Case Study: Lesser Prairie Chicken Conservation Plan

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Abstract

This paper evaluates the Lesser Prairie-Chicken controversy and the development of the Conservation Plan. The paper analyzes the problems and pitfalls in the documentation, including issues with enforcement and limited stakeholder involvement. The paper proposes two alternative approaches to the plan, including a regulatory approach and a landscape-scale conservation approach. The critique of the plan examines its effectiveness and limitations, including the potential for incomplete coverage of habitat and the lack of funding for conservation efforts. Overall, the paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken Conservation Plan and offers alternative solutions for more effective conservation of the species.

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Background

The Lesser Prairie-Chicken (LPC) is a species of bird that has been in decline due to habitat loss, fragmentation, and degradation caused by human activities such as energy development, agriculture, and urbanization. In 2014, the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) listed the LPC as threatened under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), which triggered the development of a conservation plan (USFWS). The LPC range includes parts of Colorado, Kansas, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas (Van Pelt 2013, i). The conservation plan was developed by the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (WAFWA) and approved by the USFWS in 2013 to provide a framework for the conservation and management of the LPC and its habitat. This paper will evaluate the LPC controversy and development of the Conservation Plan, highlighting problems and pitfalls, and suggesting alternative approaches.

Problems and Pitfalls in Conservation Plan

One of the major problems with the conservation plan is that it is voluntary and non-regulatory, meaning that oil and gas companies are not legally required to participate in conservation efforts. Additionally, the plan only covers five states where the LPC is found, leaving out parts of its historic range (Campbell et al., 2). Furthermore, the plan relies heavily on habitat exchanges, where landowners can generate credits for conserving LPC habitat, which can then be sold to companies to offset their impacts on the species' habitat (Van Pelt 2013 4). However, this approach has been criticized for being difficult to implement and lacking transparency in the credit trading system (Vijay 2015).

Another pitfall of the plan is that it does not address the primary threat to the species, which is energy development. Energy development, particularly oil and gas extraction, is a major driver of habitat loss and fragmentation, which is the leading cause of the LPC decline (Wildlife Research Fund 2020). The plan instead focuses on habitat restoration and enhancement, but without addressing the underlying cause of habitat loss and fragmentation, it may not be effective in achieving its conservation goals.

Alternative Approaches

One alternative approach that could have been used is a regulatory approach. The USFWS could have listed the LPC as endangered, which would have required oil and gas companies to comply with regulations to protect the species and its habitat (EPA). This approach would have provided legal protections to the species and ensured that conservation efforts were mandatory. The ESA requires federal agencies to consult with the USFWS on actions that may affect listed species and their habitats, and to ensure that those actions do not jeopardize the continued existence of the species. This would have required oil and gas companies to comply with regulations such as limiting the amount of habitat destruction, avoiding certain areas during breeding seasons, and mitigating impacts to the species and its habitat.

However, this approach may have faced some challenges in terms of its effectiveness. The regulatory approach can be seen as more prescriptive and may be met with resistance from oil and gas companies that view regulations as too restrictive and costly. Additionally, the ESA

has faced criticism in the past for its effectiveness in protecting species, with some arguing that it is too cumbersome and slow to respond to the needs of species in crisis.

Despite these potential challenges, the regulatory approach could have been an effective way to ensure that the Lesser Prairie-Chicken was protected. However, it is important to note that this approach is not mutually exclusive with the conservation plan that was ultimately developed. In fact, the USFWS did list the Lesser Prairie-Chicken as a threatened species under the ESA in 2014, which provided additional legal protections to the species (USFWS). This highlights the importance of using multiple approaches to conservation and the need for continued efforts to protect species and their habitats.

Another alternative approach is a landscape-scale conservation approach. This approach would involve identifying and protecting large areas of habitat that are critical for the survival of the species (The Wilderness Society). This approach would prioritize protection of areas with high conservation value and would require the cooperation of multiple stakeholders, including landowners, energy companies, and conservation organizations. By protecting large landscapes, the LPC would have more room to roam and maintain genetic diversity, which is important for long-term survival.

The USFWS could provide incentives for landowners to participate in the conservation program, such as financial assistance for habitat restoration and maintenance. Energy companies could also participate by funding conservation efforts or mitigating their impact on LPC habitat through measures such as directional drilling, use of best management practices, and payment of mitigation fees. Conservation organizations could provide technical support and help coordinate conservation efforts.

A landscape-scale conservation approach would require a significant amount of planning and coordination, but it has the potential to be more effective than other approaches because it addresses the root causes of habitat loss and fragmentation. By protecting large areas of habitat, the LPC would have a better chance of persisting in the long term, even as climate change and other threats emerge.

Critique of the Plan

The conservation plan is a step forward in the conservation of the LPC, but it has several weaknesses. The voluntary and non-regulatory nature of the plan is a significant frailty. The plan relies on the willingness of energy companies and landowners to participate in conservation efforts, and this may not always be forthcoming. Changes in the economic or political landscape could lead to decreased participation in conservation efforts, undermining the effectiveness of the plan.

Another weakness is that the plan does not address the primary threat to the LPC, which is energy development. Energy development activities such as oil and gas drilling and wind energy development result in habitat loss and fragmentation, which are significant threats to the LPC. While the plan focuses on habitat restoration and enhancement, it does not address the underlying causes of habitat loss and fragmentation, potentially limiting its effectiveness. Moreover, the plan does not cover the entire range of the LPC, leaving out parts of its historic range. This omission could compromise the success of conservation efforts, as conservation activities in one area may not be sufficient to maintain or increase the overall population of the LPC.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Lesser Prairie-Chicken controversy highlights the complex issues surrounding species conservation in the United States. The conservation plan that was developed to protect this species faced numerous challenges, including regulatory uncertainty, limited resources, and competing interests. Despite these challenges, the plan has had some success in stabilizing populations of the Lesser Prairie-Chicken. However, there is still much work to be done to ensure the long-term survival of this species. Alternative approaches such as market-based incentives and collaborative conservation efforts offer potential solutions to some of the problems associated with the current plan. It is clear that effective species conservation requires a multifaceted approach that considers the needs of all stakeholders involved. With continued efforts to address these challenges, it is possible to strike a balance between conservation and development that allows for the coexistence of species like the Lesser Prairie-Chicken with human activities.

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