

Public Opinion on Wildlife and Migration Corridors in Wyoming

WYOMING OPEN SPACES INITIATIVE

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An online focus group of 20 Wyoming residents and a statewide poll of 400 Wyoming registered voters surveyed public attitudes on wildlife and issues related to wildlife migration corridors. Results showed support for a range of policies to conserve big game migration corridors, but the intensity of support declined for policies perceived to negatively impact the state’s economy.

Wildlife are very important to Wyoming’s economy and to residents’ quality of life.

When asked about the importance of wildlife to Wyoming’s quality of life, 88 percent of survey respondents identified wildlife as very important or extremely important. Eighty-five percent of respondents categorized wildlife as very important or extremely important to the economy (Figure 1). Eighty-six percent of respondents agreed with the statement, “wildlife are an important part of my daily life” (Figure 2).

Migratory big game species are among the most important wildlife species to Wyoming.

Perceived declines in migratory big game populations were identified as an extremely or very serious problem by 52 percent of respondents. Focus group participants ranked elk, big horn sheep, and mule deer as the most important wildlife species (out of seven species) to the state.

How important would you say the presence of wildlife is to Wyoming residents’ quality of life and to the state’s economy?

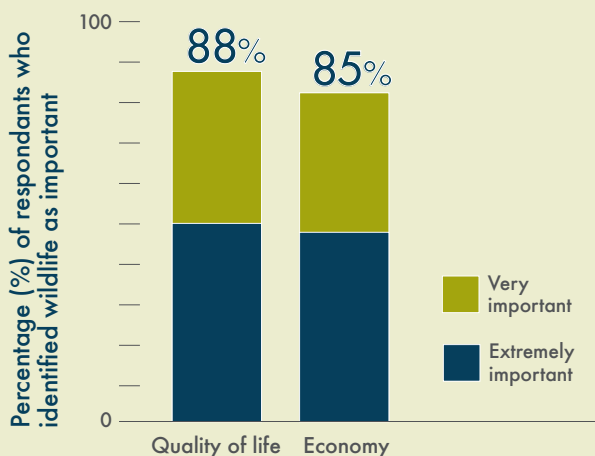


Figure 1. Wildlife is important to Wyomingite’s quality of life and the state’s economy.

Would you agree or disagree with the following statement: “Wildlife are an important part of my daily life.”

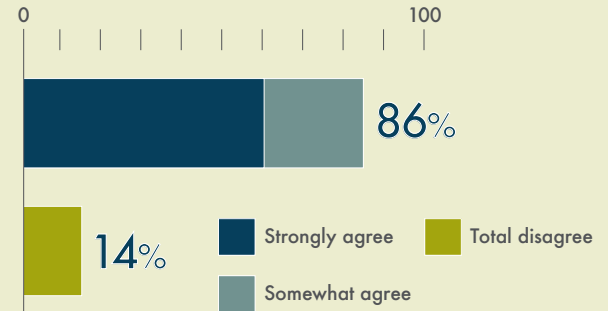


Figure 2. Wildlife is an important part of Wyomingite’s daily lives.

Highways and development pose the greatest perceived threats to big game migration.

A large majority of voters perceived highways (76 percent) and development (75 percent) as the main threats to big game migrations in Wyoming. A small majority (54 percent) of voters perceived climate change as a serious threat to migration (Figure 3).

Economic and safety concerns are more convincing than scientific arguments to justify corridor conservation efforts.

Ninety-five percent of respondents reported that economic analysis on the contributions of wildlife related activities to Wyoming’s outdoor recreation economy as a convincing reason to support corridor conservation actions. This finding was underscored in focus group discussions where participants made clear connections to hunting and tourism as important drivers of the state’s economy. One focus group participant stated, “Tourism from people coming to Wyoming to see wildlife in their natural habitats bring(s) in a lot of money to the state and local communities” (Female, Uinta County).

A strong majority (93 percent) of respondents also found facts about the decline in big game collisions with vehicles after construction of highway over/under passes to be a convincing reason for the state to allocate resources to build additional over/under passes.

Survey respondents and focus group participants were somewhat skeptical about research showing mule deer avoidance of energy infrastructure (45 percent convincing) and migration as a learned behavior that can be lost if paths are blocked (66 percent convincing).

Respondents strongly support constructing highway over/under passes within migration corridors and assisting landowners to install wildlife friendly fencing.

Respondents were asked to rate whether they supported or opposed different actions to maintain healthy populations of migrating animals in Wyoming. Poll results showed support for a number of conservation measures (Table 1).

Focus group participants clearly recognized the benefit of highway over/under passes as a win-win for maintaining migration and decreasing risks to human- and wildlife-safety, and economic costs from vehicle collisions.

Providing landowners financial incentives to conserve habitat in migration corridors was generally supported, but not as strongly as highway over/under passes or fence replacement. Focus group participants also raised concerns about the impact of providing financial incentives to landowners on the state’s budget.

“I feel there needs to be both energy resources and wildlife. There has to be a balance for both to coexist, because they both benefit the state economy.”

—Male, Sublette County

There was reduced support for conservation actions that limited oil and gas development. Focus group participants emphasized the need for an approach to conserving

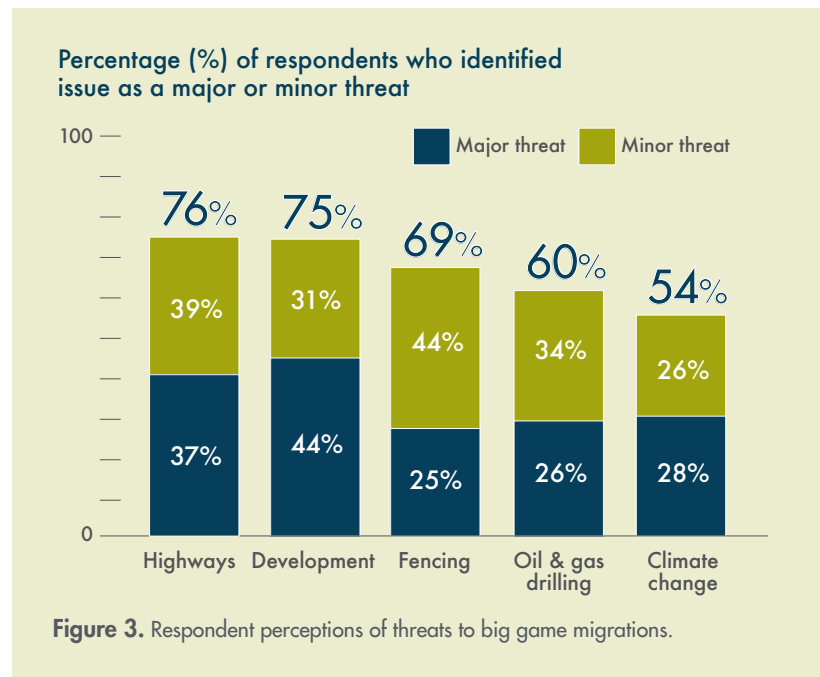


Figure 3. Respondent perceptions of threats to big game migrations.

Table 1. Respondents supported a range of policy options to maintain big game migrations.

Actions to maintain healthy populations: ranked by total support	Strongly support	Total support (Somewhat support + Strongly support)
Constructing more over- or under-passes to allow migrating animals to move across major highways and reduce accidents	64%	86%
Assisting landowners who voluntarily agree to replace unsafe fences in migration corridors with newer fencing that allows wildlife to safely jump over and go under fences while keeping cattle inside	54%	85%
Providing fair-market compensation to private land owners like ranchers who voluntarily agree to conserve some of their land in migration corridors as wildlife habitat	46%	82%
Requiring the Wyoming Department of Transportation to ensure that only wildlife friendly fencing is used when it replaces fences along state highways in areas where animals migrate	55%	80%

Table 1 (cont'd). Respondents supported a range of policy options to maintain big game migrations.

Actions to maintain healthy populations: ranked by total support	Strongly support	Total support (Somewhat support + Strongly support)
Requiring horizontal drilling, which allows oil and gas to be extracted from an angle so that well pads are not placed as close to the migration corridors, given noise and activity can affect animals passing through	38%	74%
Providing modest compensation to ranchers who agree to set aside some habitat for food for migrating animals, rather than for cattle which sometimes compete with migrating animals for the same grasses	35%	70%
Designating small portions of public lands like in National Forests where wildlife migrate each year as areas that should NOT be open to oil and gas drilling	51%	69%
Placing a limit on drilling in migration paths during the season when animals typically pass through that area in order to ensure noise, vibrations, and lights do not disrupt traditional migration areas	36%	66%

migration corridors that balances wildlife needs with Wyoming’s economy. One participant stated, “I feel there has to be both energy resources and wildlife. There has to be a balance for both to coexist, because they both benefit the state economy. I feel there needs to be more done by the oil companies on restoration” (Male, Sublette County).

Wyoming Department of Game and Fish and University of Wyoming wildlife biologists are viewed as credible information sources on migration issues.

When asked about the credibility of eight sources of information on wildlife in Wyoming, Wyoming Game and Fish was ranked as the most believable (67% very believable), with wildlife biologists from the University of Wyoming ranked next (54% very believable).

The poll and online focus groups were organized by the William D. Ruckelshaus Institute in partnership with the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions at Duke University and conducted by New Bridge Strategy. Funding for this study was provided by the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. The poll was conducted May 6-9, 2019 with randomly selected registered voters from across Wyoming (margin of sampling error was +4.9% at the 95 percent confidence interval for the overall sample).

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Poll participants at a glance

