Goose 1997

International symposium on geese

How to manage thriving goose populations
Zwolle, The Netherlands, 30-31 October 1997

Organised by:
Ecodrome Parc Zwolle, Zwolle Museum of Natural History, IBN-DLO Wageningen, University of Groningen

Statement from the expert panel

Panelists:
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The spectacular recovery of dwindling goose numbers in Western Europe and North America, to what are now (in many cases) thriving populations, poses a new challenge to nature conservation - more so since there is clear evidence of agricultural damage by the geese on their non-breeding areas, and also some evidence of damage to their arctic breeding habitats.

Whilst the apparent conflict between the geese and farmers, and between those who do and do not wish to hunt these populations often makes the headlines, the successful recovery of these populations to such healthy levels is one of the great conservation successes of recent decades. These geese are an important and much valued component of our biodiversity and landscapes, but their recovery has caused new and unforeseen problems.

How do we respond now that nature conservation policies have worked so successfully? Do we need to change these policies? Do we manage the populations around certain goals (if we can)? Or do we simply let go? Today's decision-makers are faced with a complex set of options to find a balance between conserving these spectacular migrants and minimising the damage to agricultural crops.

The International Symposium on Geese, held in Zwolle, The Netherlands from 30-31 October 1997 brought together several of the world's leading goose research biologists. Their combined expertise allowed the following conclusions to be drawn regarding the options for management in the western Palearctic, based on current science, and identified the gaps in our current knowledge, requiring further research.

A. The current status of goose populations

- Most populations in western Europe have recovered from extremely low levels in the 1950s, the exceptions being: the Lesser White-fronted Goose and the Light-bellied Brent Goose
- Several recent studies provide evidence for density-dependent regulation of goose numbers locally. However range expansion on the breeding grounds and habitat shifts on the wintering areas have enabled the populations to increase again.
- In the past, hunting reduced population sizes very significantly, particularly when populations were still small. Evidence from North America and Europe shows that present levels of hunting do not prevent a further increase in thriving goose numbers.

B. The issues

- *nature conservation*
  Geese rely heavily on the strongly man-modified wintering grounds. They constitute an important biodiversity value in the agricultural landscape
- *recreational value*
  naturalists, hunters and the general public highly value the presence of goose flocks, and these interest groups bring local economic benefits.
- *agricultural damage*
  Flocks of wintering geese cause serious agricultural damage, with important economic consequences for farmers. However, these consequences must be seen in the light of widespread overproduction of crops throughout much of the winter range of the geese.
- *habitat degradation*
  Lesser Snow Geese are heavily degrading arctic saltmarsh in North America; however, there are few reports of such degradation as yet by other species or in other areas.

C. The management options

- *do nothing (except monitoring)*
  This will lead to a continuing spiral of conflicts between geese and farmers, hunters and non-hunters, and possibly damage to

arctic habitats. However density-dependence is still a potential natural mechanism for stabilising goose numbers.

- *pay financial compensation to farmers*
  While reducing local conflict, this may be open-ended with respect to increasing goose populations. The absolute cost of compensation should be seen in the light of total agricultural subsidies.
- *redistribute the geese away from sensitive crops*
  By scaring, attraction to reserves, or both. However, care should be taken to avoid actions which positively affect population size.
- *control or reduce population size*
  By culling or hunting.

D. The requirements

- *coordination*
  Tools such as the African-Eurasian Migratory Waterbird Agreement of the Bonn Convention and the individual population management plans will be essential to coordinate international actions. At a local level, integrated management plans will be an important tool.
- *monitoring*
  Continuous monitoring of goose numbers at local and international level, as well as following mortality, productivity and hunting impact is essential for proper management.
  Monitoring the vegetation of arctic habitat is essential for timely intervention, if necessary.
  Monitoring costs and extent of crop damage, and economic benefits of ecotourism and hunting.
- *research*
  Factors determining the carrying capacities of breeding grounds should be studied in
  more detail (role of food)
  More insight is required in the role of predators in regulating goose populations.
  Research in management options.
  Research on economics of crop damage in comparison to overall agricultural policies.

E. Conclusions

No single solution will work alone. A combination of options specific to the local situation and the individual goose population is required. Integrated Pest Management may provide a useful model where specific agricultural problems must ne addressed.

"Soft" management options together with both local and international

coordination mechanisms are strongly preferred to the "do nothing" or "hard" (e.g. population regulation by culling/hunting) management options

All management should be within a framework of an agreed plan, with clear goals and appropriate monitoring.

The economics of the issue require further study, to determine the costs of crop damage when compared to the benefits of greater goose numbers (eg. from ecotourism and hunting), and to examine further the use of economic incentives in goose management.