

# **Law Enforcement Session**

## **Information and Education Programs and the Youth Resource**

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The goal of the Law Enforcement Section of the Georgia Department of Natural Resources is to gain voluntary compliance to the law by the resource user. Ignorance of the law is no defense, but it is often the reason behind a violation. Some people will violate the law because that is their nature, while others violate the law because they are misinformed or entirely ignorant of the law and the concepts that developed that law.

Information and education programs can impart the knowledge needed to correct this problem, but most information and education sections are limited by lack of manpower and inadequate budgets. However, there is available to every department an agent capable of increasing the manpower of the information and education section. That agent is the conservation officer, who sees the results of his programs in his day-to-day activity.

The results of information and education programs can only be measured by the resource at which they are aimed. There is a resource needing these programs that should be the goal of every department. That resource is our most precious and viable, our youth.

### **Information and Education Programs**

Conservation is often defined as the wise use of our resources. If we consider our youth our most valuable resource, then we must manage this resource wisely, both for our needs and for the needs of the youth resource itself.

Information and education programs impart knowledge and the discipline to use it. Today's youth are more sophisticated and more inquisitive about their environment. Television and newspapers tell of crises that affect our environment. Sometimes these views are slanted or misinformed. People, especially the young, often accept these views and reports as the unquestionable truth.

One of the keys to having a public that is aware and informed about resource issues is formal natural resource education in the school system. Edu-

cators hold the destiny of the nation in the hollows of their hands. Teachers are with our young people every day and usually present only facts about the environment to the pupils. Yet, if teachers are misinformed, or biased, about the resource issue, they may pass the wrong information to young people.

The realization that there is a critical need for environmental education is not a new idea. The Committee on North American Wildlife Policy expressed similar concern in 1973:

"We strongly endorse environmental education of many kinds in the schools. Teacher training in ecological subjects has lagged far behind minimum requirements if we are to achieve basic goals in human welfare. There is around us abundant testimony that the environmental crisis of today and tomorrow must be met in the minds of our children. There is no greater challenge of our time."

One thing is certain: if resource departments which promote scientific management practices do not inform and educate the public to combat the commonly-held misbeliefs about resource management, then special interest groups with messages narrow in scope will find it easy to sway the minds of our youth. The end result will be many resource management programs that will struggle along because they lack the understanding and support of the public.

Conservation officers can be effective tools of natural resource departments in divulging the information and education that the young people need. These officers come into contact with the public daily and are available in almost every county in every state. The officers have a variety of experiences in law enforcement and wildlife management. They have assisted biologists with field work and have observed nature at work. To gain the special knowledge in subjects which arouse the curiosity of youth and inform them as to what has been done in natural resource management, what is being done, and what can be done in the future, the officers' knowledge can be supplemented with training in teaching techniques and selected readings. The conservation officer is more accessible in each community than the biologist and is looked upon by youth as an authority on wildlife issues.

The local schools are fertile fields for the conservation officers to cultivate. Educators are always searching for methods to instill in the student a desire to learn and to search for knowledge. Many teachers are willing to use environmental education materials to inform and educate students if this material is made available to them.

Many schools offer courses to expose the student to the variety of professions available. Courses in forestry, agriculture, industry, and outdoor education are ready-made grounds for the conservation officer to demonstrate how natural resource practices work hand-in-hand with the farmer and forester, with industries in water and air quality control, and with commercial fishing and fish farms that contribute to our economy. Classes in ecology, biology, and the natural sciences explore the relationship of man and nature.

The conservation officer need only to look at a course and think of how the department or a resource relates to that course. English classes can show the communication skills that are needed in professions that deal with the public; civic classes can illustrate how the natural resource department fits into government and how laws are made; and even home economics classes can offer information on the proper care and preparation of fish and wildlife dishes.

In 1982, the Georgia Department of Natural Resources was approached for assistance in forming statewide conservation clubs, in part to obtain the sportsmen's input on conservation matters. This program was met with great success. In August 1982, the principal at Bryan County High School was approached by a conservation officer with the idea of starting such a conservation club in his school. The principal, Dr. Wendall Tanner, was excited by the idea and contacted several school board members regarding their thoughts on such a program. They too became enthusiastic, and the organizational meeting was held in September 1982, in both the high school and middle school, grades 6 through 12. More than 130 students participated and met twice a month, once for club business and planning and again for programs. The programs consisted of films, slides, and speakers from the department's sections of fisheries, game management, parks and historic sites, law enforcement, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The response was tremendous, not only from the young people involved, but also from the educators, the parents, and the community as a whole. The students went into classes armed with a desire to relate what they were studying with their environment. And since Bryan County is a rural area that receives a great deal of hunting and fishing pressure, they began to apply what they had learned to their own practices in the field.

The Georgia Conservation Club, Bryan County chapter, is now in its second year with more than 200 students participating. The students are now able to plan more of their own programs and have invited speakers from the U.S. Coast Guard Environmental Division, the Georgia Forestry Commission, the Soil Conservation Service, local forest industries, and from local conservation groups such as Ducks Unlimited. They also plan projects such as a booth at the county fair, where they will distribute material on hunter safety, boating safety, and other conservation information; a fishing rodeo to be held in the spring, with local merchants donating prizes; and workshops on turkey hunting, striped bass fishing, and deer management in hunting clubs. Future projects involve cleaning up the public boat ramp parks, tree planting, planting food plots, building wood duck nesting boxes, and conducting more workshops.

The students have gained a better understanding of their role in environmental management, while the department is working towards its goal of voluntary compliance of the law by informing and educating its future users. The public will gain wiser and better informed sportsmen, and the resource-related industries will gain new leaders. Several students have expressed a desire to

find employment as biologists, technicians, and conservation officers. In a world that has become more aware of its environment, we owe our youth an opportunity to learn about the resources and the management of those resources early in life.

Some radical special-interest groups spend millions of dollars to stop managed hunts, to prevent land acquisitions for public use, and to deny people their right of free choice regarding hunting or trapping. If the time and effort that these groups spend in spreading half-truths about wildlife and in making innuendoes about sportsmen were channeled into sound wildlife education practices, then we might possibly never again fear that a species become extinct. We owe it to the public we serve to spend our time wisely in not only performing patrol and management duties but also in informing and educating the public in the wise use of our natural resource heritage.

## Summary

Aldo Leopold (1949) in his *A Sand County Almanac* said, "What conservation education must build is an ethical understanding for the land economics and a universal curiosity to understand the land mechanism. Conservation may then follow." If we hope to educate our young people to their role in natural resource management, then factual information must be circulated to the greatest degree possible in our schools. There are many educators willing and eager to share these opportunities to inform the youth of their role in managing the future of our natural resources. The response to these programs by educators clearly indicates a long-standing need for, and interest in, this type of honest and authoritative conservation program. Our challenge—and our opportunity—is to fill this need to the best of our ability so that conservation may truly follow.

## Literature Cited

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