

Special Information and Education Session

Opening Remarks

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Abstract: Great challenges face wildlife and fish conservation in North America. Fundamental changes that are moving rapidly through our society are mirrored to a certain extent by a virtual epidemic of reorganizations within conservation agencies continent-wide. These attempts appear too often as cosmetic alterations that do not deal with the fundamental problems, and despite our good intentions, we have not been able to reduce sufficiently the distance between challenge and response. I suggest that we must rediscover our own history and reaffirm our own principles and commitments to successfully surmount the obstacles in our way.

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We are all aware of the present and great challenges facing the existing model of wildlife and fish conservation in North America. Indeed the pervasive and fundamental changes that are moving rapidly through our society are being mirrored to a certain extent by a virtual epidemic of reorganizations occurring within conservation agencies and organizations continent-wide. These attempts appear too often as cosmetic alterations that leave fundamental problems still vigorous in their wake; and it remains true that we have not, despite our good intentions, been able to reduce sufficiently the distance between challenge and response. I suggest, that like an individual encountering a stream too wide to step easily across, we must draw back to leap! We require a rediscovery of our own history and a reaffirmation of our own principles and commitments to successfully surmount the obstacles in our way.

The North American conservation achievement is outstanding for many reasons and in many ways. Unlike earlier historic movements in Africa, Asia, and Europe, which were almost consistently tied to an exclusivity tradition, spurred by the caste notions of warrior and public in Greek and Roman culture, by monarchist traditions in the Middle Ages, or by aristocratic world views of the post-Renaissance and the colonial periods, the in situ emergence of our tradition was based explicitly on inclusivity. Furthermore, the North American tradition did not emphasize conservation

through preservation as much as it did conservation through wise use. Given the crisis facing wildlife on this continent in the late last century, a crisis instigated largely through over killing of fish and wildlife populations, we should be awed by the insightful reaction of the founding movement that it did not suggest a mere preservationist approach, at least in the short term. The resulting hiatus in hunting and fishing traditions might have been overtaken by the forces of urban disconnectedness today and spelled doom for these activities, or certainly weakened them. Furthermore, such a perspective would have fundamentally altered the overall zeitgeist of conservation in ways difficult to predict.

In this historical context, and for efficacy today, it is also imperative that we recognize the insoluble partnership identity of our conservation system. While we tend to readily acknowledge the founding role played by the social and political elite—individuals such as Roosevelt, for example—we tend to overlook the more collective energy of the hunting and fishing fraternity which had already become a formidable force many decades before and which plowed and fertilized the ground on which we stand. Furthermore, perhaps to an even larger extent, we tend to ignore the important founding role played by individuals, such as Muir, who identified non-lethal interactions with nature as the epitome and axiom of man's stewardship role. It cannot be doubted in truth, however, that it was the complex dynamic of many emphases and viewpoints, all springing from a source of legitimate concern for nature, that empowered and designed the late 19th century movement from which we may trace this very discussion today. It is of no small relevance therefore that we turn our minds to the question of partnership in conservation.

As with any idea, that of conservation through wise use has matured over time and its guidance system evolved into a complex association of individuals, agencies, and organizations that function at the local, regional, and national/international levels. It is not surprising that effecting consistent and strategic conservation programs that respond to the aspirations and challenges of late 20th century society is a 3-dimensional minefield. Leadership has never been an armchair sport however. In this forum we will discuss conservation leadership. To do so, we have assembled 3 vitally important links in this endeavor and will explore what individual hunters; what a highly focused, volunteer-based conservation group; and what an organization representing Fish and Wildlife agencies throughout the North American continent understand leadership in conservation to mean and who they perceive the partners in this endeavor to be.