



Outdoor News Bulletin

How Did it All Start? The Emergence of Conservation Without Conflict

By Leo Miranda-Castro | May 2025 | Volume 79, Issue 5

In the book "The Codex of the Endangered Species Act Volume II: The Next 50 Years", edited by Lowell E. Baier, John F. Organ, and Christopher E. Segal, a compelling chapter by Jimmy Bullock, Jr. and Cindy Dohner titled "Conservation without Conflict: A Collaborative Approach to the Endangered Species Act" outlines a transformative vision for wildlife conservation in the United States. This chapter, rich with historical context and practical examples, argues that voluntary, collaborative approaches involving private landowners, government agencies, and conservation organizations can achieve more sustainable and effective outcomes than traditional regulatory methods under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

As someone who reviewed this book prior to its publication, I found its insights inspiring, leading me to contribute a quote for its cover: "Wildlife conservation today too often seems an intractable problem. Conflicting priorities for land, resources, and funding divide us along familiar lines: public-private, state-federal, Republican-Democrat. The Codex of the Endangered Species Act Volume II is a beacon of hope, offering solutions that bring people together."

The Roots of Collaborative Conservation

The chapter traces the origins of collaborative conservation to the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when figures like Henry William Herbert and Theodore Roosevelt championed the cause of wildlife preservation. Herbert's writings in the 1840s raised alarms about dwindling wildlife populations, leading to the formation of the New York Sportsman's Club, one of the earliest documented collaborative efforts to reform game laws. Roosevelt's Boone and Crockett Club, founded in 1887, further advanced conservation by influencing policy and public attitudes toward species and landscape preservation. These early efforts focused primarily on game species, but Aldo Leopold,



often regarded as the "Father of Wildlife Conservation," expanded the scope to include threatened species. In his 1936 essay "Threatened Species," Leopold called for voluntary custodians, ranging from farmers to rangers, to steward species, laying the intellectual foundation for what would become Conservation without Conflict.

The Black Bear Conservation Committee: A Case Study in Success

A pivotal example of collaborative conservation is the Black Bear Conservation Committee (BBCC), formed in response to the proposed 1990 ESA listing of the Louisiana black bear as a threatened species. The listing sparked fears among private forest landowners that it would restrict their operations, potentially mirroring the contentious northern spotted owl controversy in the Pacific Northwest. In response, the Louisiana Forestry Association convened stakeholders, leading to the creation of the BBCC, a coalition of over 70 private landowners, state and federal agencies, and conservation groups. The BBCC focused on restoring black bear populations to avoid the need for listing, implementing strategies such as habitat restoration, public education, and research coordination.

A critical factor in the BBCC's success was the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's (USFWS) inclusion of a 4(d) rule in the 1991 listing decision, which exempted normal forest management activities from ESA restrictions, alleviating landowner concerns. This collaborative approach led to a fivefold increase in occupied bear habitat, doubled bear populations, and the species' delisting in 2016. The BBCC demonstrated that partnerships grounded in trust and mutual benefit could achieve significant conservation outcomes while keeping working lands productive.

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Scaling Up: The Rise of Conservation without Conflict

The success of the BBCC inspired broader efforts, particularly in the USFWS Southeast Region, where Cynthia Dohner served as Director from 2009 to 2017. Facing a 2010 mega-petition to evaluate over 450 species for ESA listing, Dohner and her team recognized the need for a proactive, voluntary approach to avoid overwhelming regulatory burdens on private landowners, who own 90% of the land in the Northeast



and South. This led to the development of the At-Risk Species Conservation Strategy in 2011, in collaboration with the Southeast Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA). The strategy emphasized voluntary tools like Safe Harbor Agreements and Candidate Conservation Agreements with Assurances, which provide regulatory certainty to landowners while promoting species conservation.

By 2013, large forest landowners, including Hancock Natural Resource Group and Weyerhaeuser, partnered with the National Council for Air and Stream Improvement (NCASI) to explore how actively managed forests could support at-risk species. Their findings, that 25% of their 12.5 million acres were in young forest conditions and 41% in thinned, open-canopy forests, highlighted the potential of working lands to provide critical habitats. This partnership evolved into the National Alliance of Forest Owners (NAFO) [Wildlife Conservation Initiative](#), which by 2016 encompassed over 47 million acres and gained congressional support for its collaborative model.

Formalizing the Coalition

In 2017, Dohner and Wendi Weber, USFWS Northeast Region Director, coined the term "[Conservation without Conflict](#)" and convened the first coalition meeting in Atlanta, bringing together 30 thought leaders from public and private sectors. The coalition's purpose statement, finalized in 2018, emphasized that private land ownership and species conservation are not mutually exclusive and that voluntary approaches yield more durable results than regulatory ones. The first National Summit in 2019, attended by 60 coalition members, solidified the movement, with speakers like Representatives Bruce Westerman and Sanford Bishop advocating for bipartisan support.

Despite challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, the coalition grew under the leadership of Dr. Lauren Ward, appointed as Executive Director in 2020 (currently the Executive Director for the [Forest Landowners Foundation](#)). Ward doubled funding in her first year and organized virtual summits, elevating Conservation without Conflict's profile. The coalition's principles, voluntary collaboration, trust-building, inclusivity, science-driven solutions, and economic viability, have been endorsed by federal agencies, Congress, and government initiatives that highlight the importance of incentivizing voluntary and collaborative conservation on all types of working lands.

A Vision for the Future



[Conservation without Conflict](#) offers a blueprint for the next 50 plus years of wildlife conservation, as articulated in [The Codex of the Endangered Species Act Volume II](#). By fostering trust, leveraging the ESA's flexibility, and prioritizing voluntary partnerships, the coalition demonstrates that conservation and economic viability can coexist. Its successes, from the Louisiana black bear to the New England cottontail and dozens of other species, underscore the power of collaboration to achieve scalable, sustainable conservation outcomes. As the chapter concludes, "Conservation without Conflict is the future of conservation in America," a sentiment that resonates with my own views that this approach is a beacon of hope for uniting diverse stakeholders in the shared goal of conserving our nation's wildlife and working lands.

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