

METHODS OF IMPROVING PUBLIC RELATIONS

MIKE PLEDGER, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Little Rock, AR 72205
WILLIAM F. HAILEY, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission, Little Rock, AR
72205

Abstract: The authors emphasize the need for a good public relations plan by each wildlife enforcement officer. Various areas of this plan are discussed.

Proc. Ann. Conf. S.E. Assoc. Fish & Wildl. Agencies 35:727-729

In Arkansas, as well as in all the other states represented in the Southeastern Association, the enforcement field personnel are the primary public contact at the grass roots level and should be well versed in how to get along with farmers, hunters, fishermen, and other law enforcement people.

The Arkansas Game and Fish Commission has 3 major divisions, those being the Enforcement, Wildlife Management and Fisheries Divisions, much like your states, with the Enforcement Division the largest. The Information-Education Division is a small, 7-member support division that generally takes care of statewide publicity through newsletters, a quarterly magazine, radio and television shows, special brochures and publications.

During the summer of last year, one information officer from the I & E Division, was assigned in an advisory capacity, to each of the 3 major divisions to improve coverage of Commission activities and disseminate more information to the public. As you can probably guess by now, I was assigned to the Enforcement Division.

Apparently this new rescheduling of I & E personnel is working. The last year or so, thanks to the leadership of Chief Morris, has seen a streamlined production of the general hunting and fishing regulations, a reprint of the official code of regulations, a division policy handbook, the near-completion of a slide presentation on the Enforcement Division, and much more coverage of enforcement activities on the state and local level.

Whether he is aware of it or not, the successful wildlife officer must be an expert in the field of public relations, and he must practice this expertise during the various day-to-day activities. An officer's personal appearance is an important part of his public relations effort. It has been said that you never get a 2nd chance to make a good 1st impression, and this certainly applies to a wildlife officer on a new assignment, since this 1st impression often will be a lasting one. The individual officer's personal appearance reflects on the entire wildlife agency, and although the wildlife officer is the entire wildlife agency to the local sportsmen and general public in many rural communities, if this officer represents a sloppy, unkept appearance, then that is the public image of the agency as a whole.

Policy number 3 of the Enforcement Division Policy Handbook states that "Officers shall maintain a level of moral conduct in their personal business and professional affairs in keeping with the highest standards of the law enforcement profession." Nothing will destroy your image faster than problems with members of the opposite sex and booze. It is not difficult to tell when your image is sliding. The public will quit calling you for assistance and will often relay violation reports to other officers, possibly in adjoining counties. Keep in mind that it is a lot harder to clean up your act than to maintain a clean act from the start.

Most of you realize that the telephone is one of your best enforcement tools, but you may not realize that it can be one of your best public relations tools as well. The phone ringing at all hours of the day and night means you lose some sleep or time with the kids, but you must respond to the calls. Always return calls taken by your spouse or kids, because putting them off will cost you cases and cost you informants and cooperators, which can certainly damage your public relations efforts.

To be successful in his public relations efforts, the wildlife officer must have an intense interest in the people he is attempting to influence and stimulate. These people include, in order of importance, the prosecuting attorney, the judge, the news media managers, farmers and landowners, hunters, fishermen and other sportmen, all other outdoor users and the remainder of the general populace, in other words, everyone.

It does not do a wildlife officer much good to write a citation in the field, if he does not have good public relations with his prosecuting attorney and judge once the case comes to court. Since courts are different, the officer should ask the judge and prosecuting attorney about court procedures. It does not hurt to be early on court day and be available for any question that the court may have about the cases.

The news media, be it newspaper, radio, or T.V. can be a wildlife officer's best friend or his worst enemy. Each officer should be, at least, acquainted with the persons in charge of the news, and it would not hurt to invite them on a hunting or fishing trip. This trip would have the immediate advantage of selling the commission's program while in the field and the editor would feel obligated to offer his assistance if you should need it.

In his efforts to build a solid on-going public relations program, the wildlife officer should take advantage of every opportunity to become acquainted with the farmers and other landowners within his assigned area.

Nearly everyone is aware of the widespread damage that the beaver is causing across the state and Arkansas's wildlife officers are providing a helping hand to landowners all over Arkansas in an effort to control the damage these animals are causing, which is another good public relations gesture. It requires only a few minutes to stop along a fence and visit with a farmer, and the more farmers the wildlife officer knows, the more information he will receive about illegal activities on the "back forty." Nothing is wrong with a wildlife officer attending meetings of farm organizations to solicit farmer cooperation for his enforcement efforts. Ninety percent of the land in Arkansas is privately owned, which emphasizes the need for this cooperation.

In Arkansas, the Game and Fish Commission has a program of wildlife habitat improvement assistance for the private landowner called "Acres for Wildlife." It is a positive, public relations step to offer the landowner assistance with the program that will benefit his farming operation and wildlife populations at the same time. In doing this, the wildlife officer is helping the landowner as well as the sportsman, and is opening the door to a cooperative relationship that will enhance the wildlife officer's enforcement program.

The wildlife officer will find that sportsmens groups are very beneficial, and he should make every effort to become acquainted with these groups. Sportsmens group members, generally, are good prospects for cooperators and informants, and

the officer can encourage these people to assist by the officer showing an interest in their particular activity. Attendance at their meetings and volunteering for assistance to these groups can pay big dividends.

Many wildlife officers overlook a large segment of the populace in their public relations effort, namely the schools. While many of these students do not even buy a hunting or fishing license, a few hours spent with them can have a dramatic effect on the officers work, now, and in the years to come. Along this line, as the Anti-Gun, Anti-Hunting sentiment grows across this country, wildlife officers play a significant role in hunter education classes. Arkansas' enforcement officers have demonstrated a sincere concern for improving the quality of our sportsmen statewide, and regularly instruct or assist in teaching hunter safety classes. These officers realize that time spent instilling a sportsmanlike attitude now, may help to prevent violations of the law later.

Becoming involved in local community activities is an excellent way to become well-known and be in a position to gain support for your work as a wildlife officer. A few ways to become involved would be to join a service organization like Optimist, Rotary or Lions clubs; become involved in church activities; or become a Scout or 4-H Leader. Members of most civic organizations represent a cross-section of the entire business and professional community and the friendships you develop in these groups will go a long way in your over-all public relations effort.

And last, but surely not least, the wildlife officer should make a part of his public relations plan to cooperate with other divisions within the wildlife agency. The public cannot positively view the agency if all that is seen is a constant battle between the officers and the biologists. As James Timmerman said in his International Association's Law Enforcement Committee Statement, "The law enforcement committee shall promote professionalism among fish and wildlife enforcement officers and strive for better recognition of law enforcement as a profession by other conservation professionals and the general public." A solid public relations program by each county wildlife officer goes a long way toward that professionalism.