

INTERVIEWER: The land of 10,000 lakes is also the land of 10 million acres of wetlands. Now that may sound like a lot, but it's actually just half the wetlands that were in Minnesota before European settlement according to the Department of Natural Resources. In the mid-20th century, government policies incentivized farmers to drain or fill wetlands, and croplands spread across the West in areas that were critical to birds and other wildlife.

And then a movement to protect and recover wetlands grew into a system of state lands called Wildlife Management Areas. This year, the DNR is celebrating the 75th anniversary of this conservation strategy. Wildlife section manager Dave Trauba joins me now to explain in studio. Hello.

DAVE TRAUBA: Hey. Yeah, good afternoon, Emily. Great to be here.

INTERVIEWER: Thank you for being here. So what does a designation Wildlife Management Area mean? How are these places protected?

DAVE TRAUBA: Yeah, it's-- so Wildlife Management Area, I think that what makes us unique is that those lands are acquired for wildlife conservation purposes, for the production of wildlife. And compare that to a state park where it's environmental education and a lot of facilities. On a WMA, again, it's wildlife conservation, and facilities are very limited. So you might just have a parking lot because we are trying to squeeze out every acre for wildlife.

INTERVIEWER: And I mentioned Wildlife Management Areas began to protect wetlands, but I understand they now cover all kinds of landscapes. Can you describe how many they are, where they are?

DAVE TRAUBA: Yeah, again, we have around 1,500 individual units. Now the most of them are going to be what we call the prairie part of the state, the western one third, and most of them are acquired where wildlife managers said, hey, this area is important for wildlife, could have native prairie, a lot of wetlands.

As you move further east, then the WMAs tend to get a little bit larger. When you get up in the northeast part of the state, they're a little bit less abundant because there you have more state forest land, more federal forest land. So a lot of our acquired WMAs tend to be in the more western part of the state.

INTERVIEWER: What-- tell me more about what it took to create this system of conservation land.

DAVE TRAUBA: Yeah, it's a great story, Emily. So it really started in 1948, and back then this is-- so Wildlife Management Areas are part of the Minnesota DNR, managed by the DNR, held in public trust. But anyways back then, we maybe had four what they called game managers. And in 1948, Dr. Erickson Dave Bissell hired what they call the first 12 game managers, and they were located in the western part of the state, and those folks really sounded the alarm. They were coming back saying, hey, we are losing wetlands.

And I-- when I say wetlands, I'm talking lakes. They'd go up and do surveys looking for muskrat huts actually, and they would come back and say all the wetlands we saw the year before are now gone. And they're losing them at such a rapid rate. And, again, it was water and grass, water an, Grass. So the wetland density was incredible.

So we tried the voluntary approach and, that just didn't get traction. So it was like, hey, you know what. If we're going to save wetlands and for multiple reasons, we're going to need to go out and acquire them. So they sounded the alarm. And then Richard Dorer lit the candle and led the crusade.

Now Richard Dorer, the thing that's fascinating with him, he was born in 1890. He was a World War I veteran. He went to West Point. He was a graduate of West Point. Awarded the Silver Star, two bronze French medals, and what I find interesting, he joined our conservation department at the age of 48 years of age.

But he led the crusade. So when we think of if you go down to southern-- southeast Minnesota, you look at the Richard Dorer Memorial Hardwood Forest, that's him. He had two passions, saving wetlands and then the state forest.

But he did not take no for an answer. He set the vision. He went around the state talking about we need to save wetlands. There was a crusade, and people said when they listened to Richard talk, it was a moving experience, an emotional experience. So he was able to rally people around the vision.

And, again, what I can recount, He was hard to supervise. He didn't take no for an answer.

INTERVIEWER: I'll bet.

DAVE TRAUBA: But he-- long story short, the goal was 250,000 acres of WMA land. And with Richard and other people, we got to that level, and we had the tractors. Think of it back in that day, it was state and national policy that drained wetlands.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah.

DAVE TRAUBA: So when I think of saving wetlands, building the legacy we have today, I think of, oh, we bought that physical wetland. But what it was really about was changing state and national policy, how we view wetlands and how we view the environment. And that's a legacy. That's what we're really celebrating in 75 years is changing that narrative.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, changing minds and--

DAVE TRAUBA: Changing minds. Absolutely.

INTERVIEWER: That is quite the legacy. So let's talk about how this work affects wildlife. The loss and the fragmentation of habitat is a major problem for all kinds of species. So how effective have these areas been at protecting that habitat?

DAVE TRAUBA: Yeah, it's-- like I said, we're up to 1.4 million acres. Obviously we have other state land, state forest lands. But in some parts of the state, I spent most of my career in the southern part of the state. I'll be honest, in some counties that is the only wildlife habitat to a large extent.

As you move again or as you move further east, there are a little bit more natural habitats, but in the more intensive farm areas, our Wildlife Management Areas are the habitat that we have on the landscape. So they're critically important for all different species, and we think of game and non-game.

And I always tell people they're the nucleus and the heartbeat I think of wildlife conservation in Minnesota. And we all have partners. We got Ducks Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, but we got the Fish and Wildlife Service. We all got to be working together.

And I tell people really, we inherited a rich wildlife legacy. If I go back in time, we lost a lot of that legacy already, and our future generations, those that come after us, deserve a rich wildlife legacy. And I think that's what our WMA system provides is that wildlife legacy for future generations, we got a lot of success stories. At one time, Canada geese were thought to be extirpated from Minnesota.

INTERVIEWER: Really?

DAVE TRAUBA: Oh, yeah. Canada Goose Restoration Project took place on our state W-- Wildlife Management Areas. Whitetail deer, turkeys, eagles, everything, we're relatively young profession, wildlife profession. Started in the 1930s. So we have a lot of great success stories, but we have challenges today. We've always had challenges. But, again, to your central question, I look at that backbone of our state Wildlife Management Areas is really building that legacy that we have for future generations.

INTERVIEWER: I know in addition to providing habitat, these are also places where humans can bird watch, hunt, hike. I imagine there's some tensions with those uses.

DAVE TRAUBA: Yeah, for the most part, when you look at the statue in our WMAs, they're open for public hunting, fishing, trapping, bird watching. You said other compatible uses. By and large, I think what makes us unique, it's self-guided enjoyment like a state park. We're not going to have organized trail events.

So I think it's really for people to get out and enjoy solitude. Like we all say, they're-- our public lands, our WMAs are owned by the public, owned by all Minnesotans. So that's the public trust aspect. So I encourage everyone if they're like you know what, I've never been to a Wildlife Management Area, go on to our DNR website. You can find them. Go out and learn about them. They're just gems. They're just beautiful areas.

And I think what we learned during the COVID pandemic is as humans, we crave natural spaces and the natural environment, and that's-- I think it's in our DNA. So our Wildlife Management Areas are a way for you to reconnect with nature, find that solitude, and just enjoy the great outdoors.

INTERVIEWER: Just 30 seconds left. Anything you have planned in the next year to commemorate the anniversary?

DAVE TRAUBA: Well, we're-- yeah. I think we're doing this type of work, getting the message out. We got some land dedications coming up. Those dates are going to be set throughout the regions. We're going to be holding open house events where the public can connect with us. And I think the big accumulation if you will will be coming at the state fair.

INTERVIEWER: Dave Trauba leads the wildlife section of the Minnesota DNR. Thank you for being here.

DAVE TRAUBA: You're welcome.