

WILDLIFE CONSERVATION IN A CHANGING SOCIETY

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The 1950's was the decade of the physicist. The 1960's was the decade of the engineer. We are presently in that decade that will probably be recorded as that most critical as far as fish and wildlife resources are concerned.

This era will be distraught with apprehension and frustration, but will offer opportunities that can allow for long-term consolidation and realization of conservation objectives.

Current events within government will be a decided liability. Fish and Game Departments, as that arm of government responsible for conservation of wildlife and fisheries resources, will be in for a renewed share of public indignation.

Displeasure with government resulting from energy shortages (real or contrived), scandals involving public officials (elected or appointed), add fuel of doubt to the minds of the public.

The public strikes back in those avenues open to them. Local government, because of its availability, is generally the one affected. Criticism of Fish and Game Departments often stems from some fancied inadequacy of a particular service. Not enough law enforcement, not enough fish, not enough game or not enough information and education. These critics all too often are not knowledgeable of, or familiar with, the demands on government for service. We are all cut from the same bolt. Too often we think only of those activities that affect us personally, visibly and in a direct manner.

We expect the fees we pay to buy the commodities we want in the quantity and quality we desire. If fish are not available in the desired quantity and quality expected, then too much of the available money is being diverted to something else of less importance.

Government is wasteful and not trustworthy, becomes the statement and sentiment of widespread public appeal. How has this come about? Generally, and unfortunately, people do not become involved with government unless something displeases them. All too often it appears that the more distant their government contacts are, the more critical are their views. This displeasure may manifest itself in several ways. One is to maintain a close financial rein to the point that it constitutes undue constraints to needed programs, or two, the assumption of provincial attitudes reflected in an area of geography or scope of interest.

Fish and Game Departments are particularly vulnerable to constraints--fees are set by legislative action and to be elected or reelected legislators, wherever possible, must demonstrate an allegiance to the pocketbook and regional interests of their constituents.

We are a nation that once proudly proclaimed our population size and growth. The phrase "Fastest Growing" was the keynote of economic success expressed by zealous Chambers of Commerce--Increased Gross National Product was the battle-cry. Lately, we have come to recognize this infinitely increasing population as contrary to the welfare of each statistic that comprises that population. Some Chambers of Commerce are even inserting figures as to optimum numbers and acceptable limits. These figures are based on the numbers that can be fed, housed and clothed. The more valid criteria is overlooked--the ability of the environment to absorb the wastes that result from our economic successes--waste is the unrelenting burden of affluence. With these pressures then, will we be able to salvage and maintain those public values as they pertain to fish and wildlife resources within the constraints of legislative prerogatives and public acceptance.

A factor of equal or possibly of paramount importance is the aggravation of accelerated urbanization. As population centers grow they will continue to attract the constantly expanding industrial giants for a work force. This urbanization acceleration carries with it a reduced desirable environment for both the urban and wild sectors--again--frustration that must be vented and which can manifest itself in many ways.

Historically, the environment has been foremost in man's thoughts. This began with fear: forests and rivers were formidable obstacles to the white man becoming established on this Continent. The New England forest lands were something to be disposed of--as quickly and cheaply as possible. There then followed a period of understanding: the forests, streams and soil were resources that offered an income unto themselves for a better life. Lumbering became an important industry, and rivers were used for power, commerce and irrigation. This use too, progressed to a point of outright abuse. Forests were eliminated, water was diverted, harnessed for power and tapped as a free means of waste disposal.

Natural forests and grasslands disappeared and the water table subsided. The docile and subservient resources, neither alien nor hostile, were harassed and bullied into submission. Society had won. Exploitation was rampant--the good life was imminent and perceived at a scale previously undreamed of. Our basic concern with the environment was that we might be exhausting the sources of energy, food and materials with little thought given to the domino effect this might have on other public values.

Our concern now is still that the extraction or consumptive use of our natural resources will deplete these resources, but there is now another problem--that of where to dispose of our wastes.

Economic growth has failed to balance itself with the ability of the environment to absorb the resultant wastes. At what point does such balance occur? When it is too late we will know that these predicted tolerances

were exceeded. A few years ago we read of supposedly well educated people living the affluent life until their liquid assets were gone--this because of their Doomsday philosophy. We had already overpopulated and overpolluted--there was no turning back.

There has since arisen the Utopian dream. Adherents to this philosophy believe the industrial complex and technological advances must be outlawed and socially rejected. A reversion to nature and its inherent balance is preached. Somewhere between these two extremes the rational solution lies.

Technological and economic success are the basis of our environmental problems, every one of them. We were mentally unprepared to cope with the liabilities that invariably accompany technological assets. Technology and economics were not in concert with an enduring environment of which man is a part. Economic gains and a soaring Gross National Product have not accurately represented the "Better Life" nor a more satisfied society. Were our traditional values wrong? NO. Our knowledge and understanding merely failed to keep pace.

People responded and did their bit. Fur clad dowagers drove to anti-pollution seminars in their gas guzzling limousines. Students laboriously excavated pits, buried automobiles as sources of pollution, then climbed into their sport cars and jalopies and went on their way. Their indignation had been expressed. Such frustration, suspicion, over reaction and illogical action will be reflected in legislative and emotional onslaughts that may be inconsistent with management objectives or, indeed, with the welfare of wildlife and its related and integral values.

These actions may reflect ulterior motives or a sincere desire to help the resource, but unfortunately, all too often such actions are based on inadequate information or incorrect philosophy. The Instant Ecologist or Short Course Environmentalist, through intense interest, but with erroneous goals, may prove to be a formidable force with which to contend. Automatic opposition or support of any program which is based on emotionalism is a luxury society can ill afford.

Therein lies the challenge and opportunity for Fish and Game Departments. Public interest coupled with illogical philosophies can be a combination with potentially disastrous results, but with proper guidance such interest can result in successful and long-term gains for resource management programs.

For as long as we can remember there have been squabbles between sportsmen and their Fish and Game Departments. These flare and fade, not consistently, but certainly constantly. Usually these squabbles are over something unimportant; however, it is the indicator of something that is vital. Sportsmen too often feel left out, uninformed and excluded in the planning and implementation process.

Nevada is a state of 110,000 square miles, a half million people, with 85% of its land area in public domain. Even under such free access conditions, only 12% of the population hunts. If this 12% feels frustrated, then what about the other 88% which has little access to or the means to avail themselves of Department conservation information programs.

At a time which demands dispassionate analysis and sound judgment, we appear to be experiencing escalated psychological warfare. Anti-hunting and anti-gun forces are combining and gaining support based on emotionalism. Periodicals of usually accurate and just reporting character can shape thinking that casts doubt on programs and motives. For example, the Wall Street Journal with its article on gun possession, National Audubon and its article on bighorn sheep management and the National Geographic's article on alligator management.

If Fish and Game Departments are to meet their objectives these adverse thrusts must be nullified. The general public must be better informed. Decisions governing land use, predator control, timber management, nongame and rare and endangered species programs, will soon be made on the federal level. These Congressional directions, if based on emotionalism rather than biological input, may spell the irretrievable loss of resource values. A good case in point is that of the wild horse. It is unfortunate that the abundance of scientific information in fish and game files is unknown by the decision making public.

How then will fish and game conservation programs survive?

Basic, effective, educational efforts explaining objectives, philosophy, animal habitat relationships and other information pertinent to programs and activities must be initiated. We will all say "Such programs presently exist." Here, EFFECTIVE, is the key word. Programs must be redesigned for use and widespread exposure to all segments of the general public, hunters and fishermen and NONhunters and NONfishermen.

The balance-of-nature management or nonman made management is an attractive philosophy. We know that philosophy will not work unless we remove man's needs, man's influence, man's accomplishments or, indeed, man himself. The uninformed, however, have never been exposed to this depth of thinking. Resource management responsibility and public value decision makers are often oceans apart.

Departments must take the initiative in the development of educational materials suitable for presentation in classrooms and in promotion of teacher workshops designed to qualify teachers to teach other educators resource conservation. We can no longer sit back with the fat-cat attitude. Formal education in resource conservation is necessary if the public and public resources are to be served. Young people must be equipped with accurate information, not emotional interpretations on which to make correct value judgment decisions. Fish and Game agencies must take the lead in the selling and implementation of this program. Admittedly, formal education is not our function, but resource management is. In our present complex society the success of resource management will be predicated on program acceptance by a knowledgeable, decision making public. The best program ever devised is superfluous without public acceptance and support. Conservation education is probably one of education's biggest failures. We cannot continue to give lip service only to matters of such importance.

Every employee of Fish and Game must sharpen his public relations attributes. There must be full inculcation and practice of the philosophy that public relations is the action and attitude of employees, not flowery news releases, as program acceptance by the public is most often based on acceptance of personnel. Every segment of society must be made to realize that Commissions have the responsibility and desire to manage all wildlife with equal interest and vigor. Commissions, too, where necessary, must exhibit equal desire in assuming that responsibility. Special interest groups who bypass Commissions and seek direct legislative programs may create more problems for wildlife and its administration than they solve.

Better yet would be a broadening of interest on Commissions and Advisory Boards so nongame enthusiasts feel they have adequate representation. With this representation goes the responsibility of developing programs, public support and funding methods for such programs.

Sportsmen's Clubs must be made a more integral part of the program. Their potential is far greater than just buying licenses and advising in the establishment of regulations.

Problems caused by an ever increasing human population and land use decisions based thereon can effect an irretrievable loss of wildlife values. Departments must keep clubs apprised of such imminent decisions and of adverse legislation. Only then can these clubs channel their energies to support, defeat or modify such proposals to maintain wildlife values. These clubs need to experience the hard earned and exhilarating feeling of success in meeting a major challenge.

Proposals such as the Endangered Species Act, Forest Management Act, National Resource Land Management Act, Omnibus Animal Control Bill and even the National Wildlife Policy, all need attention and knowledgeable input from an interested and informed public.

Then, too, sportsmen must be made to realize that with the rights and privileges of hunting and fishing goes the responsibility of consideration and courtesy. Every square foot of land is owned either publicly or privately. Use of all land then must be in accord with its status.

Unfortunately many young people are taught to circumvent the law through the sport of hunting and fishing. Their license or tag is treated as added authority for a few more birds or fish for the more experienced adult accompanying them. Violation of regulations is one of the prime reasons many young people oppose hunting--the lack of respect for the resource. All sportsmen must accept the philosophy that it is admirable to hunt and fish WITH their youngsters, but tragic to hunt or fish FOR them.

Wildlife management in a changing society will necessitate significant wildlife program changes.

These will be trying times for Departments, the public and wildlife resources. Only those Departments, Commissions and public that adapt to the changes will remain successful in wildlife management. Generally, Fish and Game Departments can be proud of their accomplishments. Only with changes to meet the needs of a changing society, however, can they be confident of the future.

