

The sudden resignation of the most adamant defender of hunting and fishing on the California Fish and Game Commission could put the finishing touches on a sweeping philosophical shift in the way the state views wildlife, sets rules for fishing and controls predators like mountain lions and wolves.

CHAOS AT FISH & GAME

Wolf conservation plan drawn up for California

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Wildlife advocates expand target after bobcat ban

Commissioner Jim Kellogg retired in late December in frustration over what he termed a lack of consideration for the sportsmen and women he represents. The resignation — combined with the unrelated recent departures of commission President Jack Baylis and Sonke Mastrup, the commission's executive director — sets the stage for Gov. Jerry Brown to appoint conservationists to the increasingly pivotal state board.

Such a move may, observers say, complete the transformation of the commission from an organization that advocates for fishing and hunting to one that safeguards endangered species, preserves habitat and protects California's top predators from slaughter.

But it won't happen without a fight. While environmentalists say they are finally getting a fair shake in the high-stakes political game of wildlife management, advocates for outdoor sports fear that they have lost their voice and that the role they have played in the protection of species is being forgotten.

Facing divisive issues

The five-member commission, whose job is to recommend policies to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, has been wading through divisive issues that could profoundly impact the future of the state, including what to do about diminishing salmon populations, sick sea lions and disappearing sea otters.

How California responds to growing numbers of wolves, coyotes and mountain lions is a central battle. The question is whether the predators should be tolerated or encouraged — or driven away by guard dogs or gunned down when they get too close to people or livestock.

Historically, the commission has been made up almost entirely of hunters and fishermen, but that focus has changed in the past several years.

"It has been going through a transition from a predominantly hunting and fishing commission to more of an environmental commission," said Bill Gaines, a hunting advocate and lobbyist for the outdoor sports community. "They are responsible for a lot of things that would never have been on their agenda several decades ago."

Brown, who is responsible for appointments on the commission, did not say when he would fill the vacancies.

"We aim to fill all of our vacancies with the most qualified, capable and committed candidates from a broad and diverse pool of applicants," said the governor's spokesman, Evan Westrup, in a written statement. "That ultimately dictates the timing of our appointments."

Shift of power

Fish and Game's transition ratcheted up over the past few years with the departures of two commissioners: Michael Sutton, an avid hunter and fisherman who nevertheless disapproved of trophy hunting and supported marine protections, and Daniel Richards, who was famously photographed with a dead mountain lion he had killed in Idaho.

Richard Rogers, who was not considered a friend of the outdoor sporting community, also left the commission last year.

The replacements for Sutton and Rogers — Anthony Williams, a 47-year-old lawyer and Democratic consultant from Huntington Beach who is the first African American in the commission's 145-year history, and Eric Sklar, 52, of St. Helena — are viewed as more on the conservation side of the ledger.

But it was the resignation of Kellogg, who often teamed up with Sutton and Richards, that was viewed by many as the end of the line for the hunting and fishing coalition on the commission.

"I'm leaving pretty much out of frustration," Kellogg said in an interview. He had been on the board for 14 years when he retired Dec. 31, the longest-serving member of the commission.

"I'm just tired of being the only one fighting the fight for the hunters and fishers," he said. "The first 12 years I won most of the battles, and the last couple of years I lost almost every battle."

The changes on the commission are an illustration of a statewide phenomenon. Californians, more than ever, regard wildlife, including apex predators, as a valuable part of the ecosystem instead of as food or vermin.

Chuck Bonham, the director of the Department of Fish and Wildlife, says he is committed to embracing science-based wildlife and ecosystem management while preserving the history and traditions associated with hunting and fishing.

Telling name change

California Department of Fish and Wildlife Wardens Clint Garrett and Ryan McCoy collected a Drake Mallard Duck from a hunter for inspection during daily patrols on the California Delta near Brentwood, Calif. on Sat. January 9, 2016. Photo: Michael Macor, The Chronicle

Clearly, though, there has been a movement away from those traditions. The transformation became vivid in 2012 when then-Assemblyman Jared Huffman of San Rafael, who has since been elected to Congress, introduced a bill to change the name of the department that has managed fishing and hunting in California since 1872 from "Fish and Game" to "Fish and Wildlife."

The bill passed in 2013 despite opposition from hunters, who saw it as a signal that game animals would soon be made off-limits. The commission itself, however, maintained the "Fish and Game" moniker despite lobbying by environmental groups to change the names of both the commission and the department it serves.

The name change was part of a slew of legislation requiring, among other things, that the department take into account ecosystem balance and sound science when managing wildlife. To conservationists, it represented a rejection of an archaic view that wildlife is meant to be shot or speared and mounted on a wall.

"It has become a more open-minded forum where Californians of all viewpoints can be heard and, on any given day, anyone can win," said Jennifer Fearing, a lobbyist for the Humane Society of the United States and other animal protection organizations. "I think it was stacked against conservationists for so long that any shift seems like a victory for conservation."

Many farmers, ranchers and rural residents, however, believe the state is turning away from them as they struggle to hold on to their heritage.

“I come from the days when most people grew up with a fishing pole and kids spent most of their life outdoors. Today kids just sit on the couch with their cell phone,” Kellogg said. “The whole world is changing. What people don’t understand, though, is that when there isn’t any hunting in California, there won’t be any native wildlife, because it is the hunters and fishermen who spend the money on wildlife management.”

In fact, Gaines has argued, hunting and fishing tags and license fees contribute \$80 million to \$100 million a year to the Department of Fish and Wildlife — roughly a quarter of the annual budget. He said 60 percent of the interior wetlands of California are privately owned, preserved and managed for duck hunting, and that the national wildlife refuge system is overwhelmingly funded by hunters.

Fewer hunt, fish

At the same time, noted Gaines, recent studies have shown that only 10 percent of Californians actively support hunting. The number of state residents who hunt and fish has been declining for decades, according to researchers.

Hunting groups believe animal rights advocates want to outlaw the pastime entirely. They point to recent laws banning bobcat trapping, the use of lead bullets, coyote killing contests and the hounding of bears and bobcats.

The establishment of vast marine protected areas along the coast and the recent release of a draft management plan for carefully handling wolves, which are expected to multiply in California after a long absence, served as further proof to some ranchers and sportsmen that they are playing second fiddle to what they see as tree-hugging, save-the-whales city slickers.

Far from wanting to ban hunting and fishing, Fearing said she just wants state policymakers to listen to all sides. Until recently, she said, anyone who introduced science that contradicted rural ranching and pro-hunting doctrine was dismissed.

“If you want the rest of the state to chip in and advocate for more resources to make sure we have robust protection of our wildlife, you have to convince the public that you are an agency that shares their values,” Fearing said. “I think they are doing that now. It’s incumbent on them to grow that trust.”

Geoff Shester, the California program director for the marine advocacy group Oceana, said he hopes the Fish and Game Commission will be guided by a responsibility to protect rather than destroy in the future.

“What’s happening is not an antifishing or antihunting perspective,” said Shester, who has fought for the protection of ecosystems, including the San Francisco Bay herring fishery. “It’s more about how to do these activities responsibly. Dealing with issues like overfishing is good for both fishing communities and for the conservation community.”

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