

COMMON PROBLEMS OF CONSERVATION MAGAZINE EDITORS

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In discussing the problems of conservation magazine editors, the basic dilemma lies not in identifying our problems but rather in deciding on a starting point to discuss them.

Our problems are numerous and varied, so after accepting the job of preparing this piece, I decided the only accurate information source was our 16 Southeastern editors themselves. This, then, is a review of what our editors discussed with me in telephone conversations concerning their individual problems. I am most grateful for the assistance each gave me.

15 OUT OF 16

Most of our editor have problems of one type or another. Of the 16 editors contacted in this survey, only one replied: "no problems." This editor is in the "Man Bites Dog" category so we'll touch upon his remarks later.

Incidentally, we promised each contributing editor complete anonymity so that he might feel free to speak with candor and in some detail.

LEADING CATEGORIES

In a breakdown and classification of the various responses, the following 12 problems in order of importance were cited most frequently: (1) Shortage of input from technical personnel; (2) Lack of time to accomplish job properly; (3) Shortage of personnel to work with publication; (4) Obtaining quality illustrations and pictures to accompany story; (5) Maintaining desired magazine quality in face of rising production costs; (6) Deadlines; (7) Political factors; (8) Obtaining high quality writing; (9) Achieving a balance of subject matter in our magazines; (10) Getting contributors to write on the reading and educational level of the publication's readership; (11) Subscription list and circulation problems, and (12) Trying to get contributors to limit their writing on the subject of wildlife conservation or whatever the scope of the magazine might be.

Now we'll get down to a closer look at our "devilish dozen" problems.

LACK OF INPUT FROM TECHNICAL PEOPLE

This problem was near the top of the list as the editors reviewed their woes. When an editor confronts a fish or wildlife technician about this problem, the technician might reply: "I don't have time to write for the magazine."

Perhaps it's a question of priority. If so, the technician probably places writing stories for the magazine else enough to the bottom of his priority list, so that he can skip to the top of it with little or no qualm of conscience. Some game and fish technicians are good writers if they can only be motivated to sit down and write. To help this motivation along, an editor might use a little spade work in the human relations field and try to get the technician to realize how vital his contributions are to the success of the magazine.

Sometimes an editor might have unintentionally offended a game technician by replacing one of his technical phrases or the Latin name of a species with a simple phrase or a common name. It's the responsibility of an editor to explain to the writer that technical phrases and Latin names "turn off" most magazine readers quickly. These names and phrases are appropriate in a technical paper, but should be avoided in a publication for the general public.

Another method that might help you as an editor get a magazine story is to take the approach of a newspaper reporter. Set up an appointment with the fish or wildlife technician and get him to give you the facts of his story. You can go back to your office and write the story. Then take it back to the technician to review for accuracy. At least you now have something on paper and have a starting point for the development of a magazine story.

LACK OF TIME AND MANPOWER

Some humorist has defined time as "the stuff between paydays." To an editor trying to meet a regular, definite deadline, it's almost life itself.

In this context, however, we are considering time in view of the amount of it we have to spend in preparing our publications.

Several of the editors with whom we talked, said their offices were so understaffed that they could devote only a part of their time to their magazine. This lack of time frequently is directly related to the manpower shortage that prevails in Information-Education offices.

A magazine editor frequently doubles as a news release writer, a film librarian, a photographer or a public relations man. He simply has too many roles to play.

Most conservation department heads will admit that the success of their department hinges on how well informed the public is regarding its programs, yet an I & E Section is usually the first one to face a cutback in funds, and consequently manpower, when belt-tightening time comes around.

For example, one I & E Section polled in the survey had four persons, in addition to secretarial help, on its staff 15 years ago. Today that figure is down to two and this has come about while the department, as a whole, has experienced a big expansion.

One editor told us; "A good magazine is the most powerful—and cheapest—promotional piece that a state can have," and he added, "We have progressively sold our Department of Natural Resources on this wisdom."

So it appears that those of us who are not in such an enviable position have a selling job to do.

OBTAINING QUALITY ILLUSTRATIONS AND PICTURES

Quality illustrations and other art work are often the most difficult aspect of an editor's work. With good pictures even a mediocre story is acceptable to both an editor and his magazine's readership. But with poor pictures, or none at all, even the well-written story falls flat.

Some magazine staffs have at least one photographer. Some, because of manpower and budgetary limitations, have none. If an editor has a photographer assigned to work with him, his chances of obtaining quality pictures are greatly enhanced. If he has none, his chances of having good art to augment his story are remote.

Out of necessity, the editor sometimes has to request the writer of a story to submit pictures with his story. In this case careful picture editing and imaginative cropping may bolster the picture quality.

In the absence of suitable photos, sometimes a well-done cartoon or other type of drawing will enhance a story. Many metropolitan newspapers have cartoonists who are delighted to pick up a few extra dollars to enrich their in-

come. If the cartoonist has an idea of a story's subject matter, he can usually come up with something good— if he has enough time ahead of your deadline in which to work.

If your organization has an engineering section, its personnel can often be a great help in providing graphs, charts, line drawings or simple cartoons.

Although there is no substitute for good pictures, where they are not available an editor usually can use these angles to get some art to accompany his magazine article.

MAGAZINE QUALITY VS. RISING PRODUCTION COSTS

Several editors cited this problem as a persistent one in these days of increasing inflation. If your production budget has enough elasticity to compensate for this, you are indeed fortunate. If not, take heart and be patient, some revenue sharing funds may be on the way. Seriously though, if you are on a fixed budget, there are a few possible ways by which you might lower your magazine production costs or at least stabilize them until you get a budget increase. First, make sure that all your color falls on the four or eight page color signature, or whatever number of pages you might have in a color signature. Because even so much as a 10 percent color screen on a picture located on an otherwise black and white page signature frequently requires another run through the press. This involves several hours of press time and the wages of the pressman which in the case of a 25,000 press run would cost more than \$100. Sometimes an editor, thinking it will reduce expenses, runs color on only six pages of an eight-page color signature. There is no saving in this. If you have eight pages designated for color, use color on them. You're cheating your magazine if you don't.

DEADLINES

The word "deadline" is one of the most vital printable words in an editor's vocabulary. However, its meaning is often quite hazy to most people outside of the writing and publishing business. Most of us here publish our magazines for state government agencies, organizations not generally known for their speed in getting things done. However, deadlines are necessary for a publication to appear at its appointed time. These deadlines need not be as strict as those in the daily newspaper business, but they are necessary. Perhaps the deadline problem may arise from a lack of knowledge of the steps involved in the process.

Time spent in explaining the steps of magazine production to the potential contributor might ease the problem for all concerned

For instance, if your printer has your magazine scheduled to go on the press on a certain day but it's not ready then, it has to wait until the next vacant press time, which could be a couple of days or even a week. If the contributor to your magazine understands this, he might look more kindly upon what, up to now, has appeared to be your hard-nosed, uncompromising attitude toward deadlines. Basically, it's a matter of the contributor's comprehension of the steps involved in producing your magazine and his willingness to co-operate.

If this moderate approach doesn't solve your problem, and you're fortunate enough to have a backlog of ready copy, you might use another story instead of the one your would-be contributor was to have written. It may shock him when his story doesn't appear in the appointed issue and it has to wait until next month. But you will have probably gotten your message across in a most effective way. Hopefully any bruised feelings can be healed over a cup of coffee.

POLITICAL FACTORS

Several editors listed “political factors” as a problem area. These will plague editors as long as they’re working in the governmental field.

One editor said: “Because of front office interference, our magazine has become merely a mimeograph-like reproduction of other magazines.”

Other editors simply mentioned the word “politics” but didn’t elaborate.

Sometimes in a big department where there are several divisions, supposedly all working toward the same objectives, you’ll find the heads of two or more divisions at odds as to what appears in a given news release or magazine story. Happily, at least for the writer or editor, such a debate is settled for him.

If, after explaining his views to the front office, the editor still is not satisfied, he can do what a card on our secretary’s desk suggests:

“When you disagree with the boss, consider both sides— his side and the outside.”

When you work for a government agency, politics, like death and taxes, will always be with you and you have to live with it.

OBTAINING HIGH QUALITY WRITING

This is particularly hard to do if the good writers in the line divisions of your organization never have time to write and you don’t have the funds to hire a competent free lancer or can’t do it yourself.

Most of the key personnel in an organization are college-trained and as such can write reasonably well, if you can motivate them to set themselves to the task.

One editor told me: “Most technical people cannot write so the layman can understand them.”

When an editor runs into this situation, he should consider the positive side of it. At least he has something on paper. This is a good start and he and the technician, working together, can edit and rework the piece so the layman can understand the story. At least he’s much better off than the editor who begins work on a magazine and finds his material file empty.

ACHIEVING SUBJECT MATTER BALANCE

This problem is difficult where you have three or four divisions within a department and contribute to your publication at different times and rates of frequency. Some, unfortunately, seldom contribute but usually they are the ones who cry: “We aren’t getting any publicity in the magazine!”

One editor consulted in the poll said he had tried putting out a memorandum six weeks or a month ahead of his projected copy deadline for a magazine. In the memorandum he requested all divisions and sections to turn in their stories and art by a given date. The editor said when that date had passed, only one or two division had contributed to his all-too-meager copy file.

From talking with other editors, one gathers that sometimes line divisions within a department sometimes take the attitude: “The magazine is the I & E Section’s responsibility. After all we don’t ask I & E to manage a fish pond, police a camping area or patrol a 30,000-acre impoundment.”

Often the I & E Section is the most under-staffed and under-equipped unit of an organization. Where this situation prevails, the line division personnel must contribute stories on a regular, timely basis if the division is going to be represented in each magazine. Or at least suggest to the editor some story leads so he can follow up on them and do the writing.

Establishing good rapport and communications between the I & E Section and line divisions is vital if their story is to be told regularly in the magazine. The more divisions that are represented in a magazine, the closer we are to subject matter balance.

WRITING ON THE READER'S EDUCATIONAL AND READING LEVEL

"Write your story simply and be direct" was an often repeated instruction we received in journalism school. This sounds easy but sometimes it isn't because we forget that writing is merely talking on paper. Communication is the technique of transferring ideas from one mind to another with accuracy. To do this the two individuals involved must be on approximately the same level. They must be "tuned in" as teenagers say.

If the average newspaper is written on a ninth grade reading level, our writing style should approach this if we are aiming at the rank and file reader. So the fish or wildlife technician with 16 or 18 years of formal education should make a conscious effort to keep his writing style and vocabulary on his potential reader's level.

One of the best ways to do this is to write as if you were talking informally with your reader. Write your story in a smooth, conversational style. Save your Latin words and technical terms for the technical paper where your reader knows what you're talking about.

SUBSCRIPTION LIST PROBLEMS

Two or three of the editors contacted cited subscription list problems. One said: "If we have a problem, it is honestly that we are growing too fast. We have six people working on circulation alone." Another editor with growing pain problems said his circulation had almost tripled in a recent 10-month period. Still another said his circulation had reached a plateau and was leveling off.

One editor, in mentioning a problem related to circulation, said a possible raise in postal rates could cost him \$2,600 annually. He said if this raise came about, his magazine would be in financial trouble.

One editor reported that his 25,000-name mailing list had recently been converted from a carbon stencil to computer cards and this was helping his operation.

Editors want their magazine circulation to grow, because then we can show the boss that we are getting our department's message into more homes. But problems are inherent in growth as attested by the population explosion. However, these editors, for the most part, are happy that they have these growth problems.

GETTING CONTRIBUTORS TO STAY WITHIN THE MAGAZINE'S SCOPE

A couple of the editors said they had problems getting their contributors to keep within the scope and intent of the magazine. This is going to be something of a problem. An editor must make certain stories from outside contributors stay within the area covered by his magazine. Sometimes a group may try to bring pressure to bear to get their material in your magazine. This can be a problem and sometimes an editor is overruled and he has to live with it even though it's against his editorial judgement.

EDITOR WITH NO PROBLEMS

At last we come to the "man bites dog" editor— the one with no problems. He reported that three years ago his magazine was converted from a black and white letterpress publication to full color offset and in those three years his circulation has jumped from 37,000 to 127,000. He said his publication is printed on a Webb-fed press and that this has reduced his magazine production cost by two cents per copy, even for the full color publication.

He also reported they had changed the magazine format and that it covers a wider range of subject matter to appeal to a more general audience than did the old black and white magazine.

As editors we will always have problems, but I suppose they keep us interested. Here I'm reminded of a sign our departmental printer posted on his shop door. It describes the situation of many editors. It reads: "We have done so much with so little for so long that we can now do anything with nothing."

MOTIVATION THROUGH THE MEDIA

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Motivation is not a new word in the English language, but only in the past decade or so has it come into common usage. This recent usage probably came about by psychologists, school teachers, and parents who wonder whether their offspring will be sufficiently motivated to make a success of their lives.

My dictionary defines "motivate" as "to provide with a motive; to impel; to incite." Motivation is a noun form of the transitive verb "motivate."

So, we want to motivate people, perhaps impel them. It is doubtful that we should incite them except in extreme emergencies. The word "incite" has been too often associated with riots or other civil disturbances. The latter connotation may better be dropped at this point.

If we are going to motivate people, or attempt to motivate people, it might be well to first decide what we want people to do. Well, what do we want them to do?

It is doubtful that any state represented here has more than three or four hundred people engaged professionally in trying to provide better hunting and fishing for upward of a million outdoorsmen who have every right to expect better hunting and fishing, and more important, and more recently, a better environment in which to do so.

Only a handful of devoted people cannot possibly, by themselves, accomplish an almost impossible objective. They must have active assistance from what we loosely term "the general public."

First, let's get down to objectives. Hunters want better hunting. Obviously, they do their hunting in the fields, woodlands, marshes, and swamps.

Motivation Through the Media

Obviously, better habitat means better hunting, and the same goes for fishing. Mass media can be used to inform sportsmen of the need for habitat improvement, and actually get them out in the woods and fields and marshes and streams to help improve habitat.

An important group to be reached are the youngsters who belong to Scouts, FFA, 4-H, and even church youth groups. Many of these are interested in money-raising projects—building wood duck nest boxes or squirrel nest boxes. Provide them with plans and specifications and a monetary incentive, and they will do a terrific job along this line.

Tarheel farmers have planted enough shrub lespedeza in North Carolina to make a strip 15 feet wide stretching from Cape Hatteras to a point in the Pacific