

# Wildlife Agencies Perspectives of Conservation Leadership

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*Abstract:* The development of the conservation movement in the United States and particularly the role of the state fish and wildlife agencies is one of the greatest conservation statements in world history. During the 20th century, our leaders have shown great foresight and vision in stewarding our country's fish and wildlife resources. It would be easy to say we are solid, we have the track record to prove our mettle—to accept the “do nothing alternative”—the business-as-usual approach. It is, ironically, our stellar record that today may be our biggest liability. We've done so well that we are sometimes tempted to stand pat. We must work together to see that new expectations of leadership evolve and that these new expectations become the new yardstick by which we are evaluated. Standards that will encourage the dynamic and responsive leadership that will be required in the future.

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 51:528–531

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It would be unwise, I think, to begin any discussion of fish and wildlife agency leadership and responsibilities in the United States without a brief look back to establish a frame of reference.

The development and implementation of the conservation movement in the United States and particularly the role of the state fish and wildlife agencies is one of the greatest conservation statements in world history. I travel the world representing the states and I am convinced that there's nothing else like it anywhere.

When you look back to when the states first decided in 1902 to associate themselves into what would become the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and the progress made since then, a truly remarkable tale unfolds.

Incidentally, it began with a curious contradiction. The states met and formed an association to protect the states' rights to manage fish and wildlife, and yet, the first legislative item on our agenda was to begin a process that would protect migratory game birds and waterfowl—an initiative that led to the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and a preemption of state authority.

The fingerprints of state fish and wildlife directors are all over every significant piece of conservation legislation enacted in this century. During the 20th century, our

leaders have shown great foresight and vision in stewarding our country's fish and wildlife resources.

We are here today, though, not to reflect on where we have been but rather to discuss what got us here and to debate whether we have what it takes to meet the new challenges ahead. It would be easy, I think, to say we are solid, we have the track record to prove our mettle—to accept the “do nothing alternative”—the business-as-usual approach. It is, ironically, our stellar record that today may be our biggest liability. We've done so well that we are sometimes tempted to stand pat.

Before we jump to that conclusion, let's look for a minute at the strengths that produced this great track record and think how many of those strengths we can rely on today.

Here's the formula that I think gave us the strength to make the great strides of the 20th century. The formula that made us powerful and effective had four elements:

1. Politically powerful state directors typically working for governors or politically potent commissioners,
2. Unity of purpose,
3. A solid financial base, and
4. When compared to the general population, a relatively small, and well defined and supportive constituency.

We truly were different!

Today, more and more fish and wildlife agencies are buried in large consolidated departments, sources of funds that were more than adequate just a few decades ago are now woefully inadequate, we have many conflicting purposes, and new and strident voices are being heard. We are now, most appropriately, in the process of reaching out to a broad-based constituency which essentially includes everyone—establishing partnerships that will bring strangers to our table. This is a very exciting and challenging period.

I'd like to suggest that things have changed sufficiently to make it clear that if we are to continue this incredible marriage of vision and action that our predecessors have reestablished, we must reassess what we do and how we do it.

We must look forward carefully and plan our course.

I come from a Navy town and in Annapolis they still talk of Rear Admiral Clark Woodward, who noted just 2 years before Pearl Harbor that, “as far as sinking a ship with a bomb is concerned, it just can't be done.”

You have all heard the story of Fulton trying to sell the steamboat to Napoleon. Napoleon told Fulton in 1800, “What sir, would you make a ship sail against the winds and currents by lighting a bonfire under her deck. I pray you excuse me. I have no time to listen to such nonsense!”

Maybe this is why Churchill said “It is always wise to look ahead, but it's difficult to look farther than you can see. Only one link in the chain of destiny can be handled at a time.”

In 1990 when this Southeastern Association convened for its annual meeting, I had the honor of serving as your president. In my address to the plenary session that

typically begins these proceedings, I chose effective communications for the focus of my remarks that morning in Richmond. I spoke of our general ineffectiveness in dealing with the wider general public which was increasingly becoming part of our constituency and the tendency we all had to stay in our comfort zone—the unlimiteds, the federations, the forevers, the societies etc.

I also spoke about the arrogance of science.

Among my observations that morning were that while we sometimes did an adequate job communicating among ourselves, we had a horrible track record of reaching outside of our immediate circle of friends. I also noted that we had to work at listening to a far wider segment of the public, that we had to use what we learned from public attitudinal surveys, etc., to our advantage.

I'm not going to give that speech again today—but sadly it's still appropriate—nor am I going to give a communication speech. Everyone in this room knows far better than I, how far we have to go here. This need to reach out was not revolutionary thought in 1930, it certainly wasn't when I said it in 1990, and of course it is even older hat today.

But it's here that we must consider leadership. The big challenge for agency leadership right now is reaching beyond our traditional circle of friends to the broader constituency concerned about wildlife. Looking at our effectiveness in this regard and getting better at it is the challenge of the here and now!

I don't have the answers, but since this is meant to generate discussion, I'll throw out a few random thoughts and observations:

1. We must move to build new partnerships but we must never forget that these new ones are additional and not replacements. This is not our mid-life crisis . . . not our red sports car! We can't afford to lose anyone and we have no intention of abandoning our partners of 60 years.

2. We must learn to effectively apply lessons already learned.

- a) In Massachusetts a ballot initiative in 1996 was almost exactly a repeat of the one in 1932—the same unresolved issues 34 years later!

- b) When we recently sent a delegation to Europe to explain our fur resource management programs we led with the messages that our market research told us resonated least with the general public.

3. We must recognize that while our accomplishments are outstanding, they will resonate with the larger audience only if properly presented and marketed. We need to use messages developed by specialists to gain wider support for our work.

4. We must accept that on most of the issues with which we deal, public opinion is fluid and must be won over and over. I used to think that something like a Project WILD exposure was lasting. I now have come to know that while those programs have great value in building foundations of understanding on which to build later, the operative words are “on which to build later.” It's hard for me to believe now that I was ever so naive that I actually thought that the job was done after a single experience—I am now convinced that it's never done!

5. We must employ and empower marketing and mass communications specialists.

We must work together to see that new expectations of leadership evolve and that these new expectations become the new yardstick by which we are evaluated. Standards that will encourage the dynamic and responsive leadership that will be required in the future.

For several years, I taught a basic course in management at a community college in Baltimore. I always made required reading for my students the book *Confessions of an Advertising Man* by David Ogilvy. I made it required reading for my students because as president of a large advertising agency, Ogilvy had interesting insights on managing creative people. These are the people in our organizations that given the freedom to take risks, often excel, and move organizations positively. Frequently, these are the unconventional, the unorthodox, the often considered “weirdos” who have those special insights that often go unnoticed or unheeded.

Significant to our discussion this morning is that one of the givens in Ogilvy’s management theories was that all organizations run in cycles—cycles that run from dust to dynamite. Everyone here should ponder that point—where is your organization? Is your agency between dust and dynamite or between dynamite and dust?