

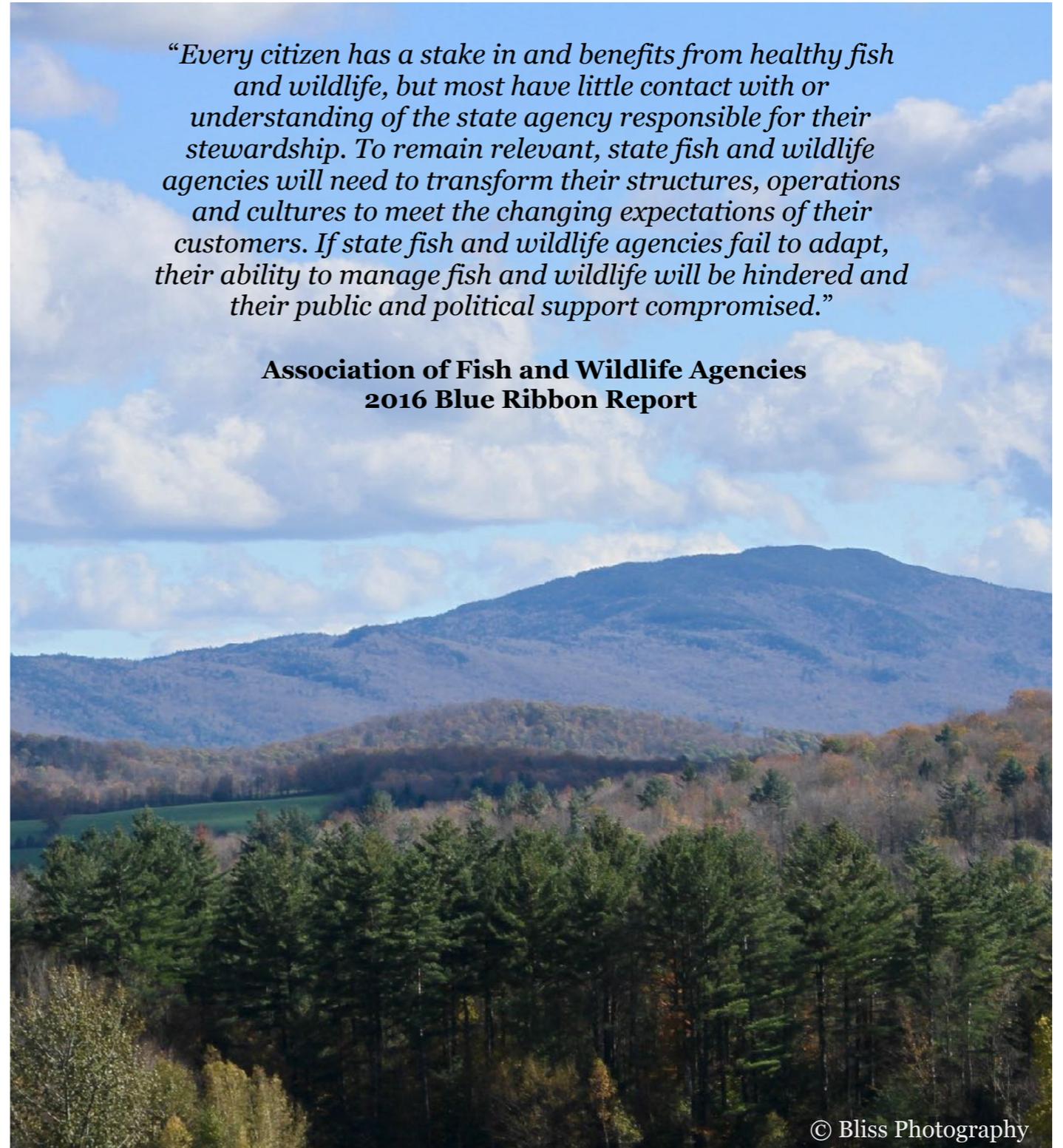
# In Crisis:

## Vermont's Wildlife Governance



*“Every citizen has a stake in and benefits from healthy fish and wildlife, but most have little contact with or understanding of the state agency responsible for their stewardship. To remain relevant, state fish and wildlife agencies will need to transform their structures, operations and cultures to meet the changing expectations of their customers. If state fish and wildlife agencies fail to adapt, their ability to manage fish and wildlife will be hindered and their public and political support compromised.”*

**Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies  
2016 Blue Ribbon Report**



# Executive Summary

Wildlife governance is in crisis in Vermont and across the U.S. due to changes in revenue streams, cultural norms, and outdated conservation strategies. The purpose of this paper is to outline the essential arguments for why the state's wildlife governance must transform to meet 21<sup>st</sup> Century demands on our wildlife.

We will discuss three primary aspects of this crisis and offer recommended solutions. Three key drivers of the crisis are:

- a) **Revenue gaps** - trapper/hunter/angler license revenues have fallen by as much as 65 percent in some license categories
- b) **Culture change and political conflict** - public attitudes have shifted in ways that conflict with traditional wildlife management
- c) **Conservation risk** - current conservation strategies fall short of addressing the risks faced by today's wildlife populations



# Revenue Gaps

Despite extensive efforts by the Department of Fish & Wildlife (DFW) to promote hunting, trapping, and fishing in Vermont, there is a major reduction in the participation in these activities by both residents and non-residents.

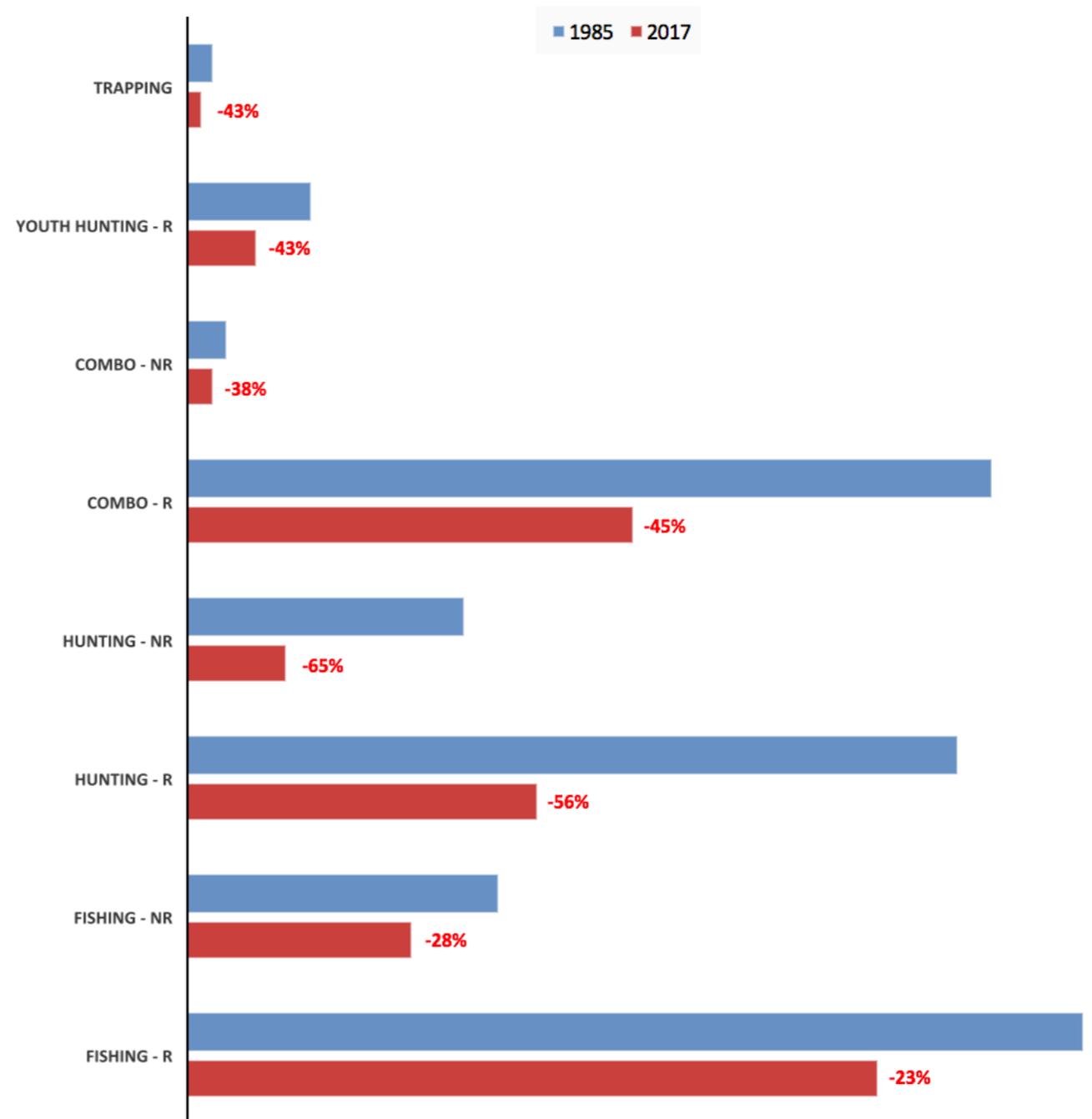
Furthermore, Vermont license sales have been trending downward since 1985 (Figure 1), and current efforts to reverse this trend have had more than adequate time to prove successful. Instead, participation continues to decline despite the campaigns and spending.

Meanwhile, participation in wildlife viewing, birding, photography, and other similar activities is experiencing rapid growth and has the potential to fund wildlife management for the 21st Century (Figure 3).

Since 2011 the number of anglers dropped by 22% to 25.8 million; hunters dropped by 16% to 11.5 million. Over the same period wildlife watchers grew by 20% to 86 million participants.

*U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's 2016 National Survey*

Vermont Trapping, Hunting, and Fishing License Trends



**Figure 1:** Trapping, hunting, and fishing license trends since 1985. Note: Youth resident hunting data is from 1993 to 2017.

*R = Resident NR = Non-resident*

## Changes in Wildlife Conservation Funding

And with the dramatic decline in trapping, hunting, and fishing participation rates, license sales revenue that has been central to wildlife conservation historically has been severely impacted (Figure 2).

Most notably, the general fund along with other public funds now exceed revenues from license sales. While general fund and federal monies have been making up the difference, these funds are very unstable; they cannot be counted on indefinitely. As a result, the financial crisis that DFW has acknowledged is destined to continue and grow over time unless something is done.

Wildlife Conservation Funding as a Percentage of Total Vermont DFW Budget

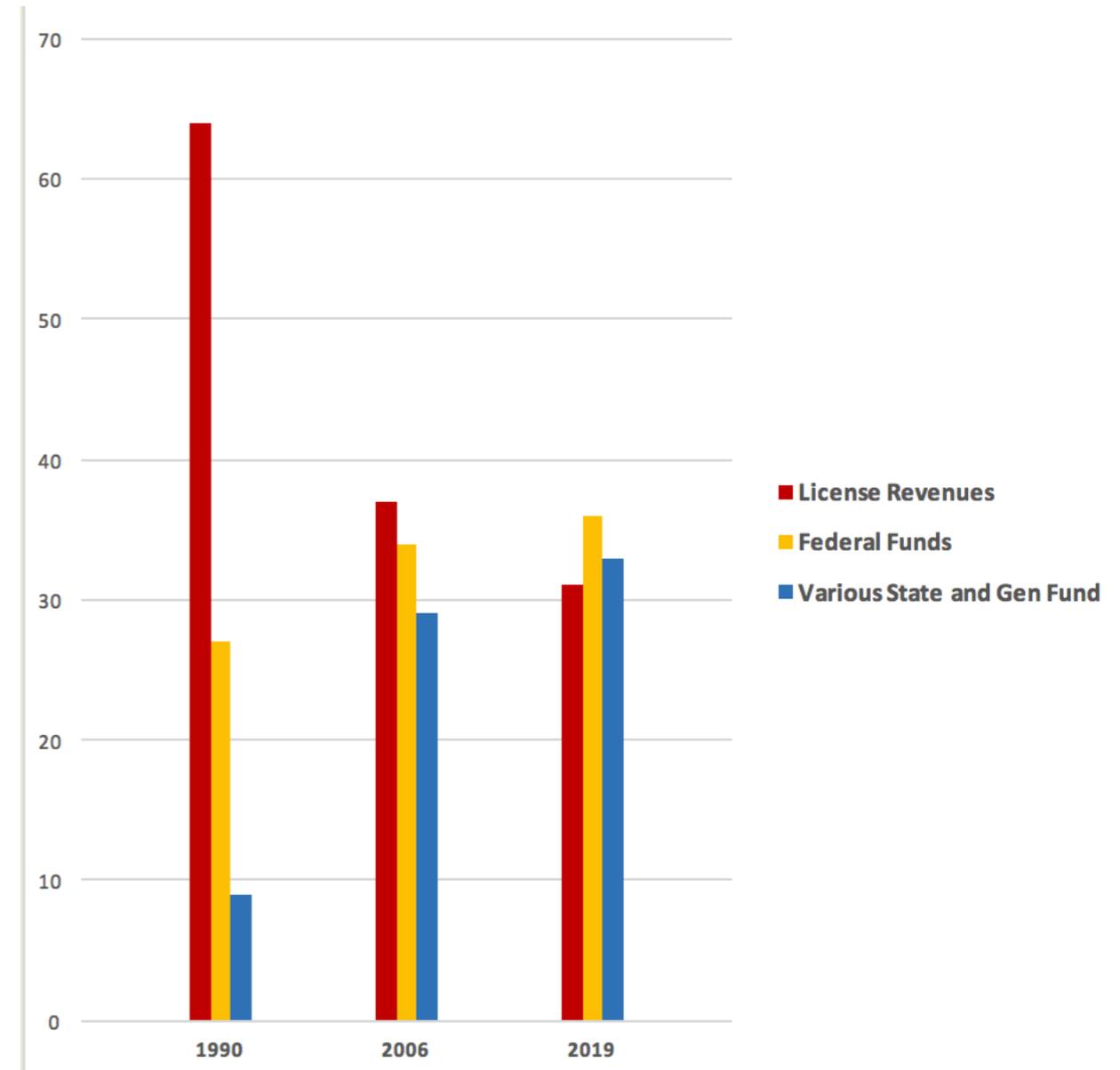


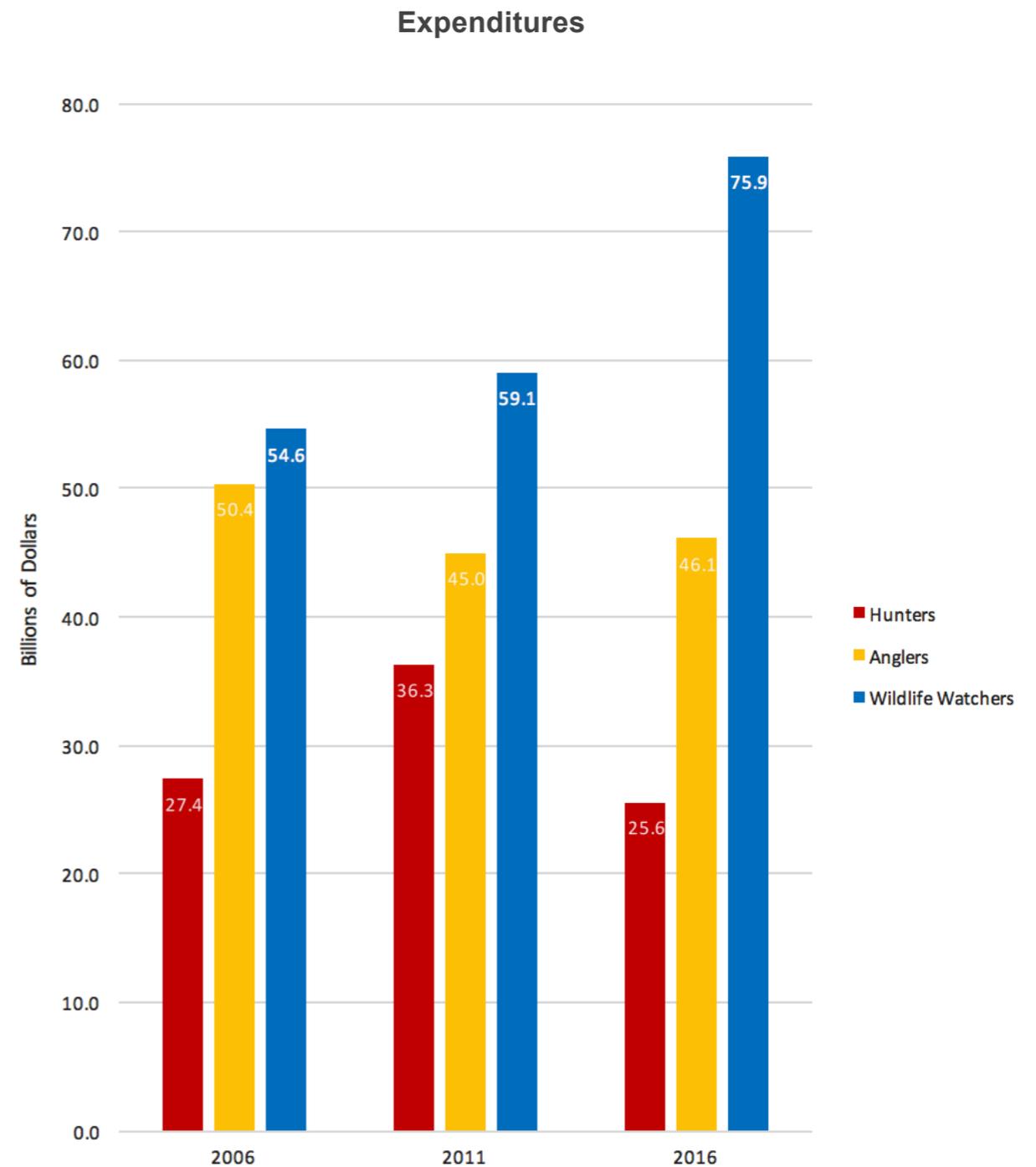
Figure 2: Comparison of revenue streams.

## Emerging Public Spending on Wildlife

While hunting, trapping, and fishing participation rates have dropped, the number of people who participate in wildlife watching has increased significantly, offering the potential to help fund wildlife management now and in the future.

In fact, Vermont is among the highest ranked of states whose citizens are engaged in wildlife watching. Notably, the USFWS (2016) found that wildlife watchers generated \$3.00 for every \$1.00 generated by hunters.

These new sources of funding are not being cultivated by the DFW because the Department and Fish & Wildlife Board (FWB) are currently controlled by trappers, hunters, and other consumptive users. Those special interests have not been willing to democratize the management of Vermont's wildlife.



Source: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
2016 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation: National Overview

Figure 3: Graph showing expenditures by consumptives and non-consumptives since 2006.

# Culture Change and Political Conflict

Beyond the financial gaps, public attitudes towards wildlife and animals in general have changed considerably, as is evidenced by controversies around animals used for entertainment or fashion:

- Barnum and Bailey closed (2017)
- New Jersey and Hawaii banned the use of wild animals in circus performances (2018)
- SeaWorld has stopped breeding captive Orcas and has been phasing out Orca performances (2015-2018)
- Global designers have gone fur-free (see Figure 4)

New scientific evidence recognizing animals as sentient beings combined with faster communication channels to disseminate information have led to an increase in global campaigns against trapping and other practices perceived as inherently cruel. It is worth noting that 100 countries and eight states including Arizona, Washington and Colorado have made leg hold and body gripping traps illegal, except in the case of wildlife conflicts (beaver dams causing flooded roads, for example).

Clearly, Vermonters are part of this cultural shift. A scientific survey conducted by UVM's Center for Rural Studies showed 75% of Vermonters support banning leg hold traps. Similarly, the survey found that Vermonters overwhelmingly oppose the wanton waste of wildlife. Both the Department of Fish & Wildlife and the Fish & Wildlife Board have refused to address wanton waste (Figure 5) despite public pressure.

## Global designers who are fur-free as of 2018:

- Burberry
- Gucci
- Giorgio Armani
- Ralph Lauren
- Versace
- DKNY
- Michael Kors
- Calvin Klein
- John Galliano
- Tommy Hilfiger
- Coach

**Figure 4:** A partial list of global designers who have gone fur-free.



**Figure 5:** Crows shot and left to rot is an example of wanton waste in Vermont.

Rather than looking for ways to bridge this culture change, DFW leadership has chosen to embrace political conflict. This includes publicly and repeatedly accusing all wildlife advocates of being anti-hunting when there is clear evidence to the contrary. Politics were also evident in the legislature's consideration of a ban on coyote killing contests. Astonishingly, neither the Department nor the Board took a position against killing contests. In fact, the Commissioner took a position *against* the banning of these killing contests. In the end it took the legislature to act to represent public interests when both of the designated wildlife bodies refused to address the issue.

And compromise related to open season (24/7 hunting) on coyotes seems destined for a similar path. Documents obtained through a public records request show that not only is the Department actively working to maintain the status quo, it is effectively silencing staff members who support the changes wildlife advocates are endorsing (Figure 6).

While DFW leaders have continuously attempted to promote the idea that compromising with wildlife advocates will mean loss for the average hunter and angler, the truth is that changes such as banning killing contests, addressing 24/7 wildlife killing, and putting rules in place to prevent wanton waste could actually benefit ethically-minded hunters and anglers.

**“With regards to a coyote season, please keep that opinion to verbal only, and among your peers. The commissioner is fighting daily to keep the status quo...”**

- A directive to wardens after internal support was voiced for doing away with the open season on coyotes

**Figure 6:** Snippet from a DFW email sent to wardens.

### **Potential Benefits of the Changes Proposed by Wildlife Advocacy Groups**

- Improved accountability
- Greater representation of citizens
- Improved foundation for collaboratively addressing wildlife conservation issues, including revenue gaps
- Reduced risk of reputational damage to ethically-minded hunters and to the Vermont brand
- Reduced number of property owners posting their land (many post due to 24/7 coyote hunting or hounding)

**Figure 7:** A list of some of the potential change benefits.

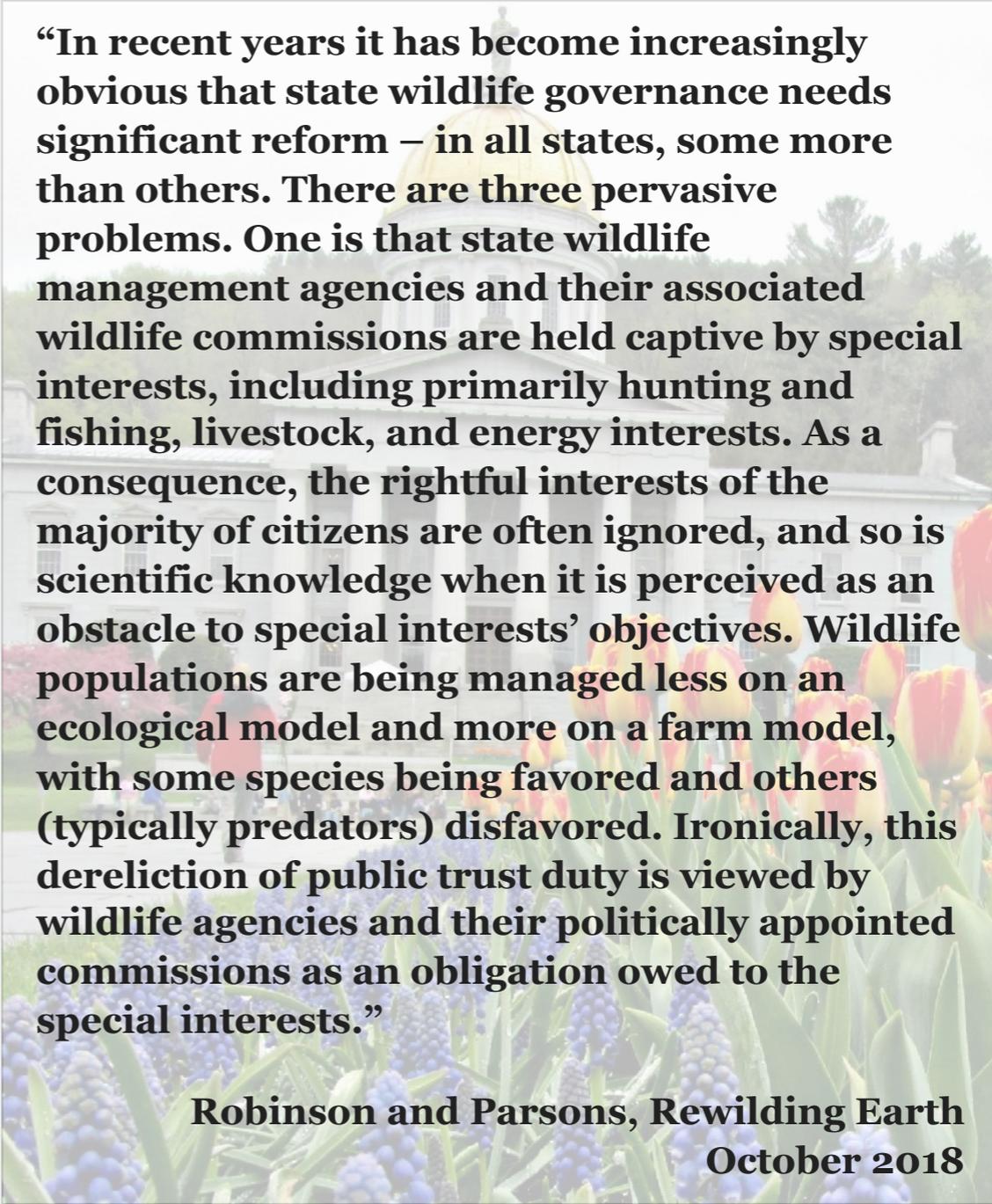
## Accountability

The FWB holds extraordinary powers to make regulations and establish public policy over those species that are shot, trapped, or fished. With that extraordinary power comes little to no accountability.

Board members are not elected and are not accountable to the governor (who appoints them for six-year terms), the legislature, or the public. They are not even required to adhere to the recommendations of the DFW biologists. When a trapper made a request to extend the bobcat trapping season, it took hundreds of letters and a strong and vocal public presence at multiple FWB meetings to get enough board members to vote according to the evidence. Without this level of extreme pressure by the public, the Board would have voted to disregard science-based recommendations and extended the season.

Despite state statutes that declare wildlife a public resource that must be managed to serve all citizens, the vast majority of Vermonters are locked out of the decision-making process. The public at large has not one seat on the board of 14 members. All current FWB members represent hunting and trapping interests, and for some, the financial conflict of interest alone is concerning.

This is not the way a healthy public board should function.



**“In recent years it has become increasingly obvious that state wildlife governance needs significant reform – in all states, some more than others. There are three pervasive problems. One is that state wildlife management agencies and their associated wildlife commissions are held captive by special interests, including primarily hunting and fishing, livestock, and energy interests. As a consequence, the rightful interests of the majority of citizens are often ignored, and so is scientific knowledge when it is perceived as an obstacle to special interests’ objectives. Wildlife populations are being managed less on an ecological model and more on a farm model, with some species being favored and others (typically predators) disfavored. Ironically, this dereliction of public trust duty is viewed by wildlife agencies and their politically appointed commissions as an obligation owed to the special interests.”**

**Robinson and Parsons, Rewilding Earth  
October 2018**

*Montpelier, Vermont*

## Conservation Risk

The final dimension to the crisis in Vermont's wildlife governance concerns conservation risk. The reality is that Vermont's wildlife face significant threats going forward. These include:

- forest fragmentation from ongoing development (Figure 8)
- increasing human-animal conflict that results from diminished habitat
- the expanding number of species considered endangered or under threat and requiring increased monitoring, and
- the multiple and growing challenges stemming from global warming

Examples of the latter include the explosion of the tick infestation and its impact on moose, the increasing threat from invasive species, and the as yet unknown consequences of changes in the range of various species.

Part of the conservation crisis is simply that traditional conservation strategies embedded in current governance are not providing answers today.

*Forest cover is declining in all New England states at a combined rate of 24,000 acres of forest per year.*

Voices from the Land; Harvard Forest 2018

**Figure 8:** Forest fragmentation is one of several significant threats to wildlife.



**Figure 9:** A moose and her calf (Vermont, 2017).

## Conclusion

In the face of foundational changes, Vermont's wildlife governance model is fixed in the past, with the interests of the majority marginalized or ignored by the DFW and the FWB as they serve trappers and hunters as their primary customer.

The mission of the DFW is “the conservation of all species of fish, wildlife, and plants and their habitats for the people of Vermont.”

The Department is falling short of its stated mission. Attempts by members of the public to engage the Department through face to face meetings to work toward a more democratic and sustainable model have proven fruitless.

The DFW cannot represent one special interest group over all other interests groups that have a stake in how Vermont's wildlife is managed. By law, wildlife is a public resource that must be managed in a way that serves the public. (VT Statutes, Title 10, Chapter 103, sub chapter 002)

We have reached an impasse.

### Problems with the Vermont Model of Conservation

---

According to their own internal documents, the DFW has identified the following inconsistencies with the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation:

- Lack of wanton waste laws
- Lack of recognition of the differing values related to the killing of wildlife
- Representation on the Fish and Wildlife Board (the exclusion of public interests)
- Cultural changes and the posting of land
- Fragmentation of land
- General Funds (the second most important source after federal) are not a reliable source of funding for the DFW

*(Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife)*

## Proposed Solution

The Vermont Wildlife Coalition calls for change in our wildlife governance structures in response to the emerging crisis. That call for change is echoed by wildlife advocacy groups from within the wildlife profession, academia, the citizenry, and perhaps most significantly, from the industry voice representing state fish and wildlife agencies. Their call for change could not be clearer and it's worth repeating:

*"To remain relevant, state fish and wildlife agencies will need to transform their structures, operations and cultures to meet the changing expectations of their customers. If state fish and wildlife agencies fail to adapt, their ability to manage fish and wildlife will be hindered and their public and political support compromised."*

Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies-Blue Ribbon Report, 2016



© StevenDavidJohnson.com

The multiple and complex issues facing Vermont requires a comprehensive and in-depth assessment. Vermont's governance must be brought into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The Vermont Wildlife Coalition (VWC) believes that the optimum approach to address these issues is the establishment of a **Legislative Working Group** whose members reflect the diversity of wildlife values held by the citizenry.

The Legislative Working Group would have a mandate to address the following:

- leadership and identity crisis at DFW during a time of complex change
- assess staffing at DFW to ensure it is structured to address contemporary needs
- recommend a FWB structure that balances public interests in its regulatory and public policy-making roles
- review and assess existing wildlife legislation to ensure its relevance to the values the citizenry holds

The Membership of the working group is critical to bringing fresh thinking and ideas to the table. A group controlled by those currently in charge would result only in a dusting off of the status quo.

The time for Vermont's legislature to act is NOW.



## About the Vermont Wildlife Coalition

The statewide Vermont Wildlife Coalition (VWC) consists of citizen volunteers and seeks a broad membership that consists of individuals and organizations from across the state that share an interest in the future of Vermont's wildlife. We engage in political action that above all supports humane conservation approaches. The VWC receives no funding from state or federal sources, but does welcome donations from the public to support its work.

### **Our Mission**

To ensure a vibrant and protected future for Vermont's wild species through wildlife-centered public education and political action.

### **Our Goal**

The Vermont Wildlife Coalition's goal is to create and foster public education, and influence statewide political action, in order to promote humane, unbiased and science-based behaviors and policies towards wildlife, and support a conservation ethic aligned with 21st Century ecological and socially responsible principles.

[www.vtwildlifecoalition.org](http://www.vtwildlifecoalition.org)

[info@vtwildlifecoalition.org](mailto:info@vtwildlifecoalition.org)

*January 2019*