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New commissioners and lawsuits have some saying hunting is under attack in Washington

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Mark McLean hikes through Rustler's Gulch, public land north of Spokane, while hunting on Oct. 21, 2018. (Eli Francovich)

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Hunting is under attack in Washington.

At least that's the assessment of Kim Thorburn, a Washington Department of Fish and Game commissioner from Spokane.

"I'm pretty upset about what's going on," she said. "We're looking at hunters as an enemy."

Although she believes the assault has been brewing for a long time, Thorburn points to a recently filed lawsuit looking to outlaw [spring bear hunting](#) and last year's ban on [coyote killing contests](#).

"They just come one item at a time," she said.

Meanwhile, the appointment of two new WDFW commissioners by Gov. Jay Inslee has drawn criticism [and concern from hunters and hunting groups](#). Some environmental organizations praised the appointments. The commissioners both have backgrounds in wildlife conservation and advocacy.

“I’m very excited with the direction Gov. Inslee has taken with the most recent appointments to the Washington Fish and Wildlife Commission,” said Sophia Ressler, Washington wildlife advocate and staff attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity in a news release.

The direction Ressler praises is giving others pause.

Mark Pidgeon, the president of the [Hunters Heritage Council](#), said his group wasn’t contacted prior to the appointment of the two new commissioners and worries that the commission, which traditionally has representatives from a variety of industries and cultures, is no longer balanced.

“To us, that throws the commission out of balance,” he said of the two appointments.

The two new commissioners are King County resident Fred Koontz and Jefferson County resident Lorna Smith. A third Eastern Washington commission seat formerly held by David Graybill of Chelan County will be filled in the near future.

Pidgeon and other advocates point to other instances in which hunting opportunity has been lost. In 2019, WDFW [ended a popular antlerless deer hunt in Eastern Washington](#). Going even further back, many point to the [banning of hound hunting and bear baiting in 1996 via a statewide initiative](#).

Marie Neumiller, the Inland Northwest Wildlife Council's executive director, shares Pidgeon's concerns. She's noticed that since COVID-19 has forced commission meetings – and public comment – online, more out-of-state groups and individuals have Zoomed in to comment.

"Some of the issues at the last meeting were flooded with two hours or more of public testimony," she said.

That isn't to say all sides shouldn't have a voice, she said.

But Neumiller believes hunters – a diverse catchall spanning the gamut from family deer hunts, trappers, hound hunters and more – are poorly understood and drowned out by more powerful and vocal groups.

"I feel like hunters are portrayed in the media in a way that doesn't actually represent who we are," she said.

'Not coming to abolish the sport'

Smith, one of the new commissioners, is aware of these concerns but assures hunters that she's not out to get them.

"I would like to calm those fears of the hunting community," Smith said. "I'm not coming in to abolish this sport."

Smith, a fifth-generation Washingtonian who comes from a family of lighthouse keepers on Discovery Bay, grew up hunting and fishing, although she doesn't do either now.

Prior to joining the commission, she was the executive director for the nonprofit Western Wildlife Outreach and was Snohomish County's lead environmental supervisor from 1986-2007.

While she supports hunting, she believes the commission needs to start making policy decisions that are "grounded in sound science," even if that means getting rid of some hunting opportunities.

In particular, she points to cougar hunting in Washington.

In April, the commission [approved more liberal cougar hunting rules](#). Some research indicates cougar hunting [leads to greater dispersal of young males](#) and possibly more human-cougar conflict. [Not all biologist agree with this assessment](#).

Smith believes WDFW has been "too dismissive" of that research.

"I would personally like to see more emphasis on science being brought before the commission as they are making their decision, rather than it having it all digested down into a few sentences," she said. "I'll do my research. I'm not going to just rely on what's brought to the table by the department."

The commission is a nine-person citizen panel appointed by the governor to set policy for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. Both new members' terms run until Dec. 31, 2026.

Changing times

What isn't in dispute is the fact that hunting, in Washington and nationwide, is in decline.

Only 5% of Americans 16 years and older hunt, according to a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study published in 2017. Fifty years ago, 10% of Americans 16 years and older hunted.

In Washington, there has been an 11% drop in state hunting license holders over between 2008 and 2018. Even more worrying for state officials, youth hunting participation is down 22% during the same period. Between 2019 and 2012, the number of hunters dropped by nearly 5%.

At the same time, attitudes about wildlife are changing as Americans live an increasingly urban life. More than 80% of Americans live in a city or suburb, [according to a 2018 U.S.](#)

[Census Bureau report](#). The century-long retreat from rural life has left formerly developed lands vacant, giving animals like deer, cougars and wolves a place to call home.

This odd situation – increased urbanization paired with growing numbers of certain highly adaptive species – is fundamentally changing how humans understand and interact with wildlife.

This is best exemplified by a 2019 study documenting a continued shift from a “traditionalist” view of wildlife, to a “mutualist” view. Traditionalists think of wildlife as resources to be used by humans, while mutualists believe animals have their own intrinsic value, separate from human utility.

“It’s a changing world,” said the study’s lead investigator, Michael Manfredo. “We’ve gone from a world where we perceived wildlife as something we had control over and should use the way we wish, to a world where we regard animals as human-like, with a certain amount of rights like humans have.”

According to the study, which was conducted by Colorado State University, “higher income, urbanization and education at the state level were associated with a higher prevalence of mutualism orientations among state residents.” In Washington, 38% of respondents were mutualists and 28% were traditionalists. Those differences aligned roughly with urban and rural areas.

The foundation of conservation

An additional concern, at least for Thorburn, is that state fish and game agencies have long depended on hunters and anglers to fund and champion conservation work.

For instance, hunting and fishing license fees and associated federal money make up more than one-third of WDFW’s annual operating budget.

While Thorburn neither hunts nor fishes, she worries if WDFW focuses too much on “urban values” it will lose its staunchest, most invested supporters.

“We manage it for all Washingtonians, not just urban Washingtonians,” she said. “I don’t think wildlife conservation and management should be by majority view on wildlife. Especially when it’s a view that really impedes conservation and management practices.”