Watchable Wildlife Program in Ecosystem Management ™

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Wildlife viewers continue to represent the fastest growing group of wildlife recreationists. From 1980 to 1990, participation in wildlife viewing away from home increased by 76 percent in the Mountain West. Watchable wildlife as a program to address the recreation, conservation, and educational aspects of wildlife viewing continues to gain momentum as well. Montana published one of the first wildlife viewing guidebooks in 1990, with sites marked by binocular logo road signs. To date, there are 18 state guidebooks, with 10 more on the way and a revised Montana edition planned for Spring, 1995. Each marked viewing area represents a "teachable moment" for concepts key to the understanding of ecosystem management. Watchable wildlife is a significant tool to convey ecosystem management principles in a lively, interpretive way at influential moments (i.e. while watching a bald eagle feasting on kokanee). The selection of wildlife viewing areas and choice of interpretive messages are especially critical. Charismatic megafauna sites (bighorns, elk, deer) attract viewers and can be a focal point for exploring the strands of an ecosystem. Enigmatic minifauna sites (frogs, bats, butterflies) offer infinite possibilities from the amazing role of

pollinators to the effects of global climate change. Finally, whole community sites, such as tallgrass prairie or cottonwood river bottom, can yield interpretation of interlocking landscapes. Watchable wildlife also goes beyond "sites" to holistic programs. The Lolo National Forest's program carries biodiversity themes to people of all ages via school talks, naturalist walks, wayside exhibits, nature trails, canoe trails and songbird educational trunks. The trick to making ecosystem management "real" is to take the esoteric and make it simple and connected to a wildlife viewing experience in a natural environment. Sound science and creative interpretation can be powerful partners.