



DOUBLEWIDE STRATEGIES

A STRATEGY FOR MONTANA WILDLIFE CORRIDORS

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Case Study: Island Park, Idaho

Background:

Roughly five years ago, the Idaho Transportation Department (ITD) began assessing needed improvements to a portion of U.S. Route 20 running along Targhee Pass between Island Park, ID and West Yellowstone, MT. ITD, working with government agencies, NGOs and other interested parties, determined that wildlife-vehicle collisions (WVCs) were a major issue along this stretch of highway, and it proposed building a major wildlife overpass system along the U.S. Highway 20 corridor in Island Park. In 2018 ITD, released a proposal for building a \$30.5 million overpass system along the U.S. Highway 20 corridor in Island Park. The proposal also included adding net wire fencing from Targhee Pass to U.S. Highway 87.

To help Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) and ITD ensure that the EA is as inclusive and participatory as possible, ITD formed a Targhee Pass Stakeholder Working Group (SWG). The SWG was composed of a wide array of local interests and state and federal agencies.

The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative (Y2Y), a conservation-focused nonprofit, and other NGOs grew to play an important role assisting ITD with public engagement related to the Targhee Pass project and as a technical partner. For more than a year and a half, Y2Y and other local NGOs worked hand in hand with ITD on revisions to their Highway 20 Corridor Plan. Original ideas for the plan included multiple overpasses, fencing and other strategies aimed at reducing collisions and getting wildlife safely across Highway 20.

The Island Park Preservation Coalition (IPPC), a local advocacy group, is most known for its local work to oppose the idea of a National Monument designation near Island Park during the Obama administration. The IPPC interpreted ITD's work and the relationship between local NGOs and ITD as an attempt by outsiders to influence their community. IPPC led a communications campaign to undermine the project, and found a willing partner in the local newsletter the Island Park News. They also utilized social media to spread their message, focussing primarily on organic facebook tactics.

Ultimately, the IPPC was able to generate enough local support to convince the local county commissioners to add an "advisory vote" question about wildlife crossings on the 2018 general election ballot. The Ballot language read: "Do you favor wildlife crossings defined as overpasses, underpasses, or other structures and/or fencing constructed or erected for the purpose of directing wildlife movement to avoid the highway –along the U.S. Highway 20 corridor in

Fremont County?” The final advisory vote was 3,743 opposed to overpasses, 892 for overpasses and 164 unsure. Voter turnout in Fremont County was over 67% which is extremely high.

During this general timeline, IDT continued with its Environmental Assessment process under NEPA. Three alternatives were developed:

- a no action alternative,
- an alternative that included multiple over passes, fencing and other structures to facilitate wildlife movement and avoid collisions, and
- a third alternative that is focused on widening and improving HWY 20 and installing a wildlife detection system.

ITD chose the third alternative.

The EA was released for public comment in January of 2019. IDT is reviewing comments and plans to release a final EA in spring of 2020. However, it is clear from the project website and interviews completed for this project that the EA has been backburnered due to difficult local perspectives and political dynamics.

The preferred alternative that ITD chose has since been heavily criticized by conservation organizations. In addition, Idaho Fish and Game produced an assessment that was critical of wildlife detection systems and went on to say:

“To date, no highway design elements can increase wildlife connectivity except crossing structures... with fences,”

A recent [news article](#) described ITD’s work in the following way:

In its recommendation for an animal detection system in the environmental assessment, ITD’s listed reasons included opposition to overpasses by Fremont County Commissioners and residents, the lack of easements needed for private land along the road and the higher rate of wildlife crashes elsewhere in the state.

Later in the same article a Fish and Game contractor is quoted saying: “It begs the question, what else besides the data and studies influenced their choice for this?”

Messaging and public framing:

Conservation oriented groups focused on human safety rather than intrinsic wildlife values for the most part. The primary public facing entity for those messages were two coalitions that were driven by conservation organizations called Fremont County Citizens for Safe Highways (FCCS) and Island Park Safe Wildlife Passage.

For instance this post from FCCS is typical of their framing of the issue:

Wildlife-vehicle collisions have increased nationwide by 50% in the past fifteen years. Nearly one out of four of all accidents on Highway 20 through Fremont County are due to collisions with wildlife, that's almost four times the national average. We in Fremont County have a much higher rate of collision and accidents associated with wildlife.

Various sportsmen groups were also engaged and publicly supported overpasses and worked in favor of yes votes for the advisory vote. Sportsmen tended to focus more on the needs of wildlife to migrate and the importance of winter foraging areas as well as the importance of hunting heritage. The following is from an Opinionated Editorial from the Executive Director of the Idaho Wildlife Federation.

I want to keep our hunting heritage alive and well for our own and future generations. Wildlife crossings mean more wildlife, more meat, more fur, and more opportunity. It's that simple. That's why I'll support wildlife crossings on November 6th. And, as the executive director of the Idaho Wildlife Federation, the voice for Idaho sportsmen and women, I encourage all sportsmen and women to cast their vote in favor of wildlife crossings along U.S. 20.

The IPPC and their partners tended to focus on messages that tied the HWY 20 overpasses to outsiders who they perceived to be a threat to their local way of life. Many of the IPPC members also seemed to think there were ties between Y2Y and the United Nations and other entities that they perceived as a threat. That theory seemed to originate from rumors about a potential Obama Administration National Monument designation early in the first term of that administration. This [language](#) from an IPPC mailer sums up their rhetorical approach to the wildlife migration issues:

- Overpasses and fences threaten economic, livability, grazing, hunting...and most forms of recreation.
- All human activity is strongly discouraged near overpasses.
- Do not let organizations from outside the state and the U.S. dictate the future of Fremont County.

State and federal agency public [communications](#) have tended to be very technical in nature, focussing on public safety, technical wildlife data and an open process for stakeholders as dictated by NEPA.

Lessons Learned:

Sometimes the best ideas are just not going to be supported locally... no matter what:

If there is a single lesson from Island Park, it's that some communities are just not going to support wildlife migration strategies no matter what state and federal agencies, NGOs and other affected parties do or do not do. It is abundantly clear based on the interviews for this project and associated research that miscalculations were made by those who believed an overpass was the best outcome, but the central issue seems to be that the local community was not looking to engage in a reasonable discussion about that issue. This is supported by the fact that Idaho Fish and Game and the Idaho Department of Transportation are currently moving forward with a number of other overpasses in the state with full community engagement and support. Further, Idaho Fish and Game incorporated migration specific conservation priorities -- including reducing vehicle collisions -- into the recently adopted statewide [mule deer management plan](#) without any pushback from outside interests.

However, it would be inappropriate to write Island Park off as a single incident that only took place because of "crazy people looking for a fight" as one interviewee put it. Wildlife migration and corridor work in the West will require work in communities that can tend towards mistrust of the government and "outside" entities. Government entities and NGOs should acknowledge this dynamic and work to understand community perspectives and needs before proposing solutions.

Conservation NGOs Have to be Careful About When and Where they Engage:

There is broad agreement that one of the most important lessons from the Fremont experience is that conservation organizations were not trusted in the local community. This seemed to start with the way the overpass idea was conceived in the first place. Assumptions were made about Island Park's year round residents and what they would support as a "solution" to local problems. Those assumptions proved to be wrong.

One interviewee summarized this issue in the following way:

"A group that can pull off the local credibility thing from both their logo and their approach to talking to folks needs to get engaged there over the long term. It doesn't have to be about conservation, just go build some relationships and trust."

Public facing brands matter:

One of the central tenets of effective communications strategies and tactics is to ensure that the brand of the effort fits with the mentality and political persuasion of the target audience. In the case of Fremont County, the organizational brands were either not the right fit for the local community, lacked local credibility, or both.

As seen in multiple sets of polling data and focus groups in the rural west, conservation organizations are never credible brands in rural areas, especially those with high concentrations of conservative voters. Based on interviews and reviews of press for this project, Y2Y was the brand affiliated with this campaign at the local level and it was not trusted by local people. In fact, the brand is associated with government overreach and the United Nations by right leaning organizations. This helped feed a narrative about outsiders invading the community of Island Park and trying to take away power from local people. Of course, this is clearly not the intent of Y2Y, but the lesson from Fremont County is that the intent, and the substance, does not matter. It's the message and the messenger.

Message research is critical:

The fact that there was no polling or focus groups or other method of message testing was a challenge for this when it came to message, messenger and target audience. We will again recognize here that resources were limited, but running an effective campaign (even one you unintentionally end up in) without message research is never a good option.

Communicating in Rural Areas Without Traditional Media Outlets:

The "media landscape" in Fremont County is not friendly to conservation issues. The local paper, the Island Park News is more of a newsletter than a good faith member of the "fourth estate" and leans hard to the right. The closest newspaper is the Rexburg Standard nearly 60 miles away and is published twice a week. This makes Fremont County a classic example of a rural community that turns to social media for community news. Because of the unfriendly media landscape and the propensity of locals to turn to social media for their news, social media needed to be a bigger piece of the communications effort in Fremont County and conservation efforts need to invest in these tools if they hope to reach local people with their messages.

ITD was clearly influenced by the advisory vote and local politics:

Despite what many people perceive as overwhelming data to support the need for a wildlife overpass on highway 20, the ITD released an Environmental Assessment that advocates for a different outcome - one that does not include an overpass. One can only assume that this is due

to the issues that ITD ran into with local opposition. This assumption is further evidenced by the fact that only one employee of Idaho Fish and Game agreed to be interviewed for this project and the Idaho Department of Transportation ignored or rejected all requests for interviews.

Case Study: Wyoming Wildlife Corridors

Background:

Wyoming has been a leader in the West when it comes to establishing big game migration corridors. This leadership has translated to a level of public discourse, engagement from elected officials and knowledge from the public that is simply much higher than it is in many other states in the West. As a result of their excellent data collection, credible messengers, and previous collaborations with the federal government on this issue, the state was incredibly well-positioned to take advantage of the Secretarial Order from the federal government on wildlife migration.

The belief that development and conservation must exist in concert to best serve Wyoming's economy is critical to how Wyoming set out to approach the issue of migration corridors. According to a University of Wyoming poll from 2019, 86% of Wyoming residents believe that wildlife play an important role in their daily lives, and 85% of respondents believe that the presence of wildlife is important to the state's economy. Wyoming residents clearly do not see economic interests as being in conflict with the health and vitality of their state's animal populations in a way that is common in other Western states and more urban communities.

In order to understand how Wyoming was able to respond quickly and successfully to this opportunity, it is important to understand the state's history with this issue and the level of familiarity that voters had before the Secretarial Order was issued. The conditions that allowed Wyoming to take advantage of this moment were created well before the Order was ever issued.

Two important precursors happened in the last decade. First, there was a real effort to collect data on and study the migration patterns of animals that started at the University of Wyoming's Wyoming Migration Initiative. This increased emphasis on data and scientific tracking of animals was cited in a number of our interviews as a key piece of the successful dynamic in the state. One of the interview subjects noted that:

"Wyoming has been well ahead of the curve on the issue of data and tracking these animals."

This new emphasis on tracking led to a fairly stunning revelation - that mule deer populations in Wyoming were declining fairly rapidly. In a state where University of Wyoming polling shows that 90%+ of Wyomingites recognize the economic and cultural value of these animals, inaction became a non-option.

Second, according to our interviews, a huge driver of this population decline was driven by oil and gas development in traditional migration paths of big game animals. This new information - that there was a real decline in wildlife populations that could be tracked better than ever before and directly attributed to oil and gas development - made it impossible for the state to avoid the issue of migration corridors.

The threat to the mule deer specifically represented a threat to a critical lynchpin of Wyoming's culture. As one of our interview subjects stated:

"It is not just the jobs in these energy sectors that the people of Wyoming care about - but also the animals and the landscapes that make the state special."

In response to this new information and greater public understanding of the challenges at hand, a number of wildlife migration projects started to pop up around the state.

Trapper's Point Overpass

In 2010, the Wyoming Department of Fish and Game worked with the Wyoming Department of Transportation to identify areas in Southwest Wyoming highways where Pronghorn were especially susceptible to collisions with motorists. Using this data, an investment was made by Wyoming DOT to create fencing and overpass structures in this area to protect both motorists and animals as the pronghorn make this important stretch of their migration journey. The project was completed in 2012.

This project also represented an early, successful, collaboration between Wyoming's state government and the federal government. Funding from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act was used to pay for these overpasses.

Implementing the Secretarial Order

In November of 2018, the United States Bureau of Land Management issued a Secretarial Order calling for the protection of migration routes and habitats of elk, pronghorn, mule deer and other species in key Western states. This order directed Western states to identify the 3-5 most

crucial migration corridors for these animals in their states and put together state action plans for addressing this issue. Once the federal government issued a secretarial order it became clear that the state had the opportunity to continue their action on this issue.

Governor's Task Force

In early 2019 as part of Wyoming's response to the Secretarial Order, Governor Mark Gordon announced the formation of the Wyoming Big Game Migration Corridor Advisory Group, a council of Wyomingites with representatives from the oil and gas, mining, conservation, hunting and fishing and local government sectors. These representatives were nominated by regular citizens and then vetted and chosen by the Governor. This group worked to study and advise the Governor on how to balance the migration of wildlife with development in the state, and culminated in recommendations issued in September 2019. Those recommendations included an executive order from the Governor that would direct state agencies to coordinate decisions in order to balance development opportunities with minimal impacts on migration corridors.

Landowners were largely content with the process that was used for developing these recommendations, though one of our interview subjects did note that the process was perhaps a bit rushed. They noted:

"While landowners were not formally represented on the council, we were sure to nominate people we knew to be landowners to represent other interests, like agriculture. On the whole, we felt like this produced a good outcome but the process was shorter than we would have liked."

One feature of this group that was raised during our interviews was the absence of any paid political advocates among its members. Official representatives from advocacy organizations - both conservation or development focused - were not welcome, and as a result the group looked and felt like an authentic collection of Wyomingites discussing the balance between wildlife and industry in a way that felt familiar. Rather than approaching this issue with organizational objectives and talking points in hand, the group produced recommendations that were very focused on the impacts that would be felt by everyday Wyomingites. Their recommendations included very user focused outcomes such as requiring direct engagement with landowners prior to the designation of a corridor.

Key Messengers and Framing

Experts: Wyoming Migration Initiative

The Wyoming Migration Initiative has been a critical piece of Wyoming's infrastructure on this issue that has helped build a successful climate that set the stage for success once the secretarial order was issued. After being founded in 2011, they have worked to embed photographers, writers and filmmakers as they make their migratory journeys to document the difficult and fascinating trip that these animals make. The results of these projects have then been presented to and screened for the communities along those migration routes in an effort to give people a new level of perspective for animals that we know they have reverence for. The Wyoming Migration Initiative has worked to appreciate the existing connections these communities and landowners have with these animals - rather than approach them as though they need to be educated from scratch.

Advocates: Conservation NGOs

Groups like WMI have largely dominated the communications landscape around this issue, with engagement from NGOs and advocacy organizations struggling to gain traction. For instance, one of the larger conservation organizations in the state is the Wyoming Outdoor Council. Migration Corridors are a top priority for WOC, and the issue is the first listed on their website under their work on wildlife. It is clear that they have a large campaign in place to discuss this issue. However, they are struggling to break through in the broader media discussion around this issue in the state. Our analysis indicates that these groups have a tendency to pit migration corridors and development against each other in a way that we know Wyomingites reject as a premise according to existing polling.

For example an op-ed written by the Wyoming Outdoor Council Executive Director entitled "[Leasing in migration corridors threatens mule deer and Wyoming's outdoor heritage](#)" notes:

"Time is running out: Science shows that any development in these corridors poses irreparable harm to mule deer herds. We must act now to defend this world-renowned corridor and other habitat that big game herds rely on for survival."

Based on the polling reviewed for this project, it is clear across the board that government entities and scientists have a greater level of public trust on these issues than advocacy organizations. So while the science around the issue may show a more contentious relationship between development and wildlife than Wyomingites believe is possible, NGOs may not be the best messenger for that story.

Experts: State and Federal Agencies

Wyoming Fish and Game has taken great care to emphasize how inclusive their approach to migration corridors is. They are quick to refer to their efforts to include stakeholders and voices from outside of their agency in the decision making process. The copy on their website which refers to migration corridors demonstrates this inclusion:

"The Wyoming Game and Fish Department spent several months working with the public and stakeholders to develop a strategy for conserving ungulate migration corridors. The culmination of that inclusive process was a vote by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission to adopt the strategy at their January 2016 Commission meeting. Migration corridors are considered vital under Commission policy and the vote adds key components of corridors, bottlenecks and stop-over areas, to this classification.

The migration corridor strategy includes proactive measures to conserve migration routes by examining potential threats and having Game and Fish and partners review and comment on projects on a case-by-case basis."

Advocates: Oil and Gas

The Petroleum Association of Wyoming (PAW) is the state's primary voice for the oil and gas industry in public policy matters, and their communications about the balance between wildlife and development are instructive. Effectively, they are simply telling Wyomingites what they want to hear and already believe - that balancing development and wildlife is possible.

They are also quick to acknowledge the value that their members and their employees see in wildlife, as seen in this passage from their website:

Many Wyoming residents working in the oil and gas industry are avid hunters and outdoor enthusiasts. They have a vested interest in protecting the viability of our wildlife. The oil and gas industry understands the importance of wildlife to the state and believes in thoughtful, data-driven policies that sustain wildlife. PAW continues to be actively involved with the state and stakeholders as policies are developed to ensure that wildlife remains viable and vibrant, and prudent development can occur.

Lessons Learned

A Science and Data Based Approach to Communications:

One of the primary factors working in Wyoming's favor as they tackle the issue of migration corridors is the data-driven approach that they have taken. From the major action of 2010 to protect pronghorn in Trapper's Point, to the approach taken by the Governor's Advisory Council in 2019, data and a reverence for it, has been at the heart of every major discussion about this issue in the state.

State agencies put data at the center of their story about Trapper's Point in 2010, relying on historical data regarding migration routes to identify the crucial stretches of U.S. Highway 191 that needed to be prioritized. Tracking data from Wyoming Fish and Game allowed them to understand the value of these stretches to the animals, and pairing that with carcass data collected by the Department of Transportation allowed them to make smart choices about where their actions could have the greatest impact. We know from polling in Wyoming that government agencies are the most well-respected messengers on this issue, and that the people of Wyoming find messages about transportation safety and the well-being of motorists to be particularly compelling. Having good data and qualified, trusted government voices allowed the state government to craft a compelling message about the value of these overpasses.

The Wyoming Migration Initiative has also worked to gather better migration data than any other Western state and used that data to build valuable tools for public communication. A prime example of one of these is their Migration Viewer tool which allows the public to see the data that is collected about these animals in an interactive map.



This ability to monitor animals with GPS tracking allows for an incredibly precise picture of where these animals migrate and helps to define the parameters for debate around the issue. One interview subject noted that the ability to be incredibly specific about where corridors did and did not exist provided a helpful level of certainty for contentious debates with the oil and gas industry about areas that should and should not be off limits. Corridors which are defined by data are simply more defensible than those that are drawn arbitrarily or through inference or best guess.

Avoiding Partisan Labels and Political Conflicts

Avoiding partisan messages and messengers was critical to the successes that Wyoming achieved on this issue to date. The best example of this approach came through the Governor's Migration Advisory Council. According to one of our interview subjects:

"The Governor's Advisory Council was specifically designed to avoid members with professional connections to advocacy organizations - they were looking for regular people who represented Wyoming."

This emphasis on regular Wyomingites and the intentional choice to avoid traditional advocacy voices paid major dividends for the advisory council.

We know from polling data that Wyomingites are skeptical of both conservation organizations and energy industry employees as messengers on this issue, so keeping both sets of voices off of the Governor's advisory group instantly boosts credibility. This choice also builds an instant bond with Wyomingites, as it plays to their belief that economic interests and conservation interests are not inherently at loggerheads.

The recommendations from this advisory group also ended up with an interesting feature as a result of the makeup of its members. The recommendations are incredibly focused on outcomes for animals and landowners, with very little language that one would find in traditional disagreements between conservationists and the energy industry.

As a result of the non-partisan approach taken by the Governor's advisory council, their recommendations were seen as the work of non-partisan experts (which they were) as the state legislature worked to pass legislation on this issue that was seen as less inclusive. The group recommendations were [hailed as the consensus of a diverse range of interests](#) when they were released, and the professionals vs. politicians dynamic was laid out nicely by Kerry Drake of WyoFile in [an op-ed that ran statewide](#).

Meeting People Where They Are At

It is clear that a large part of the success that has been achieved in Wyoming is the result of deference to the wisdom of the people of Wyoming. It would be naive to suggest that the people of Wyoming have strong existing feelings about migration corridors, but they do have strong existing feelings about wildlife and the role that those animals should play in their state's culture and economy. Rather than come at this issue with a strong, environmentally focused message being driven by messengers that people are skeptical of or have preconceptions about, non-partisan organizations have focused on playing to what Wyomingites already know and believe to be true about their state. This effort to meet people where they are on this issue and value the lived experiences of communities as they make policy decisions has helped to reduce a lot of the conflict that typically exists around this issue.

This was a core tenet of the Governor's Advisory Council in Wyoming, and when their recommendations were announced they were careful to center the wisdom and lived experiences of their members. Governor Gordon announced the recommendations saying:

"I want to thank members of the advisory committee for their efforts. They accepted the challenge of working collaboratively to identify potential solutions that would both conserve our wildlife and support our economy through multiple uses of public lands. This is what we do in Wyoming."

Show, Don't Tell

Many of our interview subjects noted that the Wyoming Migration Initiative does an excellent job of integrating this approach into their communications. A critical piece of this is the old storytelling axiom of "show, don't tell." WMI puts an emphasis on visual storytelling, with a number of photographic projects and documentary film projects produced by skilled artists. These projects show the value of these lands to animals visually, and as a result are far more impactful and approachable than written work which can easily fall into the trap of telling people what they already know.

In 2018, WMI had a National Geographic photographer track Mule Deer along the Red Desert to Hoback migration route and take a series of photographs along the way to illustrate the journey. They then [chose to host events in communities along that migration corridor](#) to engage local communities directly in a visual conversation about how animals use these lands. One of our interview subjects said:

“choosing to share a new level of insight and understanding of these animals with the communities who share the land closest to their migration routes helps to honor their connection to these animals and makes them feel included in the policy decisions being made about their shared lands.”

Don't try and tell a statewide story about corridors:

The Wyoming Migration Initiative and others who have built successful communications efforts in the state have relied on the core principle of treating each of these corridors as individual issues, rather than trying to brand them under a one size fits all umbrella statewide. This approach forces direct engagement with the surrounding communities and helps to limit the damage that can be done by messages coming from outsiders who may fall into the trap of “telling people what they feel like they already know.” The Wyoming Migration Initiative is careful to speak about the Baggs, Platte Valley, and Red Desert to Hoback corridors as distinctly different successes and has even found some value in branding each individually.

Science based entities as messengers and story framers:

Because WMI has been such an effective communicator about these issues, the engagement of less trusted messengers has been limited. We know from polling that scientists and university researchers are some of the most trusted sources of information on this issue for the people of Wyoming, so having a professional and well-organized communications arm for their work is incredibly valuable.

Literature Review of Existing Polling, Focus Groups and other Message Research

We have received a relatively small number of message data documents from the stakeholders we reached out to. We have been unable to find much published data in the grey or primary literature arena on this topic.

We received the following documents:

- NWF New Mexico/Colorado, April 2019,
- NWF New Mexico and Colorado Online Focus Group, February 2019
- University of Wyoming, May 2019,
- 2013 poll regarding wildlife crossings in Teton County Wyoming

With the exception of Wyoming, there is a lack of polling and message data that on this issue in the Western United States. It will be critical to do message and public opinion research in Montana before any communications campaigns are launched. In the short term, we can learn some valuable lessons from the existing data in Wyoming, New Mexico and Colorado.

University of Wyoming Poll

The most recent and specific polling available is a University of Wyoming poll from early 2019. It is important to note the environment in which this polling took place, after the Governor of Wyoming had announced an advisory group to study the issue which had already been at the forefront of policy discussion in the state. That public debate likely produced an audience that is more cognizant and aware of the issue than Montanans are.

The vast majority of respondents described wildlife as being an important part of their state, their daily lives and the Wyoming economy. All of those questions received greater than 85% support from respondents. However, this high level of appreciation for these animals and recognition of their value economically to the state could be specific to Wyoming, and provides essential context for the other answers within the poll.

Focus on the human experience - not ecology and wildlife migrations :

There are two main statements from the poll that indicate why Wyomingites support wildlife corridors - and they take very different approaches to the issue while sharing a common theme.

The first statement that garnered 90%+ support was:

“outdoor recreation like wildlife viewing, hunting and fishing is a wonderful part of the Wyoming way of life, but it also benefits our economy. Wildlife-related activities contribute more than one billion dollars to our state economy, provide more than seventy-two million in tax revenue, and support nearly ten thousand jobs, according to a recent University of Wyoming analysis of the state economy.”

The second was:

“Well-placed over- or under-passes with game-proof fencing reduces wildlife-vehicle collisions by about 85 percent. After construction of an overpass near Pinedale, vehicle collisions with big game fell from 85 to 16 per year.”

The key takeaway from these two extremely popular statements is that Wyomingites respond well to messages that are about how wildlife management can positively impact their own lives.

Wyoming voters respond positively when they are told that managing migration corridors well can boost their economy, and make their travels on roads safer.

Similarly the poll shows that Highways and development pose the greatest perceived threats to big game migration. A large majority of voters perceived highways (76 percent) and development (75 percent) as the main threats to big game migrations in Wyoming.

One point worth noting is that none of these statements are focused on the ecological value of wildlife corridors, nor do they center the conservation or ecological benefits in their arguments. The highest polling statement focused on the impacts to mule deer was:

“In deer and similar species, migration is a learned behavior, passed from generation to generation. Once a migration path is blocked, some will stop migrating completely, affecting their health when food is less available.”

This statement polled a full 30 points behind the statement about the contributions to the state’s economy that these animal populations provide.

It is incredibly important to note that the poorest polling statement in the entire poll focuses on impacts to wildlife, but goes a step further to squarely place the blame for migration disruption on the energy industry. This was the only statement in the poll that actually produced opposition to the idea of migration corridors. The statement:

“Some species like mule deer tend to avoid energy infrastructure even if it has been in place for years, limiting their habitat and sometimes blocking migration paths”

That statement was seen as “not very convincing” by a full 50% of poll respondents. It is one thing for respondents to disagree with something but a full 50% finding this argument “not convincing” in essence means they do not believe the statement. This is extremely troubling because it would be more beneficial if this population opposed it outright. Those people may be persuadable. The “not convincing” audience is much more problematic.

Don’t fall into the jobs vs conservation trap:

The rhetorical pitfalls here follow a similar pattern. The largest takeaway from the poll is that pitting the well-being of wildlife like mule deer against oil and gas drilling that most people believe to be essential to the state’s economic well-being is a losing battle. People are willing to concede that development along migration paths can pose a threat to mule deer populations

(75% of respondents agree) but when that development is defined as oil and gas drilling, that number drops significantly (60% of respondents agree).

In addition to making the issue more polarizing by pitting economic interests against wildlife rather than reminding people what an economic benefit they can be, this approach also violates something that this poll tells us Wyomingites believe - that wildlife are an important piece of a strong economy in Wyoming and not an impediment to it.

The Importance of Messengers

There is also an important takeaway from this poll about messengers. One of our key takeaways from our interviews in Wyoming was the value that people saw in ensuring this issue does not become partisan or dominated by typical political actors like the energy industry or conservation voices. This poll underlines how critical that choice is. Respondents found oil and gas workers and conservation organizations to be the least believable voices in this debate - with only 15% and 22% respectively finding them "very believable." The most believable entities were government organizations like Wyoming Fish and Game (95% believable), University of Wyoming researchers (89% believable), and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (88% believable). Hunters and local landowners such as ranchers were also well regarded (89% believable).

National Wildlife Federation poll

An early 2019 poll commissioned by the National Wildlife Federation in New Mexico and Colorado studied public opinion on migration issues. An incredibly important note in this poll is the difference in political views of those polled and the audiences in Montana. 48% of poll respondents identified as somewhat to very Democratic in their political leanings, compared to only 38% who identified as Republican. The current partisan breakdown in Montana is very different and it is unlikely that this data is reflective of Montana political views.

Regardless, the poll shows widespread support for corridors. Coloradans and New Mexicans overwhelmingly support efforts to protect the migratory routes of wildlife. Support reaches 85 percent in Colorado and 84 percent in New Mexico. The pollster went as far as to state:

"The goal of any outreach effort is not to convince people to support wildlife—they already do—but to spark enough intensity and passion around this issue to overcome an often determined and highly vocal opposition."

One of our interview subjects noted that they poll had two real purposes:

“It was important for us to demonstrate to incoming progressive Governors in both states that this was an issue that was safe politically - but we also needed to establish a baseline of public understanding and opinion for our work more broadly on this issue.”

New Mexico and Colorado were at the very beginning of dealing with migration corridors when this poll was put in the field - roughly the same place that Montana finds itself in now. However, in these states they were also preparing for incoming Democratic Governors who are to the left of their state parties ideologically - a factor that Montana does not have.

Messengers:

There are some themes that continue from the Wyoming poll which are still present in New Mexico and Colorado. Respondents believe that government entities and scientists are more trustworthy on this issue than anyone else and far more trustworthy than most advocacy organizations. In addition, statements that directly put these migration corridors in conflict with oil and gas development are among the least compelling arguments to respondents.

This poll also shows some differences from the Wyoming poll that can mostly likely be attributed to differences in political beliefs and cultural differences. Respondents in Colorado and New Mexico largely rejected an argument about ensuring we do not add additional burdens to land owners, ranchers, and oil and gas companies - a belief that is likely easier to hold in states where those interests are less critical to the state’s economy or less embedded in the communities being polled.

NWF Online Focus Groups

In February of 2019, NWF commissioned an online focus group asking a series of questions related to wildlife migration of rural voters in New Mexico and Colorado. These focus group results tracked fairly closely with the polling results in these states.

One main takeaway was that the importance of oil, gas, and energy development as a driver of the state’s economy was simply much less present in the minds of those who participated. Of 23 respondents, only 5 made any mention of oil, gas, or energy development in response to the question “What would you say drives the economy in your state? What industries or business sectors play a big role?” That is not likely to be the case in Montana.

Teton County Poll

In 2013, a Teton County Poll was commissioned that looked at attitudes regarding wildlife in the area. Given that this data is more than 6 years old, draws from a small geographic area, and

shares the main takeaways regarding message and messengers that we found in other polling, we will not summarize the findings here.

Polling Summary

Each of the polls we looked at contain information that can inform work on corridors in Montana, but none should be taken as gospel. There are differences in the baseline knowledge of the residents of each state and the political differences between those states and MT that must be considered.

In Wyoming, the state's leadership on this issue over time produced a very informed electorate. Their use of effective messages and messengers are critical takeaways for work in other Western states particularly Montana which has yet to undertake a formal public education campaign on this issue.

In New Mexico and Colorado, NWF is at the beginning of the process of educating the public about corridors, but the political climate is very different. Additionally, the goal of that poll was to demonstrate the political value of the issue to Democratic Governors who are seen as progressive champions - a different reality than Montana - and the polling focussed less on "soft spots" in arguments for corridors than it did on getting a positive outcome.

Summary of Message Lessons Learned:

- The most effective messages for talking about wildlife corridors across all of the polling shared one theme - put people, and the impacts that wildlife (and their migration patterns) have on people - at the center of the argument. These messages enjoy far more support than those that appeal to the natural or biological value of wildlife.
- Focusing on reducing vehicle collisions and the economic value of wildlife is a great starting point for work in Montana as they consider message research options moving forward.
- Focus on big game species that have economic value - not other species that may benefit from corridors - but are not seen as economically important.
- It is important to note that even in the far more liberal leaning samples in New Mexico and Colorado that included people predisposed to supporting conservation - individuals

were more interested in a message that puts their lived experience at the center of the story rather than conservation.

- It is incredibly rare to find a message that resonates at a high level with both more conservative rural citizens and more progressive urban people. There is a huge amount of opportunity to garner widespread support - if the message and messenger are right.

Messenger Lessons Learned:

- People trust the experts. This is the single largest takeaway regarding messengers from every poll that we looked at. Government agencies, university researchers and other official organizations are routinely cited as more believable and trustworthy than conservation organizations or advocacy organizations representing the oil and gas industry and other development.
- Beginning the process of educating, identifying and empowering messengers in Montana who are a part of these kinds of trusted organizations is critical. We know that more than a quarter of respondents are immediately put off by the wrong messengers - which makes it nearly impossible to get them to hear those messengers out, much less agree with them. The Island Park case underscored the kinds of impacts that the wrong messengers can have in a wildlife corridor debate.

Polling Recommendations for Montana:

- Create a baseline. It is imperative to understand what the people of Montana know about wildlife's contribution to the local and state economies, migration corridors and wildlife migrations. This will require a statewide poll, with a screen that is representative of the state politically, geographically, and demographically. This first poll should focus on the current level of understanding of this issue among Montanans, the way they think about wildlife in the state, their views and values on the rights of landowners on issues of land use, and determining who they trust to communicate about this issue. The results of this poll will help us understand how we can introduce wildlife corridors to the people of Montana in an effective way.
- Following that first poll, a second poll should be commissioned to understand how best to persuade the people of Montana on this issue. This poll should not be designed for public release and should seek to understand both the strengths of a good message and where corridors will be vulnerable to rhetorical pushback. It is important that there is some awareness of this issue before we do this, or else we risk skewing the results. The

poll should also identify specific arguments against corridor designations in the state so they can be effectively countered with appropriate messengers.

- The second poll should be followed with focus groups. Understanding what people believe is important. Understanding why they believe it is crucial. One round of focus groups with a representative sample of Montanans will be important.
- There should also be a round of focus groups primarily focused on understanding the views of landowners, if at all possible. This may be logistically challenging, but knowing how critical that constituency is in any public policy debate in Montana, it is worth pursuing to gain a deep understanding of what will and will not work for that constituency.

A Strategy for Montana

State of Play in Montana

Montana is at the beginning of discussing the public policy surrounding wildlife migration and the protection of migration corridors. This issue has not been at the forefront of policy discussions or public campaigns in the state which creates challenges and opportunities.

We know that wildlife is an important part of how Montanans think about their state. Pronghorn, elk, mule deer and grizzly bears are a part of everyday life, and contribute to the culture of Big Sky country in a meaningful way. What is also very clear from our interviews is the fact that Montanans value the rights of property owners and mistrust the government - especially when it comes to restricting or dictating the ways private property is used. Despite the fact that ranching may not contribute the same number of jobs or economic contributions that it has in the past, ranchers and landowners have considerable political power and will be a critical voice in any decision about wildlife migrations.

A recent secretarial order from President's Trump's Interior Department has pushed this issue into the minds of decision makers in the state, and key questions about how best to address migrations, public engagement, and communications have started to be discussed as Montana begins the process of putting a plan together for dealing with migration corridors.

It is very likely that state-level political leadership will change soon in Montana. For the last 8 years, Montana has been a red state governed by a Democratic governor. With Governor Bullock

not running for re-election, it is likely that the state government will be overseen by a more conservative administration in 2021.

Finally, our assessment of the current media and decision maker climate in Montana should not be confused with the certainty that polling and other quantitative tools would and should bring to the discussion. While we feel we spoke to a good cross section of Montanans, it was not a scientific sample and we are not pollsters or policy experts on wildlife migration. To get a real understanding of where feelings around this issue sit in the state, baseline polling and other qualitative measurements of public sentiment on this issue is a must.

Tailwinds

The advantages that come with this lack of public debate are relatively clear. Montana is a clean slate when it comes to a public discussion about corridors - the issue is mostly untainted by partisanship or heated rhetoric. As far as we can tell, relevant interests believe in the value of wildlife generally and feel that it is a critical part of life in their state and nothing has been done to erode those positive feelings as they relate to migration corridors. This clean slate also means that there is a real opportunity to educate the people of Montana without biases or preconceptions - if that work is done in a strategic manner.

Headwinds

While there is almost no discussion about wildlife migration corridors as a matter of policy happening in Montana, there is a very loud and robust conversation happening among ranchers and landowners in the state around the issue of brucellosis. These landowners and ranchers are important to the dialogue around migration corridors - and they fundamentally believe that brucellosis is being spread due to a failure of wildlife management. They generally believe that any dialogue about wildlife should center around the impact of brucellosis on their herds - rather than wildlife management or corridors more broadly. Knowing what an important constituency landowners and ranchers are, it is essential that any effort on corridor designation and protection engage this constituency in a very clear and intentional way - or else it will risk losing support from the landowner community - or worse.

Specifically, according to one of our interview subjects,

“The conversation about migration corridors should be centered around the issue of brucellosis. You cannot talk about wildlife migration policy in Montana without first addressing brucellosis and the impact that it has on ranchers like me. Private landowners are incurring additional losses and costs because of poor public management of wildlife.”

Suffice to say, it is unlikely that a conversation around migration corridors centered around this disease will be compelling to voters. This makes it essential that we are able to mitigate those concerns from landowners as we start this conversation. The most obvious way to do this is to keep landowners inside the tent, so to speak. To ensure that they are valued, they have a seat at the table, and are being given access to decision makers where appropriate. Landowners must be a part of the broader solution to this issue both publicly and privately.

If landowners are going to play a key role in this effort, it's worth considering how they view themselves and their cultural connection to the issue. Another interviewee provided a sharp summary of landowner's relationship to the land and how outsiders should consider engaging them.

“The connection that ranchers have to these lands is far deeper than what we would traditionally expect of a ‘stakeholder.’ Their livelihoods and their families depend on that land. Finding language that honors the depth of that connection is a small way to communicate that we understand how much that land affects their lives.”

In short, any strategy focused on implementing wildlife connectivity in Montana must include tactics that address brucellosis and landowner concerns around that issue, and consider treating landowners as a different class of stakeholder. This deserves additional research and thought.

What Would Wyoming Do?

When faced with a similar moment, Wyoming took a very measured and well defined approach. First, they placed a heavy priority on data. Wildlife tracking data in Wyoming is widely regarded as the best in the nation. Collaring data allowed researchers with their Department of Fish and Game as well as scientists at the University of Wyoming to have a fantastic understanding of exactly where animals were traveling as they migrated. This took an enormous amount of guesswork and uncertainty out of the debate around corridors. Montana does not have this same luxury, many of our interview subjects noted that Montana, like all western states, is well behind Wyoming's data collection efforts.

The second successful approach in the state was to build up and invest in non-partisan messengers. The University of Wyoming's Migration Corridor Initiative was able to serve as a leading face in public education efforts, with all the credibility and authority of a state university and none of the baggage that comes with left-leaning or environmental groups as leading voices. In addition the state worked to minimize the involvement of “advocacy” groups in official

actions, such as the Governor's Migration Task Force, and raise up the voices of regular citizens in Wyoming.

What does all of this mean for Montana?

Phase 1 - Engaging On Science and Preparing for Persuasion

The first phase of this work should focus on doing no harm, utilizing the successful messengers we have at our disposal and building the framework for later persuasive conversations with Montanans.

Message Research

The first step in Montana should be to do baseline polling of what the state's population understands, hears about and feels about this issue. Our sense is that the answer to all of those questions is "not much," but we need good polling data in order to be sure. We simply cannot chart a path forward without this first step.

When polling there are two very important things that we must take into consideration. First, we need to be sure that we are not conflating an understanding of where the people of Montana are starting from on this issue with message research around specific policy proposals. The first round of polling should not answer the questions "what should we be saying?" it should simply take the temperature of the state. Once we have that data, we can begin to make presumptions about what kinds of messages a voter with those thoughts, feelings, and sources of information may want to hear. Then, those assumptions can be tested in a second round of polling. Without these polls, we will be flying blind in our communications with Montanans and run the very serious risk of violating the cardinal sin around this issue - sounding like out of touch outsiders.

Polling and message research should ask questions about how voters feel generally about wildlife, the culture of the state of Montana, the land rights of property owners, and other tangentially related cultural questions. Understanding those questions - what Montanans believe to be acceptable limits on the rights of landowners, what they believe it means to be Montanan, what they believe the value of wildlife to the state is - will be essential to building a communications effort that includes a diversity of voices and has measurable political power behind it.

It will also be important to be specific and segment this polling. We cannot assume that the feelings Montanans have about pronghorn are the same as the feelings they may have about grizzly bears. We cannot assume that messages that work in the Paradise Valley are also going

to work in other parts of the state. What we know about this issue is that landowners value feeling like each conversation about each corridor is individual, distinct and respectful of the unique features of that land. In order to be effective, our polling should model that.

Engaging Voters with Science Based Messages and Listening

In addition to traditional political polling, it is critical that Montana begin the process of engaging directly with communities that will be affected by any potential policy proposals on corridors. This work should have a particular emphasis on speaking with landowners and other politically potent groups. One of our interview subjects was very direct about this point, saying:

“In order for any discussion of migration corridors to be successful, it is essential that ranchers know they are important and that they are important to the conversation - those things are not happening in Montana right now.”

It is critical that this work not be seen as an effort in persuasion or advocacy. The goal at this stage is simply to start a conversation and a dialogue around how people feel about wildlife, property rights, and the values they hold dear as Montanans. We have to begin to understand in a meaningful way what people value in these parts of the state and how they think about this issue.

One particularly useful tool for this work might be the use of a deep canvass. This is a process designed to map the values of a community based on a collection of conversations at the doors that can later help inform polling questions or message guidance. These are meant to be longer form and wider ranging conversations that do not focus on a narrow set of questions about a specific policy proposal or topic. The general principles of deep canvassing are very much what is needed in Montana - the ability to open a dialogue that is directed by the subject and not focused on any short-term policy goals.

Most critical for both of these tactics is that they are rooted in active listening. If they are seen as advocacy efforts or persuasion efforts, our sense is that it will be incredibly off-putting. Remember, is the first step in a long process in which we need these community members to feel like partners, and it must begin with an open dialogue.

Begin to Develop a Values Based Message Frame

What we have seen in other states is that the fights about this issue are rarely fought on the basis of facts. In the case of Island Park, Idaho, the issue became about intrusion by outsiders and as well as globalization and the nefarious overreach of the United Nations. The idea that we

will be able to have these conversations without delving into the often illogical emotions of voters is simply incorrect, and we need to prepare ourselves for what those emotions may be.

We simply cannot speculate on what that values based message frame should be without polling. Poll questions should prod at what voters believe to be true about their state, its culture and its relationship with wildlife in an effort to get to a values based approach to this issue.

Leading with the right voices

Equally important to the message that is delivered in Montana will be who is delivering that message and how. We suggest immediate work to identify the best non-partisan, non-advocate science driven entities you have in the state who can speak about this issue and encourage them to begin sharing their data and research in these "target communities." These messengers must be able to carry a very clean message forward safely in these regions and begin to start a conversation about this issue without being off putting or threatening to locals.

In other states we have seen a strong and pronounced aversion to the statements from conservation organizations and other green groups in these discussions. Voters simply find them to be less credible than "non-partisan organizations," and believe they have an agenda beyond simply telling the truth.

We know that the strongest messengers around this issue have been scientists from governments and universities, along with voices from the communities being affected by these choices. It is critical that even these non-partisan voices who citizens are predisposed to trust not fall into the trap of looking like outsiders pushing an agenda onto local communities from afar.

Do No Harm In the Short Term

We are at a unique moment politically in Montana. With Governor Steve Bullock's term coming to an end at the end of 2020 and the expectation being that he will be replaced by a significantly more conservative Republican Governor, it is unlikely that a new administration will place the same value on conservation focused causes. This means that it is most effective to think about the future of this issue along two related tracks.

In the short-term, it is important to make small progress around this issue while a friendly governor is in your corner. However, it is essential that these short-term gains are not seen as partisan or an overreach, or else they will jeopardize the ability to make long-term progress. We know that there can be backlash to corridor designations if they are seen as being made hastily, or in a one-size fits all manner. The short-term action cannot be seen to have those traits or it

will put the issue in a terrible light for the longer-term fight that is coming under a less friendly administration. In the short-term, we must be sure to do no harm.

Ideally, the long-term focus is on building the kinds of non-partisan, expertise driven voices who can credibly speak about these issues - similar to the Wyoming Migration Initiative in Wyoming. Raising up voices that we have consistently seen poll as trustworthy in other states - scientists, experts, academics, and career agency staff - is a good place to start as we build up new voices. Relying on these voices will ensure that this issue does not become overly partisan or threatening to a more conservative administration in Montana.

In addition to emphasizing these trustworthy voices, we must also begin to engage directly with the Montanans who will be affected by these corridors. Direct public engagement with affected landowners, ranchers, and communities will help to build local credibility - which will be essential for the success of any future corridor designations. Beginning to do the work of building those relationships now will be very helpful when it comes time to announce corridor designations in the future.

The rollout to a discussion of this issue is going to be critical. If this is framed up properly, it can be an issue that transcends partisanship for years - if it isn't, it will be seen as just another conflict between conservationists and private landowners. One of our interview subjects summed up this dynamic very succinctly, saying:

"I am not going to blame Montanans if they don't buy into a plan for migration corridors in Montana. I'm going to blame us for not rolling it out properly. It is not a race to figure out how quickly we can get this done. We have to do this work right. If it takes us five years that is more valuable than doing it quickly."

Phase 2 - Engage on Values and Policy

Once the pieces are in place for Montana to begin to have this conversation in a meaningful way with the public - a values based message, credible messengers and a track record of meaningful public engagement - here is how we would recommend that you proceed. Starting down this road before those building blocks are in place may be risky.

Treat these issues as a series of backyard campaigns - not a statewide policy proposal

The biggest enemy of any wildlife migration effort in Montana will be the sense that policymakers are taking an overly broad, one size fits all approach to the issue. The migratory patterns of these animals are different and they affect different communities in different ways.

The landowners, ranchers and community members in these areas all possess a strong connection to these landscapes and know them well. Any effort that is viewed as outsiders coming in with a top down mandate to tell them how to best manage a landscape that they feel they know better will be received poorly.

Any action on the issue of wildlife corridors needs to begin with a real, sustained public engagement effort that honors the expertise and viewpoints of landowners and members of the affected communities. Those conversations must happen before a full-scale proposal is formed or presented to them and there must be a clear pathway for those community members to influence any future proposal. If those conversations do not happen, it is likely that the backlash will be swift and sizable.

It is best to think of the policy future of migration corridors not as a single statewide push, but as a series of loosely connected individual campaigns across the state that are tailored to the specific advantages, threats, animals, and cultural realities of each region. Those campaigns should learn from one another and apply best practices learned from other efforts, but they will need to operate on separate timelines, reach separate conclusions and remain largely independent.

Take advantage of vehicle collisions as a message frame

One of the things that our interviews revealed in other states were that unique partnerships are available around this issue if we are able to broaden our thinking beyond considering this to be a conservation issue.

Notably in Wyoming, we heard stories about the way that vehicle collisions and highway safety were used as a tool for illustrating the value of migration corridors and wildlife migration management. Our interview subject noted that:

“Every single person in Wyoming knows someone who has been involved in a vehicle/wildlife crash. Talking about corridors in the context of car crashes makes it personal - makes it human.”

And when presented with data that actively managing these animals could help reduce these accidents, voters found that argument compelling. Additionally, this different lens on the problem allowed for legislative bills on the issue to garner support from auto insurance companies who anticipated a reduced number of claims, and long haul trucking associations who began to see the issue as a workplace safety cause. By taking a wider lens to this issue, unlikely partners were brought to the table and wildlife migration management could be seen as a pro-business issue.

Species Matter

In much the same way that not all communities or landscapes are the same, and should not be treated in the same way with a universal top-down campaign plan, it is also critical to remember that not all species will be received in the same way. A campaign around the migration management of ungulates should have a significantly different tone to it than one focused on the management of predatory species like wolves and grizzly bear.

Our sense is that most Montanans are able to see the economic and cultural value of ungulates without initially perceiving those animals as a direct threat to their health and safety (with the notable exception of ranchers). Wolves and grizzlies are more often seen as a nuisance or a threat by Montanans and are viewed more derisively as a result. The idea that they should make changes to their lives to accommodate animals who inconvenience and threaten them on a daily basis is simply not credible.

Conclusion

- Montana must view this as a public engagement problem as much as a communications problem and start with exercises in active listening in affected communities.
- Montana must engage in baseline polling to understand where the state is on this issue, but also the underlying cultural values that this issue touches.
- In the short term, Montana must do no harm to this issue by overreaching or focusing on protecting as many acres of land as possible.
- Montana must work to build up and empower the right kinds of messengers to speak to Montanans about this issue - non-partisan organizations that are driven by science and have no history of advocacy.