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Developing Sustainable Management Policy for the National Elk Refuge, Wyoming

TIM W. CLARK, DENISE CASEY, AND ANDERS HALVERSON, VOLUME EDITORS

JANE COPPOCK, BULLETIN SERIES EDITOR



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Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative

P. O. Box 2705

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Bulletin Series Editor **Jane Coppock**

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NORTHERN ROCKIES CONSERVATION COOPERATIVE


Box 2705
JACKSON, WYOMING 83001
307-733-6856
FAX: 307-733-6574
E-MAIL: pcurlee@wyoming.com

Welcome to Readers

The board, staff and supporters of the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative, including an anonymous donor foundation, helped bring this publication to life. We did so as an act of faith in open dialogue and as an act of hope for a better relationship between people and the elk, birds, wolves, grasses, soil and water found on and around the National Elk Refuge in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. As of this writing, in the year 2000, there is an enormous opportunity before us to make things better. But improvements only come with sustained effort by a critical mass of people.

Our faith has already been rewarded by the high quality of work put forth by the authors of this volume and by the facts of its publication and distribution to you. Our hope will be rewarded fully if this bulletin is of material value to you.

Thank you for taking time to consider the ideas and information included in this title, and more, thank you for putting this good material to work.



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Preface

Garry Brewer and Tim Clark have worked cooperatively on improving natural resource management policy in several contexts—endangered species, ecosystem management, and professional problem solving. In early 1998 Garry Brewer, then director of the University of Michigan’s Erb Environmental Management Institute, approached Tim Clark with the idea of pooling resources to address a management problem in Jackson Hole, Wyoming. In turn, Tim—professor at the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies and president of the Northern Rockies Conservation Cooperative in Jackson—approached the manager of the National Elk Refuge, Barry Reiswig, about the possibility of focusing attention on this world-renowned refuge, which supports thousands of elk each winter and many other species year round. In recent years, questions have been raised about what management policies and practices are appropriate for the refuge, how they should be carried out, by whom, and for whose benefit.

The timing for this appraisal was opportune. First, rising levels of conflict in recent years in the region highlighted a need to resolve a number of substantive and procedural problems concerning management of the refuge and the elk. Second, the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act, passed by Congress in 1997, calls for comprehensive planning on all wildlife refuges. Third, not only have there been changing uses and values of the refuge in recent decades, but the public has been demanding more involvement in management of natural resources. Fourth, the Department of the Interior decided in 1999 to undertake a multi-year, multi-million-dollar environmental impact statement on management of the National Elk Refuge. Finally, new leaders are emerging who recognize the need and opportunity for change.

Overall, these conditions made our collective effort to examine management policy on the refuge highly relevant and useful. It created an opportunity to take stock of past and present policies and to learn how society might manage its resources more sustainably, make more effective policy decisions, and strengthen democratic fundamentals in the future.

Thus, with Barry Reiswig’s enthusiastic cooperation and funding from Garry Brewer’s Erb Institute, Tim Clark invited four Yale FES students to spend the summer of 1998 in Jackson to answer four primary questions. Their findings are published as four chapters in the present volume. Anders Halverson looked at the question “*How should the elk be managed on the National Elk Refuge?*” Christina Cromley asked “*What are the lessons from managing bison on the refuge over the last fifteen years?*” Noah Matson investigated the question “*What is the status of biodiversity on the National Elk Refuge, how can it be monitored, and how can it best be sustainably managed?*” Finally, Brad Kahn took on the question “*What are the uses and values of the National Elk Refuge?*” Additional chapters include Christina Cromley’s history of elk movements in western Wyoming and reprints of two articles by Tim Clark, one describing the lack of a “commons institution” in the elk situation and one providing

a regional context for understanding elk management, both of which suggest improvements.

The next step was to use the four student papers as the springboard for a “civic dialogue” held on March 23, 1999, at the National Museum of Wildlife Art. Diverse citizens and agency personnel contributed to this day-long conversation about elk and refuge management issues and how to achieve consensus. This program and some of the participants’ reactions to it are described in the introductory chapter of this bulletin.

The final step was to approach Jane Coppock, the Editor of the Bulletin Series of the Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, to see if the School would accept our work for publication in the Bulletin Series. Especially because the Series aims to support publication of material that speaks directly to on-the-ground conservation issues, the volume was eagerly accepted and has received financial as well as editorial support from the School.

Where to go from here?

In late 1999 and early 2000 initial meetings were held among several government agencies for preparation of the environmental impact statement for the National Elk Refuge. This bulletin is being offered now at the outset of the EIS and other planning efforts for several reasons. First, with this volume we invite all those who are interested in the future of the refuge to participate in a constructive civic process. Second, these reports can serve as an information base on which citizens and officials can deliberate about how best to manage the elk and their habitat into the new century. Finally, the bulletin suggests some practical, problem-solving ideas for finding our community’s common interests. We hope that readers with diverse perspectives and needs will use this volume extensively in their deliberations, decisions, and actions. We hope, too, that all participants will come to this important dialogue with open minds, an interest in learning, and a vision of the legacy we want to leave our children.

The Editors