A Legacy of Wildlife Management

75th Anniversary of the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program

By Douglas Stang

DEC photos; line art by Wayne Trimm

SEVENTY FIVE YEARS AGO, wood ducks were nearing extinction and wild turkeys and white-tail deer were scarce. Recognizing the need to correct this downward trend, Congress passed, and President Franklin Roosevelt signed into law, the Pittman-Robertson Act in 1937—key legislation that would help restore and manage wildlife in the United States.

The Pittman-Robertson Act created a special fund derived from federal excise taxes collected on firearms and ammunition. The funds are given to individual states to use for programs that benefit wildlife restoration efforts. In New York, the Act has been instrumental in supporting wildlife population research and management that led to the recovery of many wildlife populations, including deer, turkey, bear and numerous species of waterfowl. Today, the excise tax extends to include archery equipment and accessories.

Biologists capture (above) and release (below) wild turkeys, a project that began in 1952 in NY.

Fish stocking at the Constantia Fish Hatchery, April 1940.

In 1950, based on the success of Pittman-Robertson, another act (called the Dingell-Johnson or D-J Act) was implemented to similarly help the nation's fisheries resources. This act created a special fund derived from a federal excise tax on fishing rods, reels, creels, artificial lures, baits and flies. In 1984, Congress significantly enhanced the fund by passing the Wallop-Breaux Amendment, which expands the act to include taxes on motorboat and small engine fuels, and import duties on pleasure boats and yachts.

Collectively, these acts are known as the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, whose creed is that fish and wildlife are a public trust resource (they belong to all North American residents) and fish and wildlife must be scientifically managed in such a way that their populations will be sustained

Biologists measuring fish, circa 1980.

Projects and program areas funded by Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Dollars over the past 75 years:

- A long-term research and management program to identify, characterize and protect muskellunge spawning and nursery grounds on the St. Lawrence River
- Restoration of wild turkey and bald eagle populations
- Comprehensive fisheries research and management programs on Lakes Ontario and Erie
- Investigation into the foraging ecology of common mergansers in southeastern New York with regards to potential impacts on stocked trout
- Monitor ecology, population characteristics, and harvest of several game species, including white-tail deer, black bear and American marten
- Implement the **I FISH NY** program and develop and produce the ***I FISH NY*** *Guide to Freshwater Fishing in New York State* map
- Monitor Peconic Bay finfish and crustacean populations
- Waterfowl banding and research projects
- Acquisition, access development and continued habitat management of Wildlife Management Areas and other public lands

forever. Since the programs were first implemented, New York has received more than $202 million in federal Wildlife Restoration Program funds, and more than $175 million in federal Sport Fish Restoration money.

In New York State, federal Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Funds are woven through nearly every aspect of DEC's fish and wildlife programs, funding such projects as reintroduction of declining species, population surveys, species research, acquisition of habitat, restoring aquatic habitat, hunter and aquatic education, development and enhancement of shooting ranges, and construction and maintenance of boat ramps and fishing piers in freshwater and marine environments.

Without such federal support, New York State couldn't sustain the healthy fish, wildlife and marine populations found here. While many people are familiar with the term "user pays, user benefits," the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program is more poignantly a user pays, *public* benefits program. We all enjoy the fruits of the program's science-based management of these populations, including the quality recreational opportunities these species provide.

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Through the Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration Program, biologists have been able to study a variety of species including finfish, bald eagles, ruffed grouse, marten and black bear.