

General Session

Presidential Address

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It is a humbling experience to report to you the workings of your association and share with you some of my observations as your president. Over the past 5 months I have come to appreciate, more than mere words can convey, how effective the partnerships that this association represents really are. It is all too easy to take for granted the work our committees do, and the services that are provided by the American Fisheries Society and The Wildlife Society.

As your president, I have the great privilege and honor to represent you on the executive committee of The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and in that capacity I have seen the awesome effectiveness of the collective will of all 50 states and that of our neighbors to the north and south to conserve fish and wildlife against the inexorable pressures of population growth and urban sprawl. Partnerships embodied in this association and this conference provide the opportunity for creativity within each of us to be tested and expressed. The power embodied by these collective organizations is available to you to influence legislation, and the actions of industry and local government to conserve fish and wildlife.

I am constantly amazed, and awed, by the ingenuity, insight, and conviction expressed by the various committee chairs as they present the deliberations of their several committees and the extraordinary cooperation—true partnerships—that exist among our fish and wildlife agencies and the federal agencies that aid and support fish and wildlife conservation. Partnerships such as these are nothing new. The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies is rapidly approaching its one hundredth birthday.

So what is new? I think the theme of this conference, “Partners for the Future of Fishing, Hunting, and Conservation—Stakeholders, Industries, and Resource Agencies Working Together” reflects a new emphasis that natural resources agencies are placing on cooperation as a means of protecting and enhancing fish and wildlife in contrast to, and in addition to, regulation. Fish and wildlife managers have always had to persuade people not to do things they would normally want to do. That is never an easy job. During the early stages of fish and wildlife management it was enough to simply say: “You’re taking too many,” “Don’t shoot females,” “Put the little ones back.”

Bag and creel limits, seasons, and curtailment of unethical harvest practices were relatively easy to sell. When these conservation measures were coupled with stocking programs they quickly won the support of enlightened hunters and anglers. It wasn't all that difficult to explain that the "don'ts" codified into laws and regulations were ultimately in the best interest of the people being regulated. Not that all hunters and fishermen liked or obeyed the regulations. I don't have to tell you conservation officers that. But bit by bit regulations became the mainstay of fish and wildlife management.

Early in this century, environmental prophets like Aldo Leopold warned that hunting and fishing regulations would not be enough. They saw habitat for fish and wildlife being eaten away by burgeoning population growth, wasteful farming, mining, and industrial practices, and, more recently, urban sprawl. This early conservation movement gave rise to partnerships to the familiar sportsmen clubs, rod and gun clubs, conservation alliances such as Ducks Unlimited, Trout Unlimited, The Wild Turkey Federation, Quail Unlimited, Pheasants Forever, The American Sport Fishing Association, The Wildlife Management Institute, The American Fisheries Society, The Wildlife Society, The Isaac Walton League . . . and the list goes on. Fish and wildlife managers and federal agencies, assisted and prodded by their new-found partners, turned to the same tools that had worked before—laws and regulations. The results were the eminently successful Clean Water Act, Clean Air Act, and that bugaboo of the lands rights people, The Endangered Species Act. But unlike fish and game laws, which directly benefit the people being regulated, these new environmental laws and the state and federal regulations that implement them, affect people, corporations, and political entities who see no direct or obvious benefit to themselves. As the country becomes more and more urbanized, and we become more and more disconnected from the land, it is harder for us to see the effects of our individual wants and actions on the air, water, land, and ultimately, the fish and wildlife we still want to have. It is easy to see and feel the pain that broad, sweeping environmental regulations have on industry, municipalities, and sometimes ourselves as individuals. But as in the case of the tragedy of the commons, it is not that easy to see the direct impact that each isolated action has on fish and wildlife populations. It is one thing to say: "Don't kill too many this year or you won't have any next year" but it is quite another to say: "Don't fill this wetland, or don't cut those trees, or don't build that road, so a hunter can shoot more ducks," or "don't mine that coal (or gold) so that an angler can catch trout 20 miles downstream, maybe even in another state." Harder still—"Don't build that housing development—you'll hurt the biodiversity." Have you ever tried to tell a developer what a biodiversity is . . . or how to cook it?

The regulated ask, "What's in it for us?" "Why do we have to pay so somebody else benefits?"

It all came to a head a few years ago with Secretary Babbitt's famous spotted owl and gnatcatcher "train wrecks." Congress threw up environmental stop signs and it became obvious that the stick approach would no longer work. We needed more carrots and less stick if we wanted to continue.

I see partnerships as a way of providing more carrots, more incentive and less coercion, a means of gaining the consent of the governed to be governed.

As I said before, partnerships are not new. Our earlier partnerships were, for the most part, groups coming together around a common interest to wield a greater, collective force, and they still are. The Teaming With Wildlife coalition is a truly awesome partnership—and it will work. Now, many of our emerging partnerships consist of players that have different, legitimate, but often conflicting interests. These people are coming together to define costs and benefits and work out solutions. In the best of cases, it isn't so much finding a compromise as it is providing a forum for communication, understanding, and mutual benefit.

An example of this is a cooperative trout rearing project in my own state of Maryland in which a coal company is rearing trout for the state in the effluent of a coal mine. The company saw that the mining industry had a poor reputation. Just think of the thousands of miles of rivers and streams that still flow lifeless as a result of acid mine drainage. This company is mining coal the right way. It is treating its effluent to a level that it is actually improving the receiving stream, the Potomac River, rather than just meeting minimum standards. What better way to demonstrate this than by raising trout right in the effluent of the mine? The state provides fingerling trout, materials, and food—the company provides clean, cold water, space, security, and people to feed and tend the trout. The public gets better streams and better fishing. The company comes off as the good neighbor that it is.

In closing, I want to make an unabashed plug for an international partnership that is "strictly for the birds," and I meant that in the most complimentary sense. It goes by the draft title "Cooperation for the Conservation of Birds of North America, a North American Initiative for the Protection of Birds." Under the facilitation of The Commission on Environmental Cooperation, its goal is the conservation of all North American birds, game and nongame, migratory and nonmigratory alike. It is, in effect, a partnership of partnerships. The United States is represented by Gary Myers of Tennessee, David Pashley of the American Bird Conservancy, and Paul Schmidt of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Among our most prized natural resources for their aesthetic, ecological, and economic values, birds, by their very nature, are among the most difficult to protect. They encompass extremely broad geographic ranges, use and rely on a wide range of habitats, and recognize no political boundaries. This ambitious initiative would build upon existing partnerships and is, I think, a perfect example of what the theme of this conference is all about. I commend it to you for consideration and support.

On behalf of all the directors, may I wish you all inspiration, determination, and wisdom in your work and thank you all for your untiring work in conserving our precious fish and wildlife.