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WHO ARE OUR CLIENTELE?

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The title of this session asks us to address what our clientele want, but I think we first need to address a more basic issue—who are our clientele, or at least who might they be in the future? We've given this a lot of thought in Texas in the past year or so, as we find that we have one of the most rapidly growing and changing states in the nation. In my position as department head in Texas, it is imperative that I be aware of those changes, and that I provide leadership as to how our extension program adapts to that change. When I wear my North American University Fish and Wildlife Programs president hat, I find my perspective changes to those of national issues, such as our changing demographics, public attitudes towards higher education and extension, and the ever-changing structure and influence of our national governmental institutions.

Before I discuss who "our" clientele are, I need to mention a bit about the demographics of Texas and of America. Our country is becoming quite different than the one you and I grew up in, or the one we were trained and educated to serve. Some knowledge about our changing society will help us understand who our clientele are and what their needs might be.

Although the U.S. population continues to increase, the rate of population growth is slowing, except in states like Texas, California, and Florida. There the growth rate is increasing, largely due to migration from other states, legal immigrants, and the high birth rate of the latter population. In fact, the population of Texas is expected to double in the next 30 years. The middle class white or Anglo population is aging, as the baby boomers hit their 50s. Thus the fastest growing segments of our population are age groups 25–44 and 65+ (Murdock 1996). We are becoming a population of younger minorities and older white folks. Nationally, 1/3 of Americans under 35 belong to minority groups, whereas only 1/5 of those over 35 do (Edmondson 1994). In Texas, 40% of the population are currently ethnic minorities, and within the next 15 years, no single group will hold an ethnic majority in the state.

Another phenomenon is urbanization. In Texas, 80% of the population lives in cities, and about 60% of those people live in just four cities (Murdock 1996). Cities are growing faster than other locations, and the largest cities are growing the fastest. Surprisingly, however, in some areas of the U.S. where retirement and recreation offer opportunities, small communities are growing as well (Edmondson 1994).

In Texas, 28% of households are non-family units, and 15% are single parent units, of which 77% are headed by women. In fact, nationally, 61% of children will spend part of their lives in a single parent household before age 18. Nearly half of the children of single parent households headed by women live in poverty (Edmonson 1994). Nationally, about 25% of children are born out of wedlock, although that rate is as high as 40% in some southern states.

Unfortunately, this shift to a more urbanized, highly concentrated, predominately ethnic population with limited economic resources may not portend well for those interested in natural resources. In Texas, although fishing license sales have been stable, hunting license sales have been declining 3% per year since 1987 (Texas Parks and Wildl. Dep. 1992). Less that 11% of anglers and 6% of hunters in Texas are minorities. Twenty-seven percent of Hispanic and 58% of black Texans have never visited a state park. In fact, the profile of a person least likely to visit a state park, hunt or fish is a female single parent (Texas Parks and Wildl. Dep. 1992). I would also argue that natural resource issues are not high on the agenda of most urban minority people. Larger issues, such as education, employment, health care, and crime dominate the political agenda.

Nonetheless, this climate in Texas and the U.S. offers both a challenge and an opportunity. Some rural areas are on a rebound, due to phenomena I'll explain shortly. Likewise, our traditional clientele face new challenges for which we can offer guidance. And finally, the growing urban population beckons us to provide services as well.

For a frame of reference, I define our clientele in four categories, based on where they used to live, work and recreate, and where they do now:

Rural People Living In Rural Areas—These are our traditional clientele, the farming and ranching landowners. These are the people who brought us to the dance—our traditional clientele. Two dramatic trends affect how we now approach this group. We know that this group has been declining—to about 1.2% of the U.S. population. In Texas and some other states, most of these people are small producers—1/2 of all Texas farms have sales of less than $5,000 per year (Albrecht, 1990). Only 1.5% of farms have total gross incomes of over $100,000, and they produce 32.7.% of total agricultural sales. However, both small and large landowners need a new type of information than what we've provided in the past. The Golden Cheeked Warbler episode in Texas, the Spotted Owl conflict in the Pacific Northwest, and similar issues remind us that these clientele need help to deal with the Endangered Species Act, the Clean Water Act, and other

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regulations. They specifically need help with community-based approaches to dealing with these regulations, such as conservation easements, local Habitat Conservation Plans, and Safe Harbor agreements. In addition, as commodity supports dwindle over the next 7 years, due to the 1996 Farm Bill, these clientele will need to be advised on alternative income opportunities to help them keep their land. Income from hunting and fishing, birding, nature-tourism, bed-and-breakfasts, and conservation easements will not save all of rural America from economic decline, but we must provide assistance for these clientele to avail themselves of these opportunities if they can. As a sidebar, demographers speak of a "widow belt" stretching though Texas north through the plains states - a high population of the widows of farmers and ranchers, who still live on their family land. I doubt if any of our agencies have addressed the specialized needs of this clientele group of rural people who still live on the land.

Rural People Living in Urban Areas—

Demographers also tell us that 2/3 of farmers and ranchers do not actually live on their land. They live in towns where they or their spouses have full or part-time jobs and they commute to their farms or ranches. They too need the information about coping with a regulatory environment, and means of diversifying their options for utilization of natural resources. The trick, of course, is to provide that information at a time and place convenient for these clientele. Some of these clientele hold two or three jobs so that they can continue this lifestyle, and sociological help is no doubt needed as well.

Urban People Living in Rural Areas—This group is probably the fastest growing, and makes up the "rural rebound" I mentioned earlier. It accounts for the statement that most people living on farms and ranches do not farm or ranch (Edmondson 1994). It includes commuters, who live on ranchettes but work in larger communities or cities; retirees, also attracted to "country living;" and "loan eagles"—people who can work via a computer and fax machine and who can live literally anywhere. These clientele know little if anything about agriculture or natural resource management. They often have unrealistic expectations as to what their land can sustain. These groups of people tend to be fairly affluent, well educated, and willing to learn, but they need the basics in natural resource education. Their communities desperately need advice to keep from ruining the aspects of rural areas that attracted them in the first place (McDonald 1996).

Urban People Living in Urban Areas—We cannot ignore the majority of our population. The urban populations vote and pay taxes, and it is they who will view the other three groups as "special interest groups" when it comes to governmental funding for our activities. Some urban people own or lease rural land for recreation, others simply desire natural resource recreation, while some are "green couch potatoes" who watch the Discovery Channel and send money to environmental organizations, but who do not personally get outdoors much. Unfortunately, the majority of the urban public are none of these, but are people fairly disinterested in natural resource issues. Here is where we need input into the primary and secondary educational system, with a balanced approach to natural resource conservation education. This can come through 4-H school enrichment programs, Project WILD, input through Boys Clubs or Boy Scouts, and primary and secondary teacher education programs.

I offer these four groups and their differing educational needs as a matrix for consideration of our future wildlife and fisheries educational planning. Due to the varying levels of extension personnel and operational support available in different states, and the varying needs of the states, the level to which we can provide these services will vary. Into that matrix we should figure other service providers—such as state biologists, game wardens, Natural Resources Conservation Service personnel, Sea Grant Marine Advisory Agents, teachers, and volunteers from Audubon and other organizations. In addition, we need to better interact with the teaching and research components of our institutions (Meyer 1993). We cannot cover all of the bases ourselves. We must make difficult decisions about which needs are the greatest, where our strengths lie, and how and where we can be most effective. Therein lies the extension challenge of the 90s.

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