

The iron Triangle: Why The Wildlife Society Needs to Take a Position on Economic Growth
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Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (Summer, 2003), pp. 574-577

Published by: [Allen Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3784341>

Accessed: 09/08/2012 12:03

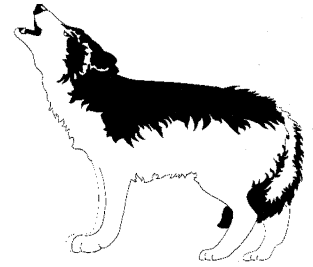
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In My Opinion



The iron triangle: why The Wildlife Society needs to take a position on economic growth

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As The Wildlife Society (TWS) Council met on the morning of September 24, 2002 at the ninth annual TWS conference, one could sense a pivotal moment in the history of the wildlife profession. After substantial deliberation, Council accepted a technical review for printing (Trauger et al. 2003) that addresses the weighty issue of economic growth. Despite the perennial political rhetoric to the contrary, it states, "Based upon sound theoretical and empirical evidence, there is a fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation." It also identifies a steady-state economy as a viable solution.

For some TWS members, the printing of the technical review approaches the culmination of 5 years of effort. We say "approaches" because the real culmination will be a position statement on economic growth, which the Local Governance Working Group of TWS began formally advocating at the sixth annual conference in 1998 (Czech 2000a). But taking a position on economic growth is not something TWS will readily do, not even with the aforementioned technical review in hand. Powerful forces exist who do not want the public to think a conflict exists between economic growth and wildlife conservation, as we will describe.

First, we want to address a blasé response to the technical review that may come from one cohort of wildlife professionals. The response may be paraphrased, "Big deal; we have now acknowledged the

self-evident." The problem is, however, that in recent decades the conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation has been anything but self-evident to the majority of Americans. And the wildlife profession is partly to blame because it has historically obfuscated the issue for the sake of political expediency (Czech 2000b).

As if that were not problematic enough, there is a much stronger obfuscatory phenomenon with which to contend. In political science this phenomenon is called the "iron triangle" (Miroff et al. 2002). An iron triangle consists of a special-interest group, a supportive political faction, and a professional society (usually manifest in a government agency) that dominates a policy arena and fends off all comers. Iron triangles are not necessarily conspiratorial. They can simply materialize when interest groups, politicians, and professionals have similar backgrounds, perspectives, and mutual economic and political interests (Browne 1992).

Let us consider the iron triangle most relevant to the conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation in the United States. This iron triangle is a virtual juggernaut in the policy arena because the "special interest" is the corporate community at large and the political "faction" is the political community at large! Corporations are concerned primarily with profits and therefore are served by a national policy of economic growth. Meanwhile,

our campaign financing system ensures political fealty to the corporate community (Korten 2001). Most folks have some sense of this impure aspect of American politics; witness the sweeping support for campaign finance reform.

Most people are oblivious, however, to the third side of the iron triangle, which is comprised of neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics arose at the dawn of the twentieth century largely as an attempt to separate the study of economics from the study of politics for the sake of mathematical analysis (Heilbroner 1992). It took the place of nineteenth-century classical economics, which was commonly referred to as “political economy” by the classical economists themselves (such as Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and John Stuart Mill). Neoclassical economics has become such an abstract, mathematical discipline that many scholars claim it has lost much of its relevance to ecological, social, and political issues (Ormerod 1997). Nonetheless, neoclassical economics is the mainstream school of economics throughout the modern world (Heilbroner 1992). It feeds the politicians the politically expedient theory of unlimited economic growth and the corollary that there is no conflict between economic growth and environmental protection (Daly 1997). The neoclassical theory of unlimited growth also helps to maintain “consumer confidence,” which is conducive to corporate profit. The influence of neoclassical economic growth theory has dire implications for wildlife conservation (Erickson 2000, Hall et al. 2000).

In response to growing discontent with neoclassical economics, various academic reform movements, societies, and schools of thought have arisen (Ormerod 1997). Examples include the International Society for Ecological Economics, the South African New Economics Network (SANE), the Post-Autistic Economics Movement (formed by French university students), various schools of Georgists, and the gradual resurrection of political economy in the academic literature. Perhaps the economist Mason Gaffney and his colleague Fred Harrison (1994) have gone the farthest in their criticism, identifying neoclassical economics as a political tool developed by American land barons to defuse the populist movement of the 1890s. They argued that Henry George’s (1839–1897) wildly popular proposal for a single tax on land was a potentially devastating threat to the land barons, who then established new economics departments in leading American universities and hired faculty to denigrate the importance of land as a factor of economic production.

The argument of Gaffney and Harrison (1994)

may seem cynical, yet their analysis is exceedingly well documented. In any event, the argument is consistent with a major distinction between neoclassical economics and the classical economics it replaced: land, labor, and capital are no longer commonly referred to as the factors of production, as they were during the classical era (Heilbroner 1992). Instead, neoclassical economic production functions are based entirely upon capital and labor (Jones 1998). This encourages economics students to underestimate the importance of land and natural resources to a sustainable economy (Daly 1997).

Wildlife professionals, however, should use discretion in their critiques of neoclassical economics. Neoclassical economics has given us much, especially in the realm of microeconomics. For example, cost-benefit analysis, hunting and fishing expenditure studies, and the contingent valuation of wildlife have helped wildlife managers make better decisions and illustrate the value of wildlife to American society (Loomis 2000). Our critique should be targeted primarily toward neoclassical macroeconomics, especially its theory of unlimited economic growth. Largely as a result of that theory, economic growth has become ensconced as a primary, perennial, and bipartisan national goal (Czech 2000*b*). Wildlife conservation requires us to weigh in at the economic policy table, but the iron triangle blocks our path.

Is there any weakness in the iron triangle? Of course there is! As wildlife professionals, we frequently employ the concept of limiting factor. We usually apply it to the production of wildlife, but in this case we may apply it to the production of policy.

The limiting factor for the iron triangle’s influence on economic policy clearly is not the corporate community with its vast resources (Korten 2001). Nor is it the political community, connected to corporate resources as it is (Greider 1992). The iron triangle’s limiting factor is neoclassical economics, partly because of its somewhat weaker attachment to the corporate community and partly because of the duress it is under from so many angles.

Fortunately for the wildlife profession, neoclassical economics is precisely the side of the iron triangle we are most prepared to breach, and our major ally is the ecological economics movement (represented by the International Society for Ecological Economics and various national chapters). The process has begun, for neoclassical economists typically argue that there is no conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation, while we and the ecological economists say there is (Trauger et al. 2003). But this is just a start; a TWS position is the next step.

What can the typical wildlife professional do toward this end? For starters, one may join the Working Group for the Steady State Economy. This group sees its primary roles as educating wildlife professionals and others on the fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation, coordinating with the ecological economics movement, and advocating the steady-state economy as a viable alternative to economic growth. At first we will advocate especially within TWS, where we may hone our advocacy skills among friends and colleagues. Once TWS takes a position on economic growth, we will be prepared to judiciously advocate for the steady-state economy in wider circles.

Some will counter that the TWS technical review on economic growth will suffice to express the current state of our knowledge, but technical reviews have little more (and perhaps less) impact on the policy arena than academic periodicals. A position statement, on the other hand, has great potential. In fact, that is why professional positions are taken (i.e., to weigh in on contentious policy issues). Most TWS technical reviews, including the technical review on economic growth, originate as supporting documents for positions.

Let us consider some of the ways a position on economic growth could be used by wildlife professionals. First, when public forums are held and corporate representatives, politicians, or neoclassical economists tell the audience there is no conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation, the wildlife professional may respond, "I beg to differ. In fact, The Wildlife Society, the society of professionals devoted to the science and conservation of wildlife, takes the position that there is a *fundamental* conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation..." This will make a huge difference in such forums because it will mark the end of the economics monopoly over transdisciplinary issues in which other professions have as much or more to contribute. Other professional societies and non-governmental organizations will be empowered and emboldened by the TWS position and likely will follow suit, engendering a synergistic and positive effect on the political economy of wildlife conservation.

We can illustrate another potential scenario with an example. Three years ago, one of us had an opportunity to brief the director of a prominent federal wildlife agency on the conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation and to propose a program to gradually educate the public about the conflict. The opportunity bore some fruit, but the fruit soon withered under the pressure experienced by the

director. Part of the problem was that it was just one person making the argument. If that person could instead have said, "But don't take my word for it; the profession you and I belong to, manifest in The Wildlife Society, takes the position that there is a fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation," the director certainly would have felt much more comfortable and empowered to act.

Finally, we would like to address what we might call "positive redundancy." It is true that TWS has a position on population, one of the two constituents (along with per-capita consumption) of economic growth. Other TWS positions perhaps could be supplemented with language pertaining to per-capita consumption. Then one could argue that, in effect, TWS already would have a collective position on economic growth. Unfortunately, there is a policy arena for neither population nor consumption; thus, these positions tend to fall on nonexistent ears. Consider the absolute impotence these positions have displayed in conservation discourse, much less the policy arena itself.

There is, on the other hand, a huge policy arena devoted to economic growth. Once economic growth is exposed as the problem and not the solution, it will be analyzed in terms of its constituent parts (i.e., population and per-capita consumption). Policies may then be developed accordingly.

In political science a great deal of emphasis is placed on the development of terminology. To be effective in policy reform, one must employ the established terminology of the existing policy arena or possess the tremendous fiscal and political capital it takes to construct policy arenas with new terms. Even if the wildlife profession had that kind of capital (which we do not) to construct, for example, a population policy arena, we still would have to confront the contradictory policies being developed in the economic growth policy arena. It is essential, then, to use the phrase "economic growth" in developing an effective position.

Just 5 years ago, a TWS position on economic growth seemed like a preposterous proposition. Many wildlife biologists who had given the topic little thought argued that there was no conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation. A larger group that included prominent TWS members acknowledged the conflict but thought the subject matter was beyond the scope of our profession. These two groups were wrong, as evidenced by the technical review (Trauger et al. 2003). Still others feared (and still fear) that a TWS position on economic growth would be too politically costly. Such fear is likewise inappropriate and based upon a simplistic

political calculus. After all, the scientific principles underlying a position on economic growth will resonate with the public's common sense (e.g., one may not have one's cake and eat it, too), creating political benefits that could far outweigh the costs. Other natural-resources professions and organizations will want to jump on the bandwagon once we get it rolling, and we can help them board.

In any event, we ought to tell it like we see it. Furthermore, because it pertains to perhaps the ultimate challenge to wildlife conservation, we ought to tell it in prominent fashion, not hide it among a dubiously distinguished series of shelf-sitting technical reviews. We, The Wildlife Society, should explicate the fundamental conflict between economic growth and wildlife conservation in the form of a policy position.

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