

A Collaborative Approach to Solving Big Game Depredation

by Doug Warnock

An increasing amount of depredation on private property in Kittitas County, Washington concerned local citizens, leading to the formation of a volunteer group that set about searching for solutions. Management policies and practices on public lands, increased human activities on public lands, plus rural residential development had altered elk behavior resulting in damage to privately owned farms and ranches. Elk were spending less time in the higher elevations of the traditional habitat on publicly held land and journeying down to the green pastures and fields in the valley floor.

Many areas of the West are experiencing such increased depredation from big game animals, because these animals are spending less time in the intended habitat, mostly public lands, and more time on agricultural land and near human populations. This depredation includes damage to crops, pastures, rangeland, haystacks, fences and other structures. In Washington State, this has become a big expense for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) in terms of both processing damage claims and time spent dealing with big game complaints. But, my experience with this issue and what we've been able to accomplish through integrating Holistic Management and consensus building suggests to me that we have a way to address these concerns both short- and long-term.

Building Trust

The Big Game Management Roundtable (BGMR) was formed in the spring of 2003 to address the problem of increasing depredation by elk in

Kittitas County, Washington. The idea to form a focus group to tackle the problem came from two people who had worked together on another project: Dave Duncan, local rancher, and Jeff Tayer, South Central Region Director for WDFW.

"The problem continued to grow, and we had not been effective in dealing with it. We needed to get a group working on it, bringing together all of the interests that have a stake in the wildlife and the land," says Tayer.

Duncan brought the idea to form such a group to Solar \$, a non-profit corporation that manages holistically and promotes Holistic Management. Solar \$ supported the proposal and agreed to provide the facilitation for it. I became involved at that point and served as primary facilitator. Our knowledge and experience in Holistic Management and consensus building guided us through the organization and operation of this collaborative effort.

The group began meeting on a monthly basis to gather and evaluate information and to develop a plan to address the problem. The Roundtable is a group of several dozen volunteers, all of whom have an interest in solving the problem. It represents most all of the stakeholder groups, including agricultural producers, sportsmen, wildlife advocates, other outdoor recreationists, conservationists, local university faculty and WDFW personnel.

It was apparent to both WDFW personnel and the landowners that the depredation had been increasing in recent years. At the same time, it had changed from being seasonal to being a year round problem and resulted in considerable economic loss to ranchers and farmers.

Members of BGMR have found that the change in elk behavior leading to depredation stemmed from not just one, but several causes. The changes in grazing practices and the associated decline in forage quality and habitat suitability was a major factor. The changes in logging practices and the associated effect on forest health and forage quantity has also contributed to the problem. There are fewer functional springs in this area, which reduces the number of water sources for game animals. Moreover, there were some landowners who unknowingly created safe havens for elk in agricultural areas, which enabled elk to raid nearby fields.

Rural residential development and the increased human presence in areas that were traditional elk migration routes contributed to the changed elk behavior. Another cause was the increased use of public lands for outdoor recreation and the expansion of recreational use year round.

The problem didn't appear to be too many elk. The problem was too many elk in the wrong place, being displaced by human activities and ineffective management.

Addressing Short & Long-Term Issues

The group met for a period of time the first year developing a dialogue and building trust and understanding among its members. The first agreement reached was recognition by all that there was indeed a problem. Next, was the agreement that the members would work together to attempt to solve the depredation problem. A two-part mission statement was developed: (1) "To identify and remedy big game damage to private property," and (2) "work collaboratively to improve overall health of wildlife and public lands."

The BGMR's strategies were to encourage elk use of public lands, to discourage the elk use of private property and to inform citizens of the county about the problem and enlist their support and

participation in addressing it.

Through the efforts of Jim Huckabay, Central Washington University professor of Geography and a BGMR Steering committee member, several students including a graduate student, assisted BGMR. They contributed greatly by keeping minutes, distributing meeting notices, doing research and providing other valuable services.

An immediate need was to put some programs in place to provide relief to those landowners who experienced losses from concentrated elk groups moving onto and across their land. Elk damaged fences were repaired and pressure was applied to the marauding elk through selected hunters that were guided by a hunt coordinator.

The longer term objective was to encourage projects that would change management practices on public land and allow selective livestock grazing to restore biological health to the rangeland. Forage plants on much of the state and federal land had become old and coarse, making them unattractive to big game animals. Elk were coming down out of the hills to eat on the green plants growing in the pastures and fields in the valley floor.

Successes Realized

In the four years since the beginning of the project, a number of successes have been achieved.

- A diverse group was brought together to address the problem resulting in hundreds of volunteer hours focused on combating elk depredation.
- The hunting coordinator was able to guide efforts of volunteer “Master Hunters,” which greatly helped in pressuring elk away from problem areas.
- Over twenty miles of elk-damaged fences were repaired.
- Relations between private landowners and WDFW were vastly improved and landowners opened up additional land to hunting.
- The public relation efforts included printing a quarterly newsletter, publishing and distributing a

brochure on “Living With Wildlife in Kittitas County” and conducting several public meetings to discuss pertinent topics, such as the implications of individuals feeding big game animals. The feeding of big game animals and the availability of safe havens were greatly reduced as a result of these efforts.

A major accomplishment of BGMR was the formation of the Wild Horse Coordinated Management Planning Program. BGMR requested and sponsored the Wild Horse CRMP, which brought together the owners of 60,000 acres of rangeland that are an important part of the elk habitat.

The CRMP group formed a holistic goal, developed a grazing plan for the area, and established a baseline monitoring system on the property. The group was able to convince the state legislature of the importance of its efforts to restore health to the land and received a \$490,000

appropriation for the development of water sources to improve big game habitat on the project.

The establishment of the CRMP Program is a long-term effort to address one of the main causes of the problem, the decreased health of the ecosystem.

Dr. Huckabay, who is writing a book entitled *Collaborative Management of Local Resource Conflicts*, summed it up well, “The Big Game Management Roundtable has had remarkable success in finding and instituting solutions to wildlife depredation on private property. Through its efforts, levels of damage have dropped off dramatically. The BGMR model remains an excellent model for those who wish to manage resource issues in a collaborative manner.”

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Tips On Organizing & Maintaining Effective Collaborative Groups

Organizing

- Engage all stakeholders – continue to recruit
- Mutual ownership of the objectives and the goal
- Take the time necessary to have everyone on board

Maintaining

- Keep people engaged
- Continue to recruit new members
- Inform new recruits and integrate them into the group
- Manage dissent – keep the group focused
- Be accountable – both the group and the members
- Be creative – use all the groups’ resources

- Community support
 - Awareness of the problem
 - Ways they can help

Keys to Success

- Open discussion & interaction among the participants
- Trust & acceptance among members
- Non-threatening forum
- Good & effective communications within the group & between the group & the community
- Experienced, effective facilitators
- Break problems down into attainable parts
 - Shorter term
 - Longer term

