

## **Oral History Cover Sheet**

**Name: Harvey Nelson**  
**Date of Interview: January 18, 1991**  
**Location of Interview:**  
**Interviewer:**

**Approximate years worked for Fish and Wildlife Service: 42 years**

**Offices and Field Stations Worked, Positions Held: Assistant Regional Refuge Supervisor in Region 3, First Director of the North American Waterfowl Management Plan**

**Most Important Projects: The North American Plan**

**Colleagues and Mentors: Bob Streeter, Sharon Amundson, Dave Sharp, Jim Patterson**

**Most Important Issues: The three things needed to help get plan on its feet.**

**Brief Summary of Interview: Talked about the three things that needed to be done to get program going, turf battles, habitat base, the Joint Ventures, predation issues, critter control and recognition of public and professional attitudes towards duck/waterfowl populations.**

[Interviewer's voice sounds further away from recorder, so is harder to hear]

Interviewer: Ok

**HN:** That was the basis for setting up the U.S. Implementation Board for the North American Plan, you know, (unclear) we sort of conceive that idea early on but it took a year or more, to um, talk that up among the principle, major conservation organizations and foundations that were interested in being key players in this program. But once they organized that themselves and they did it, I mean we couldn't do it within our structure it had to be done outside the bureaucracy. Um, once they did that uh, I've really been pleased you know with the support and the changing attitude of a lot of those organizations. To begin with, there were a lot of turf battles and a lot of concern over competition for funding and competition for membership and they were going to have their own programs to support and their own cliental to deal with, well we recognized that. And that's the kind of conversion that went on that goes through meetings until they finally agree that this is bigger than all of us and it needs our support and have to set aside all these old conflicts and debates, turf battles; and uh, not that they won't exist but we have to cut through them. And we never got that done until we got the Chief Executive Officers of these organizations around the table. Uh, and then they made up their own mind, but there were three things they felt they could do initially, that they could put their major effort into; that would not necessarily conflict with their own internal organization. One was to develop strong or stronger legislative support, uh to

assist with fund raising aspects and to assist in the communications field. Cuz we recognized again early on that the PR base for this program was almost non-existent, and to some degree, still the weakest link. Um, Implementation Board over time has done by far their best work in a Legislative arena and that's because those organizations know how to lobby and know how to do things cooperatively. And uh, through the National Resources Council of America, an international association, and perhaps guided strongly by Larry Young and the (unclear) Institute uh that's where our strength has been. And uh, and more recently then with the stronger role of Ducks Unlimited, Nature Conservancy, Isaac Walton League, National Wildlife Federation, Ottawa Society to some degree, and some of the former leading groups like NECD uh, they all kind of come to the table and said "Yep, these are the things we can help do." And just logic thru that mechanism that the Mitchell Bill was conceived and drafted and the Lithium's Act got passed, didn't happen just because a few key politicians decided they (unclear) do it and they had a lot of support.

**Interviewer:** [Can't hear him as well] Well, it's funny I was just joking (Harvey Coughed, missed part of what was said) at the DNR Wednesday and be seated at a table with Ducks Unlimited, Waterfowl Association, Pheasants Forever, Nature Conservancy and every body is just sort of (makes a some type of sound) getting together, working together; I thought that was pretty exciting.

**HN:** You bet. And I think that's been the real plus of this whole program and the fact that it's moving forward, cuz that, collectively people have been willing to set aside a lot of their earlier disputes, turf battles and put their shoulder to the wheel and say "We're

willing to help support this program, we think there's things we can do and um no matter how big or how small our contributions, we can help make it happen."

**Interviewer:** Given, a lot of change in the weather, and giving, given, steady, continuous progress on the North American Plan, continuing cooperation, partnerships, we partnerships, (unclear, someone coughing) more private support can we send a hundred million ducks south by the year 2000, or is the human population in our physical desires just going to keep us from ever reaching that, that point?

**HN:** Well, we struggle with that issue, obviously, since the day we started this program, but my own personal opinion is that those goals and objectives are attainable. We struggled with that in the drafting of the plan itself, (unclear) we didn't back way up to the habitat base and the populations that existed back in the mid '50's, which were both higher. But because of the lose that occurred in the habitat base, particular, from the mid '50' s to the early '70's, we sort of selected the early '70's as logically base to work from; we felt that those habitat figures, those population objectives were realistic. So... the message that we keep sending is that if we can attain the, if we can achieve the habitat objectives of the North American Plan, as outlined for the principles area in that plan, which are the Joint Ventures, will be future Joint Ventures. And if we can, if we can secure or provide long-term protection to the initial 6 million additional acres, high percentage of which is associated with the Canadian prairies and U.S. prairies, that'll get us a long way down the road in securing that habitat base. But if you look at the plan carefully, that's not the only habitat requirement that recognizes early on in there that in addition to that, see that's, those are major areas of concern, and they're areas that need long term protection, long term in the sense of ten year easements and (unclear). In

addition to that, it was clearly identified the need to, to also modify land use practices, prairie agriculture particular, but not just the prairies, to help achieve and modify, return to a more natural conditions. Another part landscape, over the (unclear, some type of noise coming thru) and that would have to be on thru agriculture programs, thru other incentive programs to, to deal directly with private landowners. A lot of those concepts were really based on the Mid-Continent Waterfowl Program, the information that had been gleamed out of there over time and some of it goes way back to the early work in northern prairie in terms of what was happening in prairie landscaping. So, with that kind of information base that was pretty solid. It became more obvious that indeed you could accomplish more and I think that's been reflective. Of course the last few years, the '85 farm program, now they modify it, '90 Farm Bill and then the new emphasis and support of private lands initiatives, stronger interest in new wetlands initiatives. I think all these things that come together and tend to address this basic habitat base that we're dealing with. So if we can keep that all under perspective and not get locked in the entirely to the acreage goals of the plan, which are really key areas with long term protection and we can keep in the foreground the identified need that the real efforts has to occur on private lands, then I think they're make it. Along with that, we've also gotta to be sure that we don't let the breeding population base for ducks, at least the ten principle species, erode to the point that you destroy their recovery capability. That concerns me probably more than the, then the habitat base of the final analysis.

**Interviewer:** Do you know where that point is?

**HN:** We don't know where that point is, got some good clues that are probably there in some species, so we got to be very careful that we don't let it slip any farther. I think

that's evident particular in pintails. Um, on the other side of that whole equation is that....we can't do all this alone, obviously, that's been the concept from day one in terms of implementing the North American Plan. That gave, provided the (unclear) to the Joint Venture concepts, the partnership concepts, and the private lands concepts, new wetlands initiatives, which all evolved into the President's (unclear) Policy (unclear) wetlands. All these things that are being, keep doing, but there's more to it than that because it's more than just wetlands and uh I'm also concerned that, that we keep that message up front loud and clear that it's, we talk about the habitat base, wetlands are an important ingredient but if you don't have the uplands or the grasslands or the other components to go along with that enhance production of (unclear) or prairie ducks, you're never going to get there. And then of course the other real important facet of that is, if we don't very quickly come to some decision, some resolution on the impact of predation in the prairies, we still have a major impediment to deal with. So, I keep saying loud and clear, you heard me other places before say it, that uh while there's no argument over the need to secure that habitat base and to do all these other good things in the long term, including what we need to do in private lands, that's our number one issue. Perhaps our second most important factor limiting duck production is, in the prairies if not the whole country, is the predation issue. And uh if we don't decide or don't... decide how we're going address that and be willing to put some major funding behind a program to deal with that effectively, we may well put the habitat base in place and not attain the population protections for ducks.

**Interviewer:** Well it seems like with the predator (Harvey coughing, couldn't hear) everybody realizes what's going on and they want to work with, (unclear) is a different

thing and uh state or federal agencies don't really know how to address the problem or how do how keep the predators from (unclear), um, private organizations do but yet nobody really seems like they want take the ball. We see this predator problem (unclear) back in '69 when I went up to Saskatchewan for the first time; you never saw a (unclear) now they're quite common. So, I mean it's just, it's staggering what is going on out there but you know when you got (unclear) has had an affect on it as well to, but good (unclear).

**HN:** Well, there's so many interrelationships involved and the range, and the issues range all the way from basic biology and duck production to human attitudes and emotions, so it's a very emotional charged issue. And for that reason um even many practical managers and positive thinking biologists are reluctant to deal with it, they like to have it go away.

**Interviewer:** But it's not going...

**HN:** It's not going to go away though; it's going to get worse. Because the more you reduce the.....the more you reduce the land base, the portions of the landscape that are important to prairie nesting, ground nesting birds of the prairie, particular ducks, um the less the change they're going to have to survive and the more you tend to enable predators to have a greater impact. Now, I've said for a long time, even we started do to initial research on this subject on the prairie (unclear) that was 20 years ago, 25 years ago. Um, we had to look at it from a long term and a short term basis gotta look at from an intensive view point and broader extensive view point in the long term. And while we knew there were certain things we could do to reduce the availing predators' particularity on a seasonal basis, it was largely critter control with lethal methods, so early on we, you

know that's really all that was at our disposal. We started to look other things that are not lethal or about the habitat, guess you know we spent on the prairies spent years in mid-continent others still are spending time and effort on the Wetland Program, management districts. Well this is a true relationship between more extensive habitat (unclear) than the predator population and their ability to (unclear). Um... we know, to a certain degree, that the broader the landscape that the birds have to nest in out there, the greater the acreage of suitable nesting cover, generally you would think the better chance they have for success and to some degree that's true. But the advent of the Sierra Peak Program, even back in the days of the Water (unclear) Program, we got some clues to how birds respond to changing distribution cover. Sierra Peak Program certainly offered new opportunities to, to look further at the advantages of a, the positive aspects of larger blocks of cover on private land. The trouble is we never launched any systematic evaluation of waterfowl response to that and that's a major tactical error the Service made. We uh pleaded with them to include waterfowl in the National Inventory Process of the evaluation of the Sierra Peak Program. They didn't do it because the International Association Committee that dealt with that said "Well we think that the states involvement here should relate to resident species, the Fish and Wildlife Service should be responsible for migratory birds." And the end result was ducks were never, were never incorporated in the list of species that were being evaluated. And I'm not sure that the evaluation system that they're doing, in that regard out at Fort Collins, is really, I shouldn't say I disagree with what they're doing cuz I haven't seen the results, but I'm not sure that, that even going to be good (unclear) for resident species; particularly pheasants and grouse and (unclear) and things like, birds of that nature. We have some



other clues though that come out of North Dakota, northern prairie out in Minnesota wetlands districts, that um even with the, the increase in the size of management units, the increase of quality of cover, response by ground nesting ducks um is good up to a point....and you, the first few years as the cover improved you begin to get increase number of nests. But then of all a sudden, we find they, that their **success rate** is still low and even though in the same block of cover you might have a higher nesting success for pheasants or for sharp tails or for **(unclear)**, still low for ducks. Which tells us that we got some clues to this over time, tells us that uh there's something about upland nesting ducks, I think the same is true for over water nesting ducks; there's something in their nesting behavior, perhaps in their nest site selection or location and I can't help but believe that there's some kind of, um set factor involved here. Or by predators, **(unclear)** I don't know about **(unclear)** predators but **(unclear)** predators, a pair that can find duck nests a hell of a lot quicker and easier than other nests, something there we really don't know what the answer is.

**Interviewer:** I've always wondered about that too just **(Harvey coughing couldn't hear part of what was said)** and I've lost pheasants, **(unclear)** losing pheasants, you know the bird hits the ground and I've lost **(unclear)** this year, the dogs were right there and you know **(unclear)** but I've never lost ducks like that. In fact I've had my dogs go out, more than **(unclear)** away came along **(unclear)** and they had three or four **cripples** already, **(unclear)** so yea I feel very strongly about **(unclear)**.

**HN:** There's something different there, it's an **(unclear)** problem than what it is, that's a, my way of thinking and I've made this suggestion several times but it's never really gotten any where that eventually we're, we really need to put some research money into

this part of the equation to fully understand what that is. There may be ways through cover manipulation or covers plants species or some deterrence or chemical deterrence or repellants or whatever that might be, might be ways to overcome that; so that's one issue. It's pretty obvious that we're not going to get very far down the road in launching a major predation management program to increase ducks or upland game bird production, the U.S. or maybe even Canada, if it's only going to be based on... critter control or elimination. Sure there, there's a certain amount that we'll need to do but that, you were at the Jamestown Symposium and heard those discussions, that gets back into in my terminology, intensive control, intensive management on public lands. There's things we can do on state and federal lands to more intensively manage predators than we can on private lands (unclear). So we still have to look at what can be done in the long term to reduce the predation on private lands, and that's another ball game. And they may well rest in the area of, of habitat relationships and the size of cover blocks and things we don't know a lot about. Or it may rest more with uh some other kinds of... new methods for reducing the capability of predators to reproduce, to affect their behavior and their food selection, other kinds of repellent devices and things I don't know. Um I'm a personal believer in the, we've not exhausted the uh chemical side of this equation, a lot of research people throw up their arms and say "Well, we've researched this area for 30, 40 years and without spending millions of dollars, we don't see anything on the horizon at all" I don't agree with that. You can take something as pure and simple as the (unclear) reproductive inhibitors, and uh we know that the potential is out there, the thing we don't know much about is developing delivery systems to (unclear) the critter that you want to deal with effectively for a given short period of

time in **spring of the year**. It strikes me, and I've said this publicly, that if you go to the corner grocery store and buy dog food that contains chemical compounds that interrupt the ovulation cycle of female dogs, why in the hell can't you develop something that you put in jelly beans or **(unclear)**...

**Interviewer:** **(unclear)** beans.

**HN:** something that you throw in every covert and every county road, the prairies that uh will affect the reproduction of skunks or raccoons or foxes or whatever eats it; it's not going to killing 'em, it might interrupt dogs too, cats who knows but it's not going to kill 'em, **so (unclear)** socials enigma of killing critters.

**Interviewer:** **(unclear)** being all **(unclear)**?

**HN:** Well it's being thought about again. I went out this past summer spent a couple days out in Denver with the um the **APHIS** Lab, you know used to be the Fish and Wildlife lab, since when we lost the Denver research center and transferred the, transferred the animal damage control program to agriculture, Fish and Wildlife Service lost it's research capability in this area and we haven't restored it. There's been some talk about trying to do that but uh, the only work that's continued of any magnitude at all has been with **(unclear)** people have done it **more than prairie** and that's really more in the area of predator behavior and habitat relationships, as it should be. It takes a special facility to deal with this and it's cost.

**Interviewer:** **(can't hear what was said)**

**HN:** But uh, what I've learned from my discussions with people in agriculture is that they would be ready and willing to, to move and help in this area, providing there's new money for research; which means that between Interior and Agriculture or Fish and

Wildlife Service and **APHIS**, we've have to jointly adopt some kind of a policy position on this issue and go for the money to get it done. Of course one of the issues that you're faced with right on, right off the bat is: why do you want to do this, why do you want to raise more ducks than you're raising now?

**Interviewer:** Aren't there enough?

**HN:** And your answer has to be: there's not enough to meet the demand. Not for **(unclear)**.

**Interviewer:** **(unclear, some talking at same time)**...to justify that is **(unclear, can't hear.)**

**HN:** But, there are other things we should look at. We need to look at the whole relationship to other bird species, to song birds' cuz we know a lot of other ground nesting song birds are affected just as easily, **they're taken**. And any place we can relate this to endangered species and other sensitive species we've got **(unclear)** by now. So it takes some fairly careful thought in developing a rational program that perhaps you can sell to Congress. It's kind-of interesting, we had, you know, a lot of discussion about this the last two, three years and uh it's always been one of the, the items on my back burner that we need to move forward with.

**Interviewer:** **(unclear)** really because we are running off short amount time.

**HN:** Well we've made many attempts to do that, right up to getting on the agenda for Director Meetings and um but we don't have agreement within the Fish and Wildlife Service, we don't even have agreement among the members of the Fish and Wildlife Service Director that this is an important issue. And until we do that, and until the Director or somebody decides it is an important issue uh I don't know how far we're going to get.

Interviewer: Yea, yea.

HN: We've got the develop help on the outside I think to focus attention on and we're starting to do that.

Interviewer: We're running out in a hurry, um I could, you could probably talk for 12, 18 hours, um...

HN: Let's get back something that you want to be sure of. I should leave that subject by saying I talked to Dick Smith yesterday and I think we're going get it on the February Directory agenda.

Interviewer: I guess one of the things that concerns me with the Service is everybody's got their own little thing and you know it's not, people some people are concerned with private lands and some people on refuges care about private lands and I think a lot of times from what I've seen uh there could be a lot more favorable interplay when various individuals to accomplish objectives, and I guess that's (unclear)...so I'm sure you've seen this....

HN: (unclear) Yea we really have a lot of internal disagreement or lack of understanding or something or maybe just uh turf on the...

Interviewer: turf...

HN: ...sense of programs, um which I don't buy into at all. I mean I try to stay up above that level and those things are all important, but they need to be meshed together they can't function independently.

Interviewer: That's right, (unclear) that's right.

**HN:** You know, it kind of bothers me when I read the Region 3 Wetland Report and um, the Private Lands Report of accomplishments and you can't find the North American Plan mentioned in it.

**Interviewer:** No.

**HN:** And there's several places I can edit the copying and show the relationship and it would be to everybody's advantage.

**Interviewer:** Yep, that's right.

**HN:** And we even suggested that, but nobody pays attention to it.

**Interviewer:** What's the biggest uh, biggest change in waterfowl management since you've come on board or most important active waterfowl management?

**HN:** Well, number one I think the uh, the professional recognition and an increasing public recognition that um supply of ducks or waterfowl are not unlimited and also recognition that uh the habitat base is truly eroding and disappearing; taking a long time for that to sink in. It starts to happen when the public begins to recognize that, land owners begin to recognize it, duck hunters recognize it and that degree of recognition is taken different twists and turns and over time uh I think it's starting to come together. So I think that's been a major change in recognition and attitude. I think there's a stronger recognition that uh, I like to think that...the, hunting is important management factor dealing with the set of problems. It's been a long time position and sort of an attitude that uh, part of it's based on pretty solid, earlier scientific work, that hunting really had no impact; compensatory mortality was the issue, I don't believe that. I don't believe it particularly when population levels began to decline to a point that you're impacting the breeding stock. During years of uh good reproduction and high population levels, then I

think there is some, some....some logical rational behind compensatory mortality. I think it goes out the door when you get down to a certain threshold of what population (unclear), so that's a major issue and uh I think the Service as well as the states have got to come to grips with impact on it. It's starting to happen, you have to.

**Interviewer:** Well it seems like there's so many hunters (unclear, Harvey coughing) issue, why not the state and federal agencies (unclear).

**HN:** It's a Flyway Council problem is what it is and the reluctance to want to deal with it. And a reluctance because of, has a very direct bearing on hunting of many states.

**Interviewer:** Blocking the railroad signal.

**HN:** So we have to, we have to rise above that somewhere. I think there's some um, there's a stronger recognition and support for intensive management and species management and population management. I think people have begun to see the possibilities and the results from that in the migratory bird world, particularly waterfowl. Well we're kind of fortunate that the goose populations have been being well the last seven to eleven years of this drought period we're in, if it hadn't been for that I know where we'll be in terms of the waterfowl hunting fraternity.

**Interviewer:** Well there wouldn't be a lot of waiters sold.

**HN:** We had a lot of it, well I think we've have a rebellion on our hands in terms of the way we're managing.

**Interviewer:** Yea, yep.

**HN:** And I guess I'm concerned personally that uh we've got to demonstrate to the public and to, particularly to all our anti-hunting elements that are coming to the forefront, that we know something about how to manage waterfowl. And we've got to

demonstrate that we don't let these populations decline any further. So that's where I see some things at. But uh, I see increase recognition in having to do a better job of managing the lands that the federal agencies and the state agencies (unclear), we can do that, that's what we're in business for; but that won't solve the problems any longer.

Interviewer: No, no.

HN: You've gotta be able to come to grips with how do we get a, get a better job of management done on private lands that are so important, and providing 70, 80, 90 % of these species that we're dealing with in certain parts of the country, not true for geese (unclear).

Interviewer: Well I think when we can sell (Harvey coughing, unclear) not only look at ducks but water quality and (unclear) and flooding issues like that so (unclear) then (unclear)...

HN: (unclear) I went out a couple times this week and talked to the Minnesota DNR enforcement officers training session they had on