

THE CHANGING FACE OF I & E PART I

By
Martha Harrod

Twenty years or so ago, I & E sections of most state fish and wildlife agencies did little more than issue an occasional news release and publish a hunting and fishing magazine.

The news releases, for the most part, were announcements of hunting seasons or changes in fishing regulations and although sports editors, in Kentucky, gave them good play, they were seldom considered real “news.”

The magazines were generally black and white publications with a newspaper-type format. The stories they carried were primarily how, when or where to hunt or fish and the illustrations were usually photographs of people holding big (or not so big!) fish or of groups of people who had done or were about to do something that had to do with hunting or fishing. Sportsmen club news covered many a page in the early publications and we made it a point to use lots of names and pictures of club members. The tone of the magazine was something like this: “Hunting and fishing are great in our state and if you don’t believe it, just read this!”

At that time, in the early fifties, public relations efforts were aimed exclusively at the hunting and fishing public and we were relatively secure in our belief that we knew our audience.

Most of them, we felt, were not only hunters and fishermen but members of sportsmen, or conservation, clubs as well and we were pretty sure we knew what they wanted and needed to know about the out-of-doors in our state. If there was interest among other groups in what our game and fish department did, we saw little evidence of it. Whatever praise, or criticism, our agency received came from sportsmen who were pleased or disgruntled, as the case might be, about hunting and fishing regulations, particularly in regard to season lengths and limits. We believed then, and I think we were right, that our audience’s interest was in the “take” and while we never consciously lied and said, for instance, that fishing was good when we knew it was poor, we were guilty of the sin of omission, I think, by neglecting to talk and write about problems we should have faced openly.

For about this same time other fish and wildlife agency personnel were beginning to warn us that perhaps the picture we painted was a bit too rosy; that wildlife habitat was diminishing; that some waters were being fouled to the point that fishing was affected. And even in our Kentucky Happy Hunting Ground magazine, one courageous soul went so far as to say in 1950 that “the top basic factor that affects all wildlife populations is the constantly increasing population of North America.” However, we seldom went this far out and restricted our “think” pieces, for the most part, to such topics as farmer-sportsmen relationships, game and fish law violations, gun safety and the increasing numbers of wildlife killed on our highways.

During this time, though, hunters began to notice a decline in game and in hunting opportunities and we turned to our wildlife biologists to help us explain some of the living requirements for wildlife. We tried then to include farmers and landowners in our audience, if not directly, at least through hunters and fishermen by urging them to improve their relations with landowners and encourage them to manage land in a way that would benefit wildlife. Perhaps we knew our hunting and fishing audience a little less well than we thought or perhaps our efforts simply weren’t enough. In any event, all to many sportsmen responded with a demand to stock more game.

We seemed to fare better with the fishermen — for a time, at least. The 50’s

had brought the dawning of the day of the “big” lakes in Kentucky and we had but to extol the virtues of the great new waters and suggest a few tips for fishing them to hold our fisherman audience, we thought. But there nagging, though infrequent, rumblings from a few stream fishermen. What had happened to this or that creek, they wanted to know. The fishing used to be great there. Often we knew that sewage or acid mine waters had “happened” to the stream in question but we weren’t quite ready to admit it.

Equally irritating, though even less frequent, questions came from an eccentric few who doubted the wisdom of damming up a favorite stream to impound a large lake.

With few exceptions, we ignored complaints like these and stuck with the premise that our state offered great hunting and even greater fishing and that with all the new dams, we had little to complain about.

But some of us worried privately and since we were now dabbling in radio and television and felt we were reaching people other than hunters and fishermen and since there was some indication of concern even among that group, our subject matter expanded somewhat.

In the mid-50’s we began to write and talk about such things as efforts to save the wetlands, erosion and water pollution. We tried to explain the “whys” of game and fish regulations and a 1955 Happy Hunting Ground story answered what was possibly one of the first anti-hunting messages by saying that those who “like pork chops may forget that hogs are killed to supply them and cry out against cruel systematic killing of wild geese.”

By 1960 it was obvious that progress was taking its toll of fish, wildlife and the environment. Public hunting lands were fewer, wildlife less abundant and pollution more apparent. Many fish and wildlife agencies started land acquisition programs, efforts to preserve and improve wildlife habitat were accelerated and water pollution problems were studied more intensely. We began to write and talk more about the fringe benefits of hunting and fishing and less about the harvest.

The mid and late 60’s brought the era of environmental enlightenment — an era which continues today. The affects of this almost overwhelming concern will be measured and debated for many years to come but I think most of us will agree now, that nothing in our memory has had greater influence on the thinking, the operations and the importance of an I & E section of a fish and wildlife agency.

By the time this came about most of us had fortunately enlarged our staffs — and our budgets, to some degree — to the point that we were using the news media more effectively than ever before.

Our magazines were “slicker”, we wrote more news releases, fishing reports, and feature stories and hopefully our techniques were improved; we published more and better pamphlets and most of us were into radio and television to the extent that we were at least comfortable with them and many of us, in Kentucky for instance, were doing regular weekly radio and television shows.

One of our hangups earlier on, that of subject material, was proving to be something less of a problem than we thought. Those of us who had grinded out those same old hunting and fishing stories for years have welcomed the change of pace. And surprisingly enough, few of our hunter-fisherman audience apparently resent the addition of a few “think” pieces about pesticides or predators or non-game species or even bird-watching.

And such subjects as stream channelization, strip mining and so forth have given new life to our crusading instincts and even though we still walk softly, the stick we carry is a little bit bigger now.

Concern for and interest in the environment have indeed changed the face of I & E.

We have many new problems — the antihunting movement, for example, will

demand much of us. And even though we feel that few of our known audience — the hunters and fishermen — resent the addition of new subject material in our efforts, there are many, we know, who cling to the old ways and would still rather see their own picture or name in our magazine, for instance, than read any story, even a hunting or fishing one.

And so we have many new problems but we also have many new opportunities.

Whether we solve the problems and capitalize on the opportunities depends largely, we think, on how well we know and are able to serve our audience.

THE CHANGING FACE OF I & E PART II

Mike Smith

Over the past few years, the phrase “endangered species” has gained tremendous usage in the national media. It is a popular phrase with a multitude of interest groups: certain preservationists use it in attributing wildlife decreases to hunters; and at least one national gun sport organization claims that hunters are the endangered species; and some universal thinkers stoutly maintain that Man himself is now number one on the endangered list.

If I may borrow on the drama of current jargon, I would like to submit that in Information and Education work, we face yet another “endangered species”: the disappearing audience.

In the division of public relations in Kentucky’s Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources we sense that there have been some significant decreases in at least a few of our outdoor-related audiences; correspondingly we have indications that other audiences have grown—and some at a swift rate. How do these perceived changes effect our information work? And more importantly, how they affect our future communication patterns?

Frankly, we do not yet know. As I mentioned a moment ago, we are taking about *perceived* changes. At the present time we have no quantifiable measures of change to indicate what directions our information flow should take.

Our division is called “public relations,” but we are essentially a news service. We are charged with moving almost all news and features that originate in or pertain to the Department of Fish and Wildlife. But in our task of news dissemination, the growing question becomes: to whom are we addressing this information? What are we saying to them? What should we try to tell them? How many various outdoor interest groups do we now serve? How many *should* we try to serve?

At present, we “know” less than 10% of our potential audience: and we are not too certain about how well we know that 10%. Our Department sells more than a half-million fishing licenses per year, and nearly a quarter-million hunting licenses. Yet the League of Kentucky Sportsmen (the organization of 300 sportsmen clubs from across Kentucky which has worked so closely with the Department in the past) numbers its total membership at less than 35,000 this year; and its membership has been on the gradual decline over the past few years. So the questions arise: How do we reach the individual license holder who is not affiliated with a sportsmen’s club? Indeed, what are some of the reasons for his not belonging to such an organization? What are his outdoor interests in addition to hunting or fishing?

The questions seem endless; and some of the replies from within our own ranks often tend to complicate the issues further. One of our field biologists, while checking license receipts from a given area last year, noted a very significant increase in the number of hunting licensees under 25 years of age.