

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by

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It is an honor and a pleasure to call to order the 29th annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of Game and Fish Commissioners and to have the opportunity to deliver a short President's message to you. It has been my privilege to be associated with this organization since its first annual meeting in St. Petersburg, Florida in 1947. In looking around the room I see some others who have been around since that time and I would like for those of you who attended that first annual meeting to please stand to be recognized. The number of us gray beards in the group is obviously a minority, which means the bulk of you came along later. I do not believe we "elders" have cornered the market on wisdom, since we have made our share of mistakes, but I do feel that we were lucky enough to have worked in this field during its most rewarding era. We may have learned some things which can help us all in the future.

In reflecting over the life of our Association, I am impressed with many significant changes. To me, the single most significant change, and the most difficult to deal with, is the change which has occurred in our constituents. I am sure many of you will remember back when Doc Watson was new in the Southeast and becoming a legend in his own time. In the eyes of our constituents then, we could do no wrong. Now, it seems, we can do very little right.

I think the change has come about because of the success of our early programs. In those days, issues and challenges were clearcut. Our constituents were hunters and fishermen, united behind our efforts to bring successful restoration programs to our various states. Furthermore, they as a group were willing to pay whatever price necessary to get the job done.

However, while we were engrossed in these restoration programs on game species and the resulting management programs, a slow, steady and significant constituent change occurred. Many of the unified group of the 1940's and 1950's broke into splinter groups with specific geographical, special—or regretfully, selfish—interests. An example is the deer hunter, who in the 50's was only interested in having a deer herd to hunt, has now often become critical and vocal about either sex hunting seasons. There are many other examples.

Further, we have attracted large numbers of non-consumptive "environmentalists" who come to us quite articulate and request or demand special consideration for their use of those resources produced by our successful programs. The result has been inevitable conflicts among the various user groups competing for the same resources.

Surely we have more in common with this new segment of our constituency than conflict. Reason indicates that we should all be allies, for we all have a legitimate share in and depend upon coordinated use of the same natural resources.

At the risk of offending some scientists, it has been my feeling for years that we know more about the animals we are managing than we can put to use. Therefore, "basic life history" studies should receive close scrutiny before any more large sums of our sorely needed operational funds are committed to them.

Conversely, I wonder if we are doing as much as we could toward solving the conflicts among our constituency? Although we shall always need basic scientific research, I suggest we should direct our best efforts toward solving the over-riding immediate problems of habitat loss, anti-hunting emotionalism (did you see "The Guns of Autumn"?), and the difficulties of migratory waterfowl seasons and some state seasons.

Again, at the risk of offending some of my friends, I have often wondered if our major problems are more sociological than biological and possibly should be treated as such. On the other hand, having seen some of the results produced by latter-day sociologists, I cannot be too optimistic in that area.

Much of our poor posture in the public eye is a direct result of good biology and amateurish, "do it yourself" public relations. Underfunding our attempts to get our point across has often left our cause in limbo.

While I am sure all of the public relations divisions have come a long way over the years, I think it is obvious they have been our "step children", continuously subjected to the press of priorities within the various departments. While we have been in the field with good biology programs, we have left our I&E people to compete with the multi-million dollar advertising firms often proposing views negative to what we know is right.

We could continue to go merrily on our way in the hopes that this is all a bad dream which will go away, and that because we are right we will ultimately win without any special effort. However, we would be naive indeed if we believed that. We are a minority, we should recognize that fact and act accordingly. This is firmly impressed on our minds when we realize that 6 major anti-hunting groups (most, incidentally, now opposing the 1975-76 waterfowl seasons), in 1973 raised \$14,400,000. More than the entire combined budgets of the National Shooting Sports Foundation, the National Rifle Association and the Wildlife Management Institute during that year. More significant, between 1968 and 1973 those same 6 groups enjoyed a growth rate, in dollar terms, of over 240 percent. During the same period, hunting license sales increased by only 1 to 3 percent per year.

One of our major challenges as a group is to maintain our credibility and to make ourselves heard and felt through this organization and the International Association. At the risk of offending anybody left who is not already offended, I believe we could improve in this.

Too often during past years, I have observed in the Flyway Councils, mourning dove meetings, and elsewhere, frequent conflicts among ourselves competing for the same resources. Too often we have used these organizations to "make a record for the folks back home" and to further local interests. We can no longer afford such luxuries. We have also too often concerned ourselves with day-to-day incidentals, and have failed to deal with mounting issues. Too often, we don't recognize the difference between them.

Too many times we and our constituents have become involved in conflicts on what turn out to be incidentals; the barn door being left wide open, and too late realize the horse has been stolen by those who laugh at our having been diverted by an incident while the issue is quietly lost.

In summary, it is clear that the changes in our chosen field and in society as a whole have been truly substantial in recent years. It is equally clear that we will need to change with the times or suffer the consequences.

This organization, through the years, has been one of the most viable and productive of all. We are clearly the leaders in Cooperative projects, as our record will show. I think our challenge then is to bring that cooperative spirit to bear in addressing the many issues facing us.

THE BICENTENNIAL AND THE CONSERVATION MOVEMENT

by

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If we condense the entire history of man on earth to a twelve-month year, the Declaration of Independence would have been signed on the 29th of December. Mechanized history of humanity took place in the last two days of the year. When we think about what has been done to this country in that 48-hour period on the scale of time, we should also think about future generations which will have to clean up after us.

Some 25 years ago Fairfield Osborne called the United States "the country of the great illusion." He said: "the story of our nation in the last century regards the use of forests, grasslands, wildlife and water sources is the most violent and most destructive of any written in the long history of civilization. It is the story of human energy unthinking and uncontrolled."

Have we really been such lousy stewards of the land? Is that crack in the liberty bell somehow symbolic of our influence on the American landscape?

No question about it. Our ancestors *did* cut over most of the giant forests from the East Coast to the Mississippi Valley and changed the character of the land.

They *did* cultivate the cleared land to the detriment of the original habitats and the wildlife.

Our ancestors *did* carve up the native prairies and graze their herds all the way to the Rockies, pushing plains dwellers like the elk up the mountainsides and the prairie chicken into smaller and smaller areas. In their rush to conquer the land our ancestors *did* eliminate species of flora and fauna. But this isn't a time for breast beating. As we head for our 200th birthday, it's a time for reflection and a common sense approach to the future.