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An Awakening Resource

IN AN ERA WHEN LESS and less of California's famed outdoors must be shared by more and more people, University research and extension programs on the environment are expanding. That's good news for everybody—the Experiment Station, Agricultural Extension, legislators, sportsmen, conservationists and the public.

I believe, however, that we should give even more attention to one promising, if controversial, area of environmental enhancement: The development of private land for recreation.

Opportunity for outdoor recreation—hunting, fishing, camping and just plain contact with nature—is one product of our privately-owned land resource that is not in surplus. Why aren't there more private wildlife enterprises? One reason is immediately apparent: By American tradition and law, wildlife belongs to the public. And properly so. But many people still believe that wildlife enterprises on private land somehow exploit the public's fish and game. The fact is that larger wildlife populations created by private management can benefit the landowner, the public and the environment.

Another common belief is that wildlife enterprises would result in more "No Trespassing" signs on private land which is now open to the public. The fact is that the signs are already there.

There are other reasons for the scarcity of public recreation on private lands in this state:

—Landowners are concerned about higher taxes and other costs. They don't have the economic facts needed to plan wildlife enterprises; and their bankers don't either.

—Well-meant but inflexible laws and regulations often prevent good management and harvesting of game species.

—There is no organized marketing channel for outdoor recreation.

Meanwhile, California is losing thousands of acres of natural wildlife habitat yearly to various land-use activities. Wildlife management on private lands could slow this trend toward loss of our wildlife resources.

There are consumers looking for recreation opportunities and they have money to pay for their sport. At the same time, there are many thousands of acres of private land that already provide some recreation and could yield even more under proper management.

Today, however, the possibility is limited by—among other things—lack of research and education programs. A few scientists of the Division of Agricultural Sciences have conducted excellent research projects; but a larger, coordinated program is needed. The same is true elsewhere.

Why don't we have more scientific knowledge about outdoor recreation? For several reasons: It often simply hasn't been widely recognized as a respectable field for scientific inquiry; values are involved that are difficult to quantify and evaluate; public emotionalism often interferes with application of research findings; and there is no organized industry to encourage research projects, help pay for them, and put the results to work.

But attitudes are changing and, more important, California's environment is changing. Research and Extension programs in coordination with more flexible laws and regulations—both backed up by more public understanding and support—could hasten the day when landowners are encouraged to systematically increase wildlife populations and harvest them like any other crop—to everybody's benefit.