

General Session

Presidential Address: A Vision for Wildlife and Fish Issues in a Changing World

William L. Woodfin, Jr., *Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries, 4010 W. Broad Street, Richmond, VA 23230*

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Secretary Jenkins has just delivered to you some very thoughtful remarks about change, and I am sure that we are all in agreement with his comment that if there is one constant in life, it is change. Most of us generally feel comfortable with the status quo, but it is a changing environment that provides new experiences. Whether it is a change in society, a change in how we manage fish and wildlife populations, a change in how we promote and market our agencies, or a change in our climate, the world around us is evolving into something different than it was yesterday and it will be even more different tomorrow. While change becomes the vehicle by which we achieve new horizons, it is a vision that really tells us where we are going. Without a vision, change is just “change for change sake.”

Several states represented in this room today had vision for how their agencies would be funded. Missouri led the way years ago with their 1/8th of a cent state sales tax. They were then followed by Arkansas and Virginia who both implemented their own alternative and yet innovative funding programs. I doubt that there is anyone in the audience who has not heard of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act that has become known as CARA. Regardless of the final fate of CARA with Congress, the process of seeking creative wildlife funding has led to a tremendous discussion of the roles and responsibilities of 21st Century wildlife management programs. The CARA discussions have taken us to constituencies that are new and have led to changes in how most of us view future wildlife programs. This does not mean that we have or will abandon traditional values or programs, but by reaching out and embracing new opportunities, we become stronger and better.

One hundred years ago, when we turned the corner on the 20th Century, where was wildlife management? The simple answer is there was none and wildlife populations were being decimated by activities such as market hunting. The truth of the matter is, most of the organizations represented here today were the result of a public outcry to protect the nation's wildlife. When Teddy Roosevelt in 1893 said, “There is no objection to a reasonable amount of hunting . . . the encouragement of a proper hunting spirit, instead of being incompatible with a love of nature and wild things, offers the best guarantee for the preservation of wild things,” he was expressing a vision of

conservation. When key legislators in our Congress are debating the advantages of programs such as CARA, they are doing so because of their vision to respond to a changing America.

To the students in our audience, I ask you, "What is your vision of where you want to be 20 years from now? Is your vision challenged by both the successes and failures of the past and does it recognize the impacts that technology yet to be developed will have on you?"

To our colleagues from our universities, what is your vision for the students that you teach? Are you instilling in them the ability to think outside of the box and to respond to a constantly changing world? There is an interesting story of a husband and wife who each year cooked a Thanksgiving ham. Before cooking the ham, the wife always cut off each end. After several years, the husband asked her why she did this. Her reply was that was how she was taught by her mother. Upon asking her mother why she cut off each end, the mother replied that was how her mother taught her. When grandma was finally asked why she cut off each end, her reply was that she did not have a pan large enough to fit the ham. To those of you who are teachers of young minds, are you teaching the ham story or are you challenging our future professionals how to think for themselves?

For the rest of us, how are we ensuring that we have both the vision for the future, while maintaining a respect for the past? Are we setting new goals for both ourselves and our organizations, or are we plowing in those same old familiar fields? Are we allowing our employees the freedom and encouragement to advance new ideas or are we also guilty of cutting off the ends of our Thanksgiving ham?

When people in the year 2050 or 2075 look back at how successful we have or have not been in dealing with a changing world, how will they judge us? Have we seen what others have not seen? Have we looked across the time spectrum and imagined new and innovative ways of doing business better? If so, we will be in a great position to tackle fish and wildlife issues in a changing world.

Our next speakers will discuss natural resource management in a changing society, climate change in the southeast, and creative marketing for wildlife and fisheries agencies. All of these are topics that would not have been discussed 20 years ago.

In closing, 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?