

# WHY WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES BIOLOGISTS AREN'T TREATED LIKE DOCTORS

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## INTRODUCTION

The professional status of a group can significantly affect the ability of group members to work effectively to achieve the goals of the profession. Status affects all aspects of a professional's working relationships with other professionals and with the public. People tend to listen more openly to those with high professional status, and they tend to act more readily on what they hear.

The relatively low professional status of wildlife and fisheries biologists is reflected in the treatment they receive at all levels. Biologists' opinions are frequently ignored by policy makers and public interest groups and their actions are often questioned. In short, they are not treated like doctors or attorneys or certified public accountants or even real estate brokers. This is at least partly the result of low status. Those outside of the profession do not perceive wildlife and fisheries biologists as "professionals."

## THE VALUE OF HIGH PROFESSIONAL STATUS

Those who have high professional status know its value better than anyone; physicians are the best example of this. Physicians such as diet clinic operator Dr. Nathan Pritikin know that the professional status they have opens doors closed to most mere mortals. People who would normally question almost anything respond to physicians with near reverence; they take pills without asking what they are; they put aside lifelong eating habits simply because Dr. Pritikin tells them to. Few bother to check a physician's advice. Dr. Pritikin's program is, fortunately, medically sound, but that's not the point. The point is that people open their ears and listen. They act on this man's advice without, for the most part, attempting to confirm the validity of his advice. This is the value of high professional status--it breaks down the natural barriers of doubt that frequently keep people from believing.

## THE STATUS OF WILDLIFE AND FISHERIES BIOLOGISTS

Relative to other professionals, wildlife and fisheries biologists, especially those practicing as government agents, have very little professional status. I make this observation on the basis of about 10 years work with often multi-disciplinary teams working on public works, parks and recreation, flood control, and utilities projects. In this work I have seen non-biologists question the data gathered and conclusions drawn by biological staff in a way I have never seen engineering or programming or even administrative conclusions questioned by biologists. I have seen non-biologists overrule the biologists on a staff and actually change written text in reports to reflect their conclusions rather than those of the staff. In the few instances in which non-professionals have tried to do similar things with engineering or medical conclusions, the response has been swift and effective. A non-engineer simply does not tamper with engineering conclusions. But an administrator may completely ignore advice of departmental biologists--and win praise from whatever "Friends of \_\_\_\_\_" group has brought pressure to bear.

The status of wildlife and fisheries biologists is also reflected in their pay scales. Compared to accountants, attorneys, physicians, engineers, real estate brokers, planners, and a number of other recognized professionals, the pay for wildlife and fisheries biologists is pathetically low.

## ACQUIRING PROFESSIONAL STATUS

High professional status is a function of the perceived hardship required of an individual to join the elite "certified" members of any professional group. If anyone can join the club (group) it's not perceived as being worth much. If you must suffer, if you must really earn your key to the club, then other professionals will grant you respect. They will listen and consider your opinion in almost direct proportion to the difficulty you faced in getting your professional affiliation.

It is not enough that you work hard to enter your profession, though. You must also make certain that everyone knows it. People must perceive your hardship. They must see that to achieve professional status in your field you must work hard, and that not all who try make it. The legend (true to some extent) of the agony of med school, the further agony of medical boards, and the even greater agony of internship is well known. How many in the public are equally aware of the hard work which goes into training a good wildlife or fisheries biologist?

To acquire higher professional status, then, wildlife and fisheries biologists must make a formal show of high standards. They must impose tough, formal, standards upon all members of the profession. Some of the types of standards which other professions have imposed, and which should be considered, are:

1. Certification Based Upon Examination. A number of professional groups (physicians, planners, engineers, accountants, for example) require a tough examination for all those wishing to be certified. The emphasis here should be on the word "tough." Failure rates on the certified public accountant exam or the bar exam are often quite high.
2. Apprenticeship Requirement. Physicians, certified public accounts, and professional educators are required to serve at least a brief apprenticeship. They are then evaluated by their peers.
3. Graduate Degree Requirement. Physicians, attorneys, and some educators require a higher degree before a person can be admitted to practice.
4. Professional Certification of Professional Education. The curricula of law schools, medical schools, and schools of education are evaluated by either the professional society itself (American Bar Association approved means something in law) or by a legal governmental review board primarily staffed by professional society members.
5. Licensing. Many of the professions require a formal, government-issued license to practice. Even real estate brokers have such a system.
6. Professional Conduct Boards. Within the American Medical Association, for example, there are quasi-legal conduct review boards. A physician whose actions are questioned may appeal to such a board and be judged. A citizen may also take an appeal to these boards. The decisions of many such boards are legally binding on members of the profession.
7. Continuing Education Requirements. Continuing education requirements ensure an updated level of professional skill and are considered evidence of professionalism among many groups, physicians and educators particularly.

The professional groups which impose these standards on their members are shown on Table 1. Note that none are applicable to wildlife and fisheries biologists.

## HOW TO GET THESE STANDARDS ESTABLISHED

These standards impose considerable hardship on those required to meet them. The exam for professional planners, for example, is difficult enough so that many practicing planners must study months in preparation for it. The bar exam consumes as much as a year's study.

Table 1. Standards various professionals have imposed on themselves.

STANDARD	PROFESSIONAL GROUP*						
	PHYS	CPA'S	ATTY	ENGN	WB	FB	FORSTR
1. A Graduate Degree is REQUIRED to practice in the field.....	YES	NO	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
2. An Apprenticeship is REQUIRED to practice in the field.....	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
3. Certification is based on EXAMINATION <sup>1</sup> .....	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES/NO
4. Professional Society REVIEWS and CERTIFIES college programs in field <sup>2</sup> .....	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	YES/NO
5. A LICENSE is required to enter field.....	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO
6. There is a professional CONDUCT REVIEW BOARD.....	YES	YES	YES	YES	NO	NO	NO
7. Continuing education is REQUIRED to maintain professional status.....	YES	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO	NO
8. There is a rigid, specific, CODE OF ETHICS.....	YES	YES	YES	YES	Y/N	Y/N	Y/N

\*Professional Groups are: PHYS, physicians; CPA's, Certified Public Accountants; ATTY, attorneys; ENGN, engineers; WB, wildlife biologists; FB, fisheries biologists; FORSTR, foresters.

1. Examination here refers to a professional exam other than a personnel office hiring test or interview.
2. AMA certifies undergraduate and graduate and post graduate programs; other groups have less rigorous certification
3. Judgement here is based on ethics code requiring certain professional behavior, of a specific nature, rather than merely requiring general good behavior and high standards

Yet the standards are generally self-imposed. Indeed, the American Medical Association lobbied at both state and local level for half a century to create the present system of training, evaluating, and certifying physicians.

The point here is that the standards are self-imposed, and that the professional society is usually a major force in getting the standards established and recognized by the public and by government. And it is often the local or state society which must be in the forefront.

State and local societies are the logical place for developing and lobbying for such standards because it is on the state level that the standards are most often officially recognized. In law, for example, it is a state bar exam which certifies an attorney. There is no provision for national certification, as such, though some states recognize other states' certifications. The national society can coordinate efforts to set professional standards, but most of the activity must take place at the local or state level. The professional image of each society, then, is very much in the hands of local or state chapter members. California, for example, has highly respected attorneys because the State Bar Association is active, disciplined, and willing to impose very high standards on its members.

TOWARDS A STRONG WESTERN SECTION OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY AND CAL-NEVA CHAPTER OF THE AMERICAN FISHERIES SOCIETY (TWS-AFS)

The first step which must be taken, then, for wildlife and fisheries biologists to acquire some of the status they need to achieve their professional goals is to strengthen the local

Cal-Neva organization. A first recommendation is a healthy increase in local dues, to give the local organization the wherewithal to do what other professional societies are now doing. This is the first self-imposed sacrifice that professionals make to their profession; they pay enough so that their collective voice can be heard. Local chapter dues of \$50.00 to \$100.00 are not considered at all excessive by many groups, and higher dues are not unheard of.

A strong society, with adequate backing, can then work to establish formally-recognized professional standards. Professional society representatives can find good guidelines to follow in setting up standards in the history of American Medical Association actions during the last 100 years. Doctors weren't always treated "like doctors," and the American Medical Association set about to earn professional respect in a systematic fashion. Among the actions they took, and which the TWS-AFS local organizations might consider, were:

1. Establish a Certified Training Program. The TWS-AFS could establish a recommended program of study for wildlife and fisheries biologists, inform colleges and universities of it, and evaluate college and university programs against it. This would be done, obviously, in cooperation with TWS-AFS members on college and university faculties.
2. Establish a Rigorous Test for Professional Status. Based on the recommendations for a certified training program, a test should be developed. It should be difficult enough to screen out those who aren't in at least the top two-thirds of the profession. Grandfathering should be kept to a minimum, though it is certainly justifiable in some cases.
3. Lobby for Official Recognition of Test Results. Official recognition may take the form of licensing or simply higher pay for those professionally certified. Only the local society can take this action.

There are other actions which could be taken, but these are probably the most important and require the least effort.

#### PROFESSIONAL STATUS AND THE PUBLIC EMPLOYEE

Almost all employers recognize high professional status, and the public sector is no exception. In California, for example, engineers have a special pay category in state service, as do certified public accountants, certificated teachers, and auditors. This public service recognition of professional status is important for the wildlife and fisheries biologist, as many are publically employed. It is important to note, though, that the professionalism must be established outside of public service before the government employer will respond with official recognition. The public employer will not actively promote professionalism, but will leave this to the members of professional societies. The professional society must then lobby for recognition, as certified public accountants have done to achieve their special pay status with local, state, and Federal employers.

#### THE REWARDS OF PROFESSIONAL STATUS

The primary rewards of achieving professional status are implied by the title to this paper--once other professionals recognize that wildlife and fisheries biologists have the same high standards (visible and clear) that are imposed on them, they will begin to treat wildlife and fisheries biologists differently. Employers and the public will act differently as well. Some of the concrete rewards which go with professional status include:

1. Money. High professional standards, once recognized, obligate employers to pay more to those who are professionally certified. This applies to private and public sector employers.

2. Influence. The existence of a strong, professional, well backed society of certified wildlife and fisheries biologists would significantly increase the responsiveness of decision-makers to the point of view of the society. The American Medical Association, for example, exerts a massive influence over health-care policy, even though many of its members are employees of powerful institutions. The American Medical Association reviews political appointments on a regular basis, and American Medical Association opposition to an appointment to a health care post is an almost sure means of preventing the appointment. Wildlife and fisheries biologists are unlikely to gain such power, but could increase their influence considerably with a strong program leading to higher professional status.
3. Control of Own Destiny. At present, many of those working in wildlife and fisheries programs have little or no control over their own lives--private or professional. The annual California scramble for a few low-paying jobs working for the few state agencies hiring biologists is ample evidence of this problem. High professional standards and a strong society help to strengthen the society member's ability to negotiate with employers, to control the hiring process and the criteria used for hiring, and to protect the professional member from pressure groups. A physician asked to do something unethical by a supervisor has only to call on the local American Medical Association for support to ensure that no compromise of professionalism will occur. This is certainly not the case with working wildlife and fisheries biologists, who are vulnerable to pressure at every turn.

The recent appointment of James Watt as Secretary of the Interior is good evidence that wildlife and fisheries biologists do not have high professional status and the power and influence which goes with it. Despite almost universal opposition to Watt's appointment to this policy-making post, the appointment was made. Worse yet, the official position of The Wildlife Society and the American Fisheries Society was not formally requested or considered significant. This total disregard for the opinions of professional wildlife and fisheries biologists is ample evidence that they are not, indeed, "treated like doctors." A high professional status and a strong professional society do not guarantee policy-making control, but it should be noted that very few judgeship appointments are even suggested without American Bar Association prior approval.

The program outlined here for increasing professional status of The Wildlife Society-American Fisheries Society members is a start, and only a start. It will take decades for wildlife and fisheries biologists to achieve the recognition that physicians and attorneys now have. They must even do considerable work just to catch up to professional foresters, or accountants, or real estate appraisers. It would be a good start, though. It would much improve the public image of wildlife and fisheries biologists. Ultimately, it would force people to listen and to pay attention to the biologist's professional opinion. It could result in special pay classifications for certified professional wildlife and fisheries biologists. It would certainly strengthen the professional's voice in policy making. It would be well worth the considerable personal sacrifices required, and there would be many.