

Wildlife Management and Private Forestlands Management, Southern Illinois

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This report identifies trends in private forestland and wildlife management in Southern Illinois with a limited number of key informant interviews with natural resource professionals and local stakeholders. A strictly qualitative perspective is presented.

Key Findings

- Whitetail deer, waterfowl, and turkey hunting have large presences in Southern Illinois.
- Hunting, and to a lesser extent other types of recreation, are major parts of the Southern Illinois economy.
- Conflicts with wildlife arise in the form of crop damage or automotive damage.
- Wildlife management and forest management are closely related.
- Forest management, including harvests and hardwood plantings, are common as a means of improving habitat and providing income through wood products or the growth of exploitable wildlife populations.
- While forest management trends on private land were viewed very positively, a majority of lands in the region are not managed by forestry professionals.

Wildlife

The primary wildlife issue Southern Illinois region is hunting and the associated game species management. Whitetail deer, waterfowl, and turkey constitute the major game species in the area. Waterfowl hunting has taken the form of geese and duck hunting in the past, but interviews attribute the transition to duck hunting to a loss of geese populations.

Wildlife management is widespread in Southern Illinois. Food plots for deer and turkey are common. Mast-producing (food producing for wildlife) forestland has grown dramatically in the area as have food plots for forage. Additionally, management has increased wetland area to accommodate larger populations of waterfowl. Numerous stakeholders identified the Cache River area as a successful example of this management activity.

Concerns about bluetongue disease in deer were widespread. Stakeholders spoke of an epidemic year of bluetongue that had threatened populations necessary for the continued vitality of white-tail hunting in Southern Illinois. However, stakeholders also recognized bluetongue as a cyclical phenomenon worsened by drought. The doe-to-buck ratio was also a concern in regard to quality of hunting opportunities.

A secondary issue to hunting is the damage caused by these species. Wildlife damage takes the form of crop damage and damage from car collisions with wildlife. Crop damage from deer and turkeys has been especially severe in the past year. Additionally, vegetation damage in urban-rural interface areas has become a problem, especially with increased development in some areas. Bluetongue disease in deer has relieved and will likely continue to relieve some of the population pressures contributing to vegetation damage.

Forest Management on Private Lands

Forestry on private land is closely interrelated to wildlife management. In interviews, stakeholders discussed forest management in terms of wildlife management. Stakeholders recognized the Illinois Department of Natural Resources as active in both wildlife and forest management on private and state forest lands. Likewise, the IDNR was viewed very positively, though understaffed. Stakeholders also emphasized the sharp contrast between the active management on private and state forestlands and the lack of management on the Shawnee National Forest.

Forest acres in the region have expanded sizably in the past few years largely as a result of hardwood plantings for habitat management for deer and water quality improvement. Several large grants have allowed reforestation of private and states lands in the Cache River watershed.

Most interviewees revealed a strongly positive view of active forest management, including harvesting on private lands. A small wood products industry is visible in the region in the form of small-scale sawmill operations, but stakeholders referred to unexploited opportunities with this industry in the region. The emphasis of the interviews was on forest management as an avenue primarily to improving wildlife habitat and secondarily to producing wood products. Still, forestry professionals are only involved in management on a small percentage of privately-owned forestlands. High-grading operations have decreased in recent years but nevertheless are still considered to be a problem.

Recreation & the Economy

The natural areas of Southern Illinois were seen to have significantly impacted the economy of the region. While stakeholders perceived that recreation-based activities were not the economic lifeline of the region, they identified these activities as a major

economic asset for the region. Interviewees highlighted hunting and equestrian activities as having the most impact on the region. The perceived extent of each activity's impact varied among stakeholders. Hunting occurs on both private and public lands, but stakeholders tended to attribute the hunting economy to private lands. In contrast, equestrian activity was inextricably linked to the Shawnee National Forest. Both activities rely heavily on out-of-state visitors. Stakeholders acknowledged the seasonality of these activities.

Dixon Springs Agricultural Center

Stakeholders generally supported the idea of wildlife and forestry research at Dixon Springs Agricultural Center. However, it was not an overarching concern. While hunting and other forms of recreation were not seen as the economic lifeline to the region, hunting and recreation were seen to have a very powerful effect on the economy. Interviews connected this economic impact with support for wildlife and forest management research at DSAC. Stakeholders also spoke of the value of the Forest Resource Center at DSAC while acknowledging the overall lack of education on forestry issues in the region.