

Passion Plus Unity Offer Power for Bobwhite Restoration: What are We Prepared to Do? A Commentary

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The trouble at Quail Unlimited is not just a problem for quail hunters; it creates problems for *all* people interested in northern bobwhites (*Colinus virginianus*), grassland songbirds, pollinators, native wildflowers, and any other aspect of habitat restoration. Restoration of bobwhites and their habitats cannot be achieved without a powerful non-government grassroots capacity to provide popular, political, logistical and financial support to the state wildlife agencies that have stewardship responsibility for the species. Quail hunters have the passion to help lead this charge; but without grassroots unity, their passion may lack power.

The passion

I recently have re-structured my wildlife management career to focus intensively on helping restore and conserve bobwhites and their native grassland habitats. I work for bobwhites because I am passionate about them. I am passionate about bobwhites foremost because I hunt them.

I am not alone. I work regularly with hundreds of professional biologists around the country—who work for federal, state and local government agencies, and private organizations— whose passion for quail and native grassland habitats, and whose motivation to make a difference, matches mine.

We are not alone. Tens, maybe hundreds, of thousands of quail hunters from every walk of life across our country share these passions. In this army of people with shared passions lies potential power to solve big problems.

The shared passions of biologists and hunters, agencies and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have motivated and underwritten uncountable well-intentioned conservation efforts over many decades and places, to try to restore bobwhites. Unfortunately, well-intentioned does not automatically equal effective. Despite decades of earnest but piecemeal and largely ineffective efforts and investments, bobwhite populations continued a very serious, long-term decline across their range. A major strategic change clearly was needed.

The unity at the top

Fortunately, our collective passions have generated an unsurpassed knowledge base of biological science and habitat management experience. Our continually improving

understanding of bobwhite biology, ecology, habitats and landscapes is helping us learn important lessons from our conservation shortcomings.

The 2002 “Northern Bobwhite Conservation Initiative” (NBCI)—a 22-state bobwhite recovery plan developed by the Southeast Quail Study Group (SEQSG) at the charge of the 16 state directors of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies—was the first major, collective step at consolidating decades of science and experience, to chart a common big-picture vision and pathway for success. For the first time ever, the professional bobwhite community at large had stepped boldly outside its traditional comfort zone, working together across state lines to face the daunting restoration challenge squarely.

The unprecedented bobwhite conservation progress in the seven years since the NBCI was published is nothing short of inspiring. The myriad successes, far too numerous to list, validate the bold, new strategic approach. At every level of government and society, bobwhite restoration is becoming a priority. Hunters and birdwatchers, landowners and land managers, agencies and organizations are responding and collaborating more effectively than ever before to improve conservation for bobwhites, songbirds, and pollinators.

The original NBCI that started it all now is being thoroughly revised by the same community of biologists that created it, plus hundreds more, across more than two dozen states. The imminent new NBCI should continue to inspire more collaboration and progress for years.

The power

These myriad successes of the NBCI have finally caused a fundamentally important life lesson to begin sinking in: *bobwhite management may be about habitat, but bobwhite restoration is about people, politics and money.*

It all begins with people. In the end, the vision, commitment and ability to restore bobwhites will succeed or fail with the ability of people to work together—biologists, hunters, landowners, agencies and NGOs. The first exhilarating years of the NBCI have helped the National Bobwhite Technical Committee (NBTC, the renamed and expanded SEQSG) elucidate a series of “people” components essential for bobwhite restoration to succeed across the range of the species. These components are based on the concept of a three-tiered pyramid that illustrates the major levels and relative magnitudes at which bobwhite conservationists and sportsmen must be organized, from the top—national, state and local:

- National: 1. **A national NBCI structure** and capacity to effectively address regional and national-level needs (the NBCI is working to fill this long-vacant niche);
- State: 2. **Coordinated state wildlife agency** leadership, commitment and aggressive action across bobwhite range (state wildlife agencies must step up here);
- Local: 3. **Sufficient ground-level capacity** to help landowners put quail habitat on the ground on an unprecedentedly massive scale (state agencies and non-government organizations share key roles here); and
- Local: 4. **Powerful grassroots** engagement, unification and mobilization of quail hunters, to keep the restoration movement energized (this level may be the most important niche of all for NGOs).

Improvements in how the biologists and agencies deal with ourselves and other people already are happening. At the *national* level, the SEQSG has changed its name to the NBTC and expanded to be fully inclusive of all bobwhite states. A new national NBCI Management Board is being formed, to consist of wildlife conservation administrators from states and other partners. Finally, the state wildlife agencies that have stewardship authority for bobwhites have come together to support creation of a national NBCI operational center based at the University of Tennessee. At the *state* level, the number of states with active bobwhite restoration initiatives has increase from 2 to 18, just in the seven years since the NBCI was published!

For the first time, the biologists and agencies are getting organized at the national and state levels, to fill out the top two layers of the pyramid. For the first time, we all have a common vision for a desirable future; a unified purpose; and a clear, ambitious set of goals and objectives. For the first time, bobwhite conservationists are emerging from isolation to come together across political boundaries and across broad geographies, at unheard-of scales. The professional bobwhite community is within sight of being physically capable of working hand-in-hand with the hunters and local-level conservationists to meet the daunting challenge. For the first time, many are beginning to feel hope.

Grassroots unity is essential

These positive sea changes are exactly why the still-ongoing turmoil among quail organizations has such broad ramifications for the unity and momentum of the entire bobwhite restoration movement. Just at the time when bobwhite conservationists finally are getting unified and organized at the national and state levels, the all-important local, grassroots level at the bottom of the pyramid is becoming *less* unified and organized. This development threatens to undermine the people progress of the last several years, and raises questions about whether we have lost sight of the ball.

Let me be clear up front: as the NBCI Coordinator, I have no dog directly in the fight over how the grassroots-level reshuffling shakes out. I have collaborated well with QU, Quail Forever (QF) and the National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF). It doesn't matter to me whether the resulting organization(s) is/are called QU, QF, NWTF, QUWF (Quail and Upland Wildlife Federation), IQ (Innumerable Quail) and/or GQ (Gobs of Quail). My professional interest is in an outcome that leaves the bobwhite community with *at least* as much grassroots unity, capacity, and power as before.

As the NGOs sort themselves out, some fundamental strategic points about the people part of bobwhite restoration should be kept front and center:

1. *The states are central.* State wildlife agencies have the legal authority and ultimate responsibility for bobwhite stewardship. The federal government has no central organizing role for bobwhite as for migratory birds. The bobwhite restoration movement, at all levels, must be strategically centered around and geared toward supporting and strengthening the states. No other structural alignment can succeed.

2. *The states cannot do it alone.* Regardless of how responsibly and aggressively individual states act to address bobwhite restoration, no single agency has the political, logistical or financial capacity to meet the challenge alone.
3. *NGO(s) is/are essential.* Biologists and agencies recognize that bobwhite restoration cannot be achieved without a powerful non-government grassroots capacity to provide popular, political, logistical and financial support to the states.
4. *NGO(s) cannot do it alone.* As much potential power as there is in the legions of passionate quail hunters and their organizations, the last few decades of bobwhite decline should be convincing evidence that it's not enough.
5. *We all need each other.* If we are seriously determined to succeed, the biologists and hunters need each other; the agencies, NGOs and private sector need each other. All of us—whether our niche is at the national, state or local level—need each other. We either are in this together for the future, or our passion will not have much of a future.
6. *Unity equals power.* The fewer competing quail organizations, the greater the unity, efficiency and combined resources, and thus the more power for good... and *vice versa*.

What are we prepared to do?

In my view, the ideal outcome for meeting the bobwhite restoration challenge would be one strong organization that could provide all the unified capacity and grassroots power needed. Theoretically, it may be possible to achieve NBCI implementation and bobwhite restoration with multiple competing quail organizations dividing up the grassroots passion... but it will be much more difficult. I contend bobwhite restoration already is difficult enough without adding to the complexity. Meeting the challenge with multiple quail organizations will require unprecedented measures of communication, cooperation, collaboration and goodwill among competing groups, coming together in support of the states. Can we rise to that task?

In the movie, *The Untouchables*, the shot-up and dying Sean Connery uses his last breath to ask Kevin Costner “What are you prepared to do?” It is time for the bobwhite community to ask itself that question.

Are the leaders of our bobwhite community prepared to come together to address the challenge and the needs of NBCI implementation proactively, with all eyes on the ball? To objectively identify the key functions needed from the grassroots and the NGOs, to best advance the NBCI? To negotiate and compromise? To invent an optimized quail NGO that can effectively provide the needed functions and services? If we cannot or will not physically unite into one high-powered organization, then can we—and will we—at least unite cooperatively and functionally, to complete an NBCI “machine” that has potent capacity all the way from the national to local levels? *What are we prepared to do?*

Whatever the outcome of the reshuffling, the states and the NBCI need powerful grassroots-level organizational capacity that:

1. Fully and overtly embraces the NBCI as the guiding vision for bobwhite restoration;
2. Is directly and effectively engaged with all of the state wildlife agencies across the range of the bobwhite;
3. Provides political, logistical and financial capacity *strategically and tactically geared to add value* in support of the states' bobwhite initiatives, to enable a sum bigger than the parts —rather than in piecemeal fashion, isolated from and irrelevant to the states' initiatives; and
4. Keeps the passions stoked and growing throughout the quail-hunting community, to buy all of us time and support to do the job.

In our collective passion for quail hunting lies ultimate power to solve the problems. In the few years of NBCI implementation, we have witnessed and been part of the power of vision, unity, organization and collective action. Many are feeling hopeful for the first time in decades. The unraveling of QU is unfortunate in many ways, but we should not—indeed, we must not—lose sight of the big picture vision of the NBCI. Regardless of the final outcome of the grassroots re-shuffling, the bobwhite resource depends on our willingness and ability to unite. Surely our shared passions are more powerful—and more important—than our differences.