

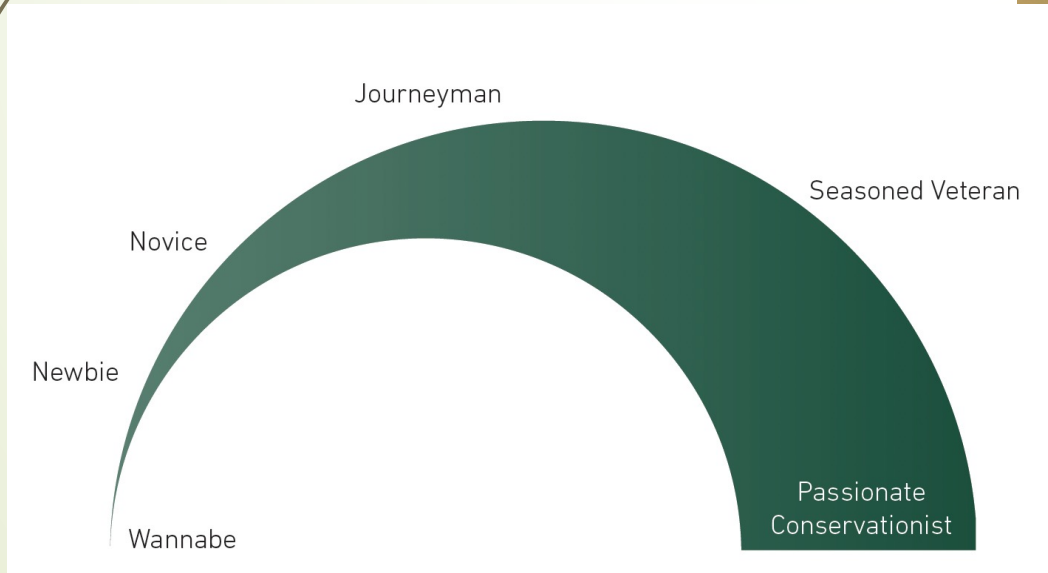
An Ethical and Sustainable Sandhill Crane Hunt



Bruce Ross Executive Director, Wisconsin Waterfowl Association

WWA Missions

- **Wetland restoration:** Private, public lands
- **Education:** “The Duckhunters’ Arc”
- **Advocacy:** Waterfowl, wetlands and hunters





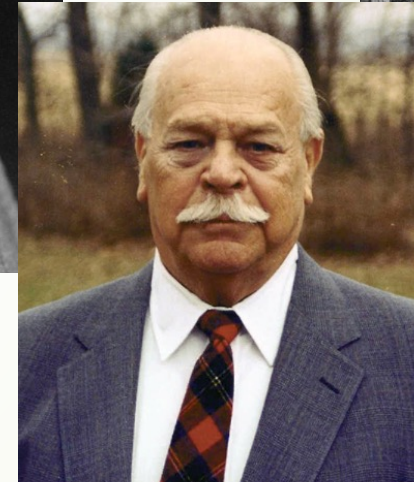
An ethical, sustainable sandhill crane hunt

Topics

- Hunters as conservationists
- Why a sandhill hunt?
- Recommendations

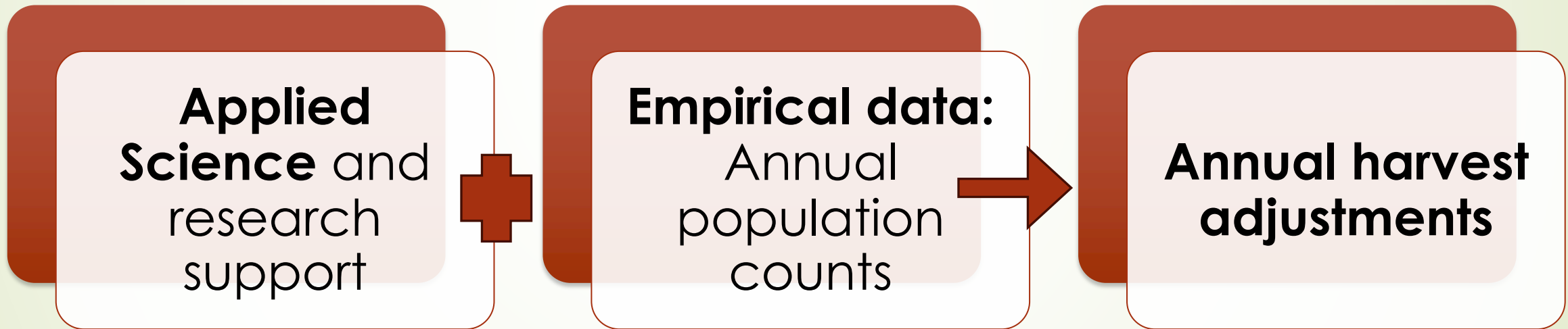
Hunter Conservationists: *Wisconsin examples*

- Curly Radtke
- Paul Husting
- Bill Petersburs
- Aldo Leopold



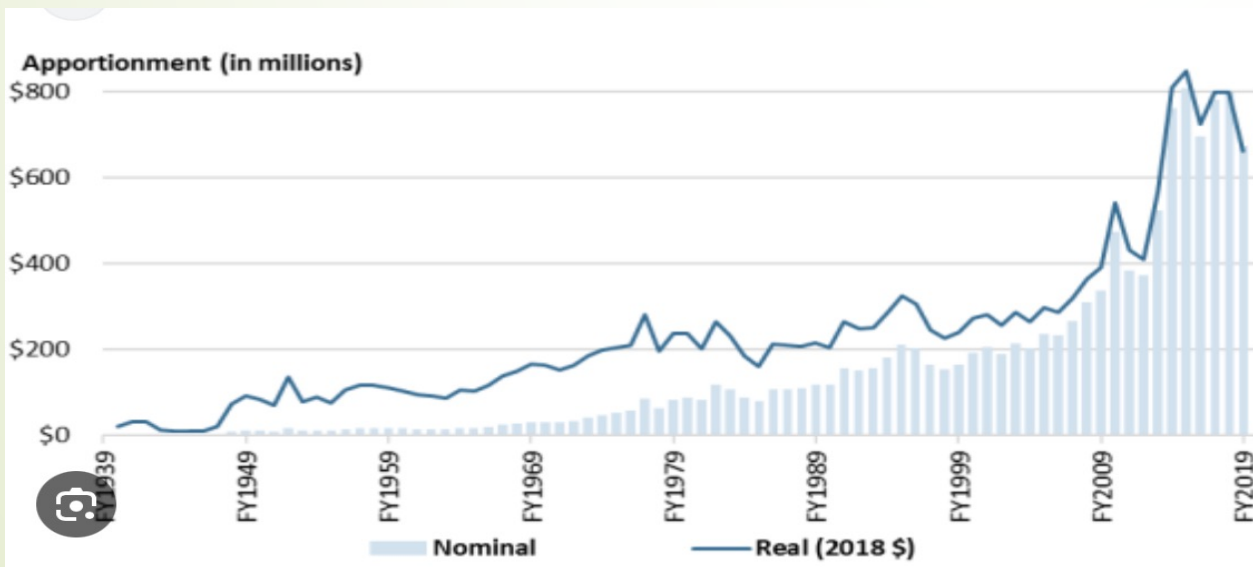
Wisconsin history is replete with hunter conservationists making a disproportionate conservation difference

Hunter Conservationists: *Supporting science-based management*



Hunter Conservationists: *Providing necessary funding*

- Hunters bring billions of dollars to conservation
 - Pittman Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act > \$18 Billion
 - Farm Bill - state biologists and agricultural partners



Hunter Conservationists: *Providing necessary funding (cont'd)*

➤ Hunters bring billions of dollars to conservation

- Pittman Robertson
- Farm Bill and state biologists
- Federal waterfowl stamp => \$37M in 2023
- State waterfowl stamp => \$700K annually
- Voluntary contributions =>
\$3.5 billion (total)

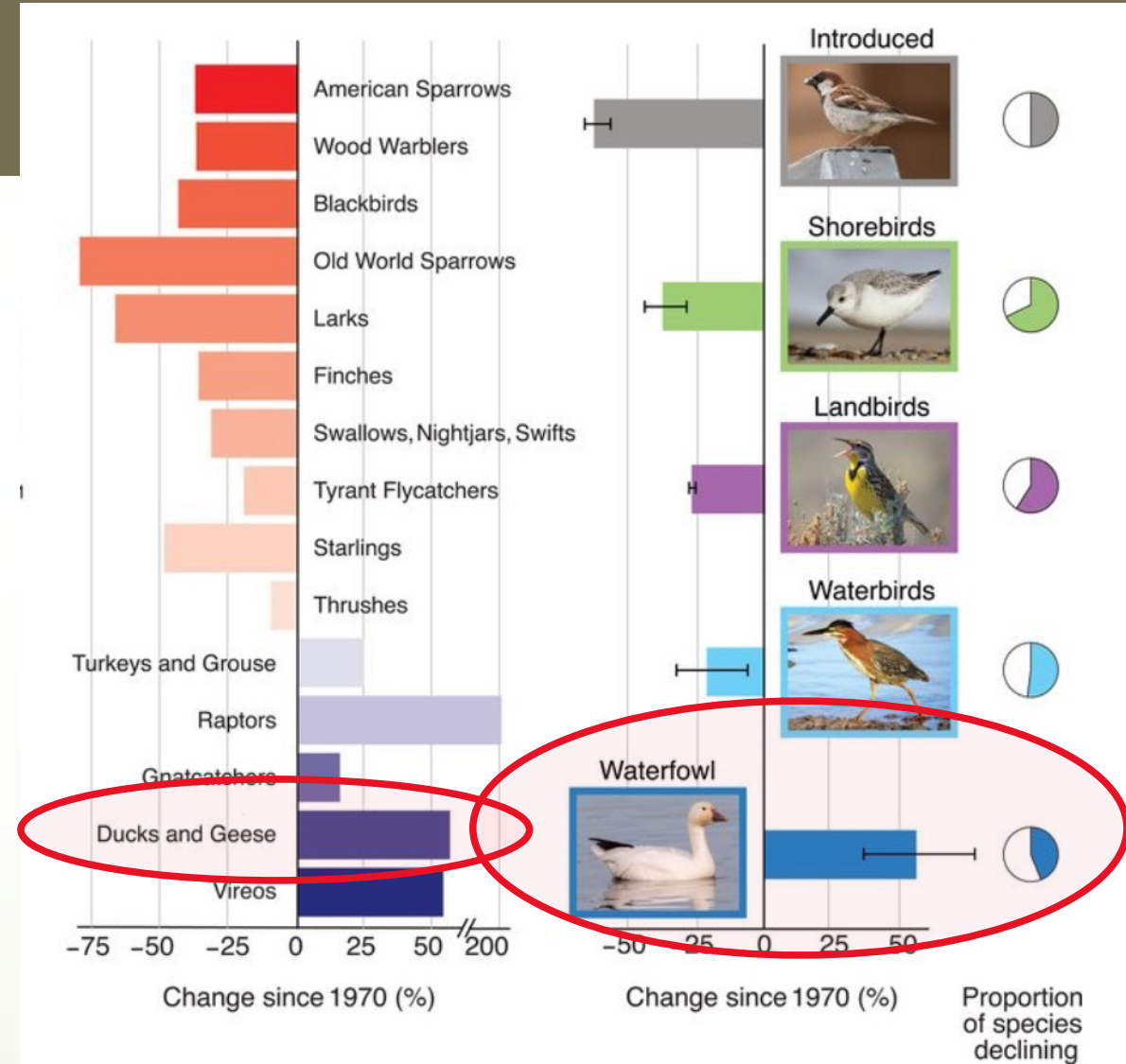


Hunter Conservationists: *Delivering results*

50-year study: North American birds are down a “staggering” 3 billion...

EXCEPT

... WATERFOWL → Up 56%





9 Reasons to Support a SACR Hunt

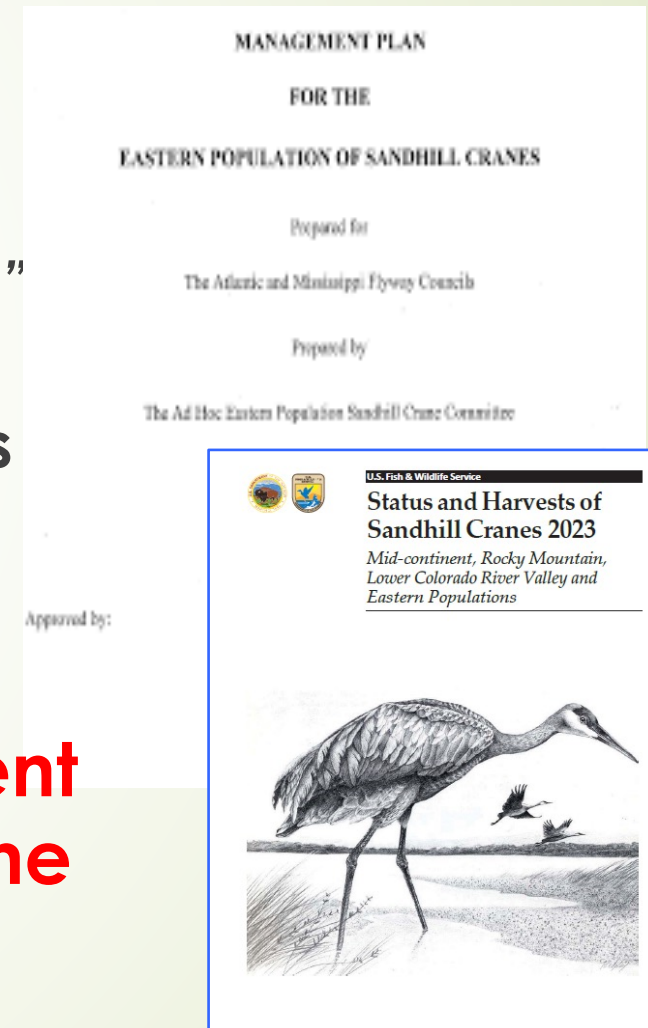
1. USFWS management plan embraces it
2. Crane population justifies it
3. Hunters support it
4. Eco-tourism is compatible with it
5. Farmers will benefit from it
6. Whooping cranes do not preclude it
7. WDNR can manage it
8. Recent ICF opinion poll supports it (*well, doesn't reject it*)
9. Constitution expects it

A sandhill crane hunt?

#1 – Federal plan embraces it

- 2011 SACR Management Plan Goal 4:
“Provide hunting opportunities for EP Sandhill Cranes”
- USFWS migratory game bird management is logical, data-informed, science-based...
... AND SUCCESSFUL

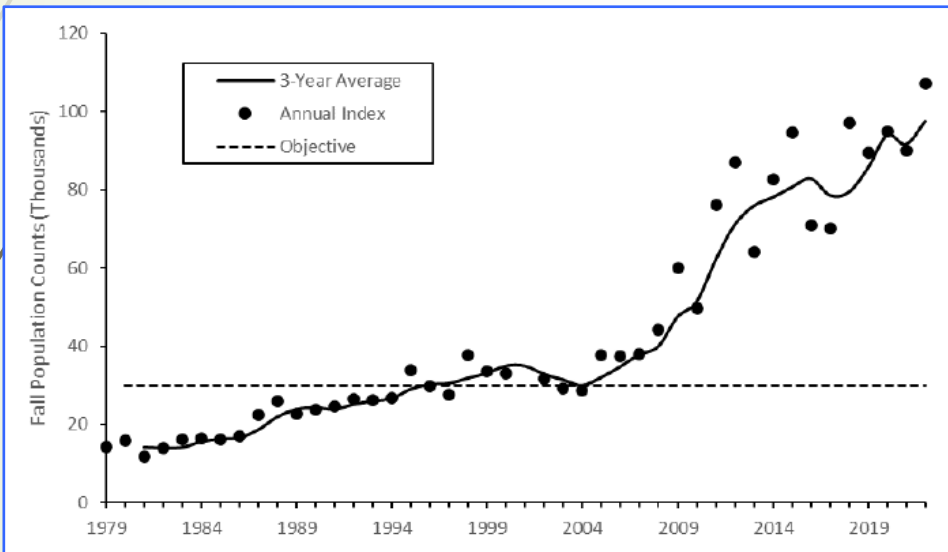
The proven USFWS flyway management system can be trusted to safeguard the health of the crane population



A sandhill crane hunt?

#2 – Crane population justifies it

USFWS Management Plan: Objective – *“Manage the EP to maintain an interim (five year) population index of 30,000 - 60,000 sandhill cranes as measured by the USFWS’s fall survey.”*



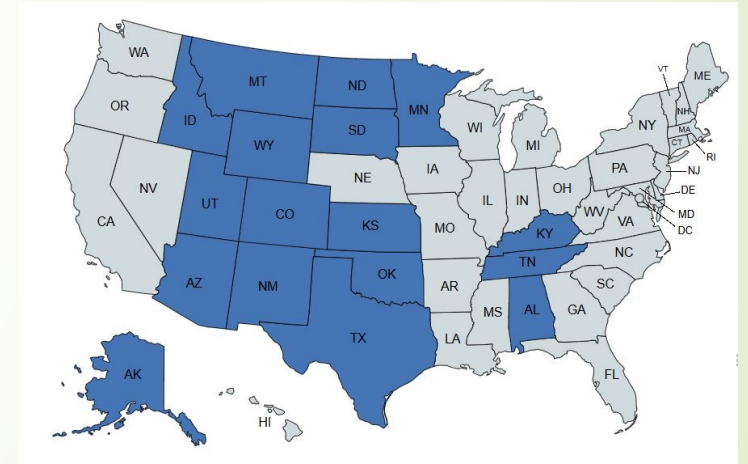
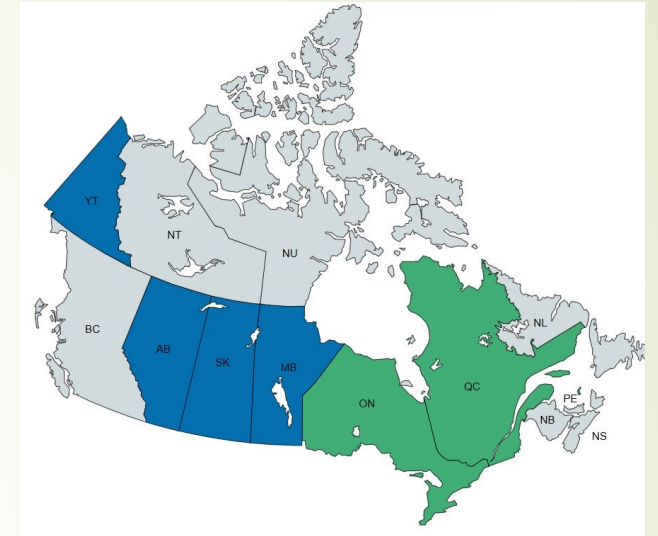
- **Current population ~twice the maximum goal**
- **Ultimate population = ?????**

Even ICF agrees the Wisconsin crane population supports a hunt

A sandhill crane hunt?

#3 - Hunters support it

- Hunted for 60+ continuous years...
 - 18 states, 4 provinces... 2 more on the way
- In Wisconsin
 - WWA survey => 94% supported a season
 - WWF policy is to establish a hunt
 - Conservation Congress supports it too



**Not every hunter will participate, but
many will seek this field-to-table
opportunity**

A sandhill crane hunt?

#4 – Eco-Tourism is compatible with it

Management Plan Objective 3 - *Provide for and monitor non-consumptive uses for EP sandhill cranes and develop public education opportunities.*

- Wisconsin's eco-tourism is important
 - Also, hunter economic impact --over \$2B annually¹
- Examples: Alabama, Horicon Marsh
- WWA worked with Dr Stan Temple to protect important staging areas

Crane tourism and hunting are compatible



A sandhill crane hunt?

#5 – Farmers will benefit from it

USFWS Management Objective 2 - *Reduce agricultural damage and conflicts associated with the EP sandhill cranes.*

- **Current damage ~ \$1.9M annually**
 - **Corn = \$900K (+ mitigation => \$2M+ on only 200K acres)**
 - **Potatoes another \$850K – no repellent**
- **Potential liability = 28 million acres of corn (\$35M-\$42M)**
- **A hunt opens the wildlife damage fund to farmers...**
- **A hunt can help cap population (Wheeler study)**
- **Farmer groups uniformly support a hunt**

Hunting is a management tool that can help farmers, even if not the complete solution

USFWS management plan: “... when this index reached about 30,000 cranes, an increase in requests for agricultural damage permits .. were observed.”

Population responses to harvest depend on harvest intensity, demographics, and mate replacement in sandhill cranes

Michael E. Wheeler ^a, Jeb A. Barzen ^{b,1}, Shawn M. Crimmins ^{c,2}, Timothy R. Van Deelen ^d

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Highlights

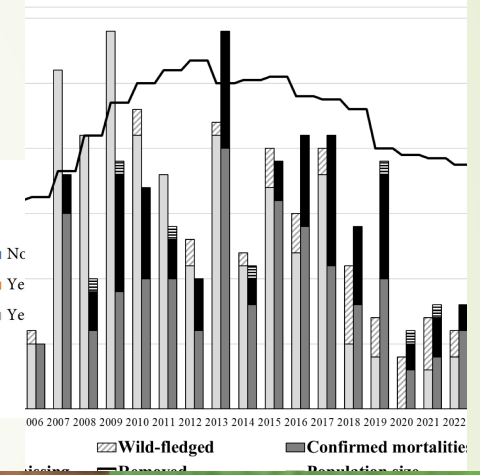
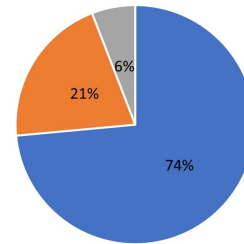
- Harvesting $\geq 7\%$ of a single subpopulation caused long-term declines in abundance.
- Abundance and population growth rate stabilized if harvest intensity was $\leq 4\%$.
- Long-term fixed harvest intensity caused average annual yield to decrease.
- Average annual yield was heavily influenced by harvest of territorial birds.
- Mate replacement caused by mortality affects fecundity.

A sandhill crane hunt?

#6 – Whoopers do not preclude it

- Wisconsin's fragile, expensive whooping crane experiment should be addressed in a hunt
 - "experimental, non-essential population"
- No ethical hunter wants to shoot a whooping crane
- ID training required when applying for SHC permit
- Waterfowl hunters must be able to make finer distinctions on faster, smaller waterfowl

No legally authorized sandhill crane hunter has mistakenly shot a whooping crane





A sandhill crane hunt?

#7 – DNR can manage it

- ▶ History of geographically segmented, limited harvest
 - ▶ Turkey, Elk, Horicon Goose zone
- ▶ Cost of managing the hunt
 - ▶ User fee borne by hunters interested in participating

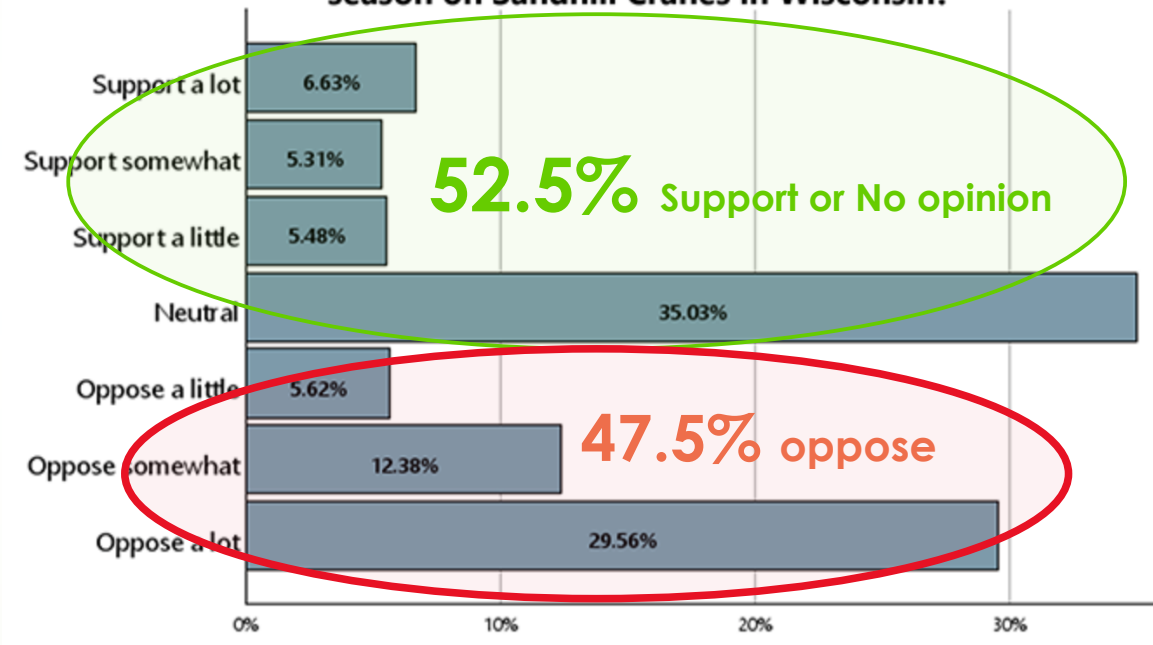
DNR has the competency, experience, and resources to administer a hunt

A sandhill crane hunt?

#8 – Public opinion doesn't discount it

- Recent ICF-sponsored study
 - A minority opposed a hunt
 - 2x as many people supported a hunt as there are hunters
 - The rest simply don't have an opinion

Figure 2.1: To what extent do you support or oppose a hunting season on Sandhill Cranes in Wisconsin?



Emotional connection is important to a species' conservation story but should not bind wildlife managers' hands.

A sandhill crane hunt?

#9 – WI Constitution expects it

“The people have the right to fish, hunt, trap, and take game subject only to reasonable restrictions as prescribed by law.”

Wisconsin Constitution Article 1, Section 26

Question: What's a reasonable restriction for a species that:

- Is hunted across the continent?
- Far exceeds federal population goals?
- Is successfully managed at the federal level?
- Creates substantial agricultural damage ?

Is an opinion poll justification for a “*reasonable restriction*” to a constitutional right?

Sandhill crane hunt: Takeaways

- Hunters are committed conservationists
- The USFWS has:
 - Proven competency to oversee a hunt
 - Foreseen the current challenges
- There are strong logical, equity, agricultural, and legal rationale to establish a Wisconsin crane hunt

Emotional connection to the SACR should not bind wildlife managers' hands, nor unreasonably restrict hunting opportunities... especially if there is some relief for farmers.

Sandhill crane hunt: Recommendations

Draft legislation that directs DNR to:

- 1. Develop a crane management plan**
 - that considers Ag damage, Eco-tourism, Hunting
- 2. Apply for experimental USFWS SACR hunt**
 - without waiting for completion of management plan
- 3. Develop a user fee structure**
 - to cover DNR hunt administration fees

An Ethical and Sustainable Sandhill Crane Hunt

QUESTIONS?

