

Wildlife on the Wind—A Field Biologist's Journey and an Indian Reservation's Renewal

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Source: Northwest Science, 85(1) : 72

Published By: Northwest Scientific Association

URL: <https://doi.org/10.3955/046.085.0109>

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A Conservation Success Story

Wildlife on the Wind—A Field Biologist's Journey and an Indian Reservation's Renewal. Bruce L. Smith. Utah State University Press. Logan, Utah (2010). 227 pages.

I enjoyed this book very much. As the title suggests, it describes the personal history and professional life of wildlife biologist Bruce Smith, as related to his work with local tribes on the Wind River Indian Reservation (WRIR) to restore seriously depleted big game populations. Smith provides insight into the social-engineering aspects, as well as the biology, of wildlife conservation in this large (about the size of Yellowstone National Park), relatively pristine area in central Wyoming, where the short-grass prairie meets the Wind River range of the Rocky Mountains. The book chronicles the journey of people and wildlife from a condition of unrestricted hunting and depleted big game populations to approximately 3-fold increases in game animals, substantially increased harvest, and a renewed connection between the tribal members and the wildlife aspect of their cultural heritage. I was a newly hired fisheries biologist when Bruce Smith arrived on the scene as the first wildlife biologist for the WRIR. I can vouch for the lack of big game in the lowlands, where the rare sighting of the largest game typically was pronghorn—always far in the distance and running at top speed, presumably in response to year-round hunting. The “silver bullet” for Bruce’s conservation challenge was the development and adoption of a game code and limits on hunting; for the most part, the wildlife habitat reflected careful stewardship by the Tribes, and all native big game species were still present, except bison.

Starting with virtually no census data, Smith leads us through the processes of inventorying the big game populations and the habitat capacity of WRIR to define the problem, developing a management plan for the reservation, and working through various modes of outreach with the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho American Indian tribes that share the reservation to protect and restore the big game. Tangentially, the smaller, often less charismatic components of the ecosystem also benefited. Along the way, Smith occasionally digresses to reveal his own history as a child, a U.S.

Marine fighting in Vietnam, and a young professional wildlife biologist in Wyoming, Montana, and California—relating influences that ultimately led him to the conservation challenge afforded by WRIR, and providing a second dimension to the book. His descriptions of individuals and discussion of historical, cultural and social issues for the Eastern Shoshone and Northern Arapaho Indians provides an interesting, sometimes tragic, sometimes uplifting third dimension. Significant social obstacles included reconciling traditions of unregulated year-round hunting with recovery of dwindling wildlife numbers; overcoming a century of distrust of U.S. government policy towards the tribes; intertribal conflicts; diminishing connection of youth with nature; and “all humanity’s intrinsic resistance to change.”

Smith’s writing is colorful and engaging, often infused with humorous incidences and distinctive expressions, such as, “[big game] had become as rare as manual typewriters at business machine stores,” or, “[my talk to high school students] went over like a screen door in a submarine.” Stories about the omnivorous, kitchen-raiding horse called *garbage gut*, the hike out from a back-country helicopter crash in hip-deep snow and sub-zero weather, fishing for golden trout in pristine high-elevation lakes, a hair-raising encounter with a large bear, and rehabilitation of an injured American kestrel all provide interesting or humorous details of Smith’s field work and colleagues. Interesting biology tidbits added to my knowledge—e.g., I didn’t know that pronghorns (clocked at 60 mph) can run 23 mph faster than their fastest contemporary predator, the wolf, and that this excess speed presumably resulted from coevolution of the pronghorn with the North American cheetah (now extinct for 13,000 years).

I recommend this highly successful and satisfying conservation case-history to anyone interested in the growth and development of an outstanding wildlife biologist, or to those interested in the recent history and status of wildlife and American Indian peoples in this part of our country.

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