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Wildlife Habitat Canada: Keeping the Promise

After decades, WHC is embracing the visions of its founders.

I remember working on a federal cabinet document under the leadership of the late Dr. James Patterson. It described a new organization to be set up by the government of Canada to create a Canadian duck stamp and distribute funds derived from hunters to conserve wetlands. The concept was modelled after a highly successful U.S. programme, started back in the 1920s. But, the Canadian stamp arrived on the cusp of the new North American Waterfowl Management Plan (NAWMP), which was being negotiated with the U.S. at the time. The \$1.5-billion NAWMP, signed in 1986, coupled with a new organization focusing on wetland conservation financed by Canadian duck hunters. This promised a new era where the relentless tide of wetland losses could finally be stopped or reversed.

This early promise melted away as WHC and its independent board chose a different path, focusing on the boreal forest and other projects mainly outside of the principal range of breeding ducks and the problems of ongoing wetland losses. During the era closing out the 20th century, the perception was the next opportunity for raising funds to support wildlife habitat would come from non-hunters. Some organizations distanced themselves from their roots of hunter support to explore these possibilities. It took at least a couple of decades of broadening and widening the scope of wildlife conservation to realize these activities were not accompanied by new revenues and that hunters would continue to carry most of the burden of wetland conservation.

In the first decade of the new century, the leadership of WHC changed a



The 26th Canadian Wildlife Habitat Conservation Stamp. Painting of Green-winged teal by Pierre Girard of Ste-Anne-de-Sorel, Quebec, entitled "Spring-time at the marsh."

number of times and financial issues loomed. An audit conducted by Environment Canada was revealing. It pointed out that WHC was not delivering value for the expenditures of duck-hunter dollars. This precipitated a number of changes.

Starting Over

A new president, David Brackett, former director general of the Canadian Wildlife Service, took the helm and helped steer WHC on a new course. He worked with the Canadian outdoors community to maintain WHC and the duck stamp. One of the last things he did for WHC was to persuade Len Ugarenko to apply as his replacement.

Ugarenko has brought ideas, energy, and decades of experience in Canada and the U.S. to wildlife conservation. As a waterfowler, he understands the valuable contributions duck hunters make to conservation, not only through their annual stamp purchases, but through volunteer support of conservation organizations and projects. He set out early to establish a new and stronger relationship between waterfowl hunters, WHC, and a wide range of outdoor organizations representing hunters. He's done so

while continuing to build relationships with non-hunters who support and contribute to many projects, helping to bring the community of interests in wildlife-habitat conservation together.

The long-term decline in Canadian waterfowling has had a huge impact over the past 25 years on funding available to conservation organizations. WHC has seen its funding base erode by 70% and hasn't been able to replace those revenues with contributions from the non-hunting public. Ugarenko recognizes the vital role hunters play in the future of wetland and wildlife-habitat conservation and the loss of waterfowl hunters as key concerns.

"The logo has changed," said Ugarenko, "to reflect who we are and what we do, placing a focus on waterfowl and wetlands, but reaching out to all wildlife conservation interests." There's also now a page on its Web site (www.whc.org) thanking hunters and recognizing their contributions to conservation.

The Next Generation

Ugarenko has looked to the future and positioned WHC to encourage hunter support and the investment of youth

and non-hunters in conservation. Encouraging youth to “get outside and in touch with nature” is high on the WHC agenda.

“You and I were fortunate to have had the opportunity to spend time out of doors in the company of family and friends as children and to get in contact with nature through hunting and fishing,” Ugarenko told me. “A lot of youth aren’t so lucky these days. There are a lot of them on medication for health conditions that would be helped if they could spend time outdoors.”

Ugarenko says youths are our future leaders and contributors to conservation. He’s anxious to support projects that create outdoor experiences and appreciation for nature, whether they be mentored youth hunts for waterfowl or other planned outdoor activities.

One great example is the new Youth Wildlife Habitat Conservation Stamp, designed to support youth wildlife-conservation projects. The Youth Habitat Stamp is a first in Canada, developed in partnership with the Robert Bateman “Get to Know Programme.” Recently introduced, close to 3,000 stamps have been sold and interest in the new programme is increasing daily.

Ugarenko and his board have brought many more changes to WHC to make it an accessible, accountable, and transparent organization. Its Web site has been redesigned to present the vision for WHC and its programmes. The site makes it easy to find out where and how WHC is spending duck-stamp dollars and other revenues. While inviting all people interested to participate in the habitat-grant programme, WHC acknowledges hunter support through the stamp programme and retains a priority on projects that would benefit wetlands and waterfowl.

“Hunters are vital,” said Ugarenko, “and we support outdoor-education programmes with a hunting component. Yet, it’s so much more than just hunting and more than just for hunted species. We take an ecosystem approach that includes all species, all terrestrial and

aquatic habitats, and strives to bring together hunters and non-hunters in conservation.”

The Bottom Line

Looking at the numbers over Ugarenko’s first 2½ years at WHC gives waterfowlers a clearer view of accomplishments and accountability for our duck-stamp dollars. Figures vary from year to year for a number of reasons, including the onset of a recession in 2008/09 and differences in land values where a conservation project is done. However, this is the first time in the first quarter-century of WHC’s existence that figures for expenditures of duck-stamp dollars have been available.

In 2008/2009, it supported 29 habitat projects for a total of \$1.1 million (mainly duck-stamp dollars), which leveraged through conservation partnerships approximately \$9.9 million in additional funding, resulting in 116,000 acres of conservation work achieved.

Twenty-six projects were undertaken in 2009/2010, for a total expenditure of \$1.2 million from WHC, which leveraged \$6.7 million through partnerships, resulting in 42,966 acres conserved.

In 2010/2011, 31 projects were approved for \$1.15 million, which leveraged an additional \$14.4 million. The actual acres conserved will be determined once these projects are completed in 2011.

Fisheries, too

Ugarenko is also looking to create a national fish-habitat stamp, which would be sold to raise funds for fish-habitat conservation. “The...concept would provide a great link with wetlands, which is where a lot of the fish anglers seek are produced,” he said.

As this was being written, another audit loomed over WHC. After closely following its history and being involved to some extent in the vision, I think Ugarenko has finally positioned the organization to deliver on its original promise to waterfowl hunters. Let’s hope the auditors agree. ●

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