

# Justice or Injustice (The Conservation Ranger)

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*Abstract:* Throughout the many years of his existence, the conservation ranger has never held an ideal relationship with the news media. The highly isolated areas that he works, the low profile he maintains, and the seclusion he often places himself in, have all contributed to making the ranger almost invisible to the news media in many areas, but especially in the area of law enforcement. As a peace officer, the conservation ranger is undoubtedly one of the least understood aspects of the criminal justice system. Often working alone, with little or no contact with the outside world, the ranger works diligently toward enforcing a state's game and fish laws. But the ranger's responsibility to the public does not end with his protection of the wildlife and habitat. It also incorporates some of the highest duties bestowed upon any government official: that which includes the protection of life, the safeguard of liberty, and the maintenance of social institution conducive to the pursuit of happiness.

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This article is about the conservation ranger and the news media, and though it is written with the intent of being presented to other conservation officers, it is my hope that it will find its way to persons who are not so associated. Therefore, with every intention of writing this article for persons not employed by a conservation agency, I would first like to tell you, the reader, about the conservation ranger and the selection process.

## **Pre-employment**

What sort of person is attracted to and selected as a conservation ranger? The conservation ranger has many faces. The list ranges from police officer to security guard; from skilled laborer to mill worker; from high school graduate to school teacher. In fact, most people who want to become a conservation ranger are people who are dissatisfied with other careers, who are looking for a secure future, and who want the satisfaction of performing effectively with little or no supervision. However, not everyone is suited to becoming a conservation ranger.

In selecting a candidate for the position of a conservation ranger, the Georgia

Department of Natural Resources goes through an extensive selection process. This process establishes certain standards vital for employment. For example, in Georgia, the applicant's background must meet minimal requirements in the following areas:

- (1) Age—The applicant must be at least 21 years of age. This age requirement is established by state law. The conservation ranger is by law a peace officer.
- (2) Education—The applicant must either have a high school education or have a high school equivalency as indicated by the General Educational Development Examination.
- (3) Citizenship—The applicant must be a citizen of the United States.
- (4) Driver's license—The applicant must possess a valid driver's license.
- (5) Vision—The Department specifies minimum requirements for uncorrected vision.
- (6) Criminal record—The candidate's record must not show a felony conviction or a sufficient amount of misdemeanors which may indicate disrespect for the law.
- (7) Miscellaneous requisites—The Department of Natural Resources requires the applicant to be available for employment anywhere in the state.

If the applicant meets minimum eligibility requirements, he enters the conservation ranger testing group. An applicant who passes this test is normally certified by the state merit system as being "eligible" and placed on a list. Being placed on the list does not mean the applicant will be offered employment. This list is generally longer than the number of positions available.

Also, during the selection process, the applicant must pass other tests to include physical fitness, background investigation, polygraph, and oral review board.

### Physical Fitness

Physical fitness is determined by 2 examinations. First, the applicant is medically examined to find out if any health problems exist which may impair his/her effectiveness as a conservation ranger. Health conditions (or problems) such as high blood pressure, heart problems, incapacitating injuries, etc., will disqualify an individual. The determination of medical fitness is the sole responsibility of a qualified doctor and not on the part of any test provided by the Department.

The physical fitness test is designed to test agility. This is not anything new to the Department but is new to current personnel. Contrary to a medical examination, the agility test is normally derived from the policy input of the Department. Thus, the agility test is designed to test the many types of physical exertion that may be routinely required of a Conservation Ranger. For example, an applicant is required to swim a certain distance, lift and carry an object of a certain weight, and run a certain distance in a given amount of time.

### Background Investigation

The Department requires that an applicant be of good character. This requirement is a must for a number of reasons. The one and most important question any

department should ask itself is, "Can this candidate represent the Department in a professional and respectable manner?" The candidate, if selected, will be the primary link between the Department and the public. Therefore, the public will judge the Department only by the representation and action of the ranger.

To make sure the Department selects the right person for the job, an extensive background investigation for each candidate must be done. The foundation for the investigation is the information filed on the application by the applicant. The investigation calls for an extensive work history, credit references, personal references, and a record of offenses, if any. The information provided is checked by the investigator, a sergeant or a corporal, who subsequently prepares an overall assessment of the applicant's character and expresses an opinion as to his/her fitness for work as a conservation ranger.

### **Polygraph Examination**

Each applicant is required to submit to a polygraph examination administered by the Georgia Bureau of Investigation. If the applicant shows to have a history of drug use, significant or frequent game law violations, or abnormal sexual tendencies, he/she is disqualified. Any applicant showing deception on the polygraph examination is removed from the list of eligibles.

### **Oral Review Board**

The Department then subjects the applicant to an oral examination or interview. Such exams are conducted by a board which is usually composed of 5 ranking officers. The board members are required to score the candidate's performance on such personality attributes as interest in the position, appearance, mental agility, bearing, self-confidence, demeanor, etc.

A candidate who is hired and completes his probationary period becomes a permanent part of a special breed of law enforcement officers—one who will represent his department in a truly professional manner, wear his uniform with dignity and pride, and do his job in such a manner that he bestows honor on both himself and his department.

### **The Public, the News Media and the Ranger**

We have just taken a look at the selection process. Let us now take a closer look at the ranger and his relationship with the public and the news media. I will share with you what I believe to be the public's view and the news media's view of the ranger and then share with you what I think his relationship with the public and news media should be.

When I first began to write about the public, the news media and the conservation ranger, I had all types of ideas about things I wanted to say. However, the more I wrote, the more paper I ended up tearing. I just could not find the right words to express what I wanted to say. There were just too many mixed emotions inside of me concerning the public and the news media. It has always been upsetting

for me to pick up a newspaper and read about the recovery of a drowning victim, the rescue of a lost child, or the control of some riotous group and see every other agency or organization given the proper credit and recognition except mine.

"Pride" is a pretty big pill to swallow, especially when one knows he put a lot of effort and work into making the mission a success, and no one considers enough of him to even mention his name. Yes, I know that credit and recognition should never be an important factor in any organization, but sometimes that is all one has. To be given a compliment, a handshake or even a pat on the back can often have a great impact on a person or organization. Too often the ranger risks his life under harsh and severe weather conditions, giving little or no thought to his safety, to only be denied the right to share the spotlight in his own success story.

Of course, being left out by the news media is not anything new to the conservation ranger. In fact, the ranger has accepted it as an integral part of his life. The ranger knows that the isolated places he often works, the unscheduled hours he often keeps and the element of surprise which he must maintain have all contributed to keeping him out of the eyes of both the public and the news media. Because of this isolation that has so often surrounded the conservation ranger, he has become the least understood law enforcement officer in the criminal justice system.

After 9 years with the Department, it still amazes me when I am in uniform to see people trying to figure out what I am. They are in no way bashful either, literally turning me so they can read what the words on my shoulder patch say, and then speaking as if they are not certain of what they read. "Oh, you're the game warden! One of my best friends is a game warden." And, of course, they have got to tell you the one famous story everyone tells, "A friend of my took a game warden fishing. . . ."

No matter how hard he tries, the conservation ranger is not thought of as a law enforcement officer. He has been tagged with the label of "animal protector," or you might say a "possum police" or "rabbit sheriff." Of course, that is his primary responsibility, protecting the wildlife and its habitat. However, the habitat consists of one animal that people sometimes forget. Which one you may ask? Well, it's the one we call man. You see, along with other responsibilities, the ranger must save, rescue, and manage people.

People do not consider themselves as being a threat to the wildlife or to themselves, and so they see the ranger as a nuisance and his job as a big joke; someone who sneaks through the woods just to catch some poor unsuspecting fisherman or hunter. But the ranger sees his job as being stimulating, rewarding, and challenging. The ranger knows that his job consists of more than protecting the resources from people, it also consists of protecting people from themselves which is probably the single most difficult thing for any law enforcement agency to do.

A prime example of attitude toward the ranger can be seen when he checks a boater for a safety inspection or stops one for being intoxicated. The boater often becomes offensive, advising the ranger to go pick on someone who is breaking the law, never realizing that he has broken the law while out trying to have a good time. But often, a good time for one boater ends up as a disaster for another. The boater

never realizes that a fast boat, a couple of beers, and a few friends who encourage him to pull unsafe stunts is always a deadly combination.

The ranger knows that people use the woods and waterways to help them unwind from the previous week's work. But he also knows that people who use the woods and waterways may also be using drugs or alcohol. To my knowledge, proof has never been established to show that people can control drugs or alcohol. As a matter of fact, all studies indicate that drugs and alcohol control people. They dull the senses, often making people daring. Persons under the influence of drugs or alcohol often say and do things that they would never attempt to try if sober. Therefore, the long arm of the law must reach out to protect them from themselves.

As I sat down with pencil in mouth and hands behind my neck, I thought about the many contributions the ranger has made toward the well being of the public. I thought, too, about the many times a ranger has saved someone's life and the only report made, if any, was the one he sent in to his office. As all these thoughts came to mind, I began to drift back into another time and place—a time when I was growing up on a Burke County farm—a time when life was simple, crime was down and a conservation ranger was a true-to-life game warden.

As I thought about my childhood, I thought too about a man who I so often heard of but can never recollect seeing. I never knew his name, what he looked like or where he came from. But I knew what he was—the game warden!

I remember each time I went into the woods to hunt or fish, I expected him to jump out in front of me—not that I had done anything wrong, but because I had geared myself up to expect it. Each time a twig snapped or a limb broke, my heart pounced. I just knew he was out there, watching and waiting for me to make a mistake. I was determined to win this game I had created in my mind.

Whenever I went into the woods, I became leery, wondering when he was going to show up and what he looked like. Someone had told me once, and for some strange reason I believed them, that he resembled the trees and brush. I often found myself looking for the game warden more than the game I was pursuing. In my mind I had created a monster, something between a ghost and Frankenstein.

As I thought about my childhood, the realization of the truth began to cloud my mind. I guess I always knew but never wanted to admit that people have never considered and probably will never consider, the conservation ranger as a "true" law enforcement officer. To most people, the ranger will always be less than a peace officer. People just do not have any more knowledge about the ranger today than I had when I was a boy. In fact, the ranger is as mysterious today as he ever was. Although hunters and fishermen have a basic understanding of him, they too do not fully understand or comprehend the full scope of the ranger's duties and responsibilities to the public and his department.

And what is the ranger's responsibility and duty? First and most important, the ranger is the first line representative of his department. Therefore, his department is judged and evaluated upon the actions and manners of the ranger. Representing his department in a local county, the ranger is constantly exposed to corruption, gratuities and political pressures; he must therefore exhibit a high level of personal

integrity and ethical conduct. Conduct such as soliciting or accepting bribes or favors make it impossible to provide impartial law enforcement.

Unlike the police officer who works a certain beat at predesignated times, the ranger doesn't have the privilege of meeting people on a routine basis. Generally, he meets people either due to a violation of the law or due to an emergency situation. In either case, the ranger is expected to exhibit a professional attitude. Often alone and without radio contact, the ranger must exhibit initiative, problem-solving ability, effective judgment and imagination in coping with numerous complex problems that he may be called upon to face. He must be able to make prompt and effective decisions, sometimes in life and death situations, and be able to size up a situation quickly and take appropriate action.

In order for the ranger to carry out his task, he must have complete knowledge of his area, not just the physical characteristics but also its normal events and usual behavior including the people who use the area. And though the ranger does not possess a law degree, his job knowledge and appearance are among those things that make him the professional he has become.

It is rather sad that most people never consider the ranger until they have called every other agency. It is not uncommon for someone to call the ranger at 0200 or 0300 hours and say something like, "I've called everyone I can think of and no one can help me. You're my last hope." The last hope for most people is generally the best deal they have ever received. Unlike most police departments who will respond only after a person has been missing for 24 hours, the ranger responds on the spur of the moment and would not have it any other way. Although the ranger is the last person called, the ranger is first to respond, last to leave and least likely to be recognized for his efforts.

So what do we do to enhance our image to the public and news media? There are several methods that can be utilized by both the ranger and his department. First, the ranger can take the same steps I have taken and contact the local newspaper. Start a weekly article. A weekly news article is very time consuming but the ranger will soon learn that it is very informative to the public and the people will somehow let him know they are enjoying it. Such an article not only serves as an outlet for information but it also introduces the ranger to the public. He becomes a symbol of trust and the ranger may find that a lot of information may be passed to him because of this newly gained trust which he shares with the public.

A second tool that can be utilized by the ranger and his department are public service announcements on both television and radio stations. Both radio and television stations have time set aside for public service announcements. In these spots the ranger can discuss new laws, safety tips, or any other information that he may think the public should be aware of or confused about. This method also brings the ranger to the public and makes him an image of authority in the area. It also helps the public to gain insight and knowledge about the ranger's job.

A third thing you may want to consider is a district public information officer. This person should handle the public and news media in a certain area. By having

a local public information officer, personal contact can be established with key people, both in the news media and public sector. If this relationship is established, the ranger can depend on these key people to keep certain information quiet until after an investigation is completed. They know they will then get full details on the situation.

A fourth and final method I will discuss is a state public information officer. The state information officer's job is to relate any information to the news media that may be of public interest. The state information officer should not be involved with questions of a routine nature. That could be done by the county ranger. He should, however, answer any question that may be of a delicate nature, and therefore be centrally located so as to be easy to contact about confusing or misinterpreted information.

There are, however, bad and good points in having a state information officer. The most favorable points are: (1) he is centrally located and therefore rather easy to contact; (2) any wrong information can be traced directly back to him; (3) the information officer speaks for the department; and (4) he is easy to contact about misleading or wrong information. Some of the negative aspects are: (1) information may not reach the information officer in a timely manner; (2) the information officer does not have first-hand knowledge of the information, and therefore, may leave out some important facts; (3) the information officer does not have time to investigate each incident; therefore, he must rely on all information passed to him as being accurate and correct; and, (4) the information officer is rarely involved in any of the on-site investigations.

Each method I have discussed may work in some departments and not in others. Of course, no department should utilize just one method, several methods should be implemented. This way the agency can see which is right for it. It may become necessary for an agency to develop other methods to fit its needs.

## **Discussion**

The Department of Natural Resources Law Enforcement Section has always been an isolated agency. Its members have generally worked alone. Away from both the public and news media, the ranger has remained a mystery to almost everyone. This mystery that surrounds the ranger has made it difficult for the public and news media to understand the significant achievements and contributions the ranger has made to his state.

The public and news media do not know about the many rescues that have been handled by the individual ranger. They do not know about the many lonely nights away from home, the many hours spent looking for a drowned victim, the many miles traveled looking for a lost person, or the many days spent working on a complaint.

The time has come for the news media and the department to become united in educating the public about the work and responsibility of the Conservation

Ranger. We have done a great job in the past in conserving and protecting the wildlife and its habitat. We must now share our experience and knowledge with others.

As I look around and see our many accomplishments, I feel really good inside. To know that I will continue to see the whitetail deer flagging its tail as it runs through the woods, to see the bald eagle soaring proudly and gracefully through the sky, and to know that my children's children will get the chance to see these beautiful sights and many others which I helped to conserve makes me more than proud to be one of the best law enforcement officers that I know—a conservation ranger.