

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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It is a pleasure to call to order the 31st annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. In doing so I would like to mention we are moving along in our fourth decade. I believe that as associations go we are young enough to have plenty of fresh ideas, and mature enough to get those ideas off the ground.

I think the association's record is respectable and healthy. We have enough of a past to look back on with pride, and there is plenty of future to look ahead to. This feeling gives me a sense of deep personal pride when I say I am a member of the Southeastern Association. I am certain that many of you share this sentiment.

The personal pride I refer to does not come from any feeling that our 17 member wildlife and fisheries organizations have collectively mastered all of the management aspects of wildlife and fisheries. We all have problems. Some of these are distinct to individual states, hinged perhaps to geographical conditions or specific areas of interest. Others are mutual problems. Some are national in scope. Some are regional. I think our annual conferences provide us with an opportunity to bring them up . . . to air them . . . and perhaps redirect our activities toward a solution.

The pride I just mentioned also springs from my confidence that the combined talents and knowledge of persons connected with the southeastern association puts us in a better position to solve those problems and do good work.

It would be easy for me today to review what has been accomplished by the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in the past 30 years. It would sound good, because many good things have been accomplished to benefit and enhance wildlife and fisheries resources. But I do not think that is the reason why we are here today. It is pleasant and satisfying to pat ourselves on the back, but that is not the purpose of this conference.

I think if we have learned one important and lasting lesson during the past three decades, it is this: complacency has no place in the management of wildlife and fisheries resources. I sincerely believe this. If the day ever comes when we feel we have accomplished enough to allow us to become complacent, we'll be in trouble.

I feel there is a popular, generalization for managers of wildlife and fisheries. The public believes we are specialists . . . people to come up with low-cost programs that will provide more game for more people on less land on a continuing basis. At the same time they want to see their rivers, lakes, streams and reservoirs provide high quality fishing on a sustained basis. If this can be accomplished on relatively modest budgets, average citizens will then believe their wildlife and fisheries managers are doing a good job.

Today, rather than review what has been accomplished in the past 30 years, I would like to discuss briefly a few of the things which I consider most important to what we hope to achieve in the immediate years ahead.

Perhaps the most important fundamental item we must be concerned with in our work is maintenance and improvement of habitat. It is getting to be an often-used word today, with slightly different meanings for different people. When we speak of wildlife habitat we are talking about the proper mixture of cover, food and water to sustain wildlife year round. Habitat is the key to wildlife survival, which also makes it the key to wildlife reproduction and abundance. When there is not a proper mixture of cover, food and water, we are getting into the quality of habitat question. If habitat is only adequate, wildlife can survive, but it won't flourish. We know our wildlife populations are necessarily low in poor to only fair habitat. We know wildlife production goes down when quality habitat deteriorates. These are fundamentals in management of wildlife resources, but it is necessary to mention them as a prelude to what I want to say.

We are steadily losing a large amount of the habitat that is vital to maintenance, production and enhancement of wildlife populations. This loss has to be checked, or balanced, if we are to simply maintain present wildlife populations. It follows that continuing loss will preclude enhancement of present wildlife resources.

I think it is necessary for us to take a good hard look at the reasons we are continuing to lose wildlife habitat, even though there is more public awareness of its importance to wildlife. It is easy to put the blame on changing land-use practices. That is like using a brief medical name to describe an illness that has many symptoms and much associated pain.

Many of those land-use practices are associated with expansion of human populations and projects to fulfill their needs. I certainly do not advocate the return of the days of small farms surrounded with honeysuckle-draped fencerows and studded with woodlots, even though the thought of them provides a pleasant memory of slow-paced living and abundant game. We are living in the age of big farms . . . often clean farms . . . industrial expansion and suburban living. Our economy is geared to this, just as we are geared to the jet age. We well remember the days of propeller-driven aircraft but they are being relegated to the past.

There are two important things we can do about this habitat loss because of human activity. We can accelerate our educational efforts. We can preach to landowners that considerations for wildlife will pay off economically, that wildlife represents a merchantable resource that can coexist on their land. We can do that.

And, there is a much more important thing we can do. Throughout the country and particularly in the southeastern United States there are millions of acres of public lands. Some of these lands are in national parks. There are millions of acres in national forests. Some lands are owned by the Corps of Engineers. There are other public lands. It does not matter which governmental agencies have the basic responsibilities for those lands . . . they can be better managed for wildlife.

On most of these public lands, wildlife has a pretty low spot on the totem pole with the administrators compared to other uses. In most of our national forests, to cite an example, wildlife does not receive the same consideration as timber production and cattle grazing. In fact, destruction of wildlife habitat has been accelerated through clear-cutting of pure stands of hardwoods and overgrazing.

Because we work with wildlife . . . because we are aware of the vital need for quality wildlife habitat to provide for the needs and wants of our people it seems to me that we should redouble our efforts to see that these public lands are managed in the best interest of those people we serve. To do anything short of this, I feel is to be derelict in our duty to those people.

I do not think we can sit back and say it is someone else's job . . . or right . . . to manage wildlife on those millions of acres of public lands in the Southeast. We are too close to the situation as a whole to remain silent when those public lands are not being properly managed for wildlife within the Congressional mandates that exist, calling for consideration for wildlife on those lands. I think it is our responsibility when we see something amiss to advise and to educate the public.

This brings to mind another serious concern. I sincerely think we may be losing the war as far as conservation education of the public goes. At first glance this may seem incredulous. There is much evidence that the public is more aware of different facets of conservation today than ever before in history. There is hardly a day that goes by when we do not read about environmental matters. Newspapers, magazines, television . . . there are wildlife programs and stories. There are messages on the importance of high quality environment. It is obvious that the reading and viewing public is more interested in these subjects than ever before. The question is, "Are the messages hitting the nail on the head?" It is a good question. There are written articles and television shows that actually misrepresent conditions in the wild. There are some television shows that would have viewers believe that predator and prey enjoy a friendly and happy personal relationship in the wild and that everything would go along smoothly without man's interference. This is true. If you will just stop and think for a moment you will recall some of the television shows I am talking about. And I am certain you have read numerous articles which convey the same message.

I cannot stress too strongly that this misrepresentation . . . the "Bambi Syndrome" . . . results in Congressional legislation which is subtly being re-oriented from conservation as we know it to preservation. You, among all people, know what this means. Conservation represents wise sustained use of wildlife resources. Preservation means, "Lock up and don't touch." It is a false concept and represents acceptance of half-truths.

In many cases, these misrepresentations are not intentional but result from misconceptions. For this reason alone we must redouble our conservation educational programs.

I am convinced that anti-hunting and anti-trapping movements are spinoffs of the "Bambi Syndrome". It is true that the media is responsible in part for many of the gains we have made. At the same time, in some cases, it is doing a disservice to the people. That's where we can and should enter the picture with intensified educational programs.

I think the financial plight of state wildlife and fisheries agencies is something that concerns us all. Our activities have been greatly expanded in recent years, largely due to the demands of people who are more aware of wildlife and environmental concerns. I anticipate those activities will continue to be broadened. I do not think the costs of maintaining and upgrading our departments will level off. I sincerely do not think they can be curtailed. Costs of state departments will continue to increase in the future. It is very important that our pay scales be raised to meet or nearly meet those in private industry and in the federal government. This means there must be new revenue sources.

I think we are going to have to play an increasingly important part in bringing about adequate funding for our departments. It is prudent to spend our money carefully . . . to budget properly . . . and to get as much for our money as we can in this day and age. But we must be alert and suggestive of new revenue sources that are acceptable to the people we serve and the state legislatures which control budgets. I think the public avidly wants satisfactory and productive wildlife management programs. They want good programs and we should keep them advised what this costs and . . . hopefully . . . how it can be best financed.

I cannot stress too strongly that federal encroachment in the management, harvest and utilization of resident game is becoming a distinct threat to the operation of our wildlife departments. This has proven to be the case with alligators, wolves, black bear, bobcats, otter, various fish and even crows.

Take the bobcat. It enjoys favorable population status in our southeastern states, as well as throughout its range. It thrives in cutover timber areas and feeds primarily on rodents. There has been no major problem. However jurisdiction over the bobcat may well be taken away from the states and placed in the hands of protection-oriented managers . . . not wildlife managers. What's next, the raccoon, the mink, ultimately the game species?

ESSA (The Endangered Species Scientific Authority) is a scary thing. It is placing quotas for pelts that will be allowed in international trade. This calls for the tagging of pelts leaving individual states. The scary part means that it calls for someone, somehow, in a Solomonlike judgment, to decide whose pelts will be tagged. This could be a blow to our trappers. It could hurt a school boy trapping to pay his way through school. *It sounds the death knell for another form of American free enterprise.* Those at ESSA have even mentioned the muskrat and the possibility of federally required tags and quotas for each state from which pelts of furbearers are shipped in international commerce.

I think the Southeastern Association should work through the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies in taking a strong and unbending stance in this particular matter and keep our congressional delegation advised. It is a classic example of regulatory powers of federal agencies being applied excessively in areas of traditional state jurisdiction without state participation or input.

These and other federal encroachments represent a distinct threat to us in our work and finally to the respective fish and wildlife resources. Control of resident fish and wildlife by Washington simply cannot be successful. Management must continue to be applied on the spot from the state level. Federal decisions take too long and are often based on faulty information from biased sources. The decision making process is far too lengthy and the federal agencies have neither the manpower, the funds nor the expertise to cope with local wildlife management problems. The alligator serves as a classic example of how a chaotic situation can easily develop.

I think it is high time that those federal agencies speak out honestly as to how far they intend to go in regulating state wildlife. It cannot be disguised that regulation is taking place. The treaties that are being signed by those agencies with foreign countries are treaties that strip us of our authority. Too often it is done before we are fully informed of what is taking place.

I think that among those spinoffs . . . anti-hunting and anti-trapping . . . of the protectionist attitude toward wildlife that is resulting from justified concern but misrepresented information, there is evolving another spinoff. There is a willing trend toward anti-use of wildlife resources. When some people become concerned by dwindling habitat and hints of shortages of some species they are moved toward total protection as a possible solution. As wildlife managers we know that total protection is no way to manage our wildlife resources. It represents an injustice to wildlife and to people.

Unfortunately anti-use of wildlife falls neatly into the promotional programs of anti-hunting and anti-trapping organizations, all to the detriment of wildlife itself.

Wildlife management as we know it today is hinged to both recreational and commercial use of wildlife and fisheries resources. Our departments are funded in most part by the users. Our management programs are geared to sustained and proper use of those resources.

It follows that we should be in the forefront of efforts to assure wise custodianship and use of those wildlife resources. If we have sufficient amounts of good habitat, if we are not restricted by unwise federal encroachment in full and fair utilization of resident wildlife resources, if we are properly funded as I think we can be, we can do a job that will stand up under the closest scrutiny. I think it can be done. I also think we should rededicate ourselves to finding the true answers to some of the questions I have proposed today.

Thank you.