

General Session

President's Address

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It is a privilege and honor to be your President and to have this opportunity to address you at the opening session of the 39th Conference of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies here in Lexington, Kentucky.

First, I want to thank Commissioner Don McCormick and his fine staff for the tremendous effort they have put into this conference. Those who have hosted this Association in the past know and appreciate the total dedication it takes to make this conference a success. So, again, I salute *Don McCormick* and his staff for a job well done.

I am excited to be a part of this outstanding Association and excited and optimistic about the future of wildlife conservation. We are members of the finest regional association with the greatest national influence, second only perhaps to the International in setting national policy. We are an association that is strong and vigorous, willing and able, dynamic and capable, and full of life. We do not shirk our duty nor run from adversity. We meet challenge and change head on.

This conference will see some significant changes and implementation of new ideas. The Directors' Business Meeting has been shortened from two days to one afternoon, a single half day. This change will allow the Directors time to attend the different sessions and participate fully in the conference. There is also a new President's 2000 Committee restricted to Directors and invited guests. This Committee will provide time for all the Directors to talk about key issues in much the same way as you have your executive meetings.

Vernon Beville dissolved all the Ad Hoc Committees and implemented a review process through the Executive Committee to ensure that all new Committees would answer specific needs. The only Ad Hoc Committee not formally ended was the Black Bear Habitat Committee and its charge will be reviewed at the Directors Meeting on Tuesday.

As I opened, I thanked Don McCormick and his fine staff. I also want to thank the numerous Association Committee chairmen, the Association Editors, Section Presidents, and their related Chairmen and Officers who do the lion's share of the work in making this Association successful.

I see my role this morning as being like that of a football coach at the start of half time. We need to know if we are winning or not, what our strengths and weaknesses are, and what holes we can plug in our defense.

I am happy and proud to report we are winning some major issues that will have significant positive impacts on this nation's wildlife resources. The D-J Expansion will revolutionize fisheries management at the field level.

Changes in the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's policies and attitudes toward inland fisheries and a national fisheries act will provide the flexibility and support needed to make the D-J Expansion workable.

The new farm legislation with its conservation reserve, sod buster, and swamp buster provisions is a cornerstone of the future. We have filled the Southeast States with deer, turkey, striped bass, hybrids, and with more opportunities to hunt and fish than anyone ever dreamed possible. We have successfully protected alligators and sea turtles, and restoration efforts are underway for many other endangered species like the peregrine falcon.

But, we are not winning all the battles. Bottomland hardwoods are being removed at a disastrous rate. Urban sprawl is ever increasing like a cancer. Clean water and clean air are uphill battles and ones that will not end in the near future.

There are many other areas where the future will be challenging and the stakes significant. Management of the nation's national forests for optimum wildlife production; preservation and enhancement of our right to hunt, fish and trap on our national parks; preserving the legal right to protect endangered species from illegal harvest as in the case of the Florida panther; restoration of striped bass on the East Coast; protection of our estuaries; and, lastly, preventing ill planned water development projects, such as the Garrison Project, are examples of some of the challenges we must face.

If there is a hole in our offense or defense, it is that we let the opposition wear us down. We lose perspective of who and what we work for. We let our personal desires overshadow our professional ethics and become negative and self serving.

To meet and overcome the challenges the future will bring, we must be united, work together as a team, and each of our players must have a positive aggressive attitude.

This may be the hardest challenge we face as an Association and as individuals. But, unlike a football game, we always seem to be under a "catch 22" condition where the rules are changed. Also, unlike a football game, our efforts are not limited to four quarters. We must be on our guard at all times.

At times, it does all of us good to reevaluate our jobs and responsibilities, who we work for and to bring our employment into perspective with the real world. This is critical if we are to be professionals and effective.

This morning I want to try to bring our careers into perspective, encourage professionalism, and promote cooperation.

First, I believe it is important to understand that each of us must work to support our families. We have been lucky enough to be employed in the Wildlife field. There is no other place I would rather work.

We meet these challenges by reassessing our efforts and dedication and by not becoming lax or indifferent. This may be the hardest challenge we face as an Association and as individuals.

Next, I think it is important to understand who is paying and has paid the bills, including our salaries, for all these years—the sportsmen, the men, women and children who buy our licenses. We owe these individuals all the support and dedication we can muster. They have not only paid our salaries all these years, but also underwrote all the costs of our wildlife management successes.

It is important to remember why the public buys licenses. They want not only the opportunity to hunt, fish, and trap, they want these opportunities preserved for future generations.

We also work for another group who are not consumptive users and who do not buy licenses, but who do contribute to nongame funds, enjoy bird watching, hiking, camping, etc., in our great outdoors.

Lastly, we do not “work for” the landowners, per se, but the lands they control are the real backbone of many states’ wildlife resources. So, if we want to meet future demands for places to hunt, fish, and trap, we must work with landowners and answer their needs. We must support hunter ethics.

It is also important to reflect on the diversity and complexity of the responsibilities that we share within the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies if we are to properly assess our personal roles.

1. The Southeastern is whitetail deer and turkey restoration and management.
2. The Southeastern is hunters, fishermen, trappers, naturalists, and non-consumptive users.
3. The Southeastern is a small child’s first walk down a sandy beach to find a sea shell or sand dollar.
4. The Southeastern is bird hunters and bird watchers.
5. The Southeastern is Project Wild and school children.
6. The Southeastern is mixed hardwood forests, pine trees, cactus, and grasses.
7. The Southeastern is hunter safety, law enforcement, and water boating safety.
8. The Southeastern is bats, darters, and other endangered species.
9. The Southeastern is bald cypress and mesquite.
10. The Southeastern is salt water, fresh water, rivers, streams, ponds, reservoirs, estuaries, oceans and swamps.
11. The Southeastern in pollution control, erosion control, wildlife mitigation and planning.
12. The Southeastern is cooperative projects, statistics, disease study, and education.
13. The Southeastern is environmental advocates.

14. The Southeastern is legislative leaders and supporters of critical legislation.

These are a few of the things that you and I are involved with and responsible for. If it walks, crawls, swims, or flies, we have a responsibility for its management.

The attitude of the individual wildlife employee is very important. The greatest strength of this Association lies with employees who work for the member agencies and associates. There are 6,100+ employees working for the 16 member state Fish and Wildlife Agencies alone. When this group is positive, motivated, and professional, there is little it cannot do.

Americans as a group tend to dwell on the negative. Our newspapers cover the bad news much more than they print the good. We read about the earthquake in Mexico and the hijack of the Achille Lauro. And, as individuals, we worry about what the other guy has, and whether we are being treated equally. We are concerned whether we are paid enough. All this can result in negative attitudes.

If we are to meet the challenges of the future, we must maintain a positive attitude, look for the positive, and be professional.

Professionalism is more than calling ourselves professionals. It is a dedication to a way of life and action.

We wonder why we are not always treated as professionals or given the respect shown attorneys and doctors. Could it be we do not always act as professionals? Could it be that we do not take part in our church and communities? Could it be we are not always dressed as professionals?

To be a professional, we must also demonstrate thorough knowledge of our expertise. We must continue, through conferences and training, to remain current on new techniques.

To be a professional biologist, a degree is only a start. To be effective, we must be able to convey management ideas to the public, work effectively with legislators, and mold public opinion if we are to implement new programs.

To be truly professional, we must realize that being right will not in itself win the contest. Many a state's either-sex deer programs have failed or encountered significant problems because we failed to explain or sell the program.

The last thought I want to promote this morning is cooperation. Cooperation between enforcement and management, between states, between states and Federal Government, and with societies and citizen groups.

Nontoxic shot is an issue that we need to be working on cooperatively if we are to answer the problem of lead poisoning. The National Wildlife Federation has sued the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to implement steel shot zones for protection of eagles. Implementation has been at the expense of state programs and the opposition of the states.

What kind of picture does this portray to the public, and what kind of groundwork does it lay for the future when one group forces another to implement a program?

We, as state agencies, cannot agree on put and take fish stocking as a valid D-J cost.

The Fish and Wildlife Service set the 1985–86 waterfowl seasons without the agreement of many individual states and flyways.

These are examples of where we have failed to properly work together and cooperate for the best interest of the resource and the users.

This morning I have tried to point out that conservation is making forward strides, but there are many more challenges to come. That to meet these challenges we must have a positive attitude, keep in mind who and what we work for, have an appreciation of the diversity of resources found in the Southeast, and encourage professionalism and cooperation.

Today, in many ways, my message may have sounded like a sermon. And I admit it has been directed to the employees of member agencies, for I believe that the strength of the future is in their hands. There is not an outside group, nor is society itself going to take care of the problems we see or answer the needs of the resources we love. We must do it ourselves. I ask each of you, when you leave here, to take a positive leadership role in wildlife conservation and join with your co-workers and the public in meeting the challenges of the future.

Lastly, I compliment those in attendance here today, for you are the ones who care and want to improve your ability.

Have a good conference and make it work for you.

Thank you.