

Presidential Address

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Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 43:7-10

It is an honor to have this opportunity to address you at the opening session of our 43rd Annual Conference. It is certainly a pleasure to be here in the great State of Missouri, and I would like to express a hearty thank you to Jerry Presley and his fine staff for hosting our conference. All of us know the difficulties of organizing and conducting a meeting of this size and importance, and it is apparent that the next 3 days are going to be enjoyable and productive.

Director Turner, on behalf of the Southeastern Association, I would like to congratulate you on your appointment and extend to you our offer of cooperation during your term as director of the Fish and Wildlife Service. We stand ready to work with you in fulfilling your agency's broad and important responsibilities, which have a significant impact on the wildlife management programs of the member states represented here today. We are also excited about the new administration in Washington, especially since President Bush is an ardent hunter and fisherman. We applaud his recognition of the importance of our wetlands and his policy of no net loss for this valuable resource. We look forward to implementation of this policy and request that thorough consideration be given to its possible impact on our waterfowl management programs.

During your tenure you will find the Southeastern Association, as well as our International Association, has a keen interest in almost every action you take in relation to wildlife management. I am sure you are already aware of the importance we place on the continuation of the current administration of the Pittman-Robertson and Wallop-Breaux federal aid programs.

As we move into the last decade of the 20th Century, it is appropriate to reflect on our past successes as well as contemplate the issues and challenges we face. I believe most of us agree that, generally, hunting and fishing opportunities in the Southeast are probably better now than at any time during this century. This has been no accident. It is the result of well planned and executed wildlife management programs implemented during a time of greatly increased public demand. Well-trained professional staffs and excellent leadership at both the state and federal levels have enabled us to meet the challenge of providing quality recreational opportunities

for our constituents and to conserve the resource. Our Association has played an important part in this success. Over the past half century we have evolved into an organization with the ability to address problems at both the state and regional levels and through the International Association, the national and international levels.

While our past efforts can be characterized as successful, we have no time to rest on our laurels. The issues confronting us are real and can only be expected to intensify in coming years. They demand our immediate collective attention.

There can be no doubt that public hunting, as we know it today, faces major challenges. The losses and changes to wildlife habitat and resultant wildlife populations can only be expected to continue. Nowhere is this more evident than in our waterfowl populations. It can rationally be said that the North American Waterfowl Management Plan may be our last hope for maintaining waterfowl populations at levels necessary to support quality waterfowl hunting.

Wildlife habitat losses, coupled with an aging population, changing lifestyles and attitudes toward wildlife, lack of access to public hunting lands, and competition from other forms of outdoor recreation, all exert pressures which lead to decreased hunting activity. Nationwide, the number of licensed hunters has remained static or dropped slightly during the past decade. The continuation or worsening of this trend translates to less public support for hunting and a corresponding decrease in political support of wildlife management programs.

To help us understand and devise strategies to meet the challenges associated with the use of our fish and wildlife resources, our association has recently initiated a Southeastern Trends Project. This cooperative study will define the number of users of fish and wildlife resources in the Southeast, identify the variables that affect use and project current and future trends. This information is critical if we are to develop long-range strategic plans to insure not only adequate wildlife populations, but also sufficient number of users and supporters of our wildlife management programs.

By identifying and monitoring significant trends and analyzing their future impacts, we will be able to anticipate changes before they occur and develop appropriate plans of action. In our growing and ever more complex society, we must develop pro-active management as opposed to reactive or crisis management. We cannot afford to wait and react to change as it is demanded by the public, legislatures, or the courts. To do so will only force us into actions that are not in the best interest of the wildlife resource or its users.

We do not face the problem of declining use in terms of sport fishing. In fact, just the reverse is true. This increased pressure on the resource does, however, present management problems in terms of providing quality fishing. For many years we were able in the Southeast to meet increased demand through the management of newly constructed reservoirs. The days of large reservoir construction are generally over and we must intensify our fisheries management efforts on our existing waters.

It should come as no surprise that the liability problem has struck wildlife management. In West Virginia, in spite of a strong law that limits the liability of

landowners, we stand to lose hundreds of thousands of acres of private land once open to hunters and fishermen, all due to a liability problem that is more perceived than actual. In addition to private landowners, state wildlife agencies should expect to face increasing liability problems. To assist with this and other legal matters, consideration will be given at our Tuesday business meeting to the formation of an Association legal committee. I am pleased that our conference program does include a Legal Session this year.

In his 1983 presidential address, Steve Wilson said he believed that the most critical conservation issue in the decade of the 1980s was the funding of state wildlife agencies. I have no doubt that this will continue to be an issue in the decade of the 1990s. We cannot hope to carry out effective wildlife management programs in the more complex and difficult years ahead without adequate funds to do so. Although some states are acquiring general revenue funds and developing new revenue sources, the 2 major funding sources for most agencies remains license fees and federal aid funds. We must continue our efforts to develop new funding sources if high-quality wildlife programs are to persist.

Several years ago, we recognized the need and opportunity for expansion of the federal aid to sport fish restoration program. Through a well-planned and coordinated effort, we were successful in providing new opportunities for our fisheries program and for the fisherman. A similar need is evident for the Pittman-Robertson program. These needs are evident not only for our traditional research and management programs, but also in the areas of hunter education, shooting range development and conservation education. There is adequate justification for expansion of this federal aid program to include the many hunting related items not currently taxed.

If we are to recruit hunters and, at the same time, stress the safe and responsible use of firearms, we must provide our citizens with access to public shooting facilities. A recent report by the National Shooting Sports Foundation revealed that some 10 million shooting enthusiasts do not have adequate facilities to practice and enjoy their sport. Next summer, the International Association and the Missouri Department of Conservation, at the suggestion of the Hunter Education Council, will host a Shooting Range Symposium to address this problem. All agencies and organizations represented here today should assist and participate in this important symposium. The need for additional public shooting ranges is evident and it is certainly in our best interest to intensify our efforts to provide these facilities.

If I asked each of you to list the 3 major wildlife issues of the day, I am sure that we would have enough topics for a non-stop discussion for the next 3 days. They would probably range from local to international in scope.

The value of our Association is that we are able to select those issues of most importance and deal with them in a rational and effective manner. By pooling our knowledge, experience, and political muscle, our collective efforts are many times greater than those of any of us acting alone.

Within our member states and participating societies and sections, we have the broad range of expertise necessary to deal with the complex and ever changing

problems associated with wildlife management today. By channeling this expertise into the appropriate committees, working under strong committee chairmanships, Association is kept abreast of current developments and receives the advice and recommendations needed to make sound policy decisions.

The current status of our Association as a strong and effective proponent of professional wildlife management results from your efforts and contributions. Through our Association, we have the opportunity to play a major role in assuring that our wildlife populations are maintained at healthy and sustained levels and that our citizens can continue to have access to quality wildlife opportunities.

I am sure you will have an enjoyable and productive conference. Thank you.