

EDUCATION VS. ENTERTAINMENT?

by

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I think it was Dorothy Parker who once came up with a bit of homely philosophy which pretty well sums up the point of what I'm going to say today. She said, "When rape is inevitable, relax and enjoy it."

The program topic is "the education aspect of a conservation magazine, as opposed to the entertainment aspect" or something like that.

There's only one thing wrong with a title like that, other than the fact that it takes a graduate of the Harvard School for the Totally Bemused to figure it out. The one thing wrong is that it presupposes education and entertainment are mutually exclusive.

Just because you're gonna get figuratively raped each month by the Fish and Game Magazine is no reason why you shouldn't be able to relax and enjoy it.

At least this is the philosophy we've always operated by in Missouri and I think we've done rather well - we have a circulation of 250,000 and climbing.

Of course, the first point raised is that our magazine is free. We give it to any adult Missourian who requests it. We figure that our readership is somewhat over a half-million for each issue — impressive, but considering that Missouri has nearly five million people, not nearly good enough.

Still, when you have a half-million editors looking over your shoulder, whether they paid dues or not, you tend to give thought pretty carefully to what goes into your magazine.

I am not a magazine editor and probably never will be one. I consider myself a writer since that is all I know how to do, other than father children and play the dulcimer and there is absolutely no job market for either of those avocations.

But I do consider myself competent in the field of writing. I should be — I'm 39 years old and have been training to be a writer since I was a freshman in high school some 25 years ago. If I haven't learned what kind of written word interests people by now, I never will.

As I look at the other state conservation magazines, I am struck with the awesome range of competence. Some are so gruesome that if they weren't supported by state funds, they'd vanish like smoke. It's a miracle to me that the taxpayers or sportsmen or whoever is footing the bill in those states don't march in a body on the Fish and Game Commission building, complete with a bucket of steaming tar, an old down comforter and an ash rail, shouting for the trembling body of the editor.

I find photos of big fish or dead deer with their tongues hanging out. After 13 years as the sports editor of a daily newspaper, I can tell you that a picture of a stubble-faced rube with a dirty T-shirt and a cigarette hanging out of one side of his mouth, holding a dry largemouth bass is about as popular as the bowling scores. I don't think it qualifies either as education or entertainment.

Obviously the people who buy permits go out and kill things — I do it myself every chance I get. But I don't think we help dignify our game creatures by running pictures of their defunct bodies. I also don't think we help our image, if any, with the always volatile anti-hunting element.

Then there are stories which obviously are put there to make people think of the good old Fish and Game people in the same breath they think of Raquel Welch. You've all seen and perhaps even run articles which are publicity puffs. If so, be ashamed. You notice, the guys who are most successful with women are not the ones who talk about it all the time, with the exception of Joe Namath.

Sure, we write about our Department in a favorable light in the Missouri Conservationist. But we don't beat our chest. We figure if we write about one of

our programs accurately and interestingly, the impression that we are good people will be left with the reader without any effort on our part. If the program is good, the impression is good. If the program is not good, then don't write about it.

This brings up what I think is an important point. The best articles I read are about people, rather than programs. I think this is a basic of this fragile process of combining education and entertainment in a conservation magazine.

We are a Department of Conservation which is a bureau and if there is anything more dull than a bureau, I don't know what it is. But within that dull old bureau are a lot of very interesting people who breath and pulse blood and say funny, entertaining, wise things that other people should hear. These interesting people sometimes even become directors and assistant or associate directors, as incredible as that may seem. They run divisions and they make field surveys and sometimes they are astounded if you go to them and talk to them like people and want to know what they think.

The New Yorker magazine does this sort of in-depth personality sketch better than anyone. Exploring the thought and personality of someone gives a remarkably good and stable foundation for exploring that person's program — which is what you're really after.

A straight reporting job would explain, for example, the workings of a goose swapping operation which has the long-range potential to create a "short migration" which is an annual trip by a flock of birds from one place to another, year in, year out. This is an interesting story and probably would remain so even in the hands of a hack reporter.

But somebody had to dream up this project. Let's say it was one of your biologists, a guy with a head on his shoulders. Let's say he talks with a sorghum accent, plays guitar and is equally at home singing Jambalaya or banding Canada geese on Hudson's Bay. The potential already is there for a story which lives and breaths and has personality and still tells you all the conservation information you would have gotten from the reporter.

To my way of thinking a conservation magazine should avoid like a social disease the temptation to let biologists explain anything. Far better that a trained writer should interpret what a biologist has to say. We're fortunate in that we have some biologists who can write. And this is true in other states as well. But such people are rare jewels and should be cherished. The normal biologist, no matter how expert he is in his field, writes like old people footrace.

If the average American, beset with television, radio, beer and popcorn and a host of other distractions can't take time to read the professionally-produced evening paper thoroughly, how the hell is he going to take time to wade through a deadly dull article by a fisheries biologist, replete with charts designed to show that bleeding shiners are more prevalent in even-numbered years.

What's more, one such atrocity in any given issue will cast a pall over the rest of the magazine and, if you have enough such articles, your average reader is likely to tell you just where you can send your magazine...sideways.

What I am trying to say with this entire presentation is that a conservation magazine must, above all else, be readable. It must be entertaining. You are throwing your state's money away if you do not print a magazine that people will read. And this does not in any way imply or say that you must abandon conservation education.

But you can't force feed education to people. They have unplumbed depths of apathy and the only way to wade through all that is to slicker them — to fool them into thinking they're being entertained when really you're impregnating them with an idea or a concept.

We used to run articles by Werner Nagel which were, when all the hillbilly humor was boiled out, pure gems of conservation philosophy. Presented

straight, they would have been as tough to swallow as Ozark goat meat, but when buttered with the apparent aimless ramblings, in country vernacular, by a character named Cy Littlebee, they went down as smooth as Cream of Wheat.

I write a number of articles each year which are only marginally educational, but which I hope are entertaining. They are humorous, mainly designed to make people laugh. If I can slip in a message, I do it, but I don't make it obvious or strain to do it. A typical example would be an article I did about a backpack trip on a wildlife area. Basically, it was a humor story about three guys who got caught in foul weather. But I also managed to let people know that a wildlife area was not synonymous with a hunting area. There were other activities possible. At that time, we were taking criticism from the anti-hunting screwballs for wanting to buy land to let people kill things.

There are several other reasons why I write primarily humor articles and why our editors run them. One is that I can make myself and, by association, my Department a personality. I am known as the guy who always screws up on some sort of outing. While that is not an especially coveted reputation, it is helpful because it generates sympathy, interest, appreciation of my problems — which I hope are everyone's problems. This in turn generates encounters with our reading public which gives me a chance to score some real conservation points.

I hope that my experiences in the outdoors are universal — that the only real difference between what happens to me and what happens to most of our readers is in my ability to tell about it interestingly. If that is true, and I think it is, then a reader's acceptance of me as a fellow stumbler into the pitfalls of life will lead him to accept my conservation suggestions more readily.

I don't know how prevalent the incidence of administrative tampering is among the magazines of other states, but I suspect it is considerable. Perhaps the director or his delegate has to approve the magazine before it is sent to the printer. Or there may be other pressures which emasculate and destroy the value of the magazine as a tool.

In this regard, we in Missouri are incredibly fortunate. I have come to the conclusion that none of our directorate, nor any of our commissioners reads *The Conservationist*. We have run articles that said things that our wheels would rather have left unsaid, but there never has been the first puff of flak as a result. Not too long ago, I wrote a story about grouse which aroused some interest. Someone wrote one of our commissioners congratulating us on our efforts with grouse. The commissioner thanked the writer, then wrote our grouse biologist asking just what it was we were doing with grouse. Obviously he had not read the article.

This is good — I think those with power to stop publication of what is good should not be allowed to read the magazine, even if they are your boss. I suppose this is impractical and isn't likely to occur. But the administration which avoids saying anything that might offend someone will avoid saying anything — and the result will be evident to every reader.

There is no way you can please all of the people any of the time. I wrote an article of what I thought was high good humor praising my wife for being patient with me — for staying home with the kids while I was out lollygagging through the woods. I thought it was the most innocuous story I'd ever written, the kind of thing that wouldn't offend a Baptist preacher.

Well, the magazine got a vitriolic letter from a woman's libber accusing me of male chauvinism and chewing me out for having five children. I requested permission to answer the broad, but Jim Keefe very wisely wouldn't let me do it.

It seems to me that the job of a magazine editor is a tough one which requires the patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon and the guts of a burglar. A good magazine is the reflection of a good editor.

I assume you all get the exchanges with the other states. Sit down some afternoon and leaf through them. You'll quickly find the good ones and the bad ones. The bad ones are the ones that have a pretty cover behind which is nothing. It's like putting a marble facade in front of a garbage dump. Either the editor is not working at his job or he's not being allowed to.

I think a good editor should probe his own department and around the state to find where writing talent lies and should then proselyte good material. Make no promises, other than to give the material full consideration. If necessary, return it for rewrites, but make use of available talent. Some of our best contributors are people with specialized talents who write out of the goodness of their heart. They include veterinarians with advice on the care of hunting dogs, doctors with advice on the care of outdoorsmen, outdoorsmen with advice on everything.

I think they offer a welcome change of pace from our own staff where there is a danger that familiarity may breed reader contempt.

There are a number of ways to convince your bosses that you should be allowed to run your magazine the way it should be run, none of which are easy.

The best convincer is performance. We don't have much of a problem with tampering in Missouri because our magazine works and our administration knows it does. It has sense enough not to mess with a good thing. But what about the magazine that never has had a chance to get off the ground?

I doubt if there really is much hope for these forlorn children of the publishing industry. It would take the I&E chief with rare talents to go in and turn a loser into a winner and most I&E chiefs of that caliber have no desire to get caught up in a losing proposition.

Obviously funding is the first requisite. You can't print a top quality magazine with just enough money to rent a mimeograph machine at U.S. Rents-It. You can put out a good magazine with a limited staff, but it isn't easy. You can't put out a good magazine with a dozen bureaucrats leaning over your shoulder.

It takes guts to go to the boss man and tell him to leave you alone; that he hired you to put out a good publication and you could do it if you were allowed to. If you're lucky and don't get fired, you'll be given a chance to improve things. You'd better do it.

It amazes me that after all these years, there still are conservation agencies which don't realize the value of good public relations. I do understand that the average administrator has an unreal concept of what makes the news process go because I see it in Missouri. They vaguely feel we in Information can turn news flow on and off like water from a tap, that we can control what is or isn't said by the news media. Well, we can't and that's good, even if they do sting us once in a while.

We have technical people who are made uneasy when we give out biological data in what they consider imprecise and vaguely frivolous language—but they are smart enough to recognize that we in Information know better than they what people will read and, even more important, they are smart enough to know that getting people to read about conservation is more important than satisfying their offended sense of scientific preciseness.

Judging from what I see in other magazines, the word hasn't gotten around. There still are plenty of articles that are better suited for a presentation to a biologists' convention. A state conservation magazine must make a choice—is it going to publish for the benefit of the technical community or for the benefit of the average schmuck who buys permits or has a passing interest in conservation? It can't be both.

Joe Average will not read an article on limnology or deer population dynamics unless it is presented in easy readable style with lots of high good humor, non-technical illustrations and points of relevance to him. He wants to

know how this study is going to affect his deer hunting or bass fishing. Otherwise he would care less whether southern Missouri mosshorned bucks grow their moss on the north side of their antlers.

Given some good writers, good photography, what is left?

If I had my choice of talent for a state conservation magazine, I think first I'd go for a talented makeup man. Someone who can lay out a goodlooking magazine can make some really shabby material look good. Most of the state magazines I've thumbed through have the opposite effect — there is some good writing or photography which is destroyed by dumb makeup.

Most makeup is as gray as a coalminer's laundry. The columns are crammed with type and the pictures are cramped and constipated. The best writing on earth would look like a Pittman-Robertson report given that kind of treatment.

So, in progressive order, I'm saying that we should be in business to educate the public about conservation, but since the public is in no mood for education, we have to sugar-coat our messages to make them seem like entertainment. This sugar coating includes good writing, given good dress-up in the form of photography and makeup.

So there really is no question of entertainment versus education — what we're after is education, using entertainment as a tool to get there. One is the means to the other.

Now is when I come to the part of my talk when I make people really mad. I'm going to show some slides to illustrate some of the points I've made and I'm sure I'll step on some toes. But remember --- it's my opinion and may not be right.

The first thing I talked about was the photos of dead creatures. In *The Pennsylvania Angler* we find three pages of dead fish and semi-live fishermen (Slides one, two, three).

As if that weren't bad enough, the same magazine shows me its annual report (slides four, five, six) in gruesome detail, and if I have not already gone to sleep, it gives me two pages of readers letters. (Slide seven). Now, I'm not totally against reader letters if they make a point or give the magazine a chance to make one. But letters like the ones marked are a waste of my time and I don't think have any place taking up the priceless space allotted us each month to get our message across.

The Kansas magazine is not bad. It has some excellent writing, pretty good photography and makeup. But it also has a column for readers to comment (slide eight). Here's one titled "neato!" written by a third grader in gee-whizy style. (Closeup slide nine). "That sure was a neato article, 'Kestrels those feathered opportunists.' I liked the first part of it...." and so on. It doesn't take up much space, but the space might just as well be blank. If we printed all the letters like this that we get, we'd have no room for anything else and since I like to see my stuff in print, I wouldn't go for that at all.

As a contrast to what I've been saying about reader letters, here's the best one I've found. (slide 10) Louisiana's magazine has a page of letters, but every one in this particular issue at least asks a question of general interest which is answered and the page itself is attractively made up. I can't really quibble with this approach if it is consistent and avoids back-patting or pointless letters. We do a similar thing in our "Almanac" page which deals with short items. By the way, Louisiana has a nice magazine with good photography which is somewhat hampered by some funny color reproduction. Maybe that can't be helped.

(Slide 11) While I'm sure that vast numbers of Alabamans know Doc Attaway, is he worth a page of the magazine? Or put it this way, if he spent 41 years in the service of the state, then he is worth a personalized story with a better picture treatment than this one. We don't get any insight about Mr. Attaway from this story. Who is he? What makes him tick? What are his conservation

philosophies? Especially what are his conservation philosophies. Let's make the retirement of Doc Attaway worth something.

(Slide 12) Besides being as gray as Pittsburgh snow, this spread is hamstrung by an indefinable picture which we can identify only by reading the article. It is a tree frog, though it looks more like a blob of disease germs as seen through a microscope. The man's dirty thumbnail is in focus, but the tree frog is not.

(Slide 13) This issue of Florida Wildlife is a mixture of good and bad. The writing is good, but the makeup is poor and certainly isn't going to grab a reader. Contrast this gray vista with a similar article in Kentucky Wildlife. (Slide 14) it's not great by a long shot, but it certainly beats the Florida makeup. (Slide 14—girl) This is to distract you while I bridge to the next slide.

I could go on almost endlessly with good and bad examples and probably wind up with everyone in the room mad at me if they aren't already. But let's face it, we in conservation information are trying to feed an apathetic public information in which it has only a moderate interest. And we're in competition with Field and Stream and Playboy and a lot of other publications with bigger budgets and higher paid talent. We go into a reader's home with a couple of strikes against us.

If we want to disseminate conservation information, we need to snag readers just as an angler snags a redhorse sucker. Let's see how some of the better magazines do it:

(Slide 15) Probably any waterfowler would read this anyway, but excellent makeup will draw in some readers who wouldn't otherwise try this South Dakota article. And it's in black and white. (Slide 16) South Dakota also does a fine job with color as evidence by this imaginative centerspread. While the photography is good, this really is a triumph for the layout man.

(Slide 17) New York makes you pay for its magazine, but you get something for your money, including beautiful reproductions of some nice outdoor paintings in this centerspread.

(Slide 18) Texas also charges, but color and photography are super. Here's a dramatic black and white photo which points right into a well-written article with a catchy, readable title.

(Slide 19) West Virginia offers the prettiest color reproduction in the country by the best photographer of scenery, Arnout Hyde, Junior. It's not a hard-core conservation magazine, but it is a good one.

Finally, I think Iowa has come up with perhaps the ultimate in publishing the conservation message. It is perhaps the most far-thinking one of all, the message of tomorrow, at least the way things are running in this country now.

(Slide 20) Iowa published a completely blank page recently. Thank you for your attention and I hope I stirred up some thought.

THE END