

State Fish and Wildlife Agencies— Are They What They Should Be?

D. A. Poole, *Wildlife Management Institute,
Washington, D.C. 20005*

Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 36:12-17

I want to preface my comments by disclosing some personal observations of Ira Gabrielson whose distinguished, professional involvement in the fish and wildlife field spanned more than 60 years. Dr. Gabe was a life-long diarist, a habit ingrained from his early days when federal employees were required to maintain written activity records.

In his unpublished diaries, he did not hide a distaste for meetings of regional and international fish and wildlife associations. Up until 1939, that is. Before then, he grumbled in his diaries at the prospect of such meetings at which his attendance was necessary. And while he certainly was no moralist, he sometimes noted displeasure with what he saw and heard. Drunkenness to the point of sessions chairmen and scheduled speakers physically unable to perform. An abusive and personally hostile anti-federal point of view. And many conferees uninformed or uncaring about the need for improving the lot of America's fish and wildlife. Many apparently attended meetings simply to kick up their heels at their employers' expense.

But toward the tail end of the 1930s, when he already had been in the field for a quarter-century, Dr. Gabrielson's reactions changed markedly. He began to express keen pleasure about a new kind of wildlife meeting attendee—enthusiastic, concerned, and determined to improve state agencies and get sound programs underway. Dr. Gabrielson's notes offer no personal conclusions about this abrupt turn of events. But it seems more than coincidental to me that the marked change he observed came shortly after passage of the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act.

A monumental law in terms of advancing wildlife management at the state level and nationally, the Federal Aid or PR Act did much to pull free-wheeling politicians off the backs and out of the pocketbooks of state fish and wildlife agencies.

I do not suggest that politics ever can be or should be eliminated, but the PR Act improved near-intolerable situations in many states. Other

strengthening features of the law are its requirements that license receipts be spent only for agency purposes and, equally important, that trained and knowledgeable persons be employed. The fisheries field was similarly helped by enactment of the Federal Aid in Sport Fish Restoration Act more than a decade later.

I outline this background to make 2 points. There is a tendency for some to overlook the significant progress of state fish and wildlife management over the years. Some do not know this, and others are content to ignore it. Lost on them is the fact that understanding the past is prerequisite to preparing oneself for the future.

The second point is that despite these many advances, a challenging road stretches ahead. The states are expected to produce more fish and wildlife on a decreasing habitat base, controlled mainly by someone else, for an increasingly diverse number of users who have less accessible area on which to seek and enjoy the resource. And to do it within fiscal and manpower constraints that are slow to respond to problems and opportunities.

At this point I should make noncommercial mention that the Wildlife Management Institute, at the request of a governor, legislative committee or a commission, evaluates the organization, administration and operation of state fish and wildlife agencies. This unpublicized, not-for-profit service was begun in 1947. Since then, Institute personnel have done 63 such studies in 39 states and 4 provinces of Canada. We share the state fish and wildlife agencies' concerns. We understand the pressures the agencies are under, including the increasing number of factions that seek to satisfy their concerns with sportsmen's money.

We recognize, too, that even though states may share common borders, the philosophies, traditions and outlooks of fish and wildlife agencies can vary greatly. Opinions differ about license fee levels and types of permits. There are differing opinions about requiring all the beneficiaries of special programs—for example, deer, turkey, trout, trophy fish, fishing lakes, and wildlife management areas—to pay a good part of associated costs.

Some states willingly seek and accept general funds assistance. Others want no part of it. Some unhesitatingly expand their programs to embrace the full spectrum of fish and wildlife. Others are reluctant to consider creatures outside the small circle of traditional game species. And many states are internally unsure about their program balance, about their allocation of funds, manpower and equipment to law enforcement, fisheries, wildlife, information and education, and the rest. Some plan for the future while others seem content to grasp for a future.

For the sake of discussion, let's assume that each state has these and other matters well in hand, and that income, expenditures, policies, procedures and programs are under regular review and refinement. What extra

dimensions might be added to a state's program? What needs are going unserved? What opportunities are not receiving a share of the sunlight? I believe that 2 areas deserve greater attention by more state fish and wildlife agencies; 1 at the state level and 1 at the national level.

East of the Rocky Mountains, private lands provide the bulk of habitat and public hunting and fishing opportunity. Locally in the East, national forests and wildlife refuges offer important habitat and recreational access, but their acreage is minor in the overall situation. The regional mix of private and public lands will not change significantly in the future. But as human population growth and associated development continue, the suitability of private lands for wildlife and their availability for public recreation likely will decrease. Both social and economic factors are involved. Therefore, I would like to see more states devising strategies to encourage the retention and improvement of habitat on private lands and their availability for angling, hunting, and other wildlife uses.

By no means is this a new thought. It has been around a long time. It more accurately might be classified as a revolting thought, rather than a revolutionary thought, because many state agencies clearly are reluctant to mix with the people who own the land. But there are outstanding exceptions, including in the Southeast, of a state agency's willingness to get into a one-on-one with the folks who own the land on which most fish and wildlife are produced.

More than 50 years ago, in the first such formal comment on the subject, Aldo Leopold's 1930 Committee on American Game Policy observed that "We submit that public hunting under the license system is workable for game species inhabiting cheap land which the public can afford to own (or lease) and operate, but that compensation to the landowners in some form or other is the only workable system for producing game on expensive farm land."

Forty-three years later, Durward Allen's Committee on North American Wildlife Policy noted that "Free public hunting has been subsidized by the landowner, who produces something that is common property and from which he may profit little, if at all. Yet access to private land will continue to be our great dependence in taking game crops. Maintaining relationships that will preserve the hunting privilege must be a long-term concern of sportsmen and administrators."

The twin problems of habitat reduction and difficulty of access do not afflict all states or sections of states equally. Nor will they over time. But more and more, mounting evidence points to greater difficulty over a wider area. Landowners are becoming increasingly vocal about trespass, littering, property damage, theft, and drunkenness to name a few. Landowners ask for relief from the thoughtless and sometimes deliberate acts of those who have

little or no respect for the property of others. They seek relief, too, from the expense of owning land, land on which others expect them to provide wildlife habitat and places to hunt at no personal cost.

Some states have responded. Michigan has reduced taxes for forested lands on which public access is permitted for hunting and fishing. Iowa and Minnesota recently eliminated real property taxes on wetlands and offer tax credits for wetlands removed from the threat of destruction. Oklahoma and others make arrangements with farmers to leave strips of uncut grain. Nebraska, Florida and others pay landowners for designated acreage open to hunting. Oregon offers a tax exemption and credit plan to encourage retention of natural riparian areas. Colorado only recently unveiled an imaginative program to improve communications and relations with landowners. Specific roles have been assigned to its law enforcement, wildlife, fisheries and information sections, and one employee serves full-time as program coordinator. The comprehensive program details the actions and estimated costs that are to be pursued under current authority, as well as the new laws required to implement other facets. And this in a state where more than 36% of the land already is in national forests and other federal holdings and mostly available for hunting and fishing. Colorado, I am sure, would be pleased to send a copy of its program to interested agencies.

I firmly believe that the time is at hand for more state agencies to get their programs down to the ground and deal with the owners of that land. It is not a simple undertaking, I realize. It will create new costs and require re-appraisal of existing manpower and budget allocations. But the failure or refusal of state agencies to handle this situation could leave a serious void in their ability to serve their hunting and angling public. In fact, failure to deal with the subject already is causing serious problems in some areas where fine habitat is off limits to sportsmen.

Turning to my second suggestion—the national level—it is satisfying to note that the states are taking a more direct and active role in representing their fish and wildlife interests in Washington. Aside from their individual contacts, the states' normal focal point for this work is the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies and other groups with whom cooperative relationships have been developed over the years.

While there are many differing and hard-held views of the merits of Washington and what goes on there, some less complimentary than others, it is a pretty sure bet that the seat of national government is not going to fade away. Increasingly, Washington-initiated actions touch on the interest, authority and pocketbook of state agencies. Inroads have been made on state authority for fish and resident wildlife. New responsibilities have been thrust on the states, yet promised financial assistance has been woefully inadequate or nonexistent. Regulatory reform—some call it regulatory evisceration—

threatens to overturn procedures established to safeguard fish, wildlife and their habitat.

State response to some issues requires only a telephone call or a thoughtful letter to a Representative or Senator. Others require personal appearances at congressional and other hearings and for discussions with key committee staff and agency people. Work of this kind makes unplanned demands on administrators' time and imposes additional burdens on the limited financial resources of agency directors and staff. Yet, the knowledgeable input and close-to-the-ground understanding of state agency people can influence the swing of the legislative pendulum on issues of considerable importance to all the states.

At national-level hearings and meetings the best participant is an individual who knows his subject intimately. The testimony of just 1 carefully selected witness can offset the hundreds of near-identical letters sometimes stimulated by anti-hunting, anti-trapping and protectionist forces.

The International Association frequently is asked to coordinate hearing testimony on major fish and wildlife bills. That is, the Association's assistance is solicited in arranging for expert testimony. As he has done in the past, the Association executive vice president consults with state agencies and others about prospective witnesses on specific subjects. The preliminary list is reviewed both for the broadest subject and geographical coverage and for political impact. The native tongue falls seductively on the ears of members of congressional committees handling fish and wildlife legislation. They identify personally with professional practitioners from their home country. I cannot emphasize this point too strongly.

Ultimately, I hope that the states, acting through their regional associations, will take a further step to help strengthen the capability of the International Association's headquarters office. Perhaps this could be done by each of the regions underwriting regional desks at the Association's headquarters. Working under the supervision of the Association's executive officer, the regional desk persons could service routine queries of state members of the regional associations while at the same time providing an on-the-scene presence of an individual acquainted with regional fish and wildlife issues, personnel, traditions and philosophies. And on assignment by the Association's executive officer, this person would take part in hearings and meetings where the subjects under consideration would benefit from strong representation of a regional point of view. And when these regional desk people return to their employing state agency, the latter will benefit from the individual's broader contact and point of view.

I realize that these 2 suggestions—greater involvement with the owners of land and more active participation in Washington through the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies—are easier to discuss than

to implement. For many states they pose a break with tradition as well as new costs. But tradition and cost are not sacrosanct. They have been broached in the past time and time again to advance fish and wildlife goals and objectives.

We all know there are myriad opportunities for fine tuning within each agency and that the agencies should routinely seek to redirect and improve their programs. But in the broad overview, I believe that the agencies should become more actively and imaginatively involved in the areas I have described. Great benefit can accrue from dealing with the future as well as with the present.