

THE IMPORTANCE OF CREDIBILITY TO WILDLIFE BIOLOGISTS

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When asked to address you today, I chose a topic that Session Chair Vern Bleich and I have been discussing for the past few years, the credibility of biologists as perceived by the sporting community.

As it becomes more and more apparent to both sportsmen and the general public that our wildlife resources need, and in some cases are crying out for, management, the role of the professional biologist is brought to the forefront of these management plans. Many times professional wildlife managers are called upon to give simple answers to complex problems. These answers are subsequently questioned by lay people with little or no knowledge of biology. The credibility of the biologist becomes a primary consideration to the legislative body whose duty it is to determine the outcome of the biological proposal or regulation. The legislative body, or regulatory body, loses sight of the fact that the facts and the biological data and other scientific knowledge, may be right on point but if the legislative body finds the political ramifications of the biological decision to be somewhat hard to sell to their constituency, whether sportsmen or preservationists, then the easy road for the regulatory body is to question the credibility of the biologists. When this happens, all of us, and especially wildlife, lose. We lose scientific knowledge, future data, and most importantly, the enthusiasm and hard work of our professional biologists. Perhaps the professional biologist's single most important tool is not his education but rather his ability to communicate accurate knowledge in a credible manner. It therefore puts an inordinate burden on wildlife managers to not only be responsible for an ever-changing ecosystem but also to sell hard ideas and new concepts to the general public and regulatory bodies.

Many years ago, while working on a sheep relocation with Dick Weaver, Vern Bleich, and Bill Clark, we sat around a campfire one evening and I was asked what was the most important thing a professional biologist could do as far as sportsmen were concerned. I think my answer shocked Vern and Bill and elicited a chuckle from Dick Weaver. The most important thing a biologist could do would be to take a competent and comprehensive public speaking class! Biologists must learn the necessity of being able to communicate with all opposing factions of wildlife organizations, whether they be preservationists, sport hunters, or have a commercial interest. It becomes increasingly difficult to communicate pure biological data without injecting one's own feelings or misgivings about the subject matter. The biggest pitfall is the injection of your personal feelings while presenting sound data, therefore rendering your

opinion useless or at least highly suspect to the person or group you have been asked to supply with your opinion. If a professional biologist falls into this trap and is branded a preservationist, conservationist, hunter, or what have you, then he has lost credibility with other groups and has probably lost great credibility even in the group with which he has been identified.

One of the hardest things in life is to take a dispassionate view about a subject such as wildlife, especially for a dedicated biologist. Even though difficult, in order to maintain complete credibility with all persons involved, it is necessary for a biologist to assume almost a third-party attitude when it comes to controversial wildlife issues. This detached scientific approach must prevail in all workings with regulatory bodies. If the biologist falls into the trap of becoming caught up in the rhetoric and emotions of the situation, even the most credible biological data will be perceived by the regulatory body in an unfavorable light.

All of us who work in the legislative field, lobbying for our different organizations, must rely on the best available data at the time. Therefore, we will ask questions about data, injecting our own slant and bias in order to best help our organizations obtain the desired legislative outcome. The professional biologist must guard against giving different data, or even slightly different emphasis on data, to organizations or individuals of differing persuasions. We all realize that biology involved with wildlife is very seldom a series of black and white answers. It seldom involves specific numbers or even population counts. Still, the biologist who tries to satisfy one group over another without proper scientific data is doing a great disservice to himself and all wildlife professionals.

Many times you will be called upon to give opinions or projections about wildlife issues which amount to not much more than a good educated guess. If you do, it becomes most important to label this as just that - your best estimate or thesis on whatever subject matter you are asked for your opinion. Conversely, many times you will be asked for data or facts that are quite irrefutable and you are positive are the latest and most correct information available. This also must be labeled as the most up-to-date and accurate information. If not, the public or regulatory body may perceive that you have held back or misled them with your information. Your credibility will be questioned and suspect in all future dealings.

Those of us who work to promulgate legislation or regulation are frequently called upon to give biological answers without proper background or training. It

becomes readily apparent that our organizations must fund biological research in order to obtain timely data to be used before regulatory bodies. The sporting community has long recognized the need to become a private funding source for many biological and scientific studies. These studies not only benefit California game animals, but all forms of wildlife and the populations of wildlife in other states. Sportsmen have traditionally expended large amounts of time, energy, and money to complete studies and amass comprehensive amounts of scientific data regarding game animals. They have always been more than willing to share this knowledge with other groups which may not have similar goals.

As a Director of the National Rifle Association, and Past President of Sacramento Safari Club, I have been

personally involved in gaining the necessary funds to complete many scientific projects relating to both game and nongame animals. Our organizations have found that it is far better to do studies which further all types of wildlife, especially game animals, and leave the decision whether to battle against the preservationists, who are anti-hunting, to a later date. The controversy between sportsmen's organizations and preservationists must take a back seat when the question of sound game management is brought before any regulatory body.

If at any time I may be of assistance to any professional biologist or game manager in gaining funds which directly benefit wildlife, even though not limited to game animals, I hope my comments today would make you feel free to contact me.