

# Private Organization Perspectives about Conservation Leadership

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*Abstract:* The National Wild Turkey Federation was founded 25 years ago and has now grown to 150,000 members. Our mission is to conserve the wild turkey and preserve the turkey hunting tradition. The NWTF leadership is comprised of chapter volunteers and technical committee representatives from each state wildlife agency working together and coordinated by NWTF staff. The NWTF has developed a close working relationship with government wildlife agencies thanks, in part, to our successful Super Fund program which raises money through our banquets and funnels these dollars to conservation projects. This past fiscal year, \$5.25 million were generated through the Super Fund program and National Projects and spent on conservation projects throughout the country. The NWTF has also spent over \$71 million in cooperator dollars since 1985 on conservation projects. Agency leadership is critical in charting our course as an organization. They must maintain our volunteers' trust to garner support for their agency programs and they must also learn to effectively sell their programs to the public. Wildlife agencies must provide vision and work proactively to resolve conservation problems. As wildlife professionals, we must broaden our view of constituents to include non-hunters. "Teaming with Wildlife" is one program which will attract a wider diversity of constituents and empower them with ownership of the wildlife resource. As conservation leaders, we have done a good job of leading; however, we have taken too much for granted. We must now sell our successes to the public, continue even stronger leadership in the future and broaden our constituent base, or we may lose what we worked so hard to achieve.

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Today I want to share with you what I have witnessed as a wildlife professional working with a non-profit organization. Our organization has built a cohesive bond between the volunteers who raise the money and resource professionals that help ensure the money is effectively put to work for the wild turkey.

The National Wild Turkey Federation (NWTF) was founded 25 years ago to raise research money for wild turkeys and to address habitat loss and negative management practices that confronted wild turkey populations. Helping resolve these conservation issues in a practical way and protecting the turkey hunting tradition is

the mission of the NWTF. We are proud to have hunting in our mission statement since hunters have paid for conservation through hunting license sales and Pittman-Robertson funds, for example.

When I started working with the NWTF 18 years ago, we had a hands-off relationship with government wildlife agencies. The agencies were reluctant to deal with private organizations, like the NWTF, because they feared these organizations would try to tell them how to run their agencies. This perception has changed because the NWTF proved they were sincere in building a strong working relationship that would enhance state and federal agency programs.

The NWTF is different from other non-profit organizations; I'm not saying we are better, just different. First, we have an active, working volunteer board of directors; leadership starts at the top. Second, we have a technical committee made up of 67 state wild turkey biologists. One or more biologists are represented from each state agency. We have worked with the technical committee throughout our history. They have helped chart our destiny. Our close relationship working on a day-to-day basis with wildlife agencies has allowed us to stay in the mainstream of problems and their solutions. Third, a volunteer structure of chapters and banquets working through our Technical Committee has developed what we call our Super Fund program. This program is funded primarily through our banquet programs and provides money for wild turkey management and educational activities. The Super Fund is administered and approved by the NWTF volunteers, technical committee members, and staff at our Edgefield, South Carolina, headquarters before the money is spent.

This past fiscal year, \$3.5 million in projects, generated through the Super Fund program, were approved and implemented by state and federal wildlife agencies which helped volunteers spend the money on priority projects. In addition, \$1.75 million was funded this past fiscal year through National Projects. National Projects money is also raised through our Super Fund banquet program. Since 1985, over \$71 million in cooperator dollars was spent on management activities. This relationship between the NWTF volunteers and the wildlife agencies is critical to the successful implementation of conservation projects.

The 150,000 NWTF volunteers are the key to our success. There is no question this catalyst drives the system. Don't ever forget that the volunteers do not get paid for what they do. They serve out of passion and respect for the resource. As one state wildlife agency chief told me, "We want to work very closely with the NWTF because you represent our turkey hunting constituency that will support our efforts."

The NWTF volunteers enjoy being out-of-doors, both the hunters and our many nonconsumptive members. They enjoy experiencing the out-of-doors at different times of the year and they value seeing a sunrise, hearing song birds, and viewing wild flowers. They are not turkey hunting for the kill but rather they seek a relationship. I feel that our volunteers have more passion and concern for the future of hunting than someone who takes the hunting privilege for granted. Hunting is a spiritual retreat that renews their spirit; I know it does for me.

Keeping in touch with, and being responsive to, the volunteer's needs is critical to the long-term survival of the NWTF. Our volunteers demand results and leadership.

They want to get involved, to touch and feel and know that they did something well and the process must be kept simple to facilitate their involvement. Their involvement provides them with ownership. Many of these volunteers go to the fund-raising banquets with the feeling that they are going to have fun and do something that is good for the resource. Many of our core people that lead at the chapter level, and we have 1,050 chapters across the U.S., want to show others what they represent; not necessarily just on-the-ground habitat projects, but also involvement with youth or women's programs.

The restoration of the wild turkey is one of this century's conservation marvels. Wild turkeys now thrive in 49 states with spring turkey seasons occurring in every state except Alaska. Our volunteers respect the comeback of wildlife in North America. Some of our volunteers have been with us for 25 years so they appreciate this comeback. Many remember when there weren't any wild turkeys. In fact, opportunities to hunt turkey, deer, or anything else were limited. Although the volunteers know that Teddy Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and Gifford Pinchot had a role in the comeback of wildlife, they still have a very strong tie to today's state and federal wildlife agencies because of programs such as the NWTF's Super Fund program.

If you don't remember anything else, remember that the NWTF has successfully sold conservation. I know most of you, myself included, have a rather dim view of salesmen, but we are salesmen. In this profession, however, we have done a poor job selling our accomplishments and programs. We have assumed that if we present the facts, people will know what Wallop-Breaux, for example, has meant to fishing in this country. However, the public doesn't know it. We must sell these accomplishments.

Providing people with the correct information is important if we are going to effectively sell our conservation programs. People are often given the wrong information or they don't always understand all the facts. It's like one of our board members, Gene Denton of Arkansas, repeating a Will Rogers quote, said, "It's not what people know, it's what people know that ain't so." And I think there is a lot of wisdom in that. Many people, that have good intentions, in particular as it relates to the wildlife issues we face today, have misguided or incorrect information. The key is to provide them with the correct information.

From where I stand, the government wildlife agencies are the ones providing the leadership about where we need to go. Without the state agency, for example, telling us through our technical committee how we can support them, we won't be successful. Our support of government wildlife agencies is a key role that will continue to grow.

Leadership is vision—understanding the future before it gets there—identifying the issues before they occur and then being proactive instead of reactive to their solutions. I think people follow leaders because they believe in their values and they respect the professionalism the leader sets by example. A leader must provide direction and anticipate where we will be in 5 or 10 years and then build conservation programs one brick at a time. People don't usually buy into an issue, or concept, at once. Long term vision is a critical skill for an effective leader.

As professionals we have viewed wildlife conservation as ours. We funded conservation programs through Pittman-Robertson for 60 years and we restored the

wildlife resources. Because we, hunters, funded this restoration, we feel the wildlife resources are ours. However, we have painted ourselves into a corner because of this attitude. We now have a whole constituency of people out there that will not have ownership because they have not funded conservation programs. As Durward Allen said in his book, *Our Wildlife Legacy*, "You call it yours and I'll call it mine." We can't do that. It is OURS. That's why "Teaming with Wildlife" is today such a controversial issue. However, with "Teaming with Wildlife" in place, a broader cross section of the public will have a stake in the conservation of our wildlife resources. We must break away from feeling wildlife resources are "mine" and remember that it is "OURS."

Finally, keep in mind that we have a whole group of kids and young adults that take our wildlife resources for granted. When I was a kid one was extremely lucky to go deer and turkey hunting. This new generation wonders, "why do we need to do anything when everything is going so good?" When, in fact, this is not true. We, I&E staff, biologists, and all wildlife professionals must sell the need for continued conservation.

We have done a great job of leading. I don't want to leave you with the impression that we have done anything wrong, but we have taken too much for granted. We must see that leadership carries conservation into the future. Organizations like the NWTF have facilitated and enhanced conservation leadership by providing financial and public support for agency programs. However, I am concerned, because of the many changes I have seen in the last 5 years (e.g., initiatives on the ballot, loss of habitat, lack of leadership in state agencies because of changes in personnel, loss of revenue) that if we don't take charge and show strong leadership, enthusiasm, and direction for the future, that all of these things that we have today may be lost. And we can't afford that for our kids and generations to come. After all, many individuals in the early part of this century worked hard for the successes we have today and many never had the opportunity to even hear the gobble of the wild turkey.