

Synopsis Remarks

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Abstract: Clearly there is a recognized need for leadership in conservation. One of the great challenges facing our professional agencies and conservation groups is to decide who comprises the constituency we seek to lead. In short, what is our constituency? In many jurisdictions only a fraction of the public is even aware that a specific state agency for wildlife conservation exists. Even a large majority of hunters, long recognized as perhaps the constituency, do not look to professional agencies for leadership . . . at least not with respect to issues dealing specifically with hunting. One of the more important points to arise from our discussions was that successful conservation leadership must entail providing those who might be led with a sense of ownership and empowerment. Furthermore, this notion was conjoined to an important corollary, that individuals and organizations so empowered can become effective leaders themselves. Therefore conservation leadership is very much about creating such leadership in others. The road ahead is never certain and change is the immutable reality of existence. For those of us who care deeply about nature and the preservation of humanity within it, the purpose of our lives is clear. We are involved in a noble and vitally important task and so we cannot avoid considerations of leadership.

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Clearly there is a recognized need for leadership in conservation. The fundamental changes that have occurred in North American society during the last 100 years have resulted in a much more complex public that has become increasingly difficult to describe. This public holds evolving views on what conservation means and who should have the responsibility for it; this public has many faces and contains the great sweep of human emotion, from apathy to unbridled passion, relative to issues such as wildlife preservation and the use of animals by humans. Therefore, one of the great challenges facing our professional agencies and conservation groups is to decide who comprises the constituency we seek to lead. In short, what is our constituency?

This question's importance is emphasized by our realization that in many jurisdictions only a fraction of the public is even aware that a specific state agency for wildlife conservation exists. This obviously raises the question of our own identities . . . who are we? Who do we work for? Furthermore, as we now know, perhaps even

a large majority of hunters, long recognized as perhaps the constituency, do not look to professional agencies for leadership . . . at least not with respect to issues dealing specifically with hunting. So, what is our agency's role as hunter educators? Are we to lead or simply function as a conduit? Do we need to lead? Should we, as professional agencies, strive for a leadership role? These powerful questions strike at the heart of our existence and purpose and obviously require thoughtful consideration. Yet all too frequently even our own agencies do not allocate time and resources for such consideration. Indeed, even at our organized meetings and conferences these discussions are often absent, or, when scheduled, frequently attract only a few. These issues should be seen as the center stage; not as a psychotherapy session for conservation hippies. Historic reviews are often of tremendous value, shedding light on performance and progress. One result of this process, brought to the fore in these discussions, is the apparent intractability of certain problems and the realization that we have as a collectivity been battling some of the very same issues for many decades. This phenomenon deserves closer attention and we ought to ponder its significance. Does it, for example, simply mean that indeed "history has many pupils but few students" or does it reflect some inevitability within the labyrinthine context of the humanity-nature relationship? Or, more to our point in these discussions, does it imply that on certain issues we have failed to lead and only become slightly better at reacting, gradually improving our ability in the face of more elaborate debates and challenges? One likely result of such a reality would be a neverending spate of skirmishes that fail ultimately to secure any philosophical beachheads from which leadership can proceed. Does this explain our tendency to feel that somehow we have been slowly winding down, reduced to maintaining our position in a swift current of change and challenge, but no more?

It is, contrarily, also possible to argue that we are indeed still progressing and that our success in conservation continues, that we are leading on the significant issues but that we have failed to effectively market our achievements to the great public whose resources we protect and whose support we must have if wild things and places are to resist being pulverized and paved. Certainly we seem to truck at least one consensus; that is, that the public conscience has plenty of elasticity and can be stretched and shaped by leadership. Therefore, our failure to perceive a majority opinion or concern for conservation, or to identify a true ethic with respect to the land and its wild occupiers, may suggest that we have failed to impart our leadership, but not necessarily that we have failed to lead. Still, it is entirely possible that we have failed in both.

One of the more important points to arise from our discussions was that successful conservation leadership must entail providing those who might be led with a sense of ownership and empowerment. Furthermore, this notion was conjoined to an important corollary, that individuals and organizations so empowered can become effective leaders themselves. Therefore, conservation leadership is very much about creating such leadership in others. Thus hunters can function, once given or having developed appropriate ethics and practices, as powerful educators and leaders in their own right. Private landowners, once advised and encouraged can have profound

effects in conservation. This is a simple but powerful idea, and its reasonableness should not diminish our study of it. After all, it suggests a clear path of leadership for us as conservation professionals; namely, as mentors to those who would make a difference and who seek the way. Not surprisingly, this construct emphasizes the need for localized empowerment and education, and in this sense recapitulates the inceptive sociality in human discourse and action. Rites, rituals and recognition are all fostered in small group settings and relatedness through genetics or purpose predisposes cooperative action for the good. Furthermore, this idea emphasizes the need for a multiplicity of talents and embraces the fields of science and research, education, policy and planning, and protection. In other words, it reinforces our matured collectivity of today. It also warns that insularity of views and biases of perspective are not leadership ideals. Leadership, in conservation as elsewhere, will require an understanding of the human animal. Leadership will involve partnering . . . within agencies and organizations and with individuals. In conservation our constituency must be every human being; we must be concerned with leading society at large.

Partnership and cooperation, however, have a fatal flaw . . . the potential for distortion or weakening of purpose. It is crucial, therefore, that we understand implicitly those principles and objectives we consider vital to wildlife conservation and the preservation of man's legitimate interactions with it. It is also crucial that we be able to articulate these. Yet, where is our script? Who are our spokesmen? What are we collectively about? Leadership will involve meditation, thinking, arguing, discussing . . . knowing! These things are required because conservation leadership is not simply about taking people where they want to go but showing them possibilities they have not considered and inspiring their efforts to achieve these goals. Leadership requires that we look ahead and realize the important inevitabilities that we must be prepared to deal with. It involves a plan for the future.

The road ahead is never certain and change is the immutable reality of existence. For those of us who care deeply about nature and the preservation of humanity within it, the purpose of our lives is clear. We are involved in a noble and vitally important task and so we cannot avoid considerations of leadership. Only the unconcerned can avoid such ideas. If there is a succinct appraisal of the conservation leadership discussions held at the 51st SEAFWA conference it would be as follows. We must engage now in discussions of our past, our present, and our future. We must ponder more deeply than perhaps at any time since the North American conservation movement began where we want to go and how we will get there. We must reach out to a broad, diverse public of genders, races, and ideologies, to fashion an ethic and a way towards another century of achievement for wildlife. We must redevelop the philosophical depth, the conceptual clarity, and the strength of purpose that were the hallmarks of our origins in conservation. We must decide if leadership is important to us and whether we are important to it.