

Testimony to House Committee on Natural Resources, Fish & Wildlife

Michael Haas, Member, Vermont Wildlife Coalition Board of Advisors
March 25, 2021

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you on a matter that dwells at the heart of conservation and management of all things wild in Vermont.

My name is Michael Haas and I live outside of Lowell Village in Orleans County. I am a member the Vermont Wildlife Coalition's Board of Advisors. The Vermont Wildlife Coalition is a group of Vermonters who value wildlife and who are interested in how wildlife is managed by state government. The Coalition supports most forms of hunting, but is opposed, on ethical grounds, to most forms of trapping and the use of dogs in hunting bear.

I am a retired clinical veterinarian and together with my wife own a 140 acre property through which Hazen Notch Brook flows to meet the Missisquoi River along our eastern boundary. It is comprised of woodlands and meadows, and waterways and supports diverse wildlife species. We manage the property to promote flourishing native flora and fauna. Our joy is derived from watching these creatures thrive and to study their ecology and behaviors. Toward that aim we have delineated 25 acres of meadow for the establishment of breeding grassland birds and I'm delighted to report that bobolinks and savannah sparrows have moved in, along with bluebirds and tree swallows who raise their broods in the many houses that we provide.

A family of beavers set up shop where the brook meets the river. Although we delight in watching them we were concerned with their effect on the landscape, particularly in the removal of trees along the waterways and subsequent invasion by Japanese knotweed, which is already a problem. Through our county forester we were able to engage a Fish & Wildlife biologist who is planning riparian restoration though massive tree planting. There are prospects of using the site as as study area for local students.

I present this background to outline our interests and enjoyment of wildlife in ways that will endure long after I am gone. In my younger days, along with two older brothers, I was a hunter but I lost interest in the sport in favor of

observation and study as I pursued an academic path through college and a masters degree in zoology. My hunting foundation instilled respect and even admiration for those who pursue game for sustenance following ethical practices. Our Vermont experience has resulted in appreciation for Vermont's wildlife governance organizations and independent entities such as Vermont Coverts. The ease in accessing this type of expertise and resources has astounded me since moving here.

There are many stakeholders in Vermont's wildlife. I appear today to argue for a voice for those of us whose interest in nature is commensurate with those practices I just outlined. Regarding certain species, such as coyote, fox, otter, mink, deer, moose, and the fish in our waters, my voice is suppressed by an organizational structure that gives inordinate preference to those who engage with these same species through consumptive endeavors.

Any argument that that organizational structure should be beholden to consumptive users because they fund the majority of the Department's budget should be rejected out of hand. Not only is the factual assumption underlying such an argument incorrect—the majority of the Department's funding comes from sources other than declining license sales--it is not a matter of "he or she who funds the Department controls the policy." The Vermont constitution provides that wildlife is held in trust for all Vermonters.

The Fish and Wildlife Board is comprised of members solely from the community of consumptives. Not only that, the board, as it now stands, has inordinate power to make rules and regulations. This structure is a relic of outdated wildlife management and it fundamentally limits Vermont's populace, including our children.

Nature Deficit Disorder, as described by Richard Louv in his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, is real. Lack of nature interaction has a deleterious effect on the mental well-being and development of children. It behooves our cultural health to engage our young Vermonters, indeed young Americans, more in nature. An unevolved perspective attempts to do so through limited means – hunting/trapping. An assessment of data shows that today's youth has limited interest in those recreations, while many more encounter wildlife though hiking,

photography, and the fascination that arises from ecological study. It is, in fact, possible to embrace both consumptive and mutualist interests and some do.

Unfortunately, change in cultural norms and preferences has given rise to distrust – many non-consumptives lament what they see as unethical taking by consumptives in ways that glorify blood sport and inflict unnecessary suffering in their quarry. Consumptives, on the other hand, view proposals such as I present today as a precarious step along a slippery slope that will lead to outlawing or severely restricting hunting practices.

This divide must be breached, and it can be through honest discussion and active listening. A Fish & Wildlife Board that represents all Vermonters is a means to that end. This board should be advisory and must reflect the perspectives of all Vermont's citizens. Our citizenry and the vitality of our wild resources would be best served by placing regulatory power in the Fish & Wildlife Department itself, based on scientific scrutiny by the department's scientists and sound socioeconomic principles.

The model of wildlife governance using public trust thinking and good governance is not original to me. Those better versed than I, such as Daniel Decker, at Cornell have already outlined these principles based on their assessment of developments in their field over decades. The message is straightforward: Wildlife governance must be adaptable and responsive to citizens' current needs and interests, incorporating multiple and diverse perspectives. This is not the case with the Fish & Wildlife Board as it now stands.

In sum, the Vermont Wildlife Coalition asks that the committee amend H.167 to make the Fish & Wildlife Board more inclusive and limit its purview to an advisory capacity. If desired we would be happy to submit proposed bill language in that regard.