

What West Texas Landowners Think About

ELK

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photo by **Louis A. Harveson, Ph.D.**

Elk were once part of the natural Texas landscape. However, it's a mystery how many elk and where they occurred prior to the 1900s. We do know from historical records that the subspecies of elk that once roamed the Guadalupe Mountains was the Merriam's elk. Unfortunately, this desert subspecies was extirpated by the 1900s. One of the most valuable references we have about the natural history of Texas is the Border Survey performed by Vernon Bailey and host of early naturalists. In that document, Bailey noted that no elk occurred in Texas.

As early as 1927, landowners attempted to restore elk to their former range in the Guadalupe Mountains. Additional stockings (or restockings, depending on how you look at it) have also been made since that time. Even the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department assisted with elk stocking as recent as the 1980s. To further complicate matters, the 75th Texas Legislature in 1997 changed the status of elk from a game animal (where hunting permits were issued by TPWD following field surveys) to an exotic. Because of the exotic status, little data exist on their status or distribution.

Working with the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, we initiated a human-dimensions study using mail-out surveys to better understand how landowners view the resources in

Texas. In 2008, we mailed 1,743 surveys to landowners who had 640 acres or more registered in their respective county appraisal office. We focused on the seven-county region of Brewster, Culberson, Hudspeth, Jeff Davis, Pecos, Reeves and Terrell. The survey consisted of 19 multiple choice questions with prepaid return postage.

Landowner Demographics

Nine hundred eighty-nine surveys were returned for a response rate of 57 percent. Ninety-one percent of respondents were landowners (as opposed to managers, or trustees). The majority of respondents (66 percent) classified themselves as absentee landowners (not living on their ranch). However, 51 percent said they owned their property longer than 31 years (13



Elk populations are on the rise across the western United States, including the Trans-Pecos region of West Texas.

percent owned 21 to 30 years, 14 percent 11 to 20 years, 11 percent 6 to 10 years, and 10 percent five years and less). Ninety-one percent of responding landowners noted that none of their property was high-fenced. The most common land-uses (with a check-all-that-apply option) included livestock grazing (36 percent), hunting (30 percent), oil/gas production (12 percent), residential (10 percent), and farming (five percent).

Elk attitudes

Regarding attitudes toward elk, 66 percent of all respondents marked that they liked elk, 28 percent neutral, and four percent responded that they disliked elk. Fifty-nine percent of respondents said they do not currently have elk on their property, 24 percent were unsure if they had elk, and 19

percent said they do have elk (representing 165 different ranches). Only 10 percent of respondents provided feed (alfalfa, protein pellets, corn) for elk. Only five percent of landowners leased elk hunts and benefitted economically from elk hunting. Only six percent of responding landowners said that elk cause damage to their property (primarily to fences and feeders). An equal number of respondents thought their elk populations were increasing (45 percent) as those that were unsure (46 percent). A small number of respondents (four percent) thought elk populations were decreasing.

Elk knowledge

We also surveyed landowners about their general knowledge of elk including impacts on wildlife and livestock, status,

and regulations. Results on this segment of our survey indicate there is some confusion about the status, regulations and impacts elk may have on livestock and other wildlife. For those questions, the most common answer was "unsure." For example, the majority of respondents were "unsure" if the TPWD regulated elk, but the majority of respondents agreed that to shoot an elk, one must have a hunting license.

Our last question posed to West Texas landowners focused on their receptiveness

to participate in a cooperative elk management program. Half of all respondents said they supported such a program, 37 percent said they did not, and 13 percent did not answer this question (many of whom noted they needed more information). Of those landowners who have elk on their property, the response rate was even higher, with 61 percent saying they were interested in a cooperative elk management program.

Conclusions

This information provides

resource professionals a starting point for beginning discussion of elk conservation in Texas. Many landowners are already managing elk and their habitats; however, many ranches do not have adequate habitat to support elk. The 165 respondents who stated they have elk on their ranches ultimately hold the fate of the Texas elk herd and it is this cohort of landowners that a cooperative elk plan should focus on.

Because of the propensity of landowners to mark "unsure"

on several ecological and regulatory questions, there is an opportunity for resource professionals to provide more technical information to better inform the stewards of West Texas about elk and other wildlife.

For more information on the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, please contact Texas Regional Director, Michael Gookins, (866) 287-9335 or mgookins@rmef.org



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