

# Wetlands and Wildlife

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The conservationist has often been called an idealist and dreamer, primarily because his proposals as regards land-use are often nonprofit. Utilization of wet lands is a theme which again compromises his normal, practical attitude toward the land.

If any land is to be utilized the questions that arise immediately are by whom; for whom; how; and for what purpose? On these points a conflict of ideas occurs which can often scuttle the most commendable program. Were each of us in the same occupation, had the same size bankbook, and were members of the same social or professional organizations, our attitudes toward a problem of mutual concern might also be similar. The main concern would be a press for prompt action.

Wetland to be best utilized for wildlife must first maintain its status as *wetland*. This same acreage to be utilized for agriculture must first be destroyed as wetland and converted into plowland or pasture.

A LANDOWNER destroys his wetlands by some form of drainage *only* when he can afford to do so. Our present-day economy with high costs for labor, raw materials, manufactured goods and farm commodities makes it financially feasible to encroach on the submarginal wetlands. Advances in power equipment and machinery have facilitated this encroachment. The cost to drain wetland soils often is as much or more than the market price of the land itself.

Virtually all marsh drainage operations operate against wildlife habitat. It is equally undeniable however that much of this drainage will put another dollar in the landowner's pocket.

In January and February, 1955 the extension service of an agricultural college in the Midwest published two cir-

culars which contained the following statements: (1) "Both the farmer and the housewife are aware of huge governmental holdings of dairy products . . ."; Here surplus rears its ugly head. (2) "The 1955 crops of wheat, corn and other basics are to be supported at between 82-1/2 and 90 per cent of parity and the 1956 crops between 75 and 90 per cent." Here too a head is reared, but its beauty is a matter of opinion.

IT BECOMES exceedingly difficult for persons interested in *all* of our national resources to understand that the government through price supports in effect pays the farmer to produce more surpluses and in so doing "forces" him to drain and plow submarginal areas (or irrigate others). An additional paradox is that even this drainage is supported in part by the same government that pays the parity and holds the surplus.

This may be an oversimplification of the situation that is actually a maze of economic stresses and strains.

The Roman philosopher Lucius Seneca, who died in 65 A.D., once said, "It is not the man who has too little but the man who craves more that is poor." If I may paraphrase this apt statement, it should read today "It is not the society that has too little but the society that craves more material wealth that must inevitably become poor."

I have removed the farmer from this comparison because I firmly believe that he is the unwitting pawn in an economic squeeze. Has the public or the conservationist any right to condemn the farmer who drains his marsh to grow more corn, even when that drainage eliminates one of the few wintering areas for pheasants in his township? No more than we can condemn the machinists at International Harvester Company for working overtime and thereby hastening

the day when the Mesabi iron pits become silent craters.

The crux of the dilemma which results in a difference of opinion on the status of wetlands is briefly this: An important publicly owned asset, namely our wildlife, is housed and often fed on private property. Furthermore the landholder has no choice as to the kind and number of public charges foisted upon him.

Those who in the name of public obligation have thrown a brickbat at the farmer for his apparent lack of conservation consciousness will find that they have hurled a boomerang, and it is about to return to its source.

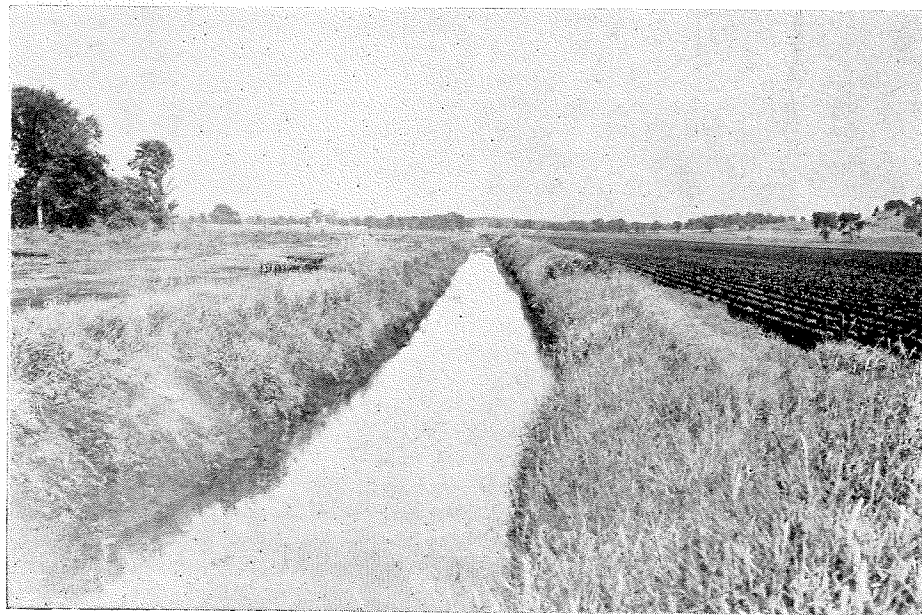
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The solution of a problem so economically and biologically ensnarled is not simple, nor is a solution readily apparent. There are two possibilities that may offer a solution. Neither is biological or deals with management directly.

As stated earlier, land management

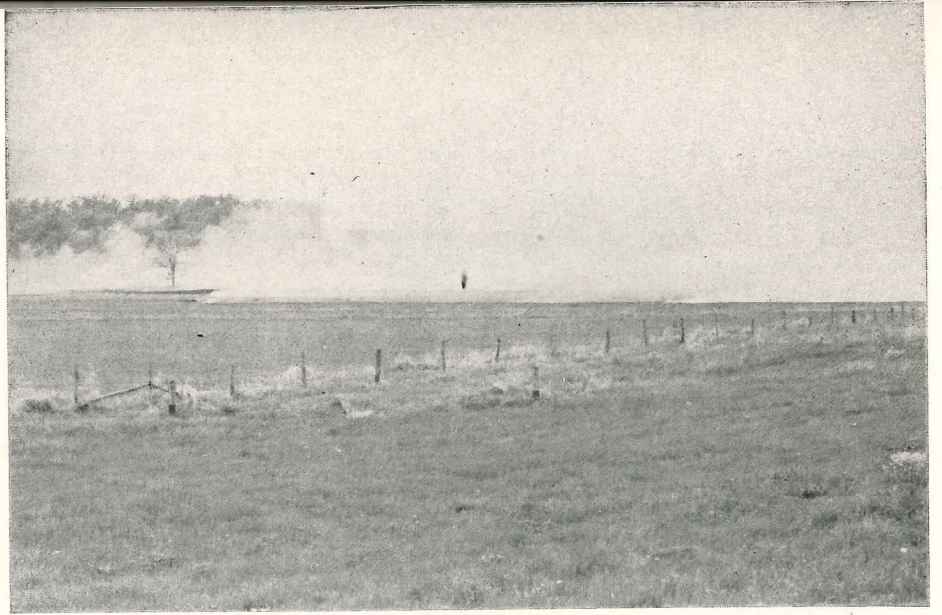
can operate only when there is land to manage and when such existence can be relied on. Further that the primary adversary of wetlands is drainage. Our attention must therefore be focused on ways and means of controlling or regulating drainage to conform to the wisest use of the land for the individual and also for society. To this end we must generate an awareness on the part of landowners, watershed organizations, and drainage committees that bringing agriculturally submarginal lands under the plow does not always mean that such lands will be, or will remain, productive, or further that this is wise land use and economy. Each parcel of surmarginal land should be viewed as part of a larger land community whose maintenance and survival is a civic as well as an individual responsibility.

It is the small slough or pothole on a single farm that appears to be expendable without critical evaluation. In aggregate these many small areas constitute an important and essential seg-



Ditch draining land that was once a tamarack bog, now a potato field. Jefferson county, 1955.





Drained marsh burning. Both dried vegetation and the upper layer of peat were burned. Dane county, 1954.

ment of wildlife habitat. This is particularly true in the Dakotas, western Minnesota, and southeastern Wisconsin. In southern Wisconsin, the recreational areas are close to large urban populations. Here the need for agricultural land close to markets is great; by the same token, the need for conserving remnant wildlife habitat is equally acute. The realization that drainage is not always beneficial will allow the extra-agricultural aspects of the land to be reviewed. If the review is unbiased, my suspicion is that much of the small unit drainage would be discouraged. Public awareness is a slow process; may it develop in time to benefit wildlife as well as agriculture.

Another aspect of this same problem and one which is sorely needed in order to evaluate and control drainage, is the registration of all drainage operators and their equipment. Anyone who has ever attempted to gather statistics on land drainage knows that obtaining a complete drainage picture is like chasing a will-o-the-wisp over endless spoilbanks. If all drainage rig operators were required to report on the where, when, what kind, and what amount of drainage was undertaken in any one year, we would have a base from which to view

land drainage. The process might also suggest a method to cull the fly-by-night rigs that can destroy wildlife habitat without establishing adequate agricultural drainage.

A second approach and one to which I make no claim to originality, is the development of some form of "game crop law," fashioned in principle after the Wisconsin forest crop law. This law recognizes that a financial sacrifice has been made by private individuals for the public good. The basic difference with wildlife is that the so-called crop benefited by proper land-use belongs *not* to the landowner but to the public.

If a state-owned car or truck were parked in your garage or barn you would expect, and rightly so, to receive the same rent that you might expect from any private citizen parking his car on your property. This situation relative to wildlife on private land is very similar.

*Unlike the forest crop Law, I do not propose that the amount of tax due from wildlife lands should be lowered or cancelled; instead some source of public funds should be drawn on to defray a part of the tax. Such a system would not alter the tax received by the county, nor should it show unwarranted partiality*



in the tax levy. The source of revenue might be varied and an equitable solution could come only after a complete study has been made. One source could certainly be the sportsmen who use the land and expect wild game to be available. A program of this kind which at the same time might open more private land to public use, would I am sure not be objected to by the enlightened sportsman.

I hasten to state that this should not be a SUBSIDY, but a willing acceptance by the public to pay justly for services rendered. Such willingness to shoulder responsibility will lessen tensions between sportsmen and farmers, and I am sure lead to benefits far in excess of wise use of Wisconsin wetlands.

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Once the game manager is assured that he has game land to manage he can apply his knowledge and skill. One of the most outstanding examples of managed wetlands is on the Horicon marsh in southcentral Wisconsin. Here state and federal wildlife corps have pooled their resources to manage the land for game, fish, recreation, and agriculture, all in the best interests of the wildlife, the land and the public.

A few of the management procedures over and above the research programs that preceded management are as follows:

(1) A share cropping of muskrats by the Wisconsin Conservation Department and selected trappers is currently operative. This program brings revenue to the state and the individual. It harvests a resource that would otherwise be lost. This program also aids in adjusting muskrat populations to the levels that can be supported by natural foods.

(2) At Horicon also is a program of level ditching which results in the creation of additional aquatic habitat within a wetland unit. This practice is a direct manipulation of the land itself, whereby ditches are dug in an extensive area of level waterlogged soils with no attempt

at drainage. The ditches fill with water and create additional habitat. Unditched areas are usually lacking a diversity of cover plants and an adequate dispersion of land and water. Such a management program benefits muskrats, other furbearers, fish and waterfowl.

(3) Many states have been using fire and herbicides to regulate the amount and kind of vegetation in small marshes, ponds and potholes. This management technique has also aided in creating or maintaining better aquatic habitat.

(4) Iowa was once covered with prairie sloughs abounding with wildlife. Today it is pioneering in the use of blasting to create sloughs where none exist.

(5) Wetland protection from cattle is a management practice so well known and understood that it bears only mentioning.

(6) One of the most outstanding regulators of wetlands, particularly large areas, (although in some cases equally effective on small ones) is that of water level control. There are endless examples of manipulating water levels to create conditions whereby waterfowl and muskrat food plants would grow in great quantities. Adjusted water levels has been the major management tool in fighting botulism or duck sickness on western marshes. Small water areas can be regulated by throwing up a small dike with a hand shovel or farm machinery; large wetlands would require impoundment structures and spill gates. Large or small water level control is often the key tool in developing or maintaining wetlands.

(7) Another outstanding example of wetland management is the control of the wildlife harvest. Here again I am constrained to use Horicon marsh as an example. During the hunting season the Wisconsin Conservation Department and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service coordinate their efforts in making the harvestable segment of the goose population using the refuge available to the public. At the same time they must see to it that the conditions of the harvest are in keeping with good sportsmanship and



that the goose population is not over-shot. This cooperative effort at managing a goose harvest has been eminently successful.

(8) Lastly and probably the best single management approach of all is to *keep hands off* all wetlands producing wildlife. This last attitude is not easily understood by the "action groups." Wetlands like wilderness areas are often self maintaining.

This list of the management possibilities is only a small fraction of that which can be brought to bear in developing our wetland resources. The program for small units will perforce be different from that of large areas. The objectives, however, will be the same; namely, to help the wetlands produce a wildlife crop for the sports public and to maintain its physical and biological integrity for the esthetic values which are available to everyone.

Persons whose charge it is to conserve and maintain our natural resources have become increasingly concerned about the loss of wildlife habitat. At the twenty-second annual conference of the Association of Midwest Fish and Game Commissioners, held July 19, 1955 at Estes Park, Colorado, the following resolution was passed:

"WHEREAS, public money or services are now being used to drain private lands for personal benefit at a time when surpluses of agricultural products exist, and

"WHEREAS, there is no national emergency involved warranting the subsidizing of such practices,

"NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Association of Midwest Fish and Game Commissioners in annual convention assembled at Estes Park, Colorado, this 19th day of July, 1955, that:

"The use of public money or services for the drainage of private lands be terminated, and that the Secretary of this organization is hereby instructed to send a copy of this resolution to the Secretary of the Interior, the Secretary of Agriculture and the Chairman of the

Appropriations Committee in both houses of Congress."

At the 1955 meeting of the International Association of Fish and Game Commissioners this same resolution, with only slightly different wording, was again passed, thus indicating the gravity attached to a land practice that runs counter to conservation.

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Wetland is a resource caught in an economic vise. The opposing jaws of drainage are economic feasibility on one hand, and mechanical facility on the other. The public whose property is housed on private land must accept responsibility for paying the rent; indeed it must accept the idea that rent should be charged.

It is illogical and unfair to berate the farmer for draining his wetlands. Some drainage is detrimental to the land and to wildlife, others could be prevented by some form of compensation to the land owner. In order to evaluate drainage adequately and to bring it into proper perspective, all operators of drainage equipment should be required by law to report annually their drainage operations. A game crop law should be worked out to help compensate the landowner for the use of his wetlands as wildlife habitat. A fair income from lands given to wildlife will prevent drastic changes in wildlife habitat. Once the future of wetlands is stabilized, there are numerous management practices which can be used to bring these lands into full fruition.

Our civic thinking is remiss when we allow a landowner to be punished for killing a duck out of season with his shotgun and at the same time condone and financially aid his efforts in destroying forever his entire marsh with tile and ditch. The death of a marsh should elicit the same moral revulsion as the death of a springshot duck. When it does, we can legislate, educate and manipulate to make Wisconsin wetlands a productive and permanent natural resource.