

General Session

Presidential Address

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I am honored, and it is without question a pleasure to have the opportunity to serve as your president and host this 48th annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (SEAFWA). It has been a fast track for me since becoming a member of the Executive Committee a few months before the 47th annual convention in Atlanta and then moving from vice president to president of the 48th convention. I want to express my sincere appreciation to all of the directors who have supported me in this transition, and I especially want to thank my excellent staff and Executive Secretary Colonel Bob Brantley who guided me and kept me informed as we moved together to this moment. Tennessee will be hosting the convention next year, and my best advice to Gary Myers, director, is the same advice David Waller, director of Georgia, gave to me: "start the ship in the desired direction with some encouraging words and let the staff guide you to your final destination." In other words, stay out of the way except when needed. It is also a pleasure working with a city like Biloxi and with its Tourism and Convention Center. They have welcomed this convention hospitably in every way imaginable.

As I look at Governor Fordice and Senator Thad Cochran, I especially want to thank them for their leadership and caring for the conservation of our natural resources and support of outdoor recreation whether it is hunting, fishing, wildlife viewing, or a few days' camping in the woods or staying in our parks.

I believe we all can agree that we are in an age where attitudes toward social values are changing. We are in a time of ever-increasing demands by the different user groups to allocate more for each one. How can we do this with limited resources while maintaining traditionally successful and mainly self supporting programs?

First let's reflect back a few years and look at where we started and come forward.

There is little argument that the hunters and sportsmen who have preceded us have established an impressive record of wildlife tradition. This base support has brought back several game species and non-game species from dangerously

low numbers to unprecedented highs. It is important that everyone remember that this unparalleled support contributes approximately \$3 million a day for conservation. This support has allowed wildlife management to become a success story that would please even Teddy Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold.

Although we are now faced with new strategies in management and allocation decisions, traditional uses must and will not be forgotten. It has been the support of the traditional user groups which has allowed the success we enjoy both past and present. It is imperative that we have state input with the Federal agencies, a lesson learned in a recent threat to move some wildlife refuges to hunting.

We all are familiar with the many, many studies showing the negative trends and reasons for these trends that affect hunting and fishing participation and license sales that we all depend on. Any one of us could write a book on this subject, and I am sure we have already read several. However, I would like to cover a few main points because they are important to how our attitudes will affect the future.

Everyone by now understands how important it is to recruit young people between the ages of 8–12. Equally important to the future of wildlife management are aging Americans and single-parent households. We probably can agree that the resource agencies must take an active or leadership role in recruiting and influencing public attitudes towards outdoor resources. This must be done by education of not only the public but by educating the professionals that are graduating from our colleges and universities. Very few come from a rural background where, in the past, they were introduced at an early age to the outdoors by family members. Most come from urban areas and don't have an understanding or feel for hunting and fishing but enjoy the contribution of sportsmen through tax dollars on hunting and fishing equipment and through state license and federal stamp sales.

People, it is time to stop preaching to the choir and start educating the public and our own people.

State and Federal agencies are no longer "sacred cows," i.e., since we control the sales of licenses, the management and use of lands, and wildlife in general, we are under the illusion that the people must continue to support traditional agency programs. Wrong! If you will allow me just one very descriptive statistic. Since 1975 (folks, we have been talking about these problem issues for a long time) and project it to year 2025: people buying licenses, stamps, etc., will continue to decline and people hunting during that time frame will not increase or at the most increase by 1% or less. If you were an investor and buying stock, would you put your money in a business I just described! No way! You would much rather invest in golf which shows annual growth indices of 30% or better.

So what I am saying to you is we need to change our focus. It is up to us, the resource agencies, to sell or market what we are and what we do. To paraphrase a statement from a movie, "build it and they will come," doesn't apply

to us and the changing attitudes. We must take control and develop programs to attract the young, the old, the single mother, women, and other minorities. The Mississippi Department of Wildlife, Fisheries and Parks' attitude has changed, and we will be developing programs through a director of marketing who will go into the schools and develop a curriculum on educating students 8–12 years of age regarding conservation, the outdoors, hunting, fishing, and the importance of what we do as a wildlife and parks agency.

As Pete Drucker stated “Marketing is so basic that it cannot be considered a separate function . . . it is the whole business seen from its final result, that is, from the customer’s point of view.” The “Unique Selling Proposition” (USP) is that hunting and fishing is a time for families and or friends who are looking for the intangible and non-harvest aspects such as recreation and time to spend together.

It is most important that the public or customer understand the values associated with our wildlife and outdoor resources. Remember that the will of the people may not always be right, but it will be served.

I encourage members of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies to take an attitude check and get moving and involve and inform our public or customer about our services. I challenge each and everyone of you to leave here with an open mind to “market what we do.”