

Fish and Wildlife Management in the New Millennium: Perspective from Federal Resource Agencies

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I am grateful for this opportunity to share some thoughts with you on the future of fish and wildlife management. To put that into context, we must understand some of the forces at play in our society—among them urban sprawl, population growth, and shifting demographics. These are going to impact the way we in the wildlife management community carry out our work and we need to be prepared for them. First, let's talk about urban sprawl and the engine that drives it—population growth. Our world is changing. Urban landscapes everywhere are expanding to accommodate a human population of 6 billion and growing. Here in the United States, population is expected to increase by 125 million people in the next 50 years. Think of that in terms of 40 more Atlantas. Imagine what our country could look like. Imagine the demands on our agriculture and natural resources to feed, clothe, and shelter our citizens. Then, of course, imagine what all this means for fish and wildlife conservation.

We only have to extrapolate what is happening to see what can happen. Right now we are witnessing the highest rate of species extinction in the history of the world. This is a warning sign that ecosystems are unraveling. If we continue as we have they are sure to give way, their support systems collapsing, leaving us with the specter of sterile landscapes of concrete on which to try to scrape up a living—to say nothing of healthy fish and wildlife populations that support our uses.

Here is something else to consider. The wildlife and fish management field remains a dominion largely of white males. The face of society at large, though, is changing. By 2050, it is expected that today's minority groups will collectively make up half of the U.S. population and women will obviously continue to be half the population. What relevance will we have if we represent an entirely different community?

Pretty stern stuff for a Monday morning, I know. But these are foreseeable changes that we must be prepared for. The one certainty is that if we do not work and act together we will fail: the entire community of interest in fish and wildlife conservation must be together.

Partnerships is the over-used term that describes this mode of action. We need to make those we have stronger, and we need to forge new ones. This is the only way I see us facing the challenges presented by the future.

To address the pressures of increased population and the relentless march of urban sprawl, there simply must be more dedicated open space. And there are promising signs that Americans are getting the message. Consider that during the 1998 elections, the Land Trust Alliance counted 148 ballot proposals on open-space funding initiatives. And of those, 84% passed, many by large margins, and for many of them, people voted to raise taxes for the sake of preserving open spaces. We are also hearing more and more about communities across the nation banding together, sometimes pooling hundreds of thousands of dollars, to buy up green spaces to keep them from development and thus preserve the character of their neighborhoods. In northern Virginia last week, slow growth candidates won. There is a limit to the amount of land that we as federal, state, or private organizations can protect in the next century. We must demonstrate to private landowners that it is valuable economically as well as aesthetically to manage fish, wildlife, and their habitats on their own lands.

I want to share with you a success story we have at the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's a program called Partners for Fish and Wildlife—I know many of you are familiar with it. I believe it is already a model private-lands conservation program. Under this program, 19,000 landowners have voluntarily asked for our help in restoring the health of their lands. Together, we have restored more than 700,000 acres of habitat and 2,000 miles of waterways. There is room for much more.

The key to the future of wildlife management is tapping into the public's desire to save wild places and wild things. To do that, though, we need to emphasize our outreach and education programs, and we need to adapt them to the changing face of America.

As good public service organizations, our ranks must reflect the face of our public. That way, all points of view have a voice within the organization, and that, in turn, will enable the organization to relate to the various segments of the American people . . . and vice versa.

The reasons we need to do this go well beyond political correctness or law. It is in our own self-interest. For public agencies—and even non-profits—our fortunes and futures rise and fall with the public's esteem, and to keep it, we must have relevance in the lives of all Americans.

In many respects the next point is of particular significance to our respective agencies and organizations. So far I have been talking about partnerships. But before we can even think about partnerships, we need to make sure we stick together ourselves. We face the very real danger of fracture within our own ranks. Our traditional constituents—the hunters and anglers—have been there from the beginning, but over the last 20 years our traditional ranks have been augmented by a strong environmental movement who values fish and wildlife management differently than many of us have traditionally. To put it gently, these two don't always get along. As they drift apart to polar positions, we are seeing tension building between them, a tension that sometimes threatens to tear us apart. We must reconcile the philosophical differences

between the hunting and fishing constituency and the environmental constituency. We need to keep both camps under one tent. We need to stay together on the common ground we share—our love for America's fish and wildlife.

If all of us who care about fish and wildlife, regardless of how that care is expressed, work together, we can accomplish amazing things. Take the Cooperative Alliance for Refuge Enhancement group, for example. Some years ago, this powerful partnership came together to support the National Wildlife Refuge System; groups as disparate as the NRA and DOW found the common ground of wanting to see the system healthy and worked successfully to begin to enhance the ability of the system to meet the challenges that face it. We need to learn from this coalition and its efforts.

There are two issues closer to home in the Fish and Wildlife Service on which we are working to get ourselves ready for the next millennium. And they deserve mention here. The first is assuring that we have a strong and healthy National Fish Hatchery System. At present: our hatchery system has a \$75 million operational deficit and a \$218 million maintenance backlog—a backlog that is 30 times greater than our annual maintenance funding. Some hatcheries are losing fish, or are unable to raise fish, because of maintenance problems. Our fisheries program is in need of rescuing and the only way I see it happening is if all of us agree on a common goal and come together at the table as did the CARE group and forge a plan of action that gets everyone on board to begin this. We have asked the Sport Fishing Boating Partnership Council to assist us in developing a strategic plan for the system. That plan will help us move forward so that we can continue to fulfill our responsibilities for mitigation, for the impacts of federal water projects, supporting tribes, and restoring native fishes and fisheries.

Natural resource management in the future must be characterized by integration not disintegration. This is true of all partnerships, but it is particularly true of the most vital partnership in the arena of fish and wildlife management—the partnership between the states and the federal government.

But this alliance is currently threatened by a situation that has been blow so out of proportion that it threatens the very foundation on which our partnership is built—the federal aid programs. The findings of a recent GAO audit have received some media attention, not all of it accurate. Here are the facts. The audit found poor record-keeping and other management deficiencies. We acknowledge these shortcomings and are diligently working to fix them. The GAO did not find, however, any evidence of corruption or illegality. Furthermore, despite what you might have read in the press or elsewhere, the Fish and Wildlife Service did not use federal aid dollars for a grant to an anti-hunting or animal rights group, nor did we ever intend to. We did not use hunter and angler dollars to pay for wolf reintroduction, spotted owl preservation, or other such programs.

I am deeply concerned that the inaccurate stories and outrageous statements that have been going around are threatening to erode the support of anglers, boaters, and hunters for the federal aid program. One newspaper article even called for the repeal of excise taxes that support Pittman-Robertson. Think about what that would mean. I

don't know the agenda of the promoters of this story, but as far as I can tell, it's not about improving fishing and hunting, strengthening conservation, or defending sportsmen.

In a few weeks, you can expect to hear about the results from a comprehensive management review conducted by a state and federal team, co-chaired by Jerry Conley and me. I ask you to listen to the problems we identify and work with us to make the federal aid programs better. These are tested, successful programs—probably the best user-pay programs ever—models for the next century, that need to be improved to make a strong partnership even more powerful to meet the daunting challenges ahead.