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The Value of Teamwork

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Wildlife and fisheries professionals are generally “loners.” Most often, we get into the profession because we love not only the outdoors, but also the solitude often associated with our job. And most universities perpetuate that by the way we’re educated – usually not as teams, but as individuals. Even when we occasionally have team projects, it’s easier to do it ourselves than to coordinate with the group. And the height of frustration is when some other team members don’t do their part.

But employers really like team players. They like not only people who can put a team together and lead it effectively (by getting along well and keeping everyone motivated), but when the situation arises, that same person being able to serve as a team player with someone else in charge.

Why do employers like team players? First, when a few people from different backgrounds tackle a problem, they bring the greatest body of knowledge, experience and skills to the task. Second, it costs less in the long run, because there is less need for trial and error – somebody on the team has probably been there, done that. And thirdly, the end product is more widely accepted because more people are involved – thus more “buy-in.”

A North Dakota State football coach once told me that if he were an employer, he’d rather hire an offensive lineman than any other player. Their position demands that they work hard for the team, not for the glory. Few people watch them during a play – all eyes are on the offensive backs, and the defense.

From my vantage point, there is a tremendous pool of talent and expertise in our current stable of Extension wildlife and fisheries specialists. And while many of you are good at several aspects of your job, you’re typically better at some aspects than others. There may be some parts of your job you don’t know much about at all. This presents a good opportunity to develop teamwork with specialists from other states, for three reasons: 1) to get the job done, 2) to learn from others, so you can do it next time, and 3) to make some great friends and networks. I’d like to share some examples from my career:

SE 4-H Wildlife Publications

A group of about five of us, with an Atlantic Richfield grant, took an enormous 4-H wildlife and fisheries literature base (scattered leaflets on various topics from a couple dozen states) and developed a national set, published and sold by the National 4-H Council. Several million copies were sold in the first few years. States with wildlife and fisheries specialists used them, and states without a specialist had access to them as well.

Trapping Beavers

When Tennessee’s beaver population started causing problems, I invited Jim Miller, then a wildlife specialist in Arkansas, to come over and help me train the state’s wildlife officers on how to trap beavers. I had trapped beavers a great deal in graduate school, but Jim had a technique unique to west Tennessee flatlands. The training session was extremely successful, and Jim and I developed a friendship that week, 33 years ago, that still continues today.

Regional 4-H Wildlife Leader Training Conferences

Some 30 years ago, I received a USFWS grant to conduct a southeast regional 4-H Wildlife Volunteer Leader Training Conference. I invited specialists from other states to help me. That pattern was

repeated by New York in the Northeast, Wisconsin and Kentucky in the Midwest, Idaho in the Northwest, and California in the Southwest. There were always multiple state specialists attending each one, and I was fortunate enough to attend all of them. I think I can safely say that these events spawned a whole new interest in 4-H wildlife and fisheries projects. I know I can safely say that friendships among those specialists blossomed.

National WHEP Contest

In 1977, I wrote a manual and put together a state wildlife judging contest, basically as a way to teach kids the importance of fish and wildlife habitat. I'd already observed how effectively other judging contests (e.g., soils, livestock) taught subject matter. The contest is the "hook" to get kids to learn. There were some growing pains, but with the help of Extension agents, the contest evolved and became highly successful in Tennessee.

The USFWS gave me a grant to conduct a training session for other state specialists and agents in the Southeast. They liked it, and together we developed a Southeast contest, and then a national contest. As specialists from around the country became involved, it grew and improved. Today, the National WHEP Contest is one of the premier 4-H events.

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage Manual

Several years ago, Bob Timm and others pulled together experience from people around the country to put together a much-needed manual on wildlife damage control. Highly successful, it has since been printed several times, revised, and placed on CD and on the Internet. It sits in a handy spot in the office of many county extension agents throughout the country.

Other Successes

There have been many other success stories involving Extension wildlife and fisheries teamwork – Eastern Wildlife Damage Workshops, 4-H Shooting Sports, to name a couple. Jim Miller can relate many more. Perhaps one of the greatest examples of teamwork involves the partnership between Extension and the USFWS. Years ago, Jim Miller and Duncan McDonald put together a simple partnership: USFWS provided the money, while Extension wildlife and fisheries specialists provided the product (leaflets, manuals, slide sets, videos, CDs, etc.) and the means to disperse them, through Extension's wonderful system, to the end users. USFWS knew Extension's credibility was high among farmers, the agriculture industry, and rural families.

Now's Your Chance!

Today, with weak budgets and unfilled positions, the need to build teams to get the job done is more important than ever. Meetings like this one provide an excellent opportunity to develop a powerful network base, from which, to build teamwork. Don't worry about who gets the credit – there'll be plenty to go around. Besides, most administrators put a high premium on good teamwork. The main thing is to get the job done the best, most efficient, and least expensive way. The personal rewards also include a few out-of-state trips, but most importantly, close professional friendships that will last a lifetime. I can honestly say I have friends in every state in the United States. Of all the neat things about my career, that's what I treasure most.