



## THE HARVARD PROJECT ON AMERICAN INDIAN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

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John F. Kennedy School of Government • Harvard University

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#### **Wildlife and Fisheries Management Program Game and Fish Department, Jicarilla Apache Tribe**

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The land base of the Jicarilla Apache Tribe boasts numerous quality fishing lakes and is home to some of North America's largest populations of elk and mule deer. Until early 1980s, however, the Jicarilla Tribe had only partial jurisdiction over these resources and virtually no money to manage them appropriately. State of New Mexico game and fish regulations applied on tribal land, and yet the State gave tribes no financial or biological support for wildlife management. Nor had the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) actively supported tribal wildlife programs.

Acutely aware that appropriate management of their valuable game and fish resources required better financing, members of the tribal government convinced the BIA to establish a small wildlife and parks program at Jicarilla in 1982. The Tribe immediately initiated an agreement with the Bureau to take over this funding stream—and thus secured the seed money needed to operate a program of their own. Fortuitously, the United States Supreme Court ruled in that same year (in a suit that the Jicarilla Apache had joined) that American Indian tribes could assert full jurisdiction over hunting and fishing on reservation lands. The Tribe's diligence in pursuing both de facto and de jure rights over wildlife management had paid off.

Initial funding for the Jicarilla Fish and Wildlife Management Program was sufficient to hire only one wildlife biologist and to establish a small operating budget, but from these humble beginnings, the Program has evolved into one of the largest and most respected fish and wildlife management initiatives on the continent. Operating under the auspices of the Tribe's Game and Fish Department, the Program manages a 14,500-acre game park and has implemented a series of projects that have been extremely successful in both preserving the Tribe's wildlife population and creating a significant revenue source for the Tribe.

Information systems for tracking and managing animal populations and innovative environmental science projects are two keys to the Program's success. The Game and Fish Department strictly limits the number of hunting and fishing permits and requires all harvesters to report their takings before leaving the reservation. Permit and catch data (including DNA information for tribally owned large game) are then tracked in the Program's computerized management information system, which tribal biologists rely on to monitor the size, composition, and health of reservation fish and wildlife populations. When necessary, the Program intervenes to thwart threats to the Tribe's game and fish resources. In 1987, for example, the Program suspended all mule deer hunting for three years to allow population

recovery, which, in conjunction with habitat improvement and predator management projects, has helped the Jicarilla reservation produce more trophy mule deer than any other comparably sized area in North America. In 1993, the Program completed a chemical treatment of one of the Tribe's largest lakes to prevent it from being overtaken by carp—the first successful project of its type in New Mexico in 25 years. In the late 1990s, the Program completed the United States' first-ever eradication of brucellosis from a captive elk herd.

Strong administrative enforcement mechanisms are a third key to the Program's success. The Tribe's Game and Fish Code, which regulates hunting and fishing on reservation land, is one of the most comprehensive and severe law enforcement codes in Indian Country. Poachers and others who illegally harvest Jicarilla wildlife face a mandatory \$10,000 fine and confiscation of their vehicles and weapons. If questioned, decisions regarding code violators are reviewed and enforced by the Jicarilla Tribal Court.

Together, these measures have resulted in a tripling of the Tribe's elk and deer populations and in the reemergence of a once-endangered trout population. They have also underwritten the Program's financial success. Jicarilla's reputation for prize-winning populations of elk, mule deer, and trout has led to a substantial increase in revenue from permits and fees. The Program currently enjoys a net profit of approximately \$500,000 per year—money that helps support other tribal programs.

The Tribe has taken numerous steps to ensure the long-term sustainability of the Fish and Wildlife Management Program. Politically, the Jicarilla Tribal Council has supported the efforts of the Game and Fish Department and has allowed it considerable decision-making autonomy. In the 1980s, the Tribe also successfully fought several lawsuits against attempts by the State of New Mexico to intervene in tribal wildlife management. Financially, the Council has supported the Department's creation of a Wildlife Management Fund, into which the Department transfers 10 percent of all revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. Fund monies are earmarked for projects such as drainage, prescribed burning, and predator control—habitat enhancement activities that will help assure program success well into the future.

Significantly, the Program has already begun to share its learning. Representatives from a number of American Indian nations and Canadian First Nations have toured the Department's facilities to learn more about the Program. Members of the Department have held an elk ranching seminar for other tribal wildlife managers. And, recently, the State of New Mexico requested the Jicarilla Game and Fish Department's assistance with the management of its own mule deer population.

Through a combination of political will, long-term planning, commitment to scientific innovation, and attention to administrative detail, the Jicarilla Apache's Fish and Wildlife Management Program has served—and should continue to serve—as a model for government programs both within and outside Indian Country.