

Cleaning up the game of Canada goose management

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Introduction

What should be done about Canada geese depends upon whose hat you are wearing.

Let us put on the hat of the hunter:

Canada geese are the best birds to hunt. It's a New Zealander's right to hunt them. Farmers grumble about the damage geese do – but farmers grumble about everything. Canada geese numbers should be maintained.

Now let us try the farmer's hat:

Canada geese are a bloody nuisance. They are a pest. They destroy crops and pasture. There's thousands of the bloody things and hunters only pop a few a year. Hunting is good sport, but farming is the backbone of the country. Canada goose numbers should be drastically reduced.

Finally, let us try the hat of a Department of Conservation worker:

Canada geese are both a pest and a resource. Management requires a careful balancing of the costs and benefits of control. More research is needed.

And there we have it – the game of Canada goose management. On one side, the hunters; on the other, the farmers. Government takes the field as referee. However, this referee is like no other. This referee takes sides. Sometimes government supports hunters; other times it supports farmers. Government in this way scores a few points for itself. Everyone thus plays the game. Hunters, farmers, and government; they all play the game of Canada goose management.

Good rules would make for a good game. Unfortunately, the rules of Canada goose management are terrible. They make for a scrappy game. Hunters fight farmers. Farmers fight hunters. Everyone fights the Department of Conservation. No one wins the game of Canada goose management – everyone loses. Hunters lose, farmers lose, and taxpayers lose. We could and we should do better. We should change the rules so that Canada goose management is a friendly game played to everyone's advantage.

This is the conclusion my colleagues and I reached in a study we did last year for the Department of Conservation.¹ In what follows I will cover the main points of that study. I will explain why present rules make Canada goose management such a scrappy game and why they make losers of everyone. I will describe the changes needed to improve the game, and I will detail how these changes can be brought about. I will thus explain how Canada goose management can be played to everyone's advantage.

Present rules make a pest of Canada geese

It is the rules of Canada goose management that make a serious pest of Canada geese. Without these rules Canada geese would be at worst a mild nuisance and at best a valuable resource.

Present rules prevent farmers making money out of Canada geese. Farmers are not allowed to charge for hunting on their land.² They are also not allowed to farm Canada geese without government say-so.³ Canada geese are therefore a pest to farmers, not a resource.

Present rules not only make Canada geese a pest, but also make them a serious pest. Farmers are prevented from controlling Canada geese as they

¹E.J. COSTELLO; P. ACKROYD; R.P. HIDE; K.F.D. HUGHEY, PROPERTY RIGHTS AND CANADA GOOSE MANAGEMENT (Centre for Resource Management, 1988).

²*Wildlife Act 1953* s. 23(2).

³*Id.* ss. 23(1), 53.

would any other pest. Canada geese are declared to be game and may be killed only by sporting methods.⁴ Farmers cannot control Canada geese. Canada geese are therefore a serious pest for farmers.

We thus see that present rules convert Canada geese from a potentially valuable resource to a serious pest. I now wish to explain how present rules make for a scrappy game.

Present rules provide a scrappy game

The rules of Canada goose management set hunters and farmers on a collision course. If it were not for these rules there would not be a scrap.

The scrap is caused by the way present rules distribute costs and benefits. Present rules place the cost of Canada goose damage on farmers. Farmers cannot profit from the bird at all. It is hunters who capture all the benefits. They get pleasure from hunting geese. The damage Canada geese cause is not a cost to them.

The less geese there are, the better-off are the farmers. The more geese there are, the better-off are the hunters. Whereas reducing bird numbers benefits farmers but costs hunters, maintaining numbers costs farmers but benefits

⁴*Id.* ss. 17, 18, 19(3), 22.

hunters. The game is such that one side can profit only at the expense of the other. Hence the scrap.

And because farmers want numbers reduced, they exaggerate the benefits of control and downplay the costs. And because hunters want numbers maintained, they exaggerate the costs of control and downplay the benefits. This exaggeration only intensifies the scrap.

Present rules not only make a serious pest of Canada geese, but also make for a scrappy game. I will now explain why present rules make losers of everyone.

Present rules make losers of everyone

The game of Canada goose management is controlled by government. It is the Crown that owns Canada geese.⁵

(Incidentally, although the Crown owns Canada geese, it does not accept liability for the damage they do.⁶ This is why the costs fall on farmers.)

The control of Canada geese is thus decided by government. Farmers in consequence must lobby to have goose numbers reduced, and hunters must lobby to have numbers maintained. This is the game. Each side uses its

⁵*Id.* s.57(3).

⁶*Id.*

political clout to achieve an advantage at the expense of the other. Political clout decides Canada goose management.

Government is helped by the South Island Canada Goose Committee. This Committee is made up of hunter, farmer, and government representatives. The referee thus takes advice from a committee of player representatives. This does nothing to improve the game. It simply dilutes responsibility. Indeed, it is not even clear who decides Canada goose management. The actual referee in government is invisible. And whoever is calling the shots certainly does not bear the costs of his decisions. The costs of management are shunted elsewhere. The costs of goose damage are borne by farmers, and control costs are borne by farmers, hunters and taxpayers. Whoever is calling the shots does not carry the can.

No rules exist to decide the balance between the interests of hunters and farmers. Government simply adjusts control operations to minimise political fall-out. The political costs of increased control are thus balanced against the political costs of less control.

Canada goose management in consequence requires both sides to bear something of a cost. Hunters must accept some control. Farmers must accept some damage. Each side must concede something to the other. Canada goose management is a loss-loss game, not a win-win game.

Present rules thus makes losers of everyone. No one gets what they want, and the game itself costs. Hunters and farmers must spend time lobbying government in an effort to protect and further what advantage they have. Hunters are diverted away from game management, and farmers are diverted away from farming. Both farming and game management suffer in consequence. The game is perhaps only made bearable for the players by the financial support taxpayers provide. Taxpayers subsidise management and control. They lose out, and don't even play the game.

The game need not be played like this. It need not be a scrappy game that produces only losers. The rules can be changed so as to make winners out of everyone. I will now explain how this can be done.

Providing a better game

Canada goose management should be depoliticised. Government should get right out of the game.

Game-bird management should be solely the responsibility of Acclimatisation Societies. They are the regional representatives of hunters and are in the best position to judge what hunters want. The agents responsible for game (including Canada geese) should be made responsive to hunters' wants. Acclimatisation Societies may well object that they cannot raise the necessary funds from their members. However, the test of good management is to be

able to provide a service that users want at a price they are both willing and able to pay. The proper response to insufficient revenue is to modify the service provided, not dip into taxpayers' pockets.

Farmers should have the right to destroy geese on their land. Individual farmers are in a better position than any committee or government department to decide appropriate pest control strategies for their farms. Farmers should also be allowed to poison geese. Outlawing poisoning adds unnecessarily to the costs of control. If farmers were allowed to poison Canada geese on their own land geese would be converted from a major pest to a mild nuisance.

Farmers should also be allowed freely to farm Canada geese commercially and to charge hunters to shoot on their land. Farmers could then profit from the bird. Canada geese would thereby be converted from a pest to a potential resource. The prospect of profits would also encourage farmers to take into account the interests of hunters and potential consumers. Farmers would thus be encouraged to manage Canada geese on their land with an eye to the interests of others.

Three main reforms are thus required. Make Acclimatisation Societies responsible for Canada goose management. Allow farmers to poison Canada geese. Allow farmers to profit from the bird.

These reforms would make hunters and farmers have regard to each others' interests. Farmers would have regard to what hunters (represented by their Acclimatisation Societies) are prepared to pay to maintain Canada goose numbers. And hunters would have regard to what it costs to compensate farmers. The game would be completely changed. Each side would have regard to the costs and benefits of control. The expectations of both hunters and farmers would be revised downwards in light of the economics of Canada goose control.

Moreover, any bargains struck would be to the advantage of both parties – otherwise the bargain would not be struck. Both parties would profit from any deal. Under present rules, deals require political compromise and incur uncompensated costs for both sides. Allowing trade would change Canada goose management from a loss-loss game to a win-win game.

These reforms would also make each and every decision maker accountable for the costs of his actions. Those making decisions on behalf of hunters would be accountable to their members – after all, their revenue would have to cover their costs. Farmers would likewise be responsible for the costs and benefits of their control decisions through the profit and loss system that drives New Zealand farming – and farmers' cost-benefit calculations would now include the benefits to be had from better providing for hunting.

The move from the present rules to the rules proposed might be supposed to involve a cost to hunters. After all, hunters at present can maintain Canada goose numbers without the need to compensate farmers. However, hunters can only maintain bird numbers at the expense of constant lobbying, and at the expense of incurring the wrath of farmers. Under the proposed rules they would no longer need to lobby government, nor fight farmers. Moreover, they could direct their attention to providing better hunting by private negotiation. The result may well be improved hunting. It may well be that hunters do not lose out in the move to the rules I have proposed. More particularly, once the new rules are in place, Canada goose management would be a game in which hunters and farmers co-operate, rather than fight. This can only be to the long term advantage of hunting in New Zealand.

We have thus seen how changes to the present rules within which Canada geese are managed can change the game for the better. I will now explain how these changes can be brought about.

Rules easily changed

The game of Canada goose management is easily converted from a bitter contest that no one wins to a co-operative game that produces only winners. A few minor changes to present rules is all that is required.

More accountable game management is already in the pipeline. Government

has decided to hand responsibility for game over to reformed Acclimatisation Societies.

The other reforms could easily follow. The steps are as follows.

The Director-General of Conservation should authorise under section 54 of the *Wildlife Act 1953*, and as a matter of course, the destruction of Canada geese on private land by farmers. Authorisation should not be conditional as general regulations for the use of poisons to protect other wildlife can be promulgated under the *Wildlife Act 1953*⁷ and, for any other purpose, under the *Pesticides Act 1979*. Authorisation should be effective for five years to allow farmers to plan long term control strategies.

The right to destroy Canada geese should *not* be granted by altering the game status of Canada geese. Altering the classification of Canada geese would mean that Acclimatisation Societies could no longer administer Canada goose hunting. They could then no longer represent hunters with respect to Canada geese or raise funds for Canada goose management.

Canada geese should *not* be declared a pest of either local or national importance under the *Agricultural Pests Destruction Act 1967*. To do so would

⁷*Id.* ss. 72(1), 72(2)(k).

oblige Pest Destruction Boards to destroy the bird irrespective of the economics of control or the value of the bird to hunters.

The Director-General of Conservation should also allow farmers to take Canada geese and their eggs on their land and to farm them as a matter of course. The Director-General has these powers under subsections 23(1) and 54(1) of the *Wildlife Act 1953*.

The sale of hunting rights requires repeal of sections 23(1) and 23(2) of the *Wildlife Act 1953*. These sections forbid the sale of hunting rights. Contrary to popular opinion, the ban on the sale of hunting rights does not work in favour of hunters' interests. It works against their interests. Farmers will not treat hunting as a land use comparable to other land uses until such time as hunting rights are saleable.

We have thus seen how the game of Canada goose management can be played to everyone's advantage. We have also seen how easily the change can be effected. The only snag is with hunters and farmers themselves. Only time will tell whether these combatants see it to be in their interests to declare peace after such a long and debilitating war.

Conclusion

The problem with Canada goose management lies not with the bird itself. Nor

does it lie with hunters, farmers, or the Department of Conservation. The problem lies with the present rules of the game. These rules make for a bitter contest that neither hunters nor farmers can win.

The rules could and should be changed. Acclimatisation Societies should be made responsible for game-bird management. Taxpayers' money should not be used to manage or control Canada geese. Farmers should be allowed to poison Canada geese on their land. Farmers should also be allowed to sell hunting rights and should be allowed to farm the bird.

It is time to take the politics out of Canada goose management. The politics should be taken out. Game management should be put in.