THE ENGINES OF PUBLIC OPINION

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I'm an old storyteller--windy and willing. But this morning I won't be telling stories, so much as talking about them.

The subject is wildlife conservation and the political engines that drive it. The relationship between conservation and politics is obvious, and I won't belabor it. Suffice it to say that game management is essentially people management--and the art of people management is a pretty good definition of working politics.

There are many components in successful game management, or in any other resource program that works. There are good politics, of course--and by that, I think I mean politics in which the people are equitably served. Money is a prime component. There must be sound planning, and workers who can put the plan into action. But all of this is based on two great essentials. There must be the best pertinent data that can be derived in field and laboratory. And in order to translate those data into political action, and ultimately into management, there must be effective communication with several publics.

In every community there are certain engines of public opinion--the shapers of attitudes, the arbiters, the delineators. These may be publishers, cabdrivers, bartenders, politicians, teachers, clergymen, physicians, businessmen--anyone who is in contact with the public and is likely to be listened to. Those engines need fuel--and the best fuel is facts. The more powerful an engine of public opinion may be, the greater its need for facts. For example, facts are the lifeblood of politics. The politician with the greatest supply of pertinent facts has a great advantage over an adversary with fewer facts, and every politician knows it.

As biologists, or resource managers, you are prime sources of certain facts. Your raw data are the petroleum crudes of our business and of biopolitics. They must undergo fractional distillation. And the greater your ability to refine your data, the more useful they will be to those engines of public

opinion. Your ability to effectively communicate those data will vastly increase their octane rating--and that imagery isn't as labored as it might seem.

Effective biopolitics depend on equal parts of fact and communication of fact, and the quality of conservation will reflect the quality of that balance. If there are abundant facts but little communication, the facts may never be put into action. And perhaps even worse is communication with inadequate facts--which can jeopardize a whole system of future programs by undermining public confidence and political support.

Your jobs in the wildlife profession involve gathering and processing facts, and applying those facts to the land. You may say, with good reason: "That's job enough. I want to be a fact-finder and a fact-user. If it is necessary to communicate the facts that I find, let a trained communicator do it."

Well, I'm not recommending that you usurp the journalist's prerogatives and functions. But you can't pass the buck, either. The biologist has a special gut response to the environments in which he works (or at least, he should have) and a special depth perception that few rewrite men can ever grasp or emulate. A good journalist works in two dimensions: length and breadth. As a biologist communicating your biology, it may be possible for you to work in three dimensions--and sometimes, if you have rare gifts--perhaps even four dimensions.

I'm not knocking journalists. They are indispensable to resource conservation. But the literate biologist is in a class of his own.

There's a misconception among many wildlifers that biological research and management is one thing, and that effective communication to the lay public is quite another. It is often felt that the two efforts are like oil and water, and tend to resist effective mixing. However, I've been long convinced that it is perfectly possible to achieve an emulsion in which the biologist succeeds in effective communications, transcending his own professional limits and vastly strengthening his professional competence. I reject the old notion that journalists have a corner on the communications game, with intrinsic talents and gifts that Providence has denied the drab, humdrum biologist. I've often talked about this with my old friend Dr. Charles Schwartz of the Missouri Department of Conservation. He is a trained biologist, and also one of the nation's foremost wildlife artists and cinematographers. Charlie once told me that if he were to train a cinematographer to make films on wildlife ecology, he would infinitely rather begin with a trained biologist than with a trained journalist-photographer. Assuming, of course, that the biologist was really devoted to such work and could be taught the basics of composition and pictorial quality. But such a biologist would know what to photograph and could more easily learn when, where and how to photograph it than could a journalist. In brief, Charlie feels that it's easier to teach necessary filming techniques to a biologist than it is to teach the necessary field biology to a trained photo-journalist.

The same thing may be true of public communications, too. It is easier to teach the principles of writing to a biologist than to teach biology to the writer. And make no mistake: a diploma from journalism school is no certification of writing skill. It is impossible to teach good writing, at J-school or anywhere else. The aspiring journalist or creative writer can be taught certain forms, and certain nuts and bolts, and do a good deal of practice writing for which he may or may not receive competent criticism--but he won't acquire intrinsic writing ability. He may develop it to some degree, but he will not acquire it. Such ability is largely intuitive; you either have it or you haven't, and I've known many professional journalists who were not good writers.

In fact, most competent journalists are not intuitive writers. Long practice and dogged effort have taught them to clarify and to express themselves in a direct and logically developed order. They are competent communicators who respect fact, and are able to transmit the essence of that fact to their readers. Any biologist is capable of learning at least that much, and is penalizing himself professionally if he is unable to write a simple, direct, declarative sentence.

Writing has much in common with research. Little of it depends on inspiration; almost all of it emerges from persistent, disciplined effort. I really don't think I've ever written anything as a result of being inspired --if I had waited for my muse to respond to my ardent blandishments, I'd have starved to death twenty-five years ago.

Clay Schoenfeld, Joint Professor of Journalism and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin, believes that any researcher-manager willing to apply the seat of his pants to the seat of his chair long enough can turn out an acceptable manuscript. It's largely a matter of deciding what you want to say, and to whom you wish to say it. Don't ever be concerned with writing "up" or "down" to an audience. Just write to them, employing a universal, timeless writing style that embodies simplicity and directness.

By the way, I take a kind of perverse pleasure in noting that some of the best information materials coming out of state conservation agencies today aren't emanating from state information-education divisions, but out of state game divisions. Some of it is really good writing, and is being done by men and women who not only know whereof they speak--but who do so persuasively and well. Nor am I speaking just of communications to and for the sporting public, or the general public. It's perfectly possible to bore professionals as well as laymen, and one of the things that I miss in the Journal of Wildlife Management is the sort of literate, pungent exposition that used to be contributed by men like Paul Errington, Doug Clarke, and Aldo Leopold. More of that later. Professionals appreciate simplicity and directness as well as laymen. Moreover, there's a critical need for natural history and ecology writings done by people who know what they're talking about. A while back, Monroe Bush, the book critic for American Forests magazine, wrote:

> Nature writing, when it is not primarily scholarly, is almost without exception superficial. For decades we have been content to rewrite Thoreau . . .
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> We are related to nature, but not as the men of 1850 were. Let us urge naturalists to search for an understanding of this present relationship--we are not doing so because we lack the perception to guide us. To gain such perception is a huge task which does not leave time for the memorializing of loons.

I think that professional wildlife biologists and managers are as likely to have that perception of man's relationship to nature as any civilized persons today. Nor are they likely to simply rewrite Thoreau when they write of nature. In saying that, I'm not being critical of Thoreau, nor of the pop ecologists who are constantly rewriting him--although after reading them, I often have an uncontrollable urge to go out and kick a tree.

The thing that irritates me about so much of our popular natural history--whether in books, magazines, TV, movies, or whatever--is that its producers have inverted priorities. Instead of knowing their subject first, and then expanding it philosophically, they first undertake the philosophical without really knowing its subject. They simply haven't paid their dues. Nor am I criticizing the use of emotion in nature writing. However, I believe that emotion should be a condiment--and not the main course. The main course should always be fact--and preferably fact based on the personal

experience of a trained and sensitive observer. The German science writer, C. W. Ceram, once commented:

> There is hardly a science that has not been skillfully popularized at least once. In my opinion, a critical principle to apply in measuring the value of this type of writing is: what relation is there between science and literature? Specifically, which preponderates, the factual or the literary? It seems to me that the best works in this class are those in which the literary effect is derived from the factual arrangement, those in which fact is consistently of prime concern.

That factual arrangement, however, must always be clear, understandable, and logically developed. If possible, it should be reduced to essentials. The English essayist, F. L. Lucas, tells us:

> It is boorish to make your reader rack his brains to understand. One should aim at being impossible to misunderstand--although men's capacity for misunderstanding approaches infinity.
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> Have ideas that are clear, and expressions that are simple. More than half the bad writing in the world comes from neglecting those simple pieces of advice. The uneducated sometimes express themselves far more clearly than their "betters," for in language--as in life--it is possible to be perfectly correct and perfectly tedious or odious. But clarity and brevity, though a good beginning, are only a beginning. By themselves, they remain bare and bleak. An attractive style requires all kinds of further gifts--variety, good humor, good sense, vitality, imagination. Variety means avoiding monotony of rhythm or of language or mood. One needs to vary one's sentence length. Under the head of imagination two common devices may be mentioned that have been the making of many a style: metaphor and simile. Imagery can gild the gray flats of prose with sudden sunglints of poetry.

In other words, the bio-writer erects a framework of facts--as simple and strong a piece of word engineering as he can manage. Then comes the job of polishing it, and maybe hanging some bright ribbons from it. The finished piece may be reportorial, dramatic, or lyrical. But it should be clear and easily read, with ponderous terms and thoughts reduced to crisp, simple prose. And always, the writer must ask himself: "Have I told the truth?" And by that, I do not mean just literate truth, but intrinsic truth as well.

In writing of conservation, or of the principles of resource management, we must always remember that the general public doesn't give a damn. To that public, conservation is essentially a dull business with dull-saving ways, and conservationists are inclined to be preachy, self-righteous, and too straight to be true. We're really espousing an unpopular cause, for people would much rather squander than save.

For years I've kept a little note taped to my desk lamp; I don't know who wrote it, but he should have been a resource writer. He said:

> What you have to remember the whole time you are writing is that nobody wants to read your stuff. Nobody at all! Just as nobody wants to listen to anyone around a bar. Writing is an inveigling process, a piece of seduction. Catch the bored reader between a yawn and gin time, and by a touch of airy magic, by a sentence which runs its course like deep-water music, you may make him read. Surprised and a little hurt about it, he may continue. He may even forget the gin. If he does, you are a writer!

O.K.--so you're not capable of giving your writing that "touch of airy magic." Or so you think. But you may be able to, in time, if you give

your wings a chance to develop and aren't afraid of trying them, and falling back to earth a few times. That always hurts--but the little interludes of hard-earned soaring make up for it.

Now, if we criticize the pop ecologists for driving a factual tack with an emotional sledgehammer, it's only fair to comment on the trained ecologist who drives a factual spike with an emotional tack hammer. In popular writing, one is about as bad as the other. The first may be lacking in literate truth, and the second is lacking in intrinsic truth. Most of the facts may be there, and they may be in order, but there's a sort of vitamin deficiency.

William Laurence, science editor of the New York Times, once said:

> Unfortunately, science writing today is still largely of the purely "factual" variety and is bound to remain so until men and women with creative ability come to realize that in science ... and its vast implications for the future of man and his relationship with nature ... lies a rich new continent for the exploration of the creative mind.

Most technically trained wildlifers probably feel that they were standing behind the door when the creative goodies were passed out. There's a good chance that they weren't, but they've managed to psych themselves out. Writing doesn't "come easy" to them, as it does to a talented writer. And I think of the note that Gustave Flaubert once wrote George Sand:

> Ideas come very easily to you, incessantly, like a stream. With me, it is a little thread of water. Hard labor at art is necessary for me before obtaining a waterfall. Ah! I certainly know the agonies of style.

And Rebecca West said:

> As to whether my writing is a mere pastime, done easily and without many revisions--it is not. Nor do I know of any writer of any merit at all who writes easily.

I know outdoor writers who take considerable pride in the fact that they can knock out an 80,000-word book in a couple of months. I have many such books at home, and without exception, they are excellent. As plant presses for small flowers and grasses, they're hard to beat. I haven't read 'em, though, and am not likely to. On the other hand, I often think of my old friend Paul Errington, who once told me that he'd just spent four hours trying to write a single sentence. And I asked Paul where he had acquired the patience to spend so much time on a single sentence--and he replied: "From my old teacher, Aldo Leopold."

In this field of bio-writing, or whatever you wish to call it, Aldo Leopold was as far ahead of the times as he was in basic game management and resource philosophy. Back in 1940, in the Journal of Wildlife Management, he published a remarkable essay entitled "The State of the Profession" in which he noted:

> I daresay few wildlife managers have an intent or desire to contribute to art and literature, yet the ecological dramas which we must discover if we are to manage wildlife are inferior only to the human drama as subject matter for the fine arts. Is it not a little pathetic that poets and musicians must paw over shopworn mythologies and folklores as media for art, and ignore the dramas of ecology and evolution?
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> There are straws which indicate that this senseless barrier between science and art may one day blow away, and that wildlife

ecology, if not wildlife management, may help do the blowing. We have, at long last, an ecological novel--Peattie's "Prairie Grove." Darling is not the only ecologist whose scientific writings have literary quality. In our profession, and on its fringes, are a growing number of painters and photographers who are also researchers. These intergrades in human taxonomy are perhaps more important than those which so perplex the mammalogists and ornithologists. Their skulls are not yet available to the museums, but even a layman can see that their brains are distinctive.

That same issue of the Journal included Leopold's "Song of the Gavilan"--his lyrical tribute to the ecology of a southwestern river. (All in all, Vol. 4, No. 3 of the Journal was a helluva issue!) In the Gavilan essay, Professor Leopold reflected:

> There are men charged with the duty of examining the construction of the plants, animals and soils which are the instruments of the great orchestra. These men are called professors. Each selects one instrument and spends his life taking it apart and describing its strings and sounding boards. This process of dismemberment is called a university.
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> A professor may pluck the strings of his own instrument, but never that of another, and if he listens for music he must never admit it to his fellows or to his students. For all are restrained by an ironbound taboo which decrees that the construction of instruments is the domain of science, while the detection of harmony is the domain of poets.
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> Professors serve science and science serves progress. It serves progress so well that many of the more intricate instruments are stepped upon and broken in the rush to spread progress in all backward lands. One by one the parts are thus stricken from the song of songs. If the professor is able to classify each instrument before it is broken, he is well content.
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> Science contributes moral as well as material blessings to the world. Its great moral contribution is objectivity, or the scientific point-of-view. This means doubting everything except facts; it means hewing to the facts, let the chips fall where they may. One of the facts hewn to by science is that every river needs more people, and all people need more inventions, and hence more science; the good life depends on the indefinite extension of this chain of logic. That the good life of any river may likewise depend on the perception of its music, and the preservation of some music to perceive, is a form of doubt not yet entertained by science.

Leopold, of course, was one of those distinctive intergrades between science and art. So was Rachel Carson. They had that, and their excellent technical training, in common. But there were some deep differences. Leopold was never really schooled in writing--and surely not in creative writing. By contrast, Rachel Carson published her first article at the age of ten and continued writing and editing into college--intending to major in English but switching to biology in her junior year. For many years she made her living from writing; for Leopold, writing was usually an adjunct of his professional involvement in forestry and game management. At no time, so far as I know, did he ever make his living from writing. He was an enthusiastic hunter, while Miss Carson had little sympathy with the blood sports. Leopold was a very human person, never pretentious, with a sort of quiet sparkle. I only met him once, and then not for long, but I liked him. Miss Carson was a very private person who gave the impression of being quite shy and introverted. Leopold could write with humor, wit, and a sort of warm irony--I can't recall that Miss Carson ever employed humor. Their styles

were markedly different, and I've heard rumors that Miss Carson was somewhat critical of Leopold--but whether for his style or philosophy, I can't say.

Yet, they had a great deal in common. For one thing, they had a total commitment to their subjects; they deeply loved the things of which they wrote, and were never ashamed to express that love. They both wore their hearts on their sleeves, and were particularly vulnerable as a result. Furthermore, they shared a disarming simplicity and gentleness and, so far as I know, a total lack of arrogance. By most standards, they were probably naive. If so, it was not a weakness. It is a key characteristic that seems to be shared by most gifted artists and writers, and their naivete was expressed in a total commitment to what they believed was good and right. They were fully involved--two people whose work radiated love and concern. Yet, it was not a blind love--it was illuminated and reinforced by knowledge, and by long, disciplined years of study and observation. They knew what they were talking about. They had been there, and they had paid their dues. All of this showed in their work. Perhaps there have been better nature writers than Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold--better, at least, in terms of literary form. But they were professional naturalists, you see. They were not dilletantes. They had come to stay and they did so with a sense of wonder and love and it showed, as it <u>always</u> shows.

None of you here is a Carson or Leopold. Nor should you be. You may be less; you may be more. You bring your own special qualities into this work and you will leave your special stamp on it. But if you're to benefit from your profession, and it from you, commit yourself to three basics: pay your professional dues, invest your work with love and wonder, and be an engine that drives the public opinion.