

Chapter 1
DEVELOPING A PLAN TO ENSURE THE FUTURE¹

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) has a 22-year history of developing and implementing wildlife habitat conservation strategies and projects and has played a leading role in elk restoration programs in several states. The RMEF, together with its partners, started restoring elk to the southern Appalachian Mountains in 1997. Elk were reintroduced in Kentucky, Tennessee and North Carolina. *See Chapter 2 - RESTORATION OF ELK for more information on this and other elk restoration efforts across the U.S.*

In 2003, the RMEF focused these efforts by establishing the Appalachians Wildlife Initiative, a vision for ensuring the future of elk, other wildlife and their habitat in the central and southern Appalachians. The epicenter of this initiative is the 16-county elk restoration zone in southeastern Kentucky.

16-COUNTY ELK RESTORATION AREA



In 2004, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation developed a conservation plan for the 16-county elk restoration area in eastern Kentucky in order to “provide the framework for a successful collaboration... benefiting wildlife, people and the land.” The purpose of which was to develop a framework that would “draw together philanthropic activity, public funding, private landowners and public land management agencies and leverage collective resources to support free-ranging healthy populations of elk and other wildlife”. This plan, created in partnership with Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR), Daniel Boone National Forest (DBNF), the Kentucky Department of Natural Resources (KDNR), the University of Kentucky (UK), the Kentucky Coal Association (KCA), Southern & Eastern Kentucky Tourism Development Association (SEKTDA), several mining companies, and corporate landowners, was completed in August 2005 and became the Eastern Coalfields Wildlife Initiative (ECWI). The following are a few of the issues and concerns brought forth in the conservation plan.

The ECWI identifies the challenges to conservation and natural resource management in southeastern Kentucky and identifies strategies to address them, including 1) improving habitat; 2) protecting habitat; 3) increasing public access to elk, wildlife, and wild lands; and 4) incorporating conservation strategies and actions into an economic development plan based on wildlife and wild land recreation.

A key strategy of the ECWI is to work in partnership with the DBNF and adjacent counties to develop the “Redbird Project,” an economic and conservation vision for the region, based on wildlife habitat recreation and conservation.

In addition, partnerships with local citizens, local government, state and federal agencies, private landowners, business and other stakeholders are central to our efforts. RMEF has already been working closely with the KDFWR, KDNR, UK, DBNF and KCA and our relationships are strong. In addition, RMEF is involved in the following:

- Working with the KDNR to reform policies and practices on reclaimed mine sites to make better wildlife habitat in these areas already favored by Kentucky elk.
- Partnered with KDFWR and 9 local coal mining companies to restore over 1,500 acres of wildlife habitat to mine sites.
- Facilitated agreements between 2 corporate landowners and the KDFWR to enroll their corporate landholdings into public access agreements with the KDFWR. These agreements added over 74,000 acres of lands available for public access in Bell, Knox, Leslie, Clay and Harlan counties.
- In 2007, three more corporate land holdings totaling 36,000 acres in southeastern Kentucky have been enrolled in public access cooperative agreements with the KDFWR. These agreements allow year-round public access for hunting, hiking, birding and fishing.

- Continue long and strong partnership with the US Forest Service (USFS) through work with the DBNF. The USFS and the RMEF have a 20-year history of partnering and have a memorandum of understanding and a strategic plan for working together. They have held annual strategic meetings and partnered on more than 1,700 conservation projects across the country with a combined value exceeding \$100 million.

Since 1997, the RMEF has invested roughly \$2.5 million in Kentucky for elk restoration, habitat enhancement and other conservation projects.

For more information on the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, visit their website at <http://www.rmef.org/home>

PUBLIC SUPPORT FOR ELK

There is broad support for elk among the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources (KDFWR) who serves as the primary administrative agency involved and sportsmen in the area. Key individuals supporting this initiative are elected and appointed officials across the state, and local and county populations within and adjacent to the elk zone.

It is the general assessment that there are two primary components to building public support for elk and its related guild of species: first, the development of an economic driver related to elk in the form of an ecotourism economy and/or a more robust hunt that will attract visitors to the area, and second, increased public access to the elk and other wildlife of the region.

LIMITED PUBLIC ACCESS WITHIN THE ELK ZONE

Access to elk and other wildlife is an integral component of creating public benefits, which will, in turn, create support and tolerance for the species. The ECWI region has the most wild, undeveloped land in the state. However, because Kentucky is characterized by highly fractured private ownership patterns and the elk range in particular has a complex mix of industrial and other private ownership, we face significant challenges to develop adequate public access to the wildlife resource.

This access is critical for two primary reasons:

- Hunter access as a means of elk population control which in turn is related to minimizing conflict with other human activities
- Wildlife viewing is valued highly as a means to generate public support for Kentucky's elk herds, and provide economic activity related to wildlife tourism.

Limited public access is due primarily to fractured ownership pattern. Ninety-three percent of the land in the eastern coalfields of Kentucky are privately owned by either small landowners or large land companies. This makes it quite challenging to find enough land to develop into areas where the elk will desire to stay. In those areas where mining is taking place nearby, limiting access is necessary for public safety reasons.

STUDY OF ELK AND WILDLIFE VIEWING POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY

As the elk herd continues to grow, it is the intent of KDFWR to increase the number of elk tags issued. Within less than ten years, it is anticipated that up to 1,500 to 2,000 elk tags could be issued in order to manage the growth of the herd. If hunters cannot gain access to the locations where elk live, harvest will fall short of objective, elk populations will burgeon and the ensuing conflict that develops with other human activities (e.g., agriculture, landscaping) will decrease the likelihood of having widespread public support for elk.

LACK OF DEVELOPED WILDLIFE TOURISM INDUSTRY

The greatest resource that this region has to offer tourists is wildlife in wild places. Because elk are generally more visible than other eastern charismatic mega fauna, they can provide unique opportunities for wildlife viewing recreation and tourism. However, as noted in the discussion above, most of the elk are on private land and largely inaccessible. Further exacerbating the difficulties of getting wildlife in front of the public is the fact that elk in east Kentucky tend to avoid large blocks of contiguous mature forest, and that is the general condition of most of the public lands available in the elk restoration zone. They tend to stay in the reclaimed mine areas that, after the coal is mined, are reestablished as open fields and pastureland. Additionally, the U.S. Forest Service and the U.S. Corps of Engineers have been unable to actively manage forest habitats on a large scale in recent years because of challenges from activist groups and budget limitations. Nonetheless, there is a great desire in eastern Kentucky to create a progressive tourism industry. This is evident in the increasing number of elk tours and elk tour operators that are beginning to spring up in the area. *See Chapter 9 – ELK VIEWING OPPORTUNITIES.*

MAP HABITAT CONSERVATION AND ACCESS OPPORTUNITIES

One of the first priorities is to map the area to determine where the elk are currently residing, who owns the lands surrounding them and whether or not there is access. This strategy is essential to protect key habitat and to communicate the public benefits that will sustain wildlife populations into the future. This strategy will help to contribute to the creation of hunting opportunities, assist in elk population management, and provide the basis for a sustainable wildlife and wild land based tourism industry.

This is a high priority need for the Eastern Coalfields Wildlife Initiative laid out in this plan on a variety of different fronts. The primary factor that limits this strategy is capital and the time of field staff to administer the project. Adequate technical expertise is available to complete this work and the vision suggested by this undertaking is ambitious and comprehensive enough that it is expected to attract philanthropic participation. Staff capacity will be stretched to support this work; however, because many of the central strategies discussed under this plan depend on a geographically explicit vision, this strategy will be a top priority of the initiative director.

ESTABLISH A PROTECTED LANDS AND ACCESS NETWORK

As stated earlier, about 93% of the land in the ECWI is owned privately. Habitat use by elk tends to focus on reclaimed surface mines, and access to mine lands is generally very limited and controlled by landowners and mining companies for security and liability

STUDY OF ELK AND WILDLIFE VIEWING POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY

protection. Because public access is limited to a select few of these properties, the general public perceives very little benefit from these lands and the wildlife they contain.

While most of eastern Kentucky is not facing an imminent threat of habitat loss from extensive real estate development, the day will come when the wild lands of the region face greater development pressure. Once land is developed for housing and commercial use the wildlife resources of the region will be greatly diminished. In the mid-1900s, for example, few residents of the Bitterroot Valley in Montana, or the East Front in Colorado, envisioned those wild places would lose much of their value for wildlife. The time for land conservation in eastern Kentucky is now.

Tactic 4A: Increase public land holdings where appropriate around established core habitat areas on the Daniel Boone National Forest through federal acquisition from willing sellers.

Tactic 4B: Where there are currently no extensive public holdings, develop a program to permanently protect private lands identified through the habitat and access mapping efforts with willing corporate landowners while protecting access to mineral potential.

Action: Develop wildlife management agreements with corporate landowners and KDFWR to increase hunting and other recreation opportunities.

Action: Develop a conservation easement program to advance this tactic. Develop funding sources and state tax credits as tools to leverage participation.

Action: Develop a land acquisition program to advance this tactic. Develop new state funding sources for acquisitions.

Tactic 4C: Establish a conservation buyer program to permanently protect key parcels or facilitate bridge transactions as appropriate.

CHALLENGES AND NEEDS

The tools of the land protection business are well established and are anticipated to remain available. The challenge of successfully implementing the recommendations above resides in the scope and complexity of the vision. *“In even a modest estimation of the land interests required to meet the needs of a habitat and access protection program, the capital need will be substantial and may eclipse all other philanthropic enterprises in Kentucky. Pairing philanthropic needs with regulatory incentives for donated land interests may be one way to lower the barrier to establishing a sustainable habitat and access program. Further, fully assembling a robust habitat protection and access program that is integrated with the economic and cultural needs of neighboring communities is typically the work of decades. It is anticipated that the potential for making small increments of progress on this strategy will be good to excellent, but fully establishing a network of preserve lands sufficient to sustain wildlife populations and a wildlife-based tourism economy is a long-term goal.”*

STUDY OF ELK AND WILDLIFE VIEWING POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY

“Initial costs of this program will be directed toward education and outreach at the state and federal levels to support public funding through Land & Water Conservation Fund, Forest Legacy, or other established or needed funding sources. For example, the opportunity exists to pursue the creation of state tax credits for conservation easements in Kentucky. Other funding sources might also be supported through legislative or administrative outreach. As the ECWI progresses and matures, we will need to expand our personnel capacity to implement an effective land protection program that will benefit from enhanced public funding sources. Should healthy funding levels become established, RMEF may need to add a Lands Program Manager (LPM) in support of the Appalachian Wildlife Initiative.”



*Elk among the fall foliage...
Two breathtaking sights one will find in Eastern Kentucky.*

THE NEXT STEP

In January 2007, Southern and Eastern Kentucky Tourism Development Association (SEKTD) contracted with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation (RMEF) to conduct a detailed study (hereafter Study) to determine the feasibility of developing a wildlife-based economic development plan for a ten-county region. The counties chosen to participate were Bell, Breathitt, Clay, Floyd, Knott, Knox, Leslie, Letcher, Martin and Perry. All ten counties are located within the Southern and Eastern Kentucky Tourism Development Association service area.

The Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation partnered with We Make Things Happen Corporation (WMTH) to provide the following:

1. Recommendations on incorporating economic development based on elk and other wildlife into a conservation plan to ensure the long term sustainability of the wildlife resource necessary.
2. Recommendations on the potential economic impact of elk and other wildlife based on experiences from other regions of the United States.
3. Recommendations on the types of tourism and economic development that would be feasible and consistent with activity dependent on elk and other wildlife.

STUDY OF ELK AND WILDLIFE VIEWING POTENTIAL FOR KENTUCKY

4. Recommendations on general infrastructure needs for developing tourism based on elk and other wildlife.
5. Recommendations on communicating what the region has to offer.
6. Recommendations on how to incorporate the Daniel Boone National Forest into this economic development vision for elk and other wildlife.

Other specific tasks included:

- Coordinating with Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources on jointly completing a survey of 2006 elk hunters to collect economic impact data.
- Collecting data from state parks regarding visitation for elk tours and elk as an attraction.
- Coordinating and scheduling meetings with county, state, and federal officials as needed to collect data, communicate the purpose of this Study, and facilitate partnership relationships between the Elk Foundation and county governments in the SEKTDA region.

Over a 6-month period, RMEF and WMTH Corporation, in partnership with DBNF, KDFWR, Western Kentucky University's Recreation Administrative Program and others, conducted an in-depth study. Meetings were set up with county officials, tourism representatives, economic developers, and both state and federal agencies to determine the location of the elk within the region, accessibility to these areas as well as discuss both the opportunities and the concerns and barriers in establishing the region for wildlife viewing. An overview of information obtained from these meetings is included in Chapter 10 and Chapter 11 of this document.

In January, a survey instrument was developed and distributed to the two hundred 2006 Kentucky elk hunters. Chapter 3 addresses the history of elk hunting in Kentucky and Chapter 4 provides information on the economic impact of the 2006 elk hunt. Chapter 2 provides background information on the success of elk restoration programs in seven states across the United States with Chapter 5 focusing more on Kentucky's restoration efforts and the impact it has had on elk and other species. Chapters 6-9 focus on wildlife and elk viewing nationwide and within the Commonwealth. The remainder of the document focuses on individual communities, their wildlife viewing opportunities and current tourism offerings.