

## 2009 Showcase in Excellence Award Recipient

### Arizona Game and Fish Department “Arizona Bald Eagle Nestwatch Program”



*Nestwatcher talking with a family near Crescent Lake*

#### **Company Information:**

*Highest Ranking Official:*  
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*Type of work:*  
The Arizona Game and Fish Department operates within the Executive Branch of Arizona State government. State law mandates that the Department protect Arizona’s wildlife resources, regulate watercraft use and enforce off-highway vehicle (OHV) laws. We do this by implementing policies for conservation, management and harvest of wildlife and by enforcing laws that protect wildlife and public health and safety.

*Workforce:* (653)

#### **Testimonial of Value** of the Arizona Performance Excellence Award Program

*The Arizona Game and Fish Department has long had a continuous improvement mindset. The Showcase In Excellence Award Program complements our efforts as it offers us an excellent opportunity to evaluate a process we think is working well. First, we analyze our own process against the award criteria; then, a team of well-trained examiners also analyzes it and gives us unbiased feedback. The feedback report highlights the strengths of our process and points out its shortcomings. This methodology serves to validate our assessment of our processes and helps to inform future improvements of those processes.*

*Participating in the AZ Performance Excellence Award Program is a critical component of our continuous improvement efforts.*

– Larry D. Voyles, Director, Arizona Game and Fish Department

#### **Highlights of Organizational Process:**

The Arizona Bald Eagle Nestwatch Program (ABENWP) is a unique, cost-effective process administered by the Arizona Game and Fish Department in cooperation with federal, state, local, and tribal agencies as well as nongovernmental organizations and private landowners.

The focus of the process is to identify and address threats and other issues affecting bald eagles and to enhance conservation efforts that are necessary to protect Arizona’s population of bald eagles. The ABENWP is most needed where eagles nest in areas of high public use.

At the heart of the program are “nestwatchers”, 20 biologists contracted annually by the Department to monitor bald eagle nests from February-June. Utilizing independent contractors as opposed to hiring seasonal staff equates to a cost avoidance of more than \$215,000 annually.

Nestwatchers interact daily with the public, and their outreach efforts are crucial to fostering public support for management actions. They act as a safeguard to the bald eagle breeding attempts by directing people away from sensitive areas, and notifying Department biologists when bald eagles are in life-threatening situations. Nestwatchers also collect important data including how eagles react to human disturbances, and how and where bald eagles use the habitat. This information helps land and wildlife management agencies make informed decisions on the best ways to effectively address specific threats to the growth of the population, while minimizing the effects on landowners and the public.

Maintenance of natural diversity, including the recovery and conservation of the bald eagle, is fundamental to meeting the Department's mission and public-trust responsibilities for Arizona's diverse wildlife resources. A national survey by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) of fishing, hunting, and wildlife-associated activities found that wildlife watchers spent \$838 million in Arizona in 2006. The success of conservation/management, including the ABENWP, contributes to those wildlife-viewing opportunities.

Evaluation of the ABENWP process occurs throughout an annual cycle during which feedback is gathered regularly from nestwatchers in the form of monthly meetings, site visits, 10-day status reports, summary reports, and program and management recommendations. Additional input and oversight comes from the Southwestern Bald Eagle Management Committee, a multi-agency partnership (with the Department as the lead) formed in 1984 to coordinate bald eagle conservation efforts in the state. The ABENWP process ensures the implementation of adaptive management principles to continually improve the program. The Department also relies on evaluation and learning from the successes and failures identified by the agencies that had previously implemented the ABENWP.

Improvements in the ABENWP process include standardization of data collection and reporting, development of guidelines for nestwatch report writing, and a mandatory review of draft reports. In 2002, the Department incorporated new data categories to better quantify how bald eagles use the landscape. These improvements allow for in-process quality control, meaningful comparisons of data between years and nest sites, and site-specific management of bald eagle breeding areas.

One way the Department measures the success of the ABENWP process is to track the number of human activities reported by nestwatchers within 1 km of an active nest or bald eagle that elicit significant responses (restless, flushed, or left area) from the eagles. In 2002, nestwatchers recorded that ~13% of all activities caused significant responses. Because of process improvements that included establishing seasonal closures, clearly signing breeding areas, and through outreach and education efforts, significant responses dropped to <2% by 2006 and remained at these low levels through 2009. During this same period, the number of human activities in bald eagle breeding areas recorded by nestwatchers increased fivefold.

Another key indicator used to measure success of the process is the size of the bald eagle breeding population and number of eaglets fledged each year. Due, in part, to the long-term success of ABENWP monitoring, the bald eagle population in Arizona has grown from 10 breeding areas in 1978 to the current 59, almost a six-fold increase. The number of young fledged has also increased over time, from an average of 16 per year in the 1980s to an average 38 per year in the 2000s. All of these efforts have helped make a significant contribution to the recovery of the bald eagle population in Arizona.