

CRANES AT A CROSSROAD by Tom Bahti

When I first started as a wildlife manager in Shawano back in the late 1970s, greater sandhill cranes were still a rarity in Wisconsin. I remember the annual spring survey of cranes, run statewide and coordinated in Shawano County by Don Goers, a local car dealer, archery shop owner and dedicated conservationist. Volunteers would spread out across the county at o'dark thirty in the morning to listen for trumpeting birds in designated areas. I always surveyed the Navarino Wildlife Area, and remember hearing perhaps 3-4 birds at various listening points on the 14,000 acres. How things have changed.

They are now a very common "charismatic megafauna" across many landscapes of the state, and, while delighting bird watchers and much of the general public, have not only caused concern with their damage to some agricultural crops, but also raised the question of having a hunting season. Regulated hunting of the lesser sandhill crane has been going on in some states in the Central Flyway for decades, and a handful of states in the Mississippi Flyway have instituted tightly controlled seasons on the greater sub-species for some time now. All have required sound biology and management....therein the conundrum.

The wildlife biology is relatively straightforward science. There is no doubt the sandhill cranes that breed and migrate through Wisconsin could sustain a highly regulated, permit-only fall hunting season with no effect on the population.

The wildlife management side of the equation is a totally different matter, and is the painstaking art. Societal wants, needs and demands, political pressures, statutory requirements, and organized constituencies all play into any discussions of a hunt.

Cranes are beautiful birds, and their courtship displays and migration concentrations bring wonder and awe to many, hunters and non-hunters alike. That being said, hunting could play a role in the protection and management of the bird. To quote The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, a major NGO in the conservation movement, *hunting is conservation*, and that fact cannot be denied.

Hunters, logically, have a vested interest in the species they pursue, and that respect and admiration manifests itself in support of biological management and adequate protection of those critters and, most importantly, their habitats. You need look no further in Wisconsin than to wild turkeys, elk, Canada geese and, dare I say, deer to see the fervor with which our residents covet those wild things and the wild places they call home. Those license dollars, species specific stamps, permit application fees and the like all are part of the grand equation of species management and conservation.

Whether or not Wisconsin is permitted to enact a regulated hunt for sandhill cranes will ultimately rest with decision makers who will need to weigh a wide range of factors. I recently read the term "social license", which describes the willingness of society to tolerate certain activities. Historically, hunting for positive conservation purposes in Wisconsin has had rather broad "social license". We can only hope that sound biology, fair chase, and a continued strong conservation ethic weigh into this decision.

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