GENERAL SESSION

PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE
SOUTHEASTERN ASSOCIATION OF GAME & FISH COMMISSION

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Normally when most of us are called upon to deliver a talk either circumstances or specific requests dictate the topic. In this particular situation since the President has the latitude to choose his own subject, I am going to exercise the prerogative of talking about something that particularly interests me and perhaps may be of interest to you; so for a few minutes I would like to ramble on about some of the philosophical aspects of fish and game administration and management.

The term "biopolitics" is not new. As a matter of fact, Durwood Allen has a chapter in his book, "Our Wildlife Legacy," entitled, "Biopolitics," and many of us in game and fish administration with a biological background, have been called biopoliticians at one time or another in our life – not always in a complimentary manner.

My concept of the term "biopolitics" is a positive one in that to me the term denotes the practical and political, if you will, application of biological facts to the problem of game and fish management. In this application lies the success or failure of wildlife programs. Balance is the key. Too much biology and we get so far ahead of public opinion that the program is ineffective; too much politics and we spin our wheels.

While reading lately more or less in preparation for these comments, I ran across some history of wildlife conservation that I thought might be worth repeating, since where we have been in wildlife conservation does relate to where we are going. We find in ancient times, as in the 20th century, that the first efforts of man to manage game and fish lay in restrictions against taking. For example, in the Bible (Deuteronomy 22:6) there is a passage which tells us that it is proper for us to take the eggs and young of a bird on a nest, but not to bother the bird – obviously aimed at protecting the breeding stock. The Greeks and Romans had game laws whose objective was not to conserve game but to keep people from frittering away their time hunting and fishing. This is certainly a different approach from that of today when an acknowledged objective of wildlife programs is the wholesome occupation of leisure time. The first recorded instance of game management occurred six centuries ago when Kublai Khan actually practiced game management complete with closed seasons, enforcement officers, game food plots and artificial feeding. History indicates that from that time until very recently relatively little emphasis was placed on managing game habitat.

In the United States, as would be expected, restrictions on hunting and fishing were the first evidence of man's interest in game and fish conservation. The first closed season on deer of which we have record was in Rhode Island in 1646. The first planting of exotics (Hungarian partridges) occurred in New Jersey in 1790; the first hunting license was in New York in 1864; the first state imposed bag limit was in Iowa (25 prairie chickens per day) in 1878: the first refuge was on Horicon Marsh in Wisconsin in 1891; the first state game farm was started in Illinois in 1905; the first state food planting program occurred in Pennsylvania in 1917; and the first major scale private game management program involving scientific investigation was begun in 1924 by Herbert Stoddard and his associates in the Tallahassee-Thomasville area of Florida and Georgia.

When we review the history of wildlife conservation and realize how recently anything other than guess work and barbershop opinion has been utilized in wildlife programs, it is little wonder that today we have some of the problems of communication between the average sportsman and the biologist.

In the Southeast and probably throughout the country, most real progress in biopolitics has been made in the last twenty years. In my opinion this progress has been considerable. I think of such obvious things as the elimination of quail stocking, the removal of size limits and closed seasons for warm water fish, the recognition of the relative unimportance of the gun to many small game species, with the resulting longer seasons and increased recreational opportunity, the antlerless deer seasons, the spring gobbler season, improvement of management techniques, knowledge about wildlife diseases, etc. In many respects I think that we in the Southeast are ahead of some of the states who got an earlier start – at least we don't have some of the old "panacea" programs so deeply ingrained in the public mind.

I am convinced that whatever progress has been made has been brought about principally by judicious tempering of biological facts with an awareness of the acceptability of these facts to the hunting and fishing public. I think the extent of our progress is dependent largely upon the extent to which we permit programs based on biological information to outdistance public opinion. If we go too fast, then public reaction sets in and the program is set back; if we don't go fast enough, then we rock along in an easy atmosphere of public acceptance and make no progress. Of one thing I am certain –– persistence, not brilliance, succeeds. Basically we progress through a day by day effort to make our operations fit the biological fact. If we approach a certain wildlife problem with the right answer and find that it is not yet acceptable to the public, then we should back off, let things simmer down and try again – preferably with a new approach. We can't win 'em all every time.

Perhaps it might be well by way of illustration to talk about a few of the specific areas of progress just mentioned. The closed season on warm water fish is a good beginning, since this battle is largely won; although in Florida, and I am sure in other states, the old concept of protecting the mama bluegill periodically crops up. For example, I can go into certain parts of West Florida today and hear Florida's first fishery biologist (20 years ago) quoted, in many instances sincerely, as saying "You can't catch bream off a bed." This reflects a problem known to all of us –– being quoted out of context –– and it illustrates that persistence is not necessarily confined to wildlife officials. It is sometimes mighty difficult to get some of our good sportsmen, particularly those who bear local reputations as woodsmen, to change their minds about some particular wildlife matter.

Probably the biggest biopolitic headache that most of us have encountered has been the problem of unsanctifying the doe. After years of preaching "protect the doe," a very proper thing during the building of a deer population, it isn't easy to all of a sudden say, we want to start killing mothers; and people can get pretty emotional about it all. All of us have had some experience with this problem and we have used various approaches to solving it. We suspect that a serious complication associated with the antlerless deer situation is that if we wait too long after a population reaches its maximum before acting, we can be faced with a particular human problem as well as a biological one. This is that certain of the hunters realize that the deer population is approaching its maximum, therefore, have no particular moral compunction about killing does, and may proceed to harvest them illegally. Experience indicates that such individuals sometimes constitute the most vociferous element opposing the opening of an antlerless deer season. They don't want the competition.

One of the difficult things to get across to the quail hunters is our belief that the gun is relatively unimportant as a factor in determining quail populations. In Florida we say, "Feed 'em and shoot 'em"; or to enlarge a bit – provide plenty of food and cover, harvest the birds freely, pray for good weather during the breeding season, and forget about predators, stocking, and practically everything else. This obviously is not too popular with the old timer who has been preaching: Take only so many birds out of a covey, kill all the varmits, restock annually, etc. People like to "turn birds loose." We cope with this particular aspect in Florida by not producing any pen reared birds, discouraging release of pen reared birds except on a put and take basis, and discouraging the trapping and moving of wild birds –– admitting that if an individual is sufficiently persistent we do issue permits to trap and move quail. The

requests are getting fewer each year.

So far this discussion has been more concerned with the "bio" part of the title, so perhaps we might devote a short while to the "politics" angle. To begin with, as far as I am concerned, politics is not a dirty word. It is the mechanism involving the interplay of ideas, personalities, and people whereby democracy works. I am inclined to say that when we have political troubles it is largely because we have failed to properly inform the public and the politicians who represent the public. Every person in wildlife resource management must deal with the problem of politics. Frankly, I think it is just as wrong for a biologist to ignore the realities of public and political opinion as it is for the politician to ignore the realities of biology. The happy solution is, of course, as with anything is life —— compromise.

The business of political and public relations has no simple black and white solution, but there are a few guidelines which I find useful in dealing with elected (or appointed public officials) or for that matter, with people in general. Maybe it might be worthwhile to discuss a few of these:

(1) Cooperate with all public officials, but try harder if the particular request is truly in the interest of the people the official represents rather than something of a more or less personal nature.

(2) Don't break your neck, but bend it mightily on small favors requested by an official —— after all, he is the representative of the people.

(3) On important issues where the integrity or purpose of your agency is at stake, learn to say "No" with a smile.

(4) Avoid taking actions that cannot be publicly justified.

(5) Avoid "eye wash" —— those programs that you know are worthless but may temporarily look good.

(6) Above all in your dealings with people —— level with them. If, for example, some public official effectively insists – above all of your biological objections – upon your releasing fingerlings in some river where they're not needed tell him or anyone else that asks that it won't help the situation and that such stocking is simply "public relations", This won't win many friends to begin with, but it will pay off in the long run in reduced demand for such wasteful programs and increased respect for your agency.

(7) Tell it all, brother! This is the easy way. Abraham Lincoln said that no man is smart enough to be a successful liar. Since most of us are not very smart, the simple thing is to tell it like it is and avoid getting ourselves in trouble.

If any of you think that I am saying that if you simply follow these rules life will be a bed of roses, you miss the point. I think that adherence to these general policies will make our jobs a little easier and a lot more productive.

In closing, I would like, as many of my predecessors have done, to make a comment or two about progress. When we look back upon situations that existed 15 or 20 years ago and observe most of our programs now, we must feel that things are better. We "conservationists" are no longer voices crying in the wilderness. Conservation has become a political catchword. Few of us are bothered with the personnel patronage problems that plagued us a few years ago. We are no longer performing many of the tasks such as killing foxes, releasing pen-reared quail, dumping millions of fingerling fish in the rivers and such gestures that were window dressing at best and concealment of our own inadequacies at worst. In my own state of Florida the climate for accomplishing something in the field of natural resource management has never been better. For example, we have had a major breakthrough in the preservation of submerged lands. There is presently a moratorium on the sale or development of state controlled marine bottoms pending specific recommendations by an inter-agency committee on which conservation interests are well represented.

Things are looking up.