

Fish, wildlife belong to all Texans

BY: FRED C. BRYANT

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Texas is known for its vast land and abundant wildlife and fish, resources available for all to enjoy through hunting, fishing or wildlife viewing. Conservation of these resources for future generations results from a uniquely North American approach viewed as the most successful conservation program in the world.

This program is called the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, and its cornerstone is the Public Trust Doctrine. The Public Trust Doctrine means wildlife belongs to all citizens, and its management is entrusted to the government to benefit present and future generations. The North American Model also is centered on the principle that fish and wildlife management must be based on sound science, and that science should drive regulations rather than emotions or short-term economics.

The North American Model was developed because market hunting of wildlife during the late 1800s and early 1900s led to the extinction and near-extinction of many species. Eventually, hunting and fishing regulations were adopted, and unregulated commercial markets were eliminated, which turned the tide on the indiscriminate slaughter of wild animals. The model deserves credit for bringing many species back from the brink to the abundant populations we now enjoy.

Today, there is a new threat to the wild creatures we all treasure — privatization of the native fish and wildlife that belong to all of us, a bad idea for many reasons. According to the Outdoor Industry Association, hunting, fishing, state park visits, bird-watching and all other nonconsumptive uses of our natural resources generate more than \$28 billion in annual consumer spending in Texas. Why contemplate disrupting such a huge economic driver?

Privatization of native fish and wildlife erodes public support for conservation initiatives, leads to the slippery slope for more species to be privatized, degrades the outdoor experience, turns native wildlife into livestock, changes the purpose from conservation to exploitation, and favors short-term economic gain over long-term conservation.

The primary mission of the Texas Foundation for Conservation is to raise awareness about the Public Trust Doctrine, and to resist any efforts to privatize native fish and wildlife for the benefit of a few. These wild animal resources are like our beaches and waterways — they belong in the public trust.

We applaud the founders of the conservation group who saved fish and wildlife in this country. We also believe Texas offers unique circumstances within the model.

As the 85th Texas Legislature convenes in January, be aware there are industry groups and individuals seeking to privatize the wildlife that belongs to us all. Government should not hand over ownership of a public resource to private entities.

Fred C. Bryant is the director of the Caesar Kleberg Wildlife Research Institute at Texas A&M University-Kingsville and president of the board of directors of the Texas Foundation for Conservation, a 501(c)3 nonprofit.

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