

# Public Land, Wildlife Habitat: Value and Value Added

*From a Michigan Resource Stewards White Paper by Tom Bailey, June 2020*

## **BACKGROUND:**

What is the value of public land? What is wildlife habitat worth? Varying views on the answers to these questions has fueled public debate in Michigan for decades. Politicians often treat public land as a surplus commodity to be liquidated, and natural areas as little more than raw material for “development.” The public is poorly informed about the importance of natural systems for all life on earth, and we often find that neither politicians nor average citizens are very well informed about the value added to our economy by the many activities that take place on public land. Neither are people generally very well informed about the amount of natural land required to maintain the healthy plant communities and wildlife populations habitat that contribute to our quality of life and the ecological balance that sustains us. Public land is an economic issue, a social issue, a science and habitat issue, and also a political issue.

Michigan Resource Stewards member Dave Borgeson, Sr., quotes Michael Crichton, who wrote: “Nothing is more inherently political than our shared physical environment. Stable management of the environment requires recognition that all preferences have their place: snowmobilers and fly fishermen, dirt bikers and hikers, developers and preservationists. These preferences are at odds and their incompatibility cannot be avoided. But resolving incompatible goals is the true function of politics.”

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, “government land” was available to homesteaders, railroads, miners and others at little or no cost.

Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century is long gone, the US population has surged and development has come to dominate the landscape, many cling to a 19<sup>th</sup> century view of public land. Fiscal hawks often see liquidation of public land as a way to fund government projects and services without raising taxes, an approach seen as reckless and even dangerous by those with a longer term view. Resource management professionals, citizen conservationists, recreation advocates, hunters, anglers, and many others value public land as habitat for wildlife, a source of important commodities, a place for recreation and other meaningful pursuits. Political battles ensue, and replay themselves over and over through the years.

## **THE PUBLIC LAND ISSUE:**

What is the value of public land and how can that value be expressed? Is there a methodology that allows us to put a dollar value per acre on wildlife habitat, recreational land, or productive forests? Can we say what a wetland is really worth? And can we guide public policy toward better recognition of the value added to our economy by public land in Michigan and incorporate this in to cost-benefit calculus?

To address these issues, we must look at public land in a variety of ways. At minimum, we must consider public land as capital, as habitat, as a community and as an American birthright.

## **CONVEYING THE VALUE OF AND VALUE ADDED BY PUBLIC LAND IN POLICY AND POLITICS:**

Members of the Michigan Resource Stewards have often made the case for public land to the legislature and others.

Opposition was often predictable, coming from a number of well-known sources. “We lined up on one side of the issue, and they lined up on the other,” observed a member of the Stewards who is a veteran of many such occasions. The usual tug of war ensued, and sometimes conservation won while sometimes it lost. There was great frustration because we often felt that the value of public land was getting short shrift because we couldn’t adequately quantify and convey the true value of public land. As we look to the future it is not enough to keep doing the same things in the same way. Times are changing and our approach needs to change with the times. The subject is so complex that even this version of the White Paper has been abridged. To see the unabridged version, which includes a discussion of future actions, visit [miresourcestewards.org](http://miresourcestewards.org)

## **CLOSING THOUGHT:**

This paper will be successful if it serves as a catalyst for action to better understand and explain the true value of public land, value added by public land, and the importance of maintaining large areas of natural land for wildlife and for people. It will succeed if it brings groups and individuals together to take on the old, tired arguments against public land, and delve deeply into the economics of public land that doesn’t stop at price-per-acre but looks into value added in terms of both economics and the intangible value of living and vacationing in a state that offers opportunities to hunt, fish, hike, ski, watch birds, hunt mushrooms and pursue a whole range of activities across a broad, varied and healthy landscape. It will be worthwhile if it helps to reinforce the important decision that the people of Michigan made to direct revenue from publicly owned natural capital into a trust fund that forever ends the boom-and-bust cycle and benefits all generations to come.

In his book, “The Quiet Crisis,” Steward Udall said it best when he wrote: “Each generation has its own rendezvous with the land, for despite our fee titles and claims of ownership, we are all brief tenants on this planet. By choice or by default, we will carve a

land legacy for our heirs.”