

# *Joint Habitat, Nongame and Endangered Species/Big Game Committee Meeting*



## *Meeting Summary*

**August 26, 2015**

*HNGES* Chairman Mark Craig called the meeting to order at 10:04 am. Craig called on Dr. David Cobb to present the topics.

### **Attendees**

#### **Committee Members**

Mark Craig, HNGES Chair  
Wes Seegars  
John Coley  
Ray Clifton  
Brian White

David Hoyle, Jr., Big Game Chair  
Tom Berry  
Tommy Fonville  
Garry Spence

#### **Commissioners**

Jim Cogdell  
John Litton Clark

Joe Barker  
Joe Budd

#### **Staff**

Mallory Martin  
Gordon Myers  
Bob Curry  
Wes Barger  
Margaret Martin  
Kyle Briggs  
Kate Pipkin  
Joe Fuller  
Steve Chase  
Lisa Hocutt  
Allen Boynton  
Carolina Medina

Betsy Haywood  
Colleen Olfenbuttel  
Todd Kennedy  
Shannon Deaton  
Geoff Cantrell  
Doug Howell  
Jon Shaw  
Susan Bunn  
David Cobb  
Erica Garner  
Brad Howard

#### **Visitors**

Henri McClees – McClees Consultation  
Joe McClees – McClees Consultation  
Fred Harris – NC Wildlife Federation

Wilson Laney - USFWS  
Sarah McRae – USFWS  
Ned Jones – NC Trout Unlimited

## *Discussion of Alligator Status and Management in North Carolina*

Dr. David Cobb provided an overview of the recent study of alligator abundance in NC that was conducted with NCSU. This was the first study in thirty years and was based on public rivers and streams only. Private areas and retention ponds were not included in the study. The study of public areas revealed some change in abundance of alligators in the extreme southern part of the state.

At the request of property owners and visitors to Lake Waccamaw, agency staff met with three property owners and State Parks to discuss concerns about the alligator population at Lake Waccamaw. Management of alligators there would involve public Game Lands on one side of the lake, waters owned by NC State Parks, and private property owners around the lake.

Cobb stated that there is a potential for regulatory proposals. Alligators are listed under the Endangered Species Act but could be managed by rulemaking. Preliminary recommendations could include a season at Lake Waccamaw from September 1 to October 1, by permit only. The permit would be for a bag limit of one alligator. To take an alligator by all legal methods would require that those methods be listed specifically in rule. Legal issues require evaluation by staff attorneys. Legal methods of take are delineated in statute and in rules. A statutory change would be required for some manners of take including snare, net, fire, feeding, explosion, poison, bang stick. Another legal question is to distinguish the difference between baiting and feeding and to revise rules accordingly.

Discussion of permits included the recommendation of fewer than ten allowed per season. Consideration to size of alligators must be given because of the reproductive capability at a certain size. It was noted that South Carolina allows one thousand permits a year with no data about size and reproduction. In the northern range of North Carolina the alligator grows and reproduces more slowly. It can take thirty years to become a large alligator.

Agency goals for gator permits must be considered. Are permits issued to reduce numbers of gators or to take trophy size gators? Consideration must be given to landowner goals and sportsmen goals. Depredation permits could be issued to deal with problem gators. A change in rules and statutes will be required for management of the alligators.

HNGES Chair Mark Craig stated that the objective is to maintain a sustainable population. It was agreed that the WRC must be proactive in establishing goals and education about management of the alligator population.

**ACTION:** The joint committees asked staff to do more research and suggest specific guidelines before adopting any rules proposals in October to send to January public hearings.

## *Discussion of Elk Management in North Carolina*

Dr. David Cobb gave a brief overview of recent studies affecting elk management. Human Dimensions surveys have been conducted and habitat feasibility studies have been conducted for the elk population in western North Carolina. As the elk population continues to move outside Maggie Valley there are increasing interactions with humans. Three vehicle collisions have occurred. In early August a property owner in Macon County killed an elk in the act of depredation.

A handout was presented regarding considerations for establishing elk hunting in North Carolina. There are regulatory barriers in place for the lawful take of elk. It is recommended that the elk be delisted as a species of special concern and be designated as a big game species, which would require statutory changes.

Public lands will have to be developed for habitat and public hunting opportunities. Currently the majority of huntable elk is on private land and studies have shown that private landowners are not likely to allow the public to hunt on their lands. Staff believes that limited permits of five or fewer could be issued for bull elk hunting only. Many legal questions and policy decisions would have to be made to determine an equitable permit system for distributing elk permits. Staff is working with the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians and the state of Tennessee, continuing to monitor elk populations.

Questions arose regarding the future of elk. Adequate grass for an elk population is not available in the mountains. Without suitable habitat, do elk belong in North Carolina? How could the agency equitably manage elk hunting permits, especially considering the desire of private property owners to sell access to their property?

A suggestion was made to hold elk forums in the western part of the state. Gordon Myers recommends holding elk forums. He stated there needs to be better communication about elk in western North Carolina.

**ACTION:** The joint committees endorsed the agency proceeding to create pathways for establishing an elk season. Rulemaking and statutory changes will be necessary. In order to proceed the listing status of elk will need to be changed; parameters will have to be set for the WRC to issue permits; and eligibility requirements must be met by permit holders.

## *Adjourn*

*HNGES Chair* Mark Craig adjourned the meeting at 11:20 am.