

Section 3.—Wildlife Resources and Conservation*

Wildlife in Canada is considered to be an important renewable natural resource. In the early days, wildlife was, and in large areas still is, a form of sustenance in the hinterland and trade in fur determined the course of exploration and settlement. During the period of the opening up of the country, many species of animals and birds became seriously depleted or completely extinct. The passenger pigeon, the great auk and the Labrador duck were extirpated, the buffalo vanished from the prairies, and wapiti, prong-horn antelope and musk-oxen were reduced to small fractions of their former numbers. The destruction was not limited to the animals and birds but in the areas of settlement their habitat was endangered by the cutting and burning of the forests, the diversion and pollution of streams and the changing of the face of the land.

Since then, it may be said that wildlife has been changed and influenced by man to the degree that he has changed and influenced the environment. The arctic and alpine tundra, one of Canada's major vegetational regions, has been changed hardly at all; the adjacent sub-arctic and sub-alpine non-commercial forest has been changed principally as a result of increased human travel causing more forest fires; the great commercial forest farther south has not lost its real character through being managed; cultivable lands, whether originally forest or grassland, have completely changed but often they and the managed forest are better for many forms of wildlife than the original wilderness. Some creatures thrive on change. There are more moose, deer, grouse and probably more coyotes than in Indian days. Fur species, such as beaver and muskrat, are easily managed and many small mammals and birds thrive better in fields and woodlots than in the virgin forest, provided that they are not poisoned by pesticides. At the present time, the harvestable surplus of game and fur species across Canada is seldom fully utilized and it is quite clear that wildlife will remain abundant in Canada wherever there is suitable habitat and enlightened management.

Thus, Canada today is known throughout the world for the wealth and variety of its wildlife. It maintains most or all the existing stocks of woodland caribou, California bighorn sheep, wolves, grizzly bears and wolverines, to mention a few. And these animals exist not only because of the vastness of their habitat but also because of man's efforts to preserve them. There is evidence of concern about the preservation of wildlife by the early Canadians; there were game laws in force in the original provinces when all but a few thousand acres of land were still the patrimony of the Indians. In 1887 pioneer conservationists were instrumental in establishing Banff Park in Alberta and in setting up a bird sanctuary at Last Mountain Lake in Saskatchewan, the first on the Continent. The same fervour for preservation of Canada's wildlife heritage led to the complete protection of wood bison in 1893 and to the purchase and establishment of a nucleus herd of plains bison at Wainwright in Alberta in 1907. Thus was formed the basis of wildlife conservation efforts which, for a long time, took the form of complete protection of certain species from destruction by man or predator. Better knowledge of nature's operations and the recognition of the fact that many other factors combine to cause fluctuation in wildlife numbers are now being reflected in a loosening of restrictions on hunting and a rescinding of preserves. The science of animal numbers is new and sometimes runs counter to popular prejudice. But it is well understood that any area will support only so many animals, and species that are highly productive must have a quick turnover. Wildlife must never be separated from the consideration of its environment and if the environment is fully stocked the annual increment need only replace the losses. All extra is surplus, only part of which is taken by predators and part, if the animal is a game species, by man.

As a natural resource, wildlife within the provinces comes under the administration of the respective provincial governments; wildlife on federal lands and certain problems of national or international interest are the concern of the Federal Government.

* A series of special articles relating to the wildlife resources of Canada has been carried in previous editions of the Year Book. See the list of special articles in Chapter XXVI, Part II, under the heading of "Fauna and Flora".