

# General Session

## Presidential Address: Economic Impacts of Fish and Wildlife Related Recreation

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The Kentucky of my youth was a rural state. Most young people connected with the outdoors. Hunting and fishing were commonplace for a young Kentuckian. Today, half of my fellow Kentuckians live in cities. Kentucky is 51% urban.

Fifty thousand jobs are tied to building Corvettes, Camrys, Explorers, and big Ford trucks. Our Department and fish and wildlife agencies across America are talking about wildlife diversity and promoting new initiatives like "Teaming With Wildlife." We are looking for user groups who can be new partners.

The theme of this conference is the Economic Impacts of Fish and Wildlife Related Recreation. Our presence here says we care about wildlife, but think back to the last political campaign in your state (local, state, national). What were the political themes? What do voters care about? The two issues that invade every political campaign at the local, state, and national levels: jobs and the economy.

Wildlife professionals can recite in intricate detail our plans to implement new enforcement strategies, new wildlife regulations, new education programs or new policy initiatives. Flyway councils debate issues with passionate conviction and sure-footed certainty based on intricate science. But we don't know how we stack up against other economic interests in our home states.

Farmers and developers know the size of their economic muscle. But by and large we don't know. We have not made the connection with the real world dollars and economic activity related to wildlife-oriented recreation. If we can make the connection with the economy and wildlife-related recreation, we can make it more socially and politically popular to support our programs.

The road builders, the home builders, and the shopping center developers are not the enemy. They make jobs and help keep economies churning. But they have "out-hustled" us. Farmers, auto builders, developers, industrialists, and local Chambers of Commerce can tell you how they stack up in the economics of your state. They make it clear that their influence is significant.

We must make it clear to our policy makers that woods and wetlands, prairies and bayous, mountains and streams, mean dollars and cents in local economies. Here are some examples of the economic impact of activities we regulate:

—In Alabama, the retail sales associated with deer hunting is \$294 million annually.

—Every Arkansas citizen spends on average of \$607 yearly on wildlife-associated recreation.

—For every 35 anglers in Florida, 1 job is created. One-fourth of anglers are tourists who help create 31,000 fishing related jobs.

—The economic impact of anglers, hunters, and “away from home” “wildlife watchers” in Missouri is \$2.4 billion a year.

—The state sales tax generated by hunting and fishing purchases in Tennessee each year is more than \$67.1 million.

—The average Texas hunter spends \$1,500 a year on hunting equipment and supplies and hunts 19 days a year.

Some of us may think that these kinds of connections are too political or non-scientific. But in these days of special interest politics, others are using “economic impact” to achieve their goals. We must become familiar with the numbers of jobs associated with hunting, fishing, boating, and wildlife-oriented recreation.

Terms like “direct expenditures” and “economic output” must become as familiar to us as the terms “slot limit,” “strict liability,” “predation,” and “stocking rates.” Most of us didn’t have computer skills until very recently. We learned computer skills as a necessary tool to do our jobs better. We learned computer skills to avoid being left behind. Today, we couldn’t think of graduating college degreed wildlife biologists without computer skills. We send our staffs into the field unarmed because we don’t know or understand the economic values associated with wildlife-oriented recreation.

—Consider that Virginia anglers, hunters, and wildlife watchers spend \$2.2 million annually and generate \$24 million in state sales taxes.

—More than 1 million people fish in Georgia and spend \$1.1 billion a year.

—Fishing, hunting and wildlife watching creates 42,000 jobs in Louisiana.

—Trout anglers account for one-third of the economic impact associated with fishing and each year spend more than \$133 million.

—Fishing, hunting, and wildlife watching create 36,561 jobs in Mississippi.

—North Carolina has 420,000 visitors who watch wildlife, 1,557,000 resident anglers, and 370,000 hunters who spend \$2.8 billion a year.

—In Oklahoma, the economic impact of striped bass fishing in the 7 counties around Lake Texamo is \$20 million a year.

—In South Carolina, in Jasper and McCormick counties alone, deer and turkey hunters spend \$15 million a year.

—In West Virginia, the economic impact of deer hunting is \$247 million annually.

—In Kentucky, tourism is an \$8 billion business. Wildlife-related recreation is \$4.2 billion annually and creates 50,000 jobs.

We are in a global competition for economic activity. We are in a competition for state budgets and we must provide a reasonably priced product to our constituents. We can sit at our computers and e-mail across the planet, but we don't know how much money moves and jobs and economic activity happens because of our efforts.

We can have impacts on policy makers if we can quantify the economic activity we regulate. We should point with pride to the jobs and sales—much of it in rural America where much of the wildlife lives and where improved economic activity packs the biggest punch.

We learned to use telefaxes and cellular phones and computers. Each of us should learn some basic economic information and arm ourselves, our employees, and our constituents. Like it or not, we are competing for resources, habitats, budgets, and attention from our policy makers.

Economic information is a tool in our arsenal. Economic information can cut a slice of the budget and the political and public support we need. Protecting and conserving wildlife may depend on how adept we are at connecting wildlife resource needs to the competition for funding and the obvious political and public support that goes with jobs and economic activity.

There is no shortage of intellect or commitment in this room. To be competitive in the future, we must sharpen our economic awareness and educate our co-workers, our constituents, our policy makers, and ourselves.

If you put our economic impact in perspective, SEAFWA annual spending on wildlife is \$32 billion. If we were a Fortune 500 company, we would be the 24th largest in America—behind K-Mart and ahead of Merrill Lynch.

If you look nationally at the annual spending on wildlife, it is \$89 billion. We would be No. 6 on the Fortune 500, behind General Electric and IBM.

Wildlife-related recreation is big business and we should learn more about our economic impacts. We will be better stewards of the resources.