the support of non-consumptive users. Vermonters who do not hunt, fish, or trap have indicated their strong willingness to pay for wildlife and habitat protection,⁴ including through their participation in voluntary programs such as the conservation license plate and habitat

¹ 10 V.S.A. § 4081(a)(1)

² 10 V.S.A. § 4081(b)

³ U.S. Department of the Interior, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. 2011 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation.

⁴ Responsive Management. 2015. *Opinions On Fish, Wildlife, And Land Use Among Vermont Residents, Hunters, And Anglers*. A report conducted for the Vermont Fish and Wildlife Department. 130 pp.

stamp. More revenue streams await investigation. However, as more Vermonters are tapped to pay for the important work of the Fish and Wildlife Department, they expect to have their viewpoints represented in the decision-making process. The Department and all Vermonters will benefit from a stronger, more diverse, and more representative Fish and Wildlife Board.

The controversial issue of coyote hunting derbies is an example of how a more diverse Board with a broader perspective on wildlife issues could make a significant difference. Competitive killing contests are morally repugnant to the vast majority of citizens, and killing for prizes is counter to the principles of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation. No scientifically based wildlife management policy would support indiscriminate slaughter of any species. In fact, the science on coyote hunting is clear that heavy persecution of these animals only increases the propagation of young coyotes, which can lead to an increase in conflicts with humans, such as increased coyote predation on livestock. Although the derbies have mostly gone underground in recent years in order to avoid public outcry, they still happen. Despite numerous attempts by concerned citizens to stop these egregious events, appeals to the Fish and Wildlife Board and the Department have gone unanswered. This is a black mark on the state's "green" reputation and a Department that is supposed to be guided by science. We suggest that in this instance and in a host of other issues, a greater diversity of viewpoints on the Fish and Wildlife Board would help the state to adopt wildlife policies more in keeping with 21st century sensibilities and scientific knowledge.

To this end, we suggest the House Fish and Wildlife Committee explore strategies for widening the range of potential Board members. One possibility is the creation of a more formalized application process, including the establishment of a list of desirable qualifications. For example, useful background for Board members could include the following as alternatives to hunting and fishing experience: knowledge of ecology, conservation biology, ornithology, mammalogy, fisheries, human dimensions of wildlife, or wildlife law; experience as a wildlife photographer, wildlife rehabilitator, veterinarian, environmental educator, or conservation commission member.

In addition, the Committee could consider amending the law to specify that hunting, fishing, or trapping experience is *not* required for Board membership, but a demonstrated commitment to wildlife conservation, management, or protection is.

There are likely other procedural and legal modifications to the Board selection process the Committee could examine and recommend. On behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity and its members, I welcome an ongoing discussion about how the Board can evolve to better serve all the people of the state and to better safeguard our precious wildlife heritage.

Thank you for your attention to this vital matter.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mollie Matteson". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long, sweeping tail on the final letter.

Mollie Matteson, M.S.
Senior Scientist