

COMMITMENT AND YOUR PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY

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"Every man owes a part of his time and money to the business...in which he is engaged. No man has a moral right to withhold his support from an organization that is striving to improve conditions within his sphere." Theodore Roosevelt does not appear to have been very sensitive to sexual equality but he was right on in expressing the commitment expected of each of us to our professional society.

Commitment -- a fine sounding word. Like ecosystem, we may often express it without examining or considering its meaning. My dictionary offers several definitions; the more appropriate elements of the definition include "a pledge or promise; a financial liability undertaken."

Let's also briefly examine the definition of profession: "A vocation or occupation requiring advanced training in some liberal art or science and usually involving mental rather than manual work. The body of persons in a particular calling or occupation." Do we -- wildlife biologists -- constitute a profession? I believe we do. However, often as not, if we examine our genesis, we find that we were lured into the profession by the call of the wild -- and soon spend our time responding to the call of the telephone. Often, I suspect, our motives in pursuing a career in wildlife initially had to do with a desire to be "in the field." Hunting and fishing frequently were our first introduction to wildlife management. If that be the case, then with advancing maturity, a good measure of academic training, and exposure to what's happening to wildlife and their habitat, we develop an awareness of our responsibility to function as resource managers. Somewhere in our maturation process comes the adoption of a personal resource ethic as well. At this point, we look about to see who shares our concerns for managing wildlife and their habitat; we seek out kindred spirits -- membership in our professional society, The Wildlife Society.

Our professional society -- The Wildlife Society -- offers the opportunity to provide service and express commitment to the profession and to the resource. Another word just crept into our vocabulary lesson -- Service. Let's use it -- another fine-sounding term -- to re-emphasize what's meant by commitment. I'd offer that the service ceases and commitment begins when the sledding gets tough.

Let's now zero in on the relationship/interaction of commitment and our professional society -- The Wildlife Society. Why is a professional society useful or perhaps necessary to express the personal commitment which I believe most wildlifers feel for the resource? I can identify at least 3 reasons for the need for a professional society.

First, there is strength in numbers. As individuals, we can feel awfully lonely attempting to further resource management. We need the reinforcement we provide one another. Whistling in the dark is a lot more comfortable when we hear other whistlers, and especially if they're working on the same tune. Strength in numbers can also encourage us to avoid the head-in-the-sand behavior which expediency sometimes prompts us to adopt.

The second reason for a professional society to express commitment to the resource is a spin-off of the first: with strength in numbers, we have the opportunity to benefit from collective wisdom of a cohort of professionals. If we can gain a reasonable consensus

opinion among knowledgeable persons, then we are less likely to err -- two heads are better than one. A corollary to this point gets driven home to The Wildlife Society Council every few meetings -- make haste slowly -- don't rush decisions. Quick decisions made in response to the heat of the moment often come back to haunt us. If you observe that The Wildlife Society makes haste slowly, for the most part you should feel good because we're less likely to misstep.

The third reason for involvement of our professional society in expressing commitment to the wildlife resource is to allow reasonable disassociation of individuals from employer-dictated policy. Sometimes the policies of resource management agencies depart from the collective wisdom of wildlife professionals. A professional society offers a mechanism for reasonable disassociation of each of us as individuals from agency policy. I'm not suggesting that The Wildlife Society offer a shelter for wholesale mutinous behavior by agency employees. I do suggest that professional societies offer an appropriate counterfoil to agency response to immediate political maneuverings. The Wildlife Society Council has recently moved us into a more active role in protecting individuals who are caught up in agency policy entanglements, while exercising responsible behavior.

Thus far we have examined the role of the professional society in furthering our individual commitment to the wildlife resource. Let's turn the question around a bit and look at our individual commitment to our professional society. What are we committing to when joining The Wildlife Society? The objectives of The Wildlife Society are:

1. To develop and promote sound stewardship of wildlife resources and of the environments upon which both wildlife and humans depend.
2. To undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation.
3. To increase awareness and appreciation of wildlife values.
4. To seek the highest standards in all activities of the wildlife profession.

Those are fine objectives; like the term "commitment", they have a nice roll to them.

One of these objectives, however, is a call to action -- 2. To undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation. Last year I shared responsibility for a student-organized graduate seminar which surveyed current issues in forest wildlife management. Quite appropriately, the economic rationale and strategies underpinning forest management were a topic. A respected forest economist addressed the group and was questioned on the advisability of harvesting forests when chance of regeneration was slim to non-existent. The answer should make us all take note: "From an economic point of view, harvest the trees. If the land won't grow another crop of trees, then it simply slips to its next economic-motivated use." When we encounter a philosophy such as this impinging on resource management, it's obvious we need the collective expression of concerned professionals as a counter.

The profession of wildlife management is operating at a disadvantage from the outset in one dimension. We have no vested interest, commodity group in the sense that foresters have with the timber industry and range managers have with the Cattleman's Association. Some would argue that the absence of such support is good, it makes it easy to keep the profession out of an industry pocket. But we sure lack some political clout which other professions often use to advantage. The lack of a strong wildlife commodity industry entices our professional society to play that "other side of the street" as well -- that of the advocate. For the most part, we resist taking strident advocacy positions; instead we are wont to adopt "reasonable" multiple-use (if you will) positions on resource issues. We also insist on strong scientific underpinnings for our positions.

Finally, let's review some of the ways each of us can express our commitment to the resource through the medium of our professional society. First of all there is membership. Membership in The Wildlife Society commits the individual to the objectives of the Society and its Code of Ethics.

Dues are the rent we pay for the space we occupy in the profession. Some 8,000 wildlife biologists elect to join our Society -- that's good. But there are at least as many who are not members -- that's bad. Let me share with you the outcome of the recent by-laws vote on unified membership; it lost almost 2:1. You can be assured that Council will be examining the meaning of this strong expression by the membership and its long-term implications regarding Society direction.

A second way for each of us to express commitment to The Wildlife Society is through Certification. About 1/3 of our membership have submitted their credentials and have been evaluated in terms of training and experience by a board of their peers. Most have been judged qualified at either the Associate or Certified Wildlife Biologist level. By submitting to Certification, the applicant explicitly accepts the code of ethics and a standards of professional conduct not required of a non-certified member. Participants in the Certification program thus subject their ethics and professional conduct to an additional level of scrutiny. The Continuing Education program of the Western Section is an obvious amplification of the Certification program. I expect to see Continuing Education gain emphasis in The Wildlife Society as another important element in our credentialing process.

A third way of expressing commitment to The Wildlife Society is through service. If I have expressed some reservations about wildlife biologists as a group being committed enough to seek membership in The Wildlife Society, then let me praise the willingness of members to serve the Society. Commitment is reflected in the attitude of our professional staff. They have always been committed to getting the job accomplished. They have risen to the challenges posed by 27 presidents and 32 Councils since 1953.

I learned, as did my predecessors, that few members refuse an offer or request to serve on Society committees. Who out there really needs to serve on yet another committee? Two-hundred and thirty-two souls said, "Yes." I count over 250 persons who refereed articles for The Wildlife Society Bulletin, and over 600 who refereed for the Journal of Wildlife Management. We operate our publications with volunteers, 3 editors; and 6-10 associate editors are active each year -- an editorship approaches a full-time assignment. The Officers and Council of The The Wildlife Society are joined each year by a fresh group of officers for 7 sections, 53 regular and 61 student chapters. I'm not sure how many section and chapter committees are active at any one time -- an enumeration is not so important as the recognition that we have a high level of participation by members in the operation and affairs of The Wildlife Society. Many members choose to put their money up front as well and supported our Headquarters Building Fund. Membership contributions were the key to success in reaching our \$250,000 target.

To encapsulate this message as a closing: Only individuals with strong personal commitment to the wildlife resource are likely to band together in a professional society -- The Wildlife Society. The actions of our society then become an appropriate measure of our collective personal commitment. We have a good record; with a renewal of commitment by each of us, we can do even better.