AN INTEGRATED PROGRAM OF FOREST AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

By CASEY E. WESTELL, JR.¹

The next speaker has a most interesting story to tell, in which the principal characters are aspen and deer. Mr. Casey E. Westell, Jr., is forest and wildlife ecologist with the American Box Board Company, Michigan. Mr. Westell has the distinction of being one of the few wildlife biologists employed by a forest industry.

Foresters, wildlife biologists, sportsmen, resort people and forest industry are commonly thought to have quite divergent views and objectives when natural resources are considered.

Foresters are dedicated to maximum, practical production of wood; similarly, wildlife biologists strive for maximum, healthy populations of game animals. The sportsmen and the resort people generally want more of everything as soon as possible. The forest industry wishes large, unending supplies of cheap wood to remain solvent and competitive.

At first glance these "capsulized" objectives appear quite unresolvable in terms of a multiple-use concept; however, today we should like to report on a program that has been initiated in Lower Michigan and has literally captured the imagination and support of all the above named interests.

Naturally, such a program did not have a spontaneous introduction; rather, it had its beginnings back when pine was "king" during the mid-nineteenth century. The cutting of the pine and the subsequent terrible fires greatly changed the character of the forests and set the stage for a sequence of events that has manifested itself in many ways—including this talk.

The "jungle" of green vegetation that followed the logging and fires in the pine type provided a "Utopian" environment for the forest-edge game species and they reproduced rapidly. Most spectacular, and probably best known, was the rise of the whitetail deer.

By 1920 there were strong indications that the deer herd was in trouble with severe local shortages of food and cover. By 1930 many areas reported "deer starvation" and authorities became somewhat alarmed at the prospect of a population "crash". Sportsmen, on the other hand, were too close to the "hey-day" of the deer herd to believe the herd could ever be in trouble.

During this period the forest industry had degenerated to a low ebb since all of the pine was gone and the second growth was unmerchantable.

From 1930 to 1950 the situation continued to deteriorate and the countless writings of professional conservationists and others are good testimony to the turbulence of this era. Food and cover became scarcer, the hunters grew discontented, extremely vociferous and very antagonistic towards the principle that anything but a buck could be a legal target.

Really, the only things that prospered during this period were the brush fields because many grew and matured into aspen stands that represented a

¹ Forest and Wildlife Ecologist, American Box and Board Company.

large storehouse of pulpwood. Industry expanded to utilize this new resource, but quickly learned that aspen was the step-child of foresters since no comprehensive studies had ever determined its proper management in Lower Michigan.

Unhesitatingly the forest industries turned to a research body, the University of Michigan, to initiate basic studies which would or could lead to sound management practices so that the aspen utilization program would not merely echo the colorful, but wasteful, earlier pine loggings.

This study, known as the University of Michigan Memorial Phoenix Project No. 29, The Aspen Study, was designed and directed by Professor Samuel A. Graham of the School of Natural Resources. All known data were blended during a three-year team study with an ecological approach involving silvics, silviculture, forest management, entomology, pathology and wildlife management. Some of these data have been reported, but the final publication, a monograph on aspen, is not expected until mid-1958.

As progress reports were submitted to the sponsoring industries, they were incorporated into management programs and plans. Among other things, it became evident that the large deer herd represented a threat to successful aspen management. Conversely, the data revealed that the aspen harvests represented the greatest "boon" to the deer herd in terms of food and cover in over 30 years!

The inter-relationships were involved and complicated and yet the people had to be told if support for forest management and herd control was to materialize.

Industry, led by American Box Board Company, launched an intensive campaign to publish all the facts and data necessary for a working, multiple use program involving aspen forests and the deer herd.

This program has been successful. All public and private agencies have reviewed and supported the program. The sportsmen, similarly, have given active support in promoting legislation and sound conservation practices. The resort industry recognizes the salvation of its future in sound conservation and has become more active in long-range planning.

The forest industries find themselves in an excellent climate of co-operation, but realize effort must be constant and concerted. They are especially mindful of the fact that in many ways success can be attributed to the years of hard work accomplished by the public conservation agencies.