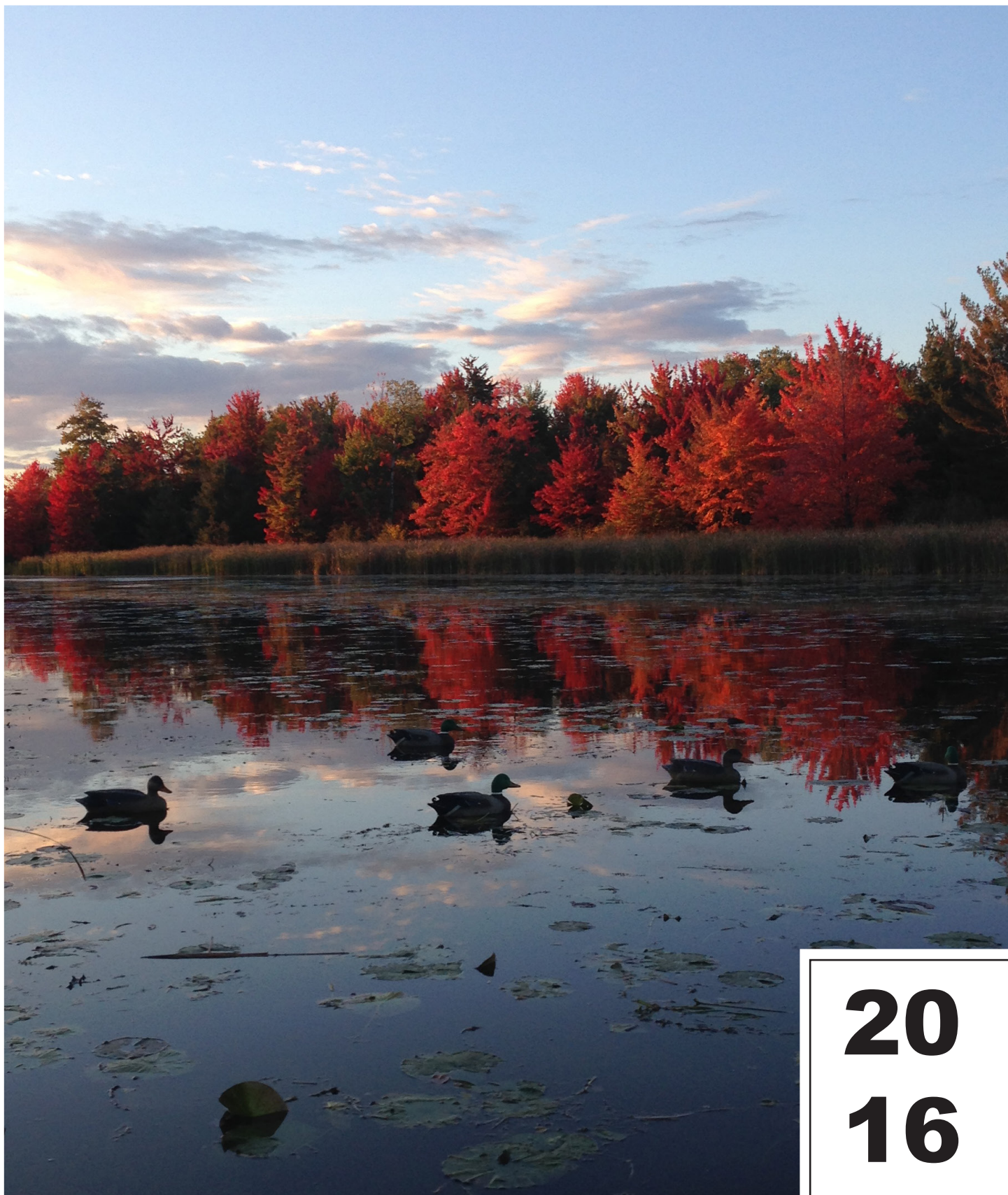


# BLUE RIBBON ADVISORY GROUP FOR SOUTHERN MICHIGAN STATE GAME AREAS



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Some of the recommendations set forth in this report revisit concepts that have been suggested or attempted in the past. Others are wholly new. As the nature of public hunting in Michigan changes and evolves, it is healthy to periodically assess the landscapes supporting those opportunities. Our work here is not intended to replace the current management approaches on our southern Michigan state game areas. Rather, it was undertaken to encourage and support experimentation in those approaches to ensure that these places continue to meet the demands of the hunting public.



# INTRODUCTION

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**O**n May 11, 2015, Michigan Department of Natural Resources (DNR) Director Keith Creagh announced the formation of a Blue Ribbon Advisory Group (Group) to examine certain aspects of the management, and current and future uses, of the southern Michigan State Game Areas (SGAs). Specifically, the Group was charged with the following:

## **Review the Role and Importance of SGAs.**

This work will include an examination of the overall use and intensity on state game lands, the funds and agreements used to acquire these lands, and the current timing and diversity of uses. SGAs play an increasingly vital role in preserving Michigan's hunting, trapping, and angling heritage, and can provide an especially effective instrument to communicate the successful conservation stories central to growing urban publics unfamiliar with the North American Model of Wildlife Management.

## **Provide a Vision for the Future of SGAs.**

The Group will explore habitat or strategic management changes that could enhance the probability of high quality hunting, trapping or angling experiences and examine the potential for the expansion of compatible uses and management practices. Expansion could include support for activities like recreational shooting and wildlife viewing.

## **Recommend Strategies that will Help Meet the New Vision of SGAs.**

The Group should explore potential strategies and the proper allocation of resources to meet new objectives. Recommendations could include potential synergies at the interface between public and private lands or linkages between SGA management and the Hunter Access Program (HAP) to provide additional recreational opportunity. Strategies could also include new forest management strategies such as veneer quality timber management that can improve wildlife habitat, creating revenues for natural resources management, and demonstrate best management practices in forestry and conservation.

## **Propose a Vision and Strategies for Creating Stronger Relationships and Regional Collaboration.**

Identify opportunities to increase awareness and support of, and appreciation for, SGAs among the business community, local and regional units of government, and surrounding communities and populations.

Michigan is rich in public lands of which SGAs are but one category. Among myriad categories of land ownership and regulatory authority associated with those lands, several related to the charge above are important to explicitly define and distinguish:

- There are a number of "dedicated" land types for DNR Wildlife Division (WLD) administration, where the dedication has followed a formal process and approves the administration of the WLD. The benefit of a dedication process is the establishment of a category of management that ensures the long-term interests of conservation and wildlife management. [MCL 324.40501] Of the dedicated types, there are:
  - State Game Areas. There are 94 dedicated SGAs throughout the state.
  - State Wildlife Areas. There are 13 Wildlife Areas in Michigan.
  - State Fish and Wildlife Area. There is one State Fish and Wildlife Area.
  - State Wildlife Research Areas. There are three research areas under WLD management.
- There are also 77 State Wildlife Management Areas embedded within the state forest or state parks system where the wildlife conservation takes priority. The funding of an area may have occurred in the past, which maintains an interest for the WLD. The list of these areas may change over time.

Other divisions may administer lands where WLD has an interest. State forests are administered by the Forest Resources Division. State parks can also have a wildlife component and are administered by Parks and Recreation Division (PRD). The authority to dedicate state parks is found at MCL 324.74102 (2). "The department shall create, maintain, operate, promote, and make available for public use and enjoyment a system of state parks to preserve and protect Michigan's significant natural resources and areas of natural beauty or historic significance, to provide open space for public recreation, and to provide an opportunity to understand Michigan's natural resources and the need to protect and manage those resources."

In both instances, a principle of “co-management” exists between the land controlling division and the wildlife management activities. In southern Michigan, where there are essentially no state forests, the co-management relationship at play in this report is between PRD and WLD. An agreement between the divisions sets forth the wildlife habitat and management prescriptions for parks and recreation areas.

The Group met seven times to explore these subjects and develop the concepts around which this report was to be drafted. Members of the Group gratefully acknowledge substantial support and assistance from the following individuals: Mr. John Beck, Michigan State University; Dr. Russ Mason, MI DNR; Mr. Steve Chadwick, MI DNR; and Ms. Victoria Lischalk, MI DNR.





## BACKGROUND

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The concept of SGAs was born out of conservation practices, which were a public reaction to an era of excessive exploitation (late 1800s -1930s) of land and of wildlife across North America. Commensurate with the founding of conservation agencies (e.g., MDNR in 1921) and refinement of the science of conservation, land acquisition and management was one common technique to restore Michigan's wildlife resources. Purchase of SGA lands was in most cases made with conservation of specific species in mind, and in most cases, these were game animals.

Purchase of SGAs was enabled by financial resources derived from the uniquely American effort in restoration of wildlife, funded through a combination of excise taxes on firearms and ammunition matched against revenue from hunting licenses. Sportsmen and conservationists realized that the declining numbers of game animals and suitable habitat required an extraordinary step, and recognized an opportunity with the onset of excise taxes in the 1930s. The aim of these efforts first and foremost was promoting value to society from restoration of wildlife populations while encouraging wise and sustainable uses of wildlife. The system of funding, protection of funds from diversion, and participation by state fish and game commissions were necessary ingredients for the recovery of wildlife species. The early successes of this conservation movement led to further investment from other sources such as the Game and Fish Protection Fund, Michigan Natural Resources Trust Fund (MNRTF), and Land Exchange Facilitation Fund.

Over the six-decade history of Michigan's SGA system, these areas have supported the conservation of wildlife, and provided recreational opportunities for millions of hunters, trappers, and anglers in pursuit of Michigan's renewable wildlife resources. The SGAs also perpetuated the democracy of hunting by providing places where any individual who holds a hunting license may pursue game. The 94 SGAs in southern Michigan, however, provide a diversity of habitats for myriad wildlife species and access to wildland-based recreation for hunters and non-hunters alike. The diversity exhibited by the SGAs occurs across a spectrum of southern Michigan environments; not all types of habitat, wildlife, or recreational opportunity exist or can exist in every location. The SGA system is one where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

We perceive that the demands placed upon SGAs are extraordinary. Hunting seasons in Michigan begin as early as September 1 and last until the end of May and specific seasons overlap with one another. Some species are eligible for hunting year-round (e.g., coyotes), though these are not frequently pursued on the SGAs. Couple this intensive use for hunting with other forms of recreation that occur in SGAs, and the result is that public lands are heavily used for much of the year. Consequently, the Group devoted a



substantial portion of its discussion to deliberations and recommendations that may ease some of the user conflicts that occur while encouraging management actions that result in greater hunter satisfaction consistent with the capabilities of the land.

As the SGA system has provided an enduring backdrop for various hunting experiences, we also recognize the importance of using SGAs as places to incubate interest in hunting and wildlife among members of the non-hunting public. Accordingly, the Group developed recommendations designed to situate SGAs as places where prospective hunters and trappers may develop the skills and comfort with our public land resources to become ardent users. Beyond encouraging more hunting, other wildlife services can be created by SGAs, including wild land experiences, wildlife viewing, and fishing access.

There was agreement within the Group that the SGAs should be viewed as community assets to the cities, villages, and townships in close proximity to a SGA while also recognizing that some of the larger SGAs are destinations for more distant visitors. The Group developed recommendations designed to create deeper integration of SGAs into the consciousness of local planning, parks and recreation activities; more citizen engagement in the activities that occur in the SGAs; and more connection to schools and educational providers.

Lastly, the Group discussed the physical disposition of SGAs. Although the report does not make specific recommendations for acquisition of new game areas or disposal of existing SGAs, our intent was to conceptualize the SGAs as part of a dynamic system comprised of publicly and privately owned land and leverage existing programs, such as the HAP, to provide more public opportunity on private lands.

The Group noted a serious lack of formal or systematically-collected data on which to form an ideal foundation for our recommendations. We discuss a remedy for that later in this report, but wish to set the frame early on that something less than perfect conditions set the tone for some of the experiments (recommendations) we propose in the report. For some, that uncertainty supports an argument against proceeding. We believe, however, that an adaptive approach to application of the recommendations, in carefully selected areas, will enable testing of assumptions that underlie recommendations and determine suitability for application elsewhere.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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The SGAs primarily must serve two important ends. First, they must continue to provide for wildlife conservation. Wildlife conservation in SGAs supports game and non-game species alike, sustains important habitat complexes unique to that landscape, and functions as part of a larger network of publicly and privately-owned lands that support that same outcome.

Secondly, the SGAs support wildlife-related recreation. Because of their proximity to the major population centers in Michigan, SGAs are heavily used and the expectation is for that use to increase and diversify. The Group aspires to not only have the SGAs continue to be a place that serves the hunting access needs of Michigan's residents, but also have the SGAs in Michigan viewed as places where a quality hunting opportunity awaits.

The recommendations follow function at different scales. For example, some might be applicable to only a few SGAs, others may be applicable to the entire SGA system. Some recommendations may potentially alter the actions of a few personnel, others will require the engagement of multiple offices and divisions within the DNR.

The following recommendations are organized first into a category representing "big changes," which is simply a way of describing recommendations that are expected to generate the most attention and likely the most controversy. They are also the more prescriptive or operational of the recommendations. The others are equally important in the Group's view, but are more commentary on how the DNR might conceptualize its approach to the SGAs in service of hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation, how the SGAs are situated as part of a larger system of public and private land wildlife habitat, and how to leverage partners and others in achieving their desired outcomes for the system.

One additional caveat to the Group's recommendations: no recommendation provided is necessarily appropriate for every game area or every part of any SGA. We do believe, however, that these recommendations are appropriate for some and are worthy of experiment.







## OPERATIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

This set of recommendations pertains primarily to the hunting experience in the game areas. They are designed to assist in reducing hunter to hunter conflict, emphasize potential for an array of hunting experiences, and create knowledge to help inform some of our toughest questions about the manner in which the SGAs are filling the needs of southern Michigan public land hunter.

### 1. Dedicated Management and Allocated Use

Borrowing from the successful model established by the managed waterfowl areas, we propose creating designated management areas for certain species on some SGAs. This recommendation recognizes that not all lands in southern Michigan have potential to produce habitats of the same quantity or quality for all species. Some places simply could be more productive for some species than for others. Accordingly, we suggest that those areas that are, or could be, highly productive for pheasants, for example, have management activities and recreational opportunities defer to maintaining and increasing the productivity of those areas for pheasants.

By way of allocating use in relation to the unique capacity and productivity of each SGA, it may be possible to reduce the potential for hunter conflict. For example, small game hunting opens on September 15, mere days before the first of the many deer hunting opportunities. On October 1, deer hunting gets underway in earnest with the opening of the archery season. The Group heard anecdotally about conflicts between archery deer hunters and small game hunters. This caused the Group to consider ways in which use might be allocated differently to reduce the frequency of those conflicts. For example, recent legislation removed the 450-foot "safety zone" for all forms of hunting, except those with a firearm. With large portions of the game areas that had been affected by the 450-foot rule now available for archery hunting, an opportunity exists to identify and allocate those edge areas that have historically been off-limits to all hunting as archery only hunting zones. Another example of allocating use differently is to apply dedicated species management approach. For example, a mature stand of beech with very little understory is not likely to be highly productive for deer hunting. It could, however, be highly productive for squirrels. Identifying such an area as a small game hunting zone could achieve the outcome of reduced hunter conflict. Similarly, the concept can be applied to those areas that have the potential to be exceptionally productive for deer.

### 2. Limited Draw Hunts

Some of the anecdotal evidence discussed by the Group suggested that public perceptions of SGAs are that one can experience competition and conflict for some areas during specific seasons. Examples include an opening day for small game, pheasants, or for the duration of the firearm deer season. Some members of the Group have witnessed the competition for parking and camping at a SGA for the firearm deer season opener, noting the hunters' strategy of camping many days early to ensure that a block of the SGA would be exclusive for their use.



A limited draw program could be developed as a pilot on a SGA, and may resemble a waterfowl reserved hunt.

This competition can appear to be too confrontational to the uninitiated hunter, the hunter without experience or knowledge of the SGA, or to a hunter without a strong social network or flexibility of accessible areas to recreate in. Consider also the scenario of a parent trying to introduce a young hunter to the sport, where the parent may find the prospect of user conflict at a SGA or the inability to secure a good location outweighs the reward of a good outing. That parent may forego the opportunity to introduce children (or others) to the sport if there are indications of negative conditions.

Where the hunting community needs to recruit, retain and reactivate hunters to perpetuate the sport of hunting, it is our suggestion to try to minimize potential conflict in some limited circumstances and provide some assurances that a new SGA user, new hunter, or a parent or guardian can have a positive experience by ensuring a

date and a place to hunt. A hunter or hunting party could be assured that there will be no turning away or lost opportunity on the day of a hunt.

We recommend that the DNR identify a small number of areas and seasons that could allow for limited draw hunts. These places would likely be in game areas that are served by a field office or some other DNR infrastructure so that the concept could be tested within existing workload. Because of the potential adverse impacts to existing users, we recommend that the experimentation be done in limited areas and with ample public messaging and education. Messaging should also avoid over-promising or guaranteeing experiences. As all hunters know, there are no guarantees for a successful, fair chase hunt. Furthermore, the DNR should:

1. Develop criteria for a limited draw hunt program(s).
  - a. Identify one or more species for hunting opportunity.
  - b. Provide for an advanced drawing or lottery that would allow the user to plan for a specific day or time of activity. The program could feature an internet application period in the summer that will allow the DNR to randomly draw by computer and notify applicant of a specific date where they would have a guaranteed date or time to hunt in a SGA.
  - c. Days and hours of opportunity (e.g. the day could be divided into segments or a number of days per week or season where draw is allowed) and the number of hunters per permit application. These considerations should reflect the uniqueness of opportunity and sustainable levels of take for the particular game species.
  - d. Define geographical units within a SGA that can be easily recognizable and enforced. Examples of geographic unity could be existing units within a SGA, a field, a numbered stake where a hunter could set up a blind or stand within a certain number of feet, or some other system.
  - e. The program could include an additional daily drawing from the pool of successful permits to choose locations, adding variability on the day of the hunt, and providing hunters to account for wind and weather variables. If there are left-over locations, or no-shows of permit holders, an additional drawing for stand-by participants may be possible.
2. Consider the diversity of opportunities within a geographic area. For example, are there opportunities nearby that allow the flexibility to users to hunt on a given day? One area may be daily draw, advanced limited draw, or an open area. It could be frustrating to area hunters if all hunting opportunities in the region were to be converted to one type of hunting access.
3. Consider that a limited draw hunt may provide a positive experience on smaller SGAs, and help ensure that a sustainable take is possible within that geographic unit.
4. Consider ways to follow up and track hunter satisfaction by using email or other technology that provides rapid feedback. Similarly, online reporting of hunt success can allow for more scientific management.

Michigan Operation Freedom Outdoors is a program that creates and promotes hunting opportunities for veterans and mobility impaired individuals. The program is aimed at providing opportunities for individuals to get back into hunting and enjoying the outdoors after a serious injury by providing places to hunt and equipment needed to enjoy the outdoors. Sharonville SGA has been in the center of this program and management of the area is directly influenced to provide access to game species through habitat manipulation and the construction of infrastructure such as trails and blinds that aid in universal access.



### 3. Prioritize Small Game Hunting

The decline of small game hunters has tracked closely with a decline in the number of hunters being recruited into the sport. In today's aging hunter population, a majority of hunters began their hunting career on small game: rabbits, squirrels, and pheasants. The Group recommends elevating small game hunting as a management output for SGAs. Building on the concepts explored in the first two recommendations in this section, the Group believes one factor contributing to initiation of hunting is having readily available access to small game hunting opportunities and flourishing small game populations. Skewing management efforts toward supporting small game species and allocating use of portions of SGAs toward small game hunting may be important steps in positioning the SGAs to serve hunter recruitment and retention needs, which we explore more fully in the following sections.

### 4. Re-Establish a Pheasant Program

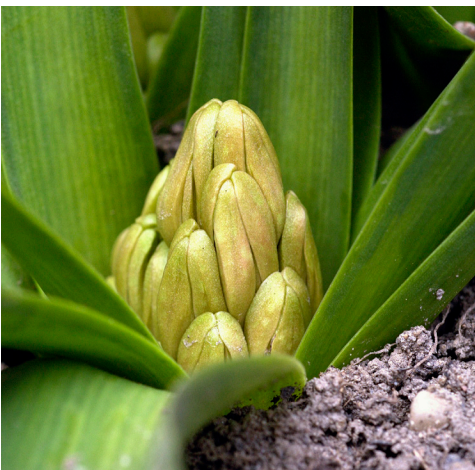
In conjunction with recommendation 3 above, and in service to our discussion of hunter recruitment, retention, and reactivation in subsequent sections, the Group recognizes the potential associated with a reinvigoration of pheasant hunting in Michigan. At one time in Michigan's history, pheasant hunting occupied the prime position of being the most sought after quarry in the state, much the position white-tailed deer hold today. A variety of changes on the southern Michigan landscape, driven by human developments, forest succession, and agricultural practices, have altered habitat and changes in predator populations. As a result, pheasant distribution and populations have declined.

Michigan's DNR had at one time committed vast resources to propagating pheasants through a DNR controlled rearing program. We are not advocating for a return to that capital and personnel-intensive operation. We do support the exploration of partnerships with private enterprises, such as the Michigan Game Bird Breeders Association to supply pheasants for release in places that have the ability to re-establish populations.

Much good work is being accomplished presently for improving pheasant habitat through shared habitat objectives and planning on public-private lands through the Michigan Pheasant Restoration Initiative. Yet, we are aware of unmet recreational demand for more pheasant hunting, which may require approaches beyond habitat restoration.

### 5. Qualitative Measures for Assessing the Hunting Experience

Annual harvest surveys, as currently conducted, capture information related to effort, type and amount of harvest, and occasionally special data on variables such as support for regulatory changes. We recommend, however, establishment and use of feedback mechanisms to more specifically understand experiences about hunting on public lands. Presently, the survey data that is collected is co-mingled between private and public land hunters. We propose that it is important to begin distinguishing the data to better understand the hunter dynamics that are unique to each context. Further, we recommend establishing some form of repeatable feedback mechanism to assess and explore hunter motivations and satisfaction in various contexts related to public lands.



# RECRUITMENT, RETENTION, & REACTIVATION RECOMMENDATIONS

Due to projected declines in the Michigan populations of hunters, anglers, and trappers, considerable efforts are being developed with an aim of Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation (R3) of those wildlife users. Public land resources and SGAs in particular are ideally situated to provide places to sustain involvement of the seasoned hunters while providing opportunities to recruit new users or encourage novices to become ardent enthusiasts. In keeping with some of the topics explored in previous sections of this report, the Group believes that SGAs can simultaneously serve the needs and expectations of different users. The SGAs can be positioned to meet the needs of the novice hunter, who may have more informational and knowledge demands about what habitats are there, what species are present, and other information about how to best pursue their quarry. In doing so, the SGAs will help lower a knowledge barrier for participation in hunting and other wildlife related recreation.

## 1. Mentored/Apprentice/Youth Small Game Hunting Opportunities

We emphasize small game hunting as a priority for the SGAs in large measure because of our belief that small game hunting is an enduring gateway for creating lifelong hunters and outdoor enthusiasts. Setting aside a portion of a SGA, perhaps a small game management area described in the previous section, for a weekend apprentice/mentored small game hunt is one such possibility. Or, providing youth/mentored/apprentice hunts at locations of pheasant releases, also described in the previous section.

### Flat River Youth Rabbit Hunt

For the past few years Flat River SGA has been host to a youth rabbit hunting day in January. This event is open to young hunters seeking the adventure of targeting rabbits and squirrels. The DNR partnered with local sportsman's clubs to team young hunters with enthusiastic hunting dogs and patient dog handlers to pursue cottontails and fox squirrels across the SGA and surrounding private land. Young hunters get a hot breakfast, spend the morning chasing rabbits and squirrels, sometimes with success, and then are hosted to a warm lunch and door prizes to close out the event. Partners include; The Belding Sportsman's Club, Mid-Michigan United Sportsman's Alliance, Quality Deer Management Association-Montcalm County, and Michigan Squirrel Dog Association.



## 2. Learn to Hunt Programs

Outreach to adults is a vitally important element of R3. In addition to reconnecting adults to hunting experiences they may have had as a child, the goal of these programs is to invite adults into the hunting community through highly structured programming that focuses on enabling that individual to become independently capable of hunting. These programs are ideally designed for SGAs which often are in close proximity to population centers and have an array of habitats and hunting opportunities that can demonstrate the kinds of experiences more seasoned hunters recognize.



### **Learn to Hunt**

A new cadre of individuals are becoming motivated to try hunting for various reasons including to better understand where their food comes from, to improve self-sufficiency, and to experience nature in new and unique ways. The Learn to Hunt (LTH) Program was created to provide both instructional and hands-on experiences to these new and novice hunters. Each LTH program provides instructional basics for hunting game in Michigan along with a mentored hunt opportunity, designed to provide confidence and knowledge for new hunters. Sixteen adults signed up for a spring 2016 LTH turkey program that culminated in a late May, mentored hunt at the Barry SGA in the southwestern Lower Peninsula. Barry SGA was a superb setting to search for turkey signs (such as turkey tracks, dusting bowls, scratching), practice turkey calling, and scout for prime turkey hunting spots. Two participants were successful in harvesting turkeys during the LTH mentored-hunt weekend at the SGA, and all expressed eagerness to try turkey hunting again in the future.

### **3. Other Wildlife-Related Recreation**

In the future, SGAs must be allowed to continue their intended role since inception: a place where wildlife and wildlife-related recreation has primacy of use. More explicitly, they must not be converted to places that service a variety of non-wildlife dependent recreation, which are functions that state parks and recreation areas already serve. The Group recognizes, however, ample opportunities exist for SGAs to support other wildlife-related recreation. Traditionally, birding has been identified as the exemplar of “other” wildlife-related recreation. Recently, the concept of recreational conservation in the form of organized habitat improvement projects has become popular as a way to connect other wildlife enthusiasts with SGAs specifically and public lands in general.

Dog training and field trials are related uses for some SGAs as well. The US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) does not presently view dog training and field trials as compatible uses for a SGA, but we believe this is a topic worthy of further discussion and exploration. In our view, working with hunting dogs is akin to practicing marksmanship skills on a shooting range, a practice well supported by the USFWS and the various funds and state grant programs they administer.

### **4. Improve Access to SGA Fisheries**

Many high quality fishing opportunities exist in the state game system, however access to those fisheries is limited in many places. We recognize the opportunity to exploit this untapped resource by executing strategies to provide better access to those water bodies. We are not calling for the proliferation of boat ramps and road access. In many cases, improving trail access to isolated lakes and pond that could support small craft such as a layout boat, canoe, or kayak will provide a substantial improvement in access to the fishery. Additionally, providing more small craft access to these water bodies increases their accessibility to the waterfowl hunter and trapper.

### **5. Shooting Range Development**

The shooting sports represent a rapidly growing segment of the outdoor recreation population. Much of the money generated through the Pittman-Robertson Act is through sales of ammunition and firearms. That revenue, in turn, provides funding to state fish and wildlife agencies, which are then

used to manage and conserve wildlife. The SGAs can play an important role in meeting the demand for more shooting ranges. As discussed in this report, there are likely places within the state game system that do not function well from a game or wildlife point of view. In those cases, we recommend exploring converting those marginally productive areas to provide developed and structured shooting opportunities through the development of a range. However, we propose doing so only after categorizing and analyzing the SGAs as called for later in this report, and do not prioritize this activity highly. Rather than adding new shooting opportunities within the SGAs, state recreation areas provide much greater potential for establishing new shooting range opportunities for the public. We note that southwest Michigan, approximately that area west of Lansing and south of Grand Rapids, should be explored in more depth to understand what demand exists for the development of new public shooting opportunities by way of prioritizing this action.

Of more immediate impact is the prospect of assessing those shooting “areas” in the game area which are, through historical use, functioning as unorganized shooting ranges. We recognize the limitation of personnel and resources to establish the infrastructure that would enable these areas to graduate to a shooting “range.” We do recommend, however, the exploration of leveraging grant dollars that may be available to assist in the development of these areas and to pursue concession agreements with a private vendor to manage the range. This model has worked successfully at Bald Mountain State Recreation Area and the Island Lake State Recreation Area shooting ranges.



## CONNECTIVITY TO SURROUNDING COMMUNITIES

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Michigan's public land resources, and especially SGAs in southern Michigan, are community assets. As travel destinations they are economic engines encouraging direct and indirect spending for businesses and retailers surrounding them. In many cases the SGAs are well kept secrets, and we believe this should change. Increasing connectivity with the SGA to the residents and communities within its service area are vitally important for ensuring that a base of support exists for these areas.

### 1. Governance of SGAs

If SGAs are to be community assets, adherence to good governance practices will enhance participation by a cross section of society, building trust through increased public accessibility and transparency of decisions about specific SGAs, while demonstrating benefits for all community members.

### 2. Communications with Various Publics

- a. An upgrade of the amount and type of information available through the DNR website and other mechanisms of technology tailored to the specific SGAs can be expected to increase public awareness and use of SGAs.
- b. A specific section of the DNR WLD's annual report dedicated specifically to SGAs can be expected to signal the importance of issues related to habitat while providing an opportunity to highlight specific SGAs.

### 3. Connectivity to Local Units of Government

The Group recommends a concerted effort to engage local units of government in conversations about the SGAs in their vicinity. Beyond mere discussions of activities occurring in the game area, we propose engaging in a deeper discourse about incorporating the SGA into local master planning conversations, streamlining processes and overcoming barriers to cooperation across jurisdictions.

### 4. Connectivity with Non-Government Organizations

Many conservation-related Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) can provide services for the management, promotion, and improvement of the SGAs. Though in its early stages, there is documented success in creating a volunteer network to complete habitat projects on SGAs and other public lands. We recommend continuing to prioritize these relationships with conservation organizations. As we wrote above, the concept of recreational conservation, that is, people who enjoy working on habitat projects may well represent an important and emerging segment of the outdoor population. Providing public land stewardship opportunities creates vital connections between people and their public lands.

The NGO relationships can also be positively leveraged to demonstrate habitat work. Consider the value of having land owners, interested in forming a pheasant co-op, travel to part of a game area that has been specifically managed for pheasant habitat. Using the SGAs to demonstrate the habitat improvements that can be made on private land extends the impact of the game area well beyond its physical borders.

Many land managing NGOs such as the conservancy community preserves, conserve, and protect areas that support vital habitat complexes for a variety of species. Brokering conversations among large land owners, including the state (and other divisions within DNR), provides the perspective of systems based thinking, where we view SGAs as part of a system that includes other publicly held lands, private land, and private lands that are publicly accessible.



### **Making Sustainability Out of Scatterplot**

Over the past 10 years, Southwest Michigan Land Conservancy has steadily built its resume' in the art and science of conservation planning. With a unique and vulnerable 6,300 acre resource area to build from and plenty of experienced partners aboard to keep each other honest, the Jones SGA conservation planning project is off to a promising start. Our mission will be to connect the scattered wildlands of the Jones SGA through the creation of sustainable greenways and conservation-friendly, "wildlife approved" practices on adjacent lands.

Geoffery D. Cripe, Landscapes, Winter 2014-2015, Vol. 22, No. 2

## **5. Connectivity with the Business Community**

Opportunities abound to connect Michigan's SGAs with the business community. Discussions among the Group on this subject conceptualized event-oriented support from small businesses and local retailers. For example, a local grocery or restaurant could provide lunch or refreshments for a local habitat project occurring on the game area. For larger outdoor retailers, they could conduct demonstrations and host workshops located at game areas, for example duck or turkey calling, proper installation of a tree stand and demonstration of climbing safety, and the use of other outdoor equipment.

Businesses provide important points of contact with users of SGAs as well as potential points of recruitment for new users. Expanding and improving on current communication efforts in partnership with businesses can be expected to awareness and uses of SGAs. If the goal is to recruit new and diverse users, the DNR may consider expansion of the types of businesses with whom they partner. For example, communicating the features of a SGA in businesses who cater to birders may expand use of SGAs for wildlife viewing.

### **Partnership with the Business Community**

Since 2008, Meijer Stores have given over 15,000 free, junior hunting licenses to youth in Michigan. These efforts have been instrumental in ensuring that Michigan's hunter recruitment programs have been and remain highly successful. Michigan's outdoor resources are economic drivers in Michigan and ensuring that we have well-managed opportunities and an enthusiastic hunting public is not only good for conservation-it's good for business, too.

## **6. Developing Friends Groups and Adopt-A-Game-Area Programs**

There is some data that shows that most SGA users live in relatively close proximity to the game area, which is not altogether surprising. This would suggest that much opportunity exists to develop "friends" groups and adoption programs for assisting the maintenance and conservation of the game areas. Maintaining parking lots, removing litter, assisting with signage, as well as identifying a committed group of game area users, would all assist in the management of the game area. There are some examples of this approach in PRD, but the effort has not been undertaken formally for the SGAs. It is important to note that we do not necessarily view it as a DNR responsibility to organize these



groups, rather be receptive and supportive of their establishment and assist others who would more directly facilitate their establishment, such as an NGO.

## 7. SGAs as Classrooms

There was much discussion about better utilizing the SGAs as places to demonstrate and animate the concepts of ecology, biology, and other natural sciences that are discussed in school curricula. Other states, Pennsylvania notably, have developed learning modules to underscore the concepts explored in the classroom that come to life in the game area. Beyond this, educators and students can also become prime audiences for assisting with habitat projects in the game area.



### Burke Lake Banding Station

Burke Lake Banding Station (BLBS) is located at Rose Lake State Wildlife Research Area in Bath, Michigan. The BLBS provides an extraordinary venue to integrate avian research, train current and future wildlife professionals, and engage all ages with hands-on learning activities, while showcasing the diversity of birds inhabiting mid-Michigan. The BLBS is drawing bird enthusiasts and school-aged children from across southern Michigan (e.g., Detroit, Jackson, and Grand Rapids). Rose Lake serves as an outdoor classroom, where wildlife ecologists work with teachers and kids from K-12 schools, summer camps, 4-H groups, and others to teach about bird ecology and inspire appreciation for our natural resources and the intrinsic value of wildlife. Visitors can observe scientific research and field biologists in action, as well as gain hands-on experience with the incredible diversity of birds that are captured. The Rose Lake Wildlife Research Area is an impeccable outdoor classroom that highlights the visibility of state-owned lands beyond the traditional, consumptive user (i.e., hunters and anglers).



## DISPOSITION OF THE SYSTEM

We previously referenced disposition, but we return to the idea that the SGAs function as part of a system. This system includes state parks, state recreation areas, state forestland, and other types of publicly owned lands. The SGAs fulfill an important role within that system: providing a place where wildlife and wildlife-related recreation are the primary and dominant uses for that land. That primacy does not exist in other parts of the overall public land footprint. The SGAs are a system as well, representing areas of various habitat complexes that support a wide array of game and non-game species. They are of many different sizes ranging from under 100 acres to more than 50,000 acres. The SGAs vary in proximity to human population centers and to the DNR's human resources to manage them. The varied SGAs possess an array of site-specific productivity for wildlife and not all, nor can all SGAs, provide the same types of hunting experiences.

We propose that a way to categorize SGAs that depicts biological and social trade-offs would inform decisions about disposition of current SGAs and identify needs for future acquisitions.

### **1. Seek the Expansion of the SGA System**

Without question, there is a shortage of publicly available hunting land in southern Michigan. The Group believes acquisition of additional SGA land serves both a vital need to secure additional wildlife habitat and expands wildlife-related recreational opportunities. However, when we state “expansion of the SGA system” perhaps it is fair for us to suggest an expansion of its two primary outcomes: wildlife conservation and wildlife related recreation. Current offerings, such as the HAP provide public hunting opportunities on private lands. The MNRTF also may be a vehicle for accomplishing this recommendation. Certainly, through fee-simple acquisition of additional acreage, we can expand the footprint of the SGA. However, beyond and in addition to fee-simple acquisition, we also have the ability, via the MNRTF and HAP, to acquire rights in land. Prioritizing acquisition of rights in land in southern Michigan that radiate out from the SGA, creates a layer-cake of public and private lands that are serving our two primary outcomes, while making efficient use of a limited fund source to do so.

### **2. Develop a Classification for SGAs**

The SGAs are classified primarily by geography. Beyond this, we propose developing a classification for the SGAs based upon size. As a next layer of analysis, we propose classifying the game area by function or management objective. For example, the managed waterfowl areas have some consistency in how they are managed across the system. That same model could be applied to grasslands that are managed for pheasants, for example.

### **3. Assess the Productivity of an Area and Contemplate Future Management Goals**

Although not all game areas are highly productive for hunters or wildlife, our purpose in developing some of the recommendations preceding this section was in part to illuminate other opportunities that may increase the perceived value and function of any particular SGA. For example, some SGAs may not be open for hunting with a firearm because of proximity to occupied buildings, which should compel the consideration of making it an archery-only hunting area, or perhaps that is a place that would be ideal for demonstrating grasslands habitat management and would be a place that private land owners could seek out to learn more about how to manage for that habitat type on their property. Perhaps that area provides a vital corridor for wildlife between other public and privately owned wildlife lands, like a conservancy.

### **4. Develop a Service Area Concept to Overlay the Game Areas**

We favor the idea of developing a service area concept for the game areas. As we note above, there is evidence to suggest most SGA users live in close proximity to the game area. Consequently, understanding the service area from which most of the use of the game area come from, will assist in matching outreach and communications efforts with the appropriate geographical scale of stakeholder residences. It will also assist in illuminating where gaps exist for populations that are not served by a game area. Such information can help inform the land acquisition strategy utilized by the DNR.

### **5. Incorporation into the Master Planning Process**

The master planning process, which is undertaken for each game area, sets forth the overarching management objectives for the game area. While the Group did not discuss the master planning process except by reference from staff, we suggest that the recommendations provided in this report be incorporated into SGA master plans as they are updated into the future.



