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## **Preserving the Legacy: Navigating the Future of America's Conservation Funding**

Written by Jack Stelpflug

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In late October, I found myself in the public forests of northeastern Wisconsin. These are public lands that my family has enjoyed and hunted for over half a century. While wandering through the forest with my 12-gauge shotgun, with the goal of flushing a Ruffed Grouse or spotting a Grey Squirrel, I was overcome with a deep sense of gratitude for the public land opportunities I enjoy as an American citizen. It worries me that the practice of hunting is a dying tradition. From peak participation in 1982, where over 17 million engaged in the sport, the number of hunters has fallen to approximately 11.5 million. Furthermore, hunters above the age of 45 now constitute 60% of the hunting population, compared to just 29% in 1991 (US Fish and Wildlife Service). It is evident hunters are simply aging out of the practice; however, it also appears that hunting is not being passed down through the generations anymore. Why? I believe that a stigma exists about hunting. Many view it as an immoral practice and see it as nothing more than a group of men seeking to quench some sort of bloodlust. Perhaps it is a sentiment that we have developed to a point where we have the luxury of not having a hands-on approach to our food sources. Either way, the decrease in hunting participation may have a negative implication for our system of conservation.

The United States enjoys an exceptional juxtaposition of economic prowess and vast public lands, a national treasure that is undervalued by far too many. Our lands and resources, held in trust for public use, are secured thanks to our distinctive system of conservation and funding. Central to this conservation method is the American System of Conservation Funding (ASCF), an example of successful environmental stewardship. Rooted in the early 20th-century conservationist movement and championed by figures like Theodore Roosevelt, the ASCF operates on a “User-pays, public-benefit” structure, where those that consumptively use the land, like hunters and anglers, pay for the privilege and right to do so. This system stands as a rare example of government oversight functioning precisely as it was meant to.

At the core of the ASCF are three funding sources: proceeds from sporting licenses, and excise taxes from the Wildlife / Sport Fish Restoration (WSFR) programs. Most state wildlife agencies rely on these revenues for around 80% of their funding, with sportsmen and women contributing up to 100% in some states. This “User-pays” structure originated with hunting and fishing license fees. Since 1939, nearly \$71 billion has been directed to state agencies via this user-pays model (US Fish and Wildlife Service, 2022). This system later evolved with the additions of the Wildlife Restoration Act (Pittman-Robertson Act) and the Sport Fish Restoration Act (Dingell-Johnson Act), both borne from the initiative of hunters and anglers. Enacted in 1937, these acts redirect excise taxes from outdoor goods to conservation efforts. Of the two, the Pittman-Robertson Act contributes more towards conservation primarily through taxes on firearms and ammunitions.

The effectiveness of the ASCF can be attributed to the fact that regulation was implemented on behalf of the citizens and in keeping the citizens' best interests in mind. However, disruptions to the "user-pays" model can have a significant impact on conservation efforts without support from other sources. For instance, one such source could be grants from state agencies. However, State agencies are already feeling the financial burden from the decrease in hunting participation. For instance, Wisconsin's Department of Natural Resources (DNR) has not only been forced to decrease the scope of several conservation projects but has also had to cut several positions within the agency. The revenue from hunting licenses in Wisconsin has fallen by 37% from 2000 to 2023 (See Figure 1 below) (US Fish and Wildlife Service).

On the bright side, gun and ammunition sales have surged, increasing funds from the Pittman-Robertson Act (See Figure 2 below). These funds have somewhat offset the decrease in license revenues, suggesting a future dependence on this source for conservation financing. Despite its historic contributions, this dependency is not without concerns. Excise tax revenues lack the flexibility of revenues generated by license sales, for they are often earmarked for specific purposes, and do not provide the financial agility that license sales do. Furthermore, these revenues fluctuate with public discourse on gun control, as highlighted by the correlation between mass shooting events and gun sales reported by CNN (Wiener-Bronner, 2017). Such unpredictability undermines the stable financial groundwork that conservation endeavors require. Finally, states are required to contribute at least 25 cents for every dollar they wish to receive from the Pittman Robertson act. A decline in revenue from hunting licenses could mean that states may have to make difficult allocation decisions when budgets are tight. This could eventually lead states to be more reluctant to participate in conservation activities.

Altogether, while the ASCF has admirably funded conservation for decades, shifts in public behavior and economic trends bring up questions of its sustainability. Moving forward, however, I believe that the obstacle confronting our conservation system can be overcome through free-market solutions, with minimal government intervention.

Perhaps the remedy for this issue could be found through corporate sponsorship. We could foster partnerships between state game agencies and private companies interested in wildlife conservation efforts. Companies would provide funding in exchange for benefits like positive public recognition and public relations associated with supporting conservation efforts. We have seen the growing emphasis of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives in recent years, and this could be a fantastic way for firms to differentiate themselves. This could be especially beneficial for companies that specialize in products specifically marketed to sportsmen and women like hunting apparel companies, for instance.

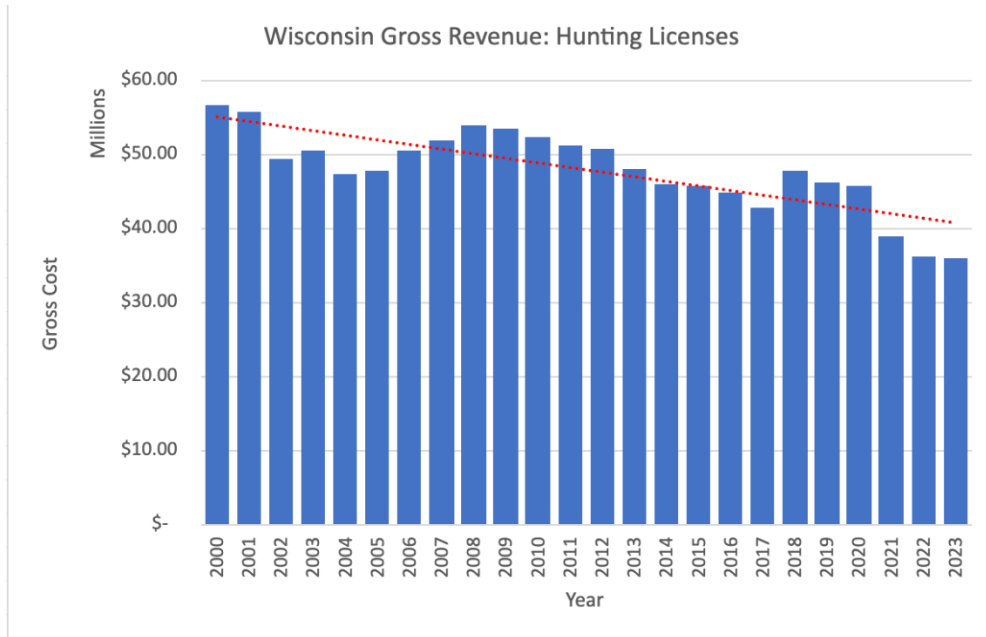
Shortcomings in funding could also be rectified by voluntary donations and philanthropy in general. By establishing platforms that are easy to use, individuals, corporations, and outdoor enthusiasts could contribute to specific conservation projects that they would like to see nurtured. In having a more specified list of donation destinations, the conservation initiatives would become more palpable for would-be philanthropists and could encourage more donations. What's more, per the Permanent Conservation Easement Tax Incentive, donations made to land trusts or government agencies are tax deductible.

Hunting and outdoor education programs would serve as another possible avenue to increase conservation efforts. Programs like these would involve investing in events that promote hunting, fishing, and outdoor activities to reinvigorate the enthusiasm in these practices among younger generations. The design of these programs could involve educating the youth about the work of renowned conservationists such as Aldo Leopold, among others. In doing this, young Americans could obtain an understanding of our unique conservation framework. Further, giving youth the opportunity to take an active role in their food procurement and interaction with the natural world is something that I think is missing from our modern society. If private organizations, outdoor retailers, and schools set up programs that fostered these types of experiences, adolescents would be exposed to the laundry list of benefits that come along with these practices.

Altogether, hunting and conservation are inextricably linked. Decreasing participation in the practice brings into question the stability of our wonderful conservation framework. The time has come for us to discuss what the future will look like for the protection of our lands and wildlife.

**Figure 1:** Wisconsin gross revenue from hunting licenses

*Data collected from the US Fish and Wildlife Service*



**Figure 2:** Excise tax revenue from the Pittman-Robertson Act

*Data collected from the US Fish and Wildlife Service*

