

Getting the Word Out—Disseminating Information Utilizing the Print Media

W. F. Hailey, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, 2 Natural Resources Drive, Little Rock, AR 72205

Abstract: A basic outline is provided to aid and encourage wildlife officers with disseminating timely local area information utilizing the print media.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 42:540–545

It is recognized that in order to provide local outdoor users with current information regarding regulations, wildlife population trends, and other timely information, it is advantageous for conservation officers to provide this public service using their local area print media.

I have found that one of my many responsibilities should be to provide hunters, trappers, fishermen, boaters, and all other outdoor users with enough localized information to aid them to be able to stay within, and not be in conflict with, the regulations governing their particular outdoor recreational activities. In brief, this is an effort to educate through the local newspaper rather than in the courtroom.

One primary reason to use the newspaper and not television and/or radio is that, in my view, the electronic media is instantaneous in that once said, the information is no longer available, and also the fact that we retain only about 10% of what we are told. This is one of the reasons television and radio commercials are repeated over and over again. A secondary consideration was that most of my assignments were in rural areas, far removed from television studios or radio stations. Local newspapers, however, were always within walking distance of the courthouse.

One of the important things to keep in mind about a newspaper column is that once your comments are in print, that information is somewhat permanent. The same information broadcasted by the electronic outlets is ephemeral. When I was involved with a weekly television program several years ago, video tape was not readily available in the studio. Everything I did was live, and this had the possibility of generating a world of small problems. Raptors and furbearers that managed to free themselves in a television studio are difficult to recapture. All of this, however, does add a measure of levity and unscheduled excitement to live air time.

During past field assignments, I produced regular weekly radio and television

programs and wrote weekly newspaper articles. Television was easy, radio was something of an inconvenience, but the newspaper work was, at first, a horrible, time-consuming, and frightening experience. Then, as I learned my way—and with the aid of understanding editors, and one not-so-eager to help—I found writing a weekly article was much less traumatic, and, at times, even a real pleasure, especially when dealing with some hot news (good news) that had local application.

Writing your first newspaper article is not at all unlike a first attempt at anything else. You may experience some trepidation, and then after a period of trial and error, all of your fears, real and imagined, clear up, and you are on your way to becoming a local scribe, enhancing your professional image, and, in turn, the image of your agency.

I like to compare writing my first weekly newspaper column to my first arrest, or my first ride in an over-powered 8 m wooden jon boat, upstream, and over some fast and potentially hazardous shoals. Or better yet, my first ride in a M46 gun tank, with an instructor who had no fear. My thoughts during that first high speed tank trip were that I should have been assigned to the mud-Marines and should travel only on foot. Closed up in a 44,000 kg steel mass, bouncing along the ground at speeds of 65 and 80 km per hour, with a fearless operator, will generate a grand amount of panic. However, once in the driver's seat, with some experience, the fear is gone and you are thinking, "with a little more work on the track this beast should hit 95 km per hour on a hard flat surface."

Good working relations with the print media does require preparation, a little time, and some tact. Editors are like judges in that if you start a battle with them, you are destined to lose the entire war. Remember, you are operating on their turf, and they have the wherewithal to control the entire campaign. If you have a vindictive editor, one with an ax to grind and a lot of free time to write, you might find yourself with a serious problem.

You will find, as I did, that most all editors are eager for any and all information. If you agree to write up the information, especially if it has a local angle, they will do most anything to accommodate you. You may find that 1 editor or newspaper publisher who will cause you some grief by refusing what you have offered, or if they accept your piece, they will not give you or your agency a byline. These editors may also "edit" your work to the point that you will not be able to identify it. This may prove dangerous, especially when they edit the wording you have very carefully taken from your code of regulations. It is unrealistic to expect editors to use your copy unedited; on the other hand, you can point out to the editor the hazards involved in editing and ask to jointly go over your copy so he can work out the troublesome parts.

Editors require a lot of evangelistic time and effort to convince them that what you will offer, at no cost to them, will provide a much desired service to the readers. If this fails, walk down the street to the radio station, offer your services, and read the same material to the listening public. It won't be in print, but you will be getting the word out which should be your primary media goal.

It has been my experience that if you have 2 or more newspapers in your area,

and they all accept your assistance, treat them all on an equal basis. If you prepare a local news release, give the exact same copy to each paper at the same time. It is fine to have a particular editor or reporter to take an interest in your efforts, interview you, and write and add his own material. If you have 2 or more competitive papers and you show favoritism to 1, the others will take a dim view about your practices. Be fair and professional about your writing activities. The care and feeding of local newspaper editors is extremely important for myriad reasons.

One of the many things I miss about not being in the field is the weekly visit with the local newspaper editor, usually in the favorite community watering hole. These editors or publishers have a good feeling about what the public is thinking and are a real good source of information. Most of the editors I have dealt with turned out to be good friends and co-workers, and this was a big help with my efforts to get the word out. They would often offer suggestions about what should be the subject of future attempts at writing. Some may ask you to co-author front page or feature stuff and when this happens, you have arrived! Some will want to interview you and write the copy themselves. This is fine, it will save you time and probably be as good as if you did the writing.

There is a clear distinction between column material and "hard news." Hard news is reportable fact—time sensitive—and it's usually sufficient to tell the editor about things like the completion of a major court case or a new county turkey harvest record. The editor will then carry the ball by checking the court record or interviewing the officer or a source the officer suggests, then write the story. Yes, when editors do the writing you run the risk of mistakes, but if you communicate carefully, you can minimize this risk. When the editor does the writing, don't ask to edit his copy prior to publication, but also don't hesitate to ask for corrections or clarifications if there is a problem with the original story.

I have given information to editors in several different forms. With one very small weekly paper I sat with the publisher and dictated from notes while he ran the linotype machine actually casting the words in slugs and squiring hot lead all over the place. For a larger daily I dictated to a secretary but for most I delivered typed copy.

Typed copy should be double spaced, leaving wide margins around the page to accommodate any editorial notes. Make sure to proofread your copy, then proofread again, and once more. It is most important to spell persons' names correctly. Stay within your allotted space; if your article is too short or too lengthy this will cause problems in setting up the page. If the paper gives you 15 column inches (38cm), stay within that boundary. Most editors will place your column in the same place each week.

It is easy to get along with your editor, just remember when you hand him your copy be sure to follow these suggested guidelines: provide timely information; use 8½ × 11 white or yellow paper; use only one side; number each sheet; copy should be typewritten; double space; have wide margins (at least 5cm); give the original to the editor, not a copy; do not fold, bend, or roll the copy; deliver in advance of deadlines; do not abbreviate; do not use slang or agency buzz-words; proofread and

double check spelling; proofread again; have a co-worker proofread and check spelling; separate paragraphs; do not exceed your allotted space; and give "hard news" separately to the editor/publisher.

If at first you have trouble writing, take your agency's weekly news release to your editor with notes regarding local application. You may want to use other printed information that is produced by your own department or division. Generally, most editors want local information, not something that applies to another end of the state. Unless, of course, there is a distant site where a good number of your local area hunters and fishermen go for special activities.

Don't overlook writing for the non-consumptive outdoor user such as the camper, backpacker, birder, floater, rockhound, and others. As we all know, many of these people use wildlife management areas, stream accesses, and camping areas maintained by license dollars. This kind of writing is an excellent public relations tool we usually overlook. You can provide a real service to these people when you inform them about available facilities, fees, and resident wildlife species.

It is important to have your copy ready to go at least 1 week in advance. This way if you are called away from the office your effort to get the word out will continue without interruption. If your deadline is during a deer or turkey season and you know you will be busy, prepare that particular article in advance. Remember to give your editor current deer and turkey harvest information for his own use.

In the event you use the writings of others, remember to give them proper credit. We are all very fortunate to have excellent writers on our staff—visit with them, they may have do's and don'ts about outdoor writing. You probably will find them eager to help. They may even print some of your work.

Avoid the use of agency buzz-words. For example "I sent *traffic* to our office and they said . . .". Most readers have no idea of what "traffic" is all about. To them they may think you sent something you found on a busy highway. Write it something like this: "I *asked* our office and they said . . ."

I am by no means an outdoor writer, and English grammar has always been difficult for me, but even with this handicap, with a typewriter, a little time, and desire, I have managed to get the word out, and it has been worth the extra effort. In Arkansas, our administration wants us to write more and our job description says that we will. During the past year, Arkansas wildlife officers wrote or otherwise submitted 509 newspaper articles, which was about 4 per officer. This was an increase over the previous year and I am sure that next year totals will increase substantially.

You have an endless source of information. For example, the information you received at this conference. The outdoor user is interested in this annual activity. Give this to your editor, with local application, and you will be helping to get the word out.

During a recent visit with Enforcement Chief Bob Harmon of the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency in Nashville, I discovered that 60% of the 156 Tennessee wildlife officers were actively involved working with the print media. Some of these officers write articles and some take that Agency's weekly news release to their

local papers with their own notes about local conditions. Chief Harmon told me that an editor friend said there were 3 "musts" to print in order to have a successful paper: (1) obituaries; (2) local historical items and photos; and (3) outdoors information and stories.

Searching for subject matter is no real problem. While you are rattling around over your assigned area, make notes, mental or otherwise, of the questions received from the people you visit. The staff writer for my agency who is responsible for the weekly statewide news release recently told me that it was nearly impossible to over-emphasize this. He also said that field officers pass up more good stories in a week than he finds out about in a year. Usually, it's not difficult to determine what the public wants most in the way of current information or on which topics there is the most confusion. Next week put the questions and answers in print, and, once again you will be getting the word out, and it will likely be what the public wants. Most questions are seasonal, and if it is not timely to give the answers, save your notes for next year, to use just before the particular activity that generated the questions in the first place.

Write your article, then at the last of each one, use a sub-title like "Know Your Wildlife Code" and print, verbatim, a section from the code that applies to current seasons, methods, and limits, or whatever you find appropriate for that particular time. I have found that this is a very popular service with outdoor users.

One of my favorite things to write about is the extreme importance of habitat, development, improvement, and protection. Keep in mind that wildlife habitat is the single most essential element of wildlife management. Without it, there would be no birds, fish, or mammals, and no real need for our services as guardians. If we think enforcement is the most important element in wildlife management, we are living in a dream. Enforcement is an important element; however, it is not the most important element in modern-day wildlife management in North America. In my view the three most important elements in wildlife management are: (1) habitat; (2) habitat; and (3) habitat.

See how easy it is to editorialize! Keep in mind that editorializing is fine, but through your writing, be careful not to set agency policy, this must be left to your administrators.

Generally, the arrival of each season generates a new surge of interest in the outdoor recreational activities relative to that particular epoch. Along with this renewed interest is a desire for information about regulations that apply to specific activities. Most important to the outdoor user are seasons, methods, limits, and any regulation changes from previous seasons. Next in importance is information about local game population trends.

Probably, 1 of the greatest disservices a conservation officer may unknowingly perpetrate against his employer and the public is that of keeping news to himself. The officer that bemoans public ignorance, expecting his information and education staff through their efforts to inform the public while he does nothing to get the word out has no cause to lament.

An Information and Education (I & E) staff member doing the very best job of

informing outdoor users has far less impact than the local officer. The field officer must never lose sight of the importance of providing his administrators with any and all news he finds on the "back forty" of his assigned area. I & E staff may have an understanding of the big picture, but without a knowledge of the happenings on the "back forty" the big picture is not at all complete. The exchange of information is a "must" and a 2-way street. You all know how important this is to wildlife law enforcement and the lengths we go to in order to gain information.

I hope I have stirred your interest and given you some new ideas and thoughts about the interesting and beneficial task of working with the print media. This work requires some effort but the end result is a better informed public. For the individual officer it is an additional step toward professionalism.

My message, in brief, is that the print media and printed information is a great ally, and we should use this vehicle to help us tell our story, and, most importantly, help get the word out.