

# The Role of the California Department of Fish and Game in the Conservation of California's Oak Woodlands<sup>1</sup>

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As you put the role of the California Department of Fish and Game in hardwood conservation in perspective, it is important to focus on the resource and the Department's interest in oaks. Depending on the source of the estimates, there are somewhere between 7.5 and 11 million acres of hardwood-dominated rangelands in California. From a wildlife perspective, they are very rich in native species, providing important habitats for more than 300 species of amphibians, reptiles, birds, and mammals. Key featured species draw a lot of public attention, including mule deer (*Odocoileus hemionus*), black bear (*Ursus americanus*), western gray squirrel (*Sciurus griseus*), band-tailed pigeon (*Columba fasciata*), and mountain quail (*Oreortyx pictus*). These five species provide recreational hunting and wildlife viewing opportunities on both privately and publicly managed oak woodlands. Furthermore, the myriad nongame species also provide innumerable wildlife-viewing opportunities.

There have been significant losses, fragmentation, and other negative impacts on oak woodland throughout California during the past century. In particular, losses and changes due to residential and commercial development have increased over the past 20 to 30 years. We need to recognize that there have been some changes in the land uses which most affect oak woodlands. We know traditional impacts to oak woodlands in rural areas were fuel wood cutting, removal, and control of oaks for rangeland improvement. However, in recent years and in different areas including southern California, the San Francisco Bay Area, and some of the expanding urban areas, removal of oaks and fragmentation of hardwood-dominated plant communities are due to the demand for human developments on lands in and around urban areas.

So what is the role of the Department in conserving oaks? Generally speaking, under state laws and public policy in California, the Department is the agency primarily responsible for conserving, protecting, and managing wildlife resources. The Department's hardwoods programs are guided by these laws and public policies. We carry out these responsibilities as generally framed by the California Environmental Quality Act and the more recent public policy jointly developed and implemented by the California Board of Forestry (Board) and California Fish and Game Commission.

The Department recognizes that adopting policies and regulations is not the only option to encourage oak woodland conservation. An important component of the Department's program involves developing and implementing guidelines for enhancing both the wildlife species and oak woodland habitats upon which they depend. Participation in the Integrated Hardwood Range Management Program through the University of California and involvement with both the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection and the Board offer other means to represent wildlife interests.

An important role, of course, is land management, and the Department is also a land manager. The Department administers approximately 200 wildlife areas and ecological reserves involving more than 750,000 acres. These areas support some 55,000 acres of significant oak woodland habitats that we are responsible for managing, protecting, and improving.

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<sup>1</sup>This was an invited, plenary paper presented at the Symposium on Oak Woodlands: Ecology, Management, and Urban Interface Issues, 19-22 March 1996, San Luis Obispo, Calif. None of the plenary papers at this symposium was subjected to technical peer review; they were the views of the presenters, in behalf of the organizations they represented.

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What does the future hold? There is cause for concern. The well-documented declines and fragmentation in oak woodland habitats, along with the commensurate pressures on oak woodland-dependent species, should be seen as a serious warning. Valley oak woodlands, for example, are suffering from urban and agricultural development pressures. They have suffered extensive losses, and these losses continue at an alarming rate.

In the face of these human pressures and increasing levels of residential and commercial development in oak woodlands near major urban areas, it is time for a reality check. In light of the down-sizing in natural resource agencies at both the state and federal levels, there are fewer people and funds available specifically for hardwood and oak woodland management programs. The reality is that there is going to be less done by government natural resource agencies. The key to addressing that challenge, of course, is what we can and will do together. I think we need to recognize the importance of partnerships. I think we need to recognize the importance of partnerships. In light of the fact that approximately 80 percent of California's hardwood rangelands are on private land, successful programs will involve landowners, local governments, and nongovernmental organizations. We need to use some new techniques, such as interest-based negotiations. By doing so, we can identify the mutual benefits and the mutual desires of landowners, local, state, and federal governments, and other interested parties involved in long-term efforts to protect and manage the state's magnificent oak woodland plant communities and attendant wildlife.

Those are some of the realities that cause me to be cautious. However, there is also reason for cautious optimism. We are seeing a higher level of public recognition of the importance, from a natural resource perspective, of oak woodlands in California. They do support a wide variety of wildlife, and the public expects and demands protection of those values. We are seeing unprecedented levels of cooperation at higher levels between some of the most important government agencies and private partners. Cooperating agencies include the Department, California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, University of California, California Oak Foundation, California Cattlemen's Association, and conservation groups in general.

The Department is actively involved in a wildlife management area program for private lands, and much of the private land enrolled in this program occurs in oak woodlands. Incentives are offered to the owners of private lands to manage their property so that it benefits wildlife and complements their primary land uses. Under this program, fee hunting and wildlife-associated recreation can be custom fit into a 5-year habitat and land management plan. More than 50 of those areas are licensed by the California Fish and Game Commission. The landowners pay fees to defray the costs of administering the program. We see this program as a win-win outreach situation. About two-thirds of those areas are north of Sacramento, with most interest in the northeastern part of the state.

It is also important to look at the results of current applied management investigations. An example is timber stand manipulation in California black oak (*Quercus kelloggii*) communities involving the Department and the USDA Forest Service on the Tahoe and Eldorado National Forests. Results can provide the standards we need to better guide future management programs. Conferences such as this that encourage the exchange of information and improved awareness are also important. That kind of commitment is what we need and is a reason to be optimistic.

I encourage you to build on this cooperative spirit, expand the partnerships, and encourage the exchange of information in order to reach those mutually beneficial outcomes that we would all like to see for California's oak woodlands.