

Conservation by Multiplication
By Dan Ashe
Director, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In the 20th century, led by icons including John Muir, Gifford Pinchot, Aldo Leopold and Ding Darling, America created the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the National Wildlife Refuge System and other federal and state public land protections. As a result, nearly 30 percent of the nation's land is protected, in some form, and stands as a foundation for the future.

In the 21st century, we will strengthen that foundation. But if we want to meet this century's conservation challenges, we must link the public estate to the more than 70 percent of the land that is privately owned. Many species entrusted to our care rely on private land to survive and thrive. If we're going to conserve biological diversity, we must keep our public land foundations strong and build on them by engaging private landowners, most of whom are proud land stewards.

That's why we've focused on a vision for the Refuge System that sees refuges as hubs of networks of public and private lands. It's why our field offices are engaging landowners across the country and developing voluntary conservation easements on hundreds of thousands of acres. These easements and other tools allow us to do conservation work through landowners, helping them achieve sustainable economic use of their lands while protecting and enhancing essential habitat for wildlife.

By linking habitat on these private lands to our public estate, we are doing conservation by multiplication rather than simple addition. And to deal with 21st-century challenges like changing climate, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's next generation will need to graduate to algebra, trigonometry and calculus, creating more complex connections and giving wildlife the means to move across the landscape in step with the seasons, increasing human presence and shifting sources of food and shelter. That's why we are building next-generation capacities like Landscape Conservation Cooperatives (LCCs) and Refuge System Inventory and Monitoring.

I recently read an article about Jude Smith, the manager of Buffalo Lake, Muleshoe and Grulla National Wildlife Refuges in Texas and New Mexico. He's at least in Algebra II already.

"Whatever we are doing on the refuge complex," he says, "I'm considering how we can take the benefits and knowledge we have gained to surrounding landowners on the larger landscape. This complex is too small to make the big difference for wildlife that we are after."

Smith knows the formula for success. If you multiply your refuge lands by partnership with private landowners, the product is a landscape that makes the difference.

This is happening as we work to conserve the greater sage-grouse. We have a strong public lands foundation, with 64 percent of the habitat under Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service management. We are strengthening that foundation but also working with and throughout the 11 range states to build strong state conservation programs and enlist private landowners in voluntary conservation. In the end, we are multiplying efforts and conserving a "sagebrush sea" that supports sage-grouse and hundreds of other species.

In Harney County, OR, our folks have signed up nearly 300,000 acres of private ranch lands in conservation agreements. Rancher Tod Strong put it best when he said, “What’s good for the bird is good for the herd.” Amen, Tod.

We *can* conserve the nature of America, if we think big, like Jude Smith, and reach out to good private land stewards like Tod Strong. Practice multiplication! Prepare for calculus! Think big!