

Fish and Wildlife Conservation in a New Millennium and a Changed World: Anything is Possible!

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In preparing for today's session, my first step was to review what the recent leaders of this organization had to say. And I found that review to be very informative.

In 1997, Dr. Robert Bachman of Maryland was president of the Southeastern. His annual meeting address dealt with partnerships, the need for which has never been greater than at this point in our history, not only for conservation but even for national security as recent tragic events have so painfully demonstrated.

In 1998, our host for this meeting, Mr. Tom Bennett of the great commonwealth of Kentucky, was president. He reminded us of the economic importance of hunting, fishing, and other wildlife associated recreation. His words are just as striking today and probably more important. In these dark days of fear and economic recession, we must be armed with the facts and figures to demonstrate the dollars and cents—as well as the biological—significance of what we do. Today, Tom has given those to us, and their importance cannot be overstated.

In 1999, Greg Duffy of Oklahoma talked about the new opportunities and challenges related to changes in demographics, in our customer base, and in technology. He pointed out the necessity for wildlife agencies to “embrace the sciences of human dimension research and marketing as full components of modern wildlife management.” I expect we will hear much more about these topics later today.

Then, last year, Bill Woodfin of Virginia addressed us on the topic of “A vision of wildlife and fish issues in a changing world.” I don't think Bill had any idea just how much our world would be changed in the brief span since last year's meeting. He challenged us to be visionary leaders and asked: “How will future generations judge you? Whether you are a fisheries biologist, wildlife biologist, conservation officer, administrator, student, professor, or conservation organization professional,” will you be considered as maintaining the status quo or as a visionary who had the ability to positively influence our issues in a changing world?”

Now I am here in the first year of the new Millennium and our world has changed, so much so that maintenance of the status quo is no longer an option. But, partnerships, emphasis on economic realities, approaches using human dimensions research, and vision to achieve natural resource conservation objectives are more important than ever.

In the early years of the past century, then President Teddy Roosevelt, a tireless champion of conservation, stated: "There can be no greater issue than that of conservation in this country. Just as we must conserve our men and women and children, so we must conserve the resources of the land on which they live." As I hope will become apparent in my remarks, Teddy Roosevelt's statement rings with even greater authority today.

It has become almost trite to say it, but it is nonetheless true. Our world changed forever on September 11. But as Secretary of the Interior Gale Norton observed recently, it has been phenomenal to see the resurging interest among the public in our outdoor resources, in nature, since the terrorist attack.

Pat Robertson, a legendary sports writer in South Carolina, said in his column in the state newspaper shortly after the attack: "I know it is time to go outdoors to get close to nature, to feel the warmth of God's love in the sunshine." And outdoor writer Sharon Rushton stated it perhaps even more elegantly, saying: "The settings of the natural world help to ground our thoughts, to think love instead of hate, to think justice not revenge, and to face fear with courage."

For me, I think some of what Secretary Norton noted about the power of the natural world is that we can step out into creation and know at the most visceral level of our being that something so marvelous could exist only because God is good. And that is the antidote for the evil of September 11, 2001.

People have seemed to have a great need to reconnect to bedrock values, to the natural world, and its creator. These are the resources that nurtured the first Native Americans, the first European immigrants, and the most recent of the citizens to move to our shores. And we are the managers—the gatekeepers if you will—of that world. Never has our responsibility to society been so vast. Never have we as conservation professionals had such a tremendous opportunity to help heal a nation traumatized by madness and murder. And, yes, never have the obstacles to our work been greater.

Just 10 days after the attack, an article in the premier journal of scientific endeavor in the world, *Science*, (September 21, 2001) posed the alarming question: "If groups armed with little more than knives and pilot's training could bring about such mind-numbing devastation, what might they be capable of doing with weapons of mass destruction?" In response to this question, Allison MacFarlane, a nuclear security researcher at MIT stated: "Now, anything is possible." She was speaking from the negative perspective—of nuclear bombs and biological weapons, but there is equal reality in her words from a positive side too. Now, anything really is possible, and nowhere more so than in our profession.

We are seeing incredible new pressures brought upon our agencies by the looming recession, with its massive impacts on our financial resources. At the same time, we are being asked to take on more and more non-traditional roles, particularly in the enforcement and homeland security areas. Our staff in wildlife, education, natural areas, research, and every other part of our agencies are also being asked to do more to help—whether it is in ensuring the safety and security of the public as they come onto our properties and facilities or dealing with concerns over the safety of water supplies or the potential spread of diseases through wildlife populations and on and

on. We are also seeing more and more interest in our detailed knowledge of woods and waters, in our GIS databases, in our geological data, in our information on molecular biology and wildlife diseases, in our dive teams and special investigative units, and in the basic equipment that allows our folks to get out into the woods and waters. And, unfortunately, because of the nationwide financial downturn, our people are having to add to all their other worries the likelihood that some will be losing their jobs as our budgets go from being pinched to being cut to being slashed.

So, what can we do? First, we must become more innovative and open in forming new partnerships and more committed to old ones. And our partnerships must become real. I am enormously encouraged by a meeting some of us were privileged to attend with Secretary Norton last Thursday. While we didn't get the response we wanted on CARA, it was crystal clear that this administration is committed in a way we have not seen in a long time to better partnering between federal and state agencies. We should be heartened by the appointment of a state parks director—Fran Mainella from Florida—to head the National Park Service and the nomination of one of our own, Steve Williams, Secretary of the Kansas Department of Fish and Wildlife, to become new director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. For those of you who, like me, have marine fisheries responsibilities in your agency, the new Director of the National Marine Fisheries Service is Bill Hogarth, a former director of marine fisheries for the state of North Carolina. So we have a lot of players in key federal positions who come out of the state government sector, who know that it is in the states, not inside the Beltway, that the work of conservation really gets done.

But we must also explore stronger and larger partnerships with the private sector, NGOs and private business. Partnering is no longer nice to do or just good politics, it is essential if we are to get our jobs done; it is vital to our survival.

Flexibility also must become our watchword. Our agencies must become characterized by flexibility, agility and mobility, not bureaucracy, rigidity and ossification. For example, there is probably no greater single challenge facing the members of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies than the impacts of human population growth and urbanization upon wildlife and fisheries habitat. That's something that hasn't changed since September 11. But what has changed is that, all of a sudden, due to the economic slowdown, there may be a lot more landowners interested in selling to conservation buyers. At the same time, we have less monies to work with to acquire habitat. A classic catch-22. While I certainly don't have the answer, I fall back on what my father told me. When confronted with the financial realities of costs to send me to the college I had chosen, my parents and I realized we had a problem, your basic lack of money problem. So, being all of 17 years old at the time, I put on my best voice of manhood and said, "Dad, it costs too much, so I just won't go to college." And my father looked at me and said, "Don't you worry son. I may not have any money, but I'm full of arrangements." And that's what we have to be in these unusual times: full of arrangements. We can't look to just the old solutions, we have to find new ones. We must use and leverage what financial and human resources we have, regardless of their perceived restrictions, in new and innovative ways, whether in law enforcement, wildlife, fisheries, biological diversity, marine, or

wherever. So we must use our resources wherever they are to their best effect. In South Carolina, we are losing about 2.5 acres to development for every person added to the state's population.

Another thing that we must all keep in the forefront of our thinking is the importance of a growing and healthy economy in each of our states—not only for our citizens, but for our natural resources as well. Our ability to perform our jobs depends to an enormous extent on an educated, informed and environmentally aware public. Survey after survey has indicated that a jobless person cares little for the environment, while those who are employed are more inclined to care for and work toward the protection of our environment. Therefore, we must operate under the premise that economic development and job opportunities are important to natural resource protection across our country.

When talking about economic development, it's essential to discuss factors such as water treatment, sewer treatment, highways and roads, labor force availability, education, training, and other issues vital to providing the type of infrastructure conducive to economic development and growth. At least as important, if not more so, is the background against which all these factors are projected—each state's environment and the quality and diversity of its natural resources. Simply put, our agencies are in the quality of life business, and businesses invest and bring their people to places that are known for high quality of life. Our responsibility is to ensure that the drumbeat for the war on terrorism and economic stimulation does not drown out the steady rhythm of the direct financial contributions of fish and wildlife resources to local economies. Tom Bennett has done a terrific job of reviewing the substantial magnitude of the fish and wildlife industries in our states. They are significant economic engines in their own rights. And, to a large degree, our natural resources are amenities that can be used to market each of our states as attractive locations and good environments for other business. The resources we manage are vitally important to the economic body as well as to the psyche and soul of this country, but nobody else is going to sell that message for us. We've got to do it ourselves. And selling is not a job that traditionally has been associated with fish and wildlife agencies.

One of the two main protagonists in the seminal movie about American musical culture, "The Blues Brothers," the Elwood Blues character (I believe) responded to a question about what he and his brother were doing with the straightforward statement, "We're on a mission from God." And that ladies and gentlemen is the best mission statement for any fish and wildlife agency in the country. We are on a mission from God to protect and conserve his creation and use it for the betterment of the quality of life for all people. To accomplish that mission, we must form stronger, broader, and more innovative partnerships with more and different kinds of groups than we perhaps ever envisioned. We must become incredibly flexible and opportunistic, taking on with relish the new duties required of us in this changed world but also taking advantage of new opportunities to find the resources necessary to do our jobs. In the words of my dad, we must be full of arrangements. And we have got to get out and sell our product. There is no product more important, more basic to this nation. Everybody needs it and everybody should want it, but we've got to tell them about it.

Today, I am proud to be an American, I am proud to be a conservationist, I am proud to be a member of a Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, and I am especially proud to be going about our mission from God. As Mark Duda put it so well in our session Saturday, what we do is now more relevant than ever before. We are facing more challenges than ever before, but absolutely anything is possible as we work together for the future of wildlife conservation!