



Can Elk Be Restored to West Virginia?



There is growing interest among sportsmen and women as well as the general public in restoring elk to West Virginia. Other eastern states have successfully brought elk back to portions of their original habitat and many believe that elk would thrive in the Mountain State as well. For example, Kentucky and Tennessee, with technical and financial assistance from the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation carefully evaluated whether they could restore elk in selected areas of their states. After completing evaluations, Kentucky initiated their elk restoration project in 1997 and Tennessee followed in 2000. Could the same approach be used to bring elk back to suitable areas in West Virginia?

According to notes left by early naturalists, elk were found in great abundance in West Virginia on the savannahs and near the natural salt licks of the state. But due to the pressures of land clearing, fire, unregulated hunting and other factors the elk were wiped out late in the 1800s. The last reported elk in the state were reported in 1875 in the headwaters of the Tygart and Greenbrier Rivers.

West Virginia has some of the most rugged topography in the entire eastern United States, a fact that likely contributed to elk surviving longer in West Virginia than in neighboring states. The mean altitude in the state is 1500 feet, giving it the highest average altitude east of the Mississippi River.

All of West Virginia's terrain belongs to the Appalachian Mountain system. The western two-thirds of the state, known as the Allegheny Plateau, is severely dissected by streams into a maze of irregular hills and valleys. Its drainage runs westward and eventually reaches the Gulf of Mexico. In the eastern third of the state, the Allegheny and Blue Ridge Mountain ranges run northeast to southwest, and its rivers ultimately drain into the Atlantic Ocean. The state has virtually no extensive expanses of level land.

Natural resources are abundant in West Virginia, particularly bituminous coal, natural gas and timber. West Virginia produces about

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15 percent of the total coal production in the country and leads the nation in underground coal production. Forests cover about three-fourths of West Virginia's 24,231 square miles. Private mining and timber companies own many large tracts of land in the state. Modern mining reclamation practices and science-based forest management programs are providing greater wildlife benefits than ever before.

In 2002, the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources (DNR) requested assistance from the Elk Foundation in order to have an intensive evaluation conducted on whether elk could be restored to the state. The Elk Foundation agreed and DNR then requested proposals from leading university researchers to conduct the West Virginia evaluation.

Researchers at the State University of New York and Cornell University submitted the best overall proposal to WVDNR to conduct the study, "Feasibility of Restoring Elk to West Virginia."

The intensive investigation was initiated in November 2002 with funds raised through local, grass roots efforts by volunteers of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. As West Virginia has more than 1 million acres of public recreation areas including two national parks, 37 state parks, nine state forests, 47 wildlife management areas and two national forests, the scheduled completion date is spring of 2005.

The study will identify areas in the state with the best wildlife habitat in an effort to determine the best possible biological location to sustain a healthy, free-ranging elk herd. Following the completion of the biological feasibility aspect, a sociological study will be conducted to discover what social and economic impacts restoring elk will have on current land uses.

The Elk Foundation has agreed to continue to raise and provide the necessary funding for this feasibility study. The proposal projects an estimated \$200,000 in expenses (outlines below in brief).



BUDGET

\$150,000