

General Session

Presidential Address

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Proc. Annu. Conf. Southeast. Assoc. Fish and Wildl. Agencies 46:1-3

It is indeed a pleasure and an honor to address this 46th annual meeting of the Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies.

Did you realize that this is one of the largest wildlife conferences in this nation? We are here to enjoy it, to share information, and to take this information back to our respective states to continually improve our wildlife programs.

And I would like to thank Dr. Andrew Sansom and his fine staff for providing this opportunity. We are hosting this meeting next year in Georgia and have already put a great deal of effort into it. So, I can certainly appreciate the effort it takes to host this meeting.

I have made some observations concerning wildlife agencies that I would like to share with you. The "Environmental Movement" or the "Green Movement," that we are all familiar with, is spreading across this nation like wildfire. It is unbelievable how contagious this movement is. People that I have known all my life that never had any interest in the environment or outdoors are into recycling and are becoming environmental activists. We, as wildlife managers, have the opportunity to make tremendous strides as a result of this movement. We must get on the bandwagon and provide leadership and guidance. If we don't do it, someone else will. And I am uncomfortable with some of the groups that are involved. Many of the parties are opposed to traditional wildlife management as we know it.

We cannot sit back on our laurels and boast about past achievements. Sure, we have done a great job increasing deer herds, turkey flocks, establishing Canada geese flocks, stocking striped bass, hybrid bass, etc. There is no question about that. And the hunters and fishermen know what a great job that we have done because they have always been our customers.

But the market is changing. There are different customers that have evolved from this environmental movement. This group is not really interested in our past achievements. They have a tremendous interest in wildlife, but not in the traditional consumptive areas that wildlife managers have provided. This new potential customer also offers an opportunity to greatly increase support for our agencies' programs.

This group has heard that we are not agencies that really have all wildlife's

best interest at heart. They have heard that we only manage game animals and game fish. And that we really care little about all wildlife.

The next question is, How are we responding to these allegations? Are we focusing on our past performances? Are we saying that hunters and fishermen are funding our programs and we don't have funding to implement the new programs this new customer is asking of our agencies?

We are at a "moment of truth." What are our actions reflecting? We all know that we are evaluated on our actions and not our words. Are we walking our talk? That's the question we must ask ourselves.

I recently attended a workshop on the status and management of neotropical migratory birds. Based on survey information, it is evident that many species are declining. Who is voicing these concerns? Why haven't the states been playing a leadership role in this effort?

Let me give you an example of an area that we can improve in. Information on population trends on neotropical migrations is based on surveys conducted by volunteers. Every state has numerous surveys conducted annually. How many state wildlife biologists are involved? In Georgia, we have only one, our nongame coordinator. Yet, we are the agency responsible for managing all wildlife in the state.

We might respond by saying that these birds are migrants and should be monitored by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Don't we all run dove call lines as well as participate in monitoring migratory waterfowl populations? We are not sending a clear message to these potential customers that we have all wildlife's best interest at heart. We are not walking our talk.

I contend that we cannot wait for new funding. We are asking these new customers to pay us for a product they haven't seen. It's like saying "Trust me, I'm from the government and I'll deliver the product you want." First, we must show these new customers what we can do for them. They need more examples. We must show them wildlife trails, wildlife viewing areas, put more emphasis on guided fish and wildlife education tours and wildlife demonstration areas on state lands, have butterfly/hummingbird garden demonstrations at all facilities. These are just some examples of products that we can provide to these new customers. When these customers see more of our products, the funding will definitely follow. But first, we must earn their trust and respect.

State agencies have become involved with neotropical migrants and seeking funding for nongame programs through the International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. These areas are being addressed, but the involvement was just a recent happening.

Many states are doing a great job at developing these new products. And all of us are certainly moving in this direction. But are we communicating this to the public? It might be the best kept secret around.

We must all do a better job of informing the public of our programs and we must get much more involved in education. Within this environmental movement, there is a tremendous lack of accurate information. We, as wildlife agencies, must educate the public on wildlife issues. We must make this a priority. This is one of

our biggest challenges in Georgia. On one of our responsive management surveys in Georgia, we asked the public if they supported more I&E efforts. Over 80% supported increasing the number of fish and wildlife education centers, guided tours and trips, adult education, and education in the schools. There is a plea for information. They want to be more knowledgeable.

I would like to hire a professional marketing firm to develop an I&E campaign and hire professional I&E people to implement it. But, we are in a survival mode, like every other wildlife agency. We are establishing I&E as a priority and will be making this a part of every employee's duties. That's the only way we can make it work.

The issues that I have mentioned are just another challenge for us as wildlife professionals. There will always be challenges. There is no question in my mind that we will be successful in meeting these challenges. I feel good about where we are going because I know that you will not find any more dedicated people anywhere than in the wildlife profession. This is our opportunity to advance forward and show these new customers through our actions that we are wildlife conservation agencies and not simply game and fish agencies.