

General Session

SEAFWA President's Address

Greg D. Duffy, *Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation,
P.O. Box 53465, Oklahoma City, OK 73152*

Proc. Annu. Cont. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 53:1-3

I can think of no other organization I would rather be associated with than SEAFWA. It is made up of the kind of folks who really do care about wildlife and have an unmatched love for the outdoors and the sports of hunting and fishing.

The people of the Southeastern's member agencies and institutions have a history of making great personal sacrifices to help others enjoy the same quality of life that we all love so much. You, and those who have preceded you, have helped birth a whole new profession over the past 53 years, that of modern wildlife management.

Now, here we are at the end of the century, the beginning of a new millennium. It would be a lot easier to be reflective and look back. Our accomplishments have been many. I'm going to do some of that, but in sticking with the theme of this year's conference I'm obliged, as are you, to try to anticipate the job we're going to do when we go home.

It is never easy to speak with confidence about the future. I know at times it is hard not to feel overwhelmed when you look at all the challenges that are out there that will affect wildlife populations and recreation. But this profession that we're proud of gives us no choice but to do our best at anticipating and addressing the future.

Just recently I was scanning through an old 1912 annual report from our agency. It was more than just a financial, legally required, bureaucratic document. We only had two people in the department at that time, but somehow they found the time to produce this book which was first class documentation, a kind of baseline, of the state of our wildlife at that time.

Boy, did they have a lot of challenges.

The deer were gone. There weren't any turkeys. The passenger pigeons had flown the coop and the buffalo and antelope were already history. The hunting of prairie chicken, which once filled our skies, was now banned and their future dim. But, on the other hand, some species were still common. Hawks and coyotes were thick and bounties were in vogue.

There were many interesting asides in the book. Like how the county folks were dead set against the killing of the plentiful dove, and how legislation was in the works to ban the air rifle, and auto-shotgun (one was a crippler and the other way too lethal). But one of their biggest concerns was how to convince landowners that the wildlife

on their land didn't belong to them, and to convince most hunters that they couldn't go just anywhere and kill anything.

We were a new state, just getting organized. Law and order was getting established. There was less need for subsistence hunting than in previous years and some federal laws on commercialization were in the works.

Ironically, though, probably the biggest opportunity they had was that the only way things could go was up! They did have some confidence, not in bringing back prairie chicken, turkey, bass, or antelope, but there was hope for deer, squirrel, rabbit and in the streams which could still provide some good fishing.

There wasn't much mention of science as an answer to their needs. But what really came through was a commitment to a practical belief to stop the obvious excesses.

The public was aware that there wasn't any game around. They needed to support, and they did, the establishment of the first game laws. Laws, of course, are often for the other guy, and it took a long time for many to obey the laws that the public had helped establish.

In the thirties and forties, organizations such as the Southeastern and its member states began to establish the science of wildlife management. We learned to be effective in our efforts by developing and delivering good, sound biological information to our managers who were dedicated to produce results. That effort of allowing science to become the bedrock of our decisions took.

Now, for the most part, we can produce fish and game at healthy levels, manage their population through harvest and protection.

What about today's challenges and opportunities?

It is easy to address the challenges but I won't belabor them. I think we, as professionals, have done a good job in at least identifying them:

- Urbanization
- Human population growth
- Fragmentation of habitat
- Corporate farming
- Anti-hunting and fishing sentiments
- Funding for conservation
- Pollution issues
- Lack of time for recreation
- Aging lakes, and on and on.

There is though, one other challenge that is, to some extent, a direct result of what most of us would see as a good thing. It is a kind of challenge that could come from complacency. The kind, that comes from the fact that today, now—not five years from now—but right now, many of our wildlife populations are, for the most part, in pretty good shape. Our deer and waterfowl numbers are in some cases so high as to present problems, most other populations are stable, and our license buyers, those who fund wildlife conservation, are relatively content. Some who would be most critical in less good times, today ask what are you worrying about?

Sometimes, at least back home in tornado alley, it can be the brightest and most quiet right before the storm.

So, what are today's opportunities? We don't spend as much time talking about them as we do our challenges. But, they are there waiting to be seized.

Today, we are grounded in science. We know what to do biologically. There is generally public trust in our science. The majority of our constituents have faith in our decisions. It is the information age. We should be able to communicate our logic and guidance a lot easier than in 1912. And as I mentioned times are, indeed, pretty good.

Now I tend to be pretty optimistic and think that we can and will take advantage of these opportunities.

Back in 1912 it took a lot of guts to work up the courage to tell landowners that the wildlife on his property belonged to the public. Something had to be done, though, the situation was bleak. Desperate actions were clearly called for in those desperate times. Today, when things seem pretty good, it will probably take even more courage to protect the long term future of our wildlife and the recreation it provides.

Do we need to change the way we have been doing things? We are all aware of the gradual decrease in participation among those who have historically supported wildlife conservation. We also know that if that trend continues, or gets worse as some predict, not only will the funding base for our work diminish but the social support for the sports of hunting and fishing will also. Fish and wildlife could ultimately suffer.

Today, intense efforts continue to expand management to enhance all wildlife species. That effort must continue. But we must also not lose sight of those whose passion for wildlife has produced the greatest comeback story in history, our hunters and anglers.

Just who is our everyday constituent? He—or she—is not the same person as ten or twenty years ago. A lot of them are just plain gone and they haven't been fully replaced by awaiting year classes.

Times have changed. There are fewer rural people. Sportsmen don't have the places to hunt and fish they once did. They don't have the family members to teach and take them. There is much more competition for their time.

I believe that with conviction, we can succeed. The challenges are different, but no greater than in 1912. The hardest work we will have to do is change ourselves and realize that it is time to take the next step. We have learned how to produce the product. The next century demands that we learn how to make it more available to our customers. That means learning to embrace the sciences of human dimension research and marketing as full components of modern wildlife management.

We cannot be content to produce more fish and wildlife for fewer and fewer people to enjoy. Complacency that goes with having a lot could well be the challenge that our grandkids say we just couldn't meet.

If we meet this challenge head on, we will be fishing one day with that same grandkid, telling him how much better it is today than back in the 1900s.