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Extension Wildlife Programs: Thoughts and Ideas

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The following commentary is a summary of some personal thoughts, reflections, and opinions on extension wildlife programming based on my experience at the University of Georgia as Extension Wildlife Specialist during the years between 1976 and 2001. I hope it will be of some value to new specialists. Because I was the only Extension Wildlife Specialist, I was in a unique position to develop an overview of the entire wildlife management field. Along the way, I had the opportunity to be full time within Extension, have a split appointment, and be assigned to an academic department.

I arrived in Athens, Georgia to join the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service in December of 1976. My appointment was 100% extension in the Extension Forest Resources Department. The phone rang several times a day. Callers, mostly county extension agents, had questions on a wide variety of topics. I was surprised, flattered, and disturbed by the great credibility given to me simply because I was the Extension Wildlife Specialist. A major theme was earthworms – how to raise them, how to revitalize worm beds in decline, and other details. The earthworm business became my primary “program.” Earthworms were alleged to be a secret component in McDonald’s hamburgers. Supposedly large volumes were being shipped to Japan to decompose waste, and of course there was the fish bait business. Earthworms were “big business” but I became suspicious.

There were several earthworm companies advertising for growers. A worm company wanted me to come, visit their facility, and render advice. Fortunately, I took with me Bob Glover, an extension-marketing specialist. On the way over Bob said, “The first thing we need to do is to see if they are selling worms or selling franchises.” It did seem that they were setting up growers with buy-back promises. According to rumor, the worm business was even bigger in California. It makes a fascinating story, but to skip to the end. I contacted Lee Fitzhugh, an Extension Wildlife Specialist in California. He advised me that these businesses were actually pyramiding schemes. Companies would buy worms from early investors to sell to new investors. I got it figured out that the main reason for contacting Extension was to get letters from me, on university letterhead, to show to investors that they were getting advice from the University of Georgia Cooperative Extension Service.

This early experience had a few lessons. One is that the extension specialist network is an excellent help in starting a new program. Another is to ask for help from specialists in other fields. The Extension Service lends great credibility to other organizations; do not squander the Extension Service reputation with careless connections.

Within a year or two, the worm fad ended. The worm franchising companies disappeared. I sorted through my saved phone messages and notes and wrote an article for the *Georgia Market Bulletin*, the state agricultural newspaper. The average caller who invested prior to calling me lost about \$2,000. Those who called prior to investing lost about \$70. Thus ended my first extension “program.”

The nature of demand for wildlife management information changes endlessly. An important program during the 1970s and 80s was fur trapping for landowners. Fur prices were up. I was invited to run for president of the Georgia Trappers Association. I declined, but accepted vice president. I sometimes found myself in the middle of conflict between houndsmen and trappers. There was high demand for information on how to raise quail for the released quail hunting industry. I felt unqualified to deal with

questions about quail nutrition and disease. I transferred this topic to a friend in the poultry science department. Deer management information for hunters was increasing in demand. Extension deer management programs in Atlanta attracted thousands. Today, all these programs, once timely and needed, have declined within Extension due to decreasing demand, as is the case with fur trapping, or they have been partly taken over by private organizations, which has happened to a large extent with deer management.

Losing “control” over a program where there is high demand can be disappointing, but new opportunities for programs are always popping up. Currently, there is huge unfilled demand in the area of backyard wildlife management. Before going further – what is a program? The word “program” has various meanings. A program can mean a single presentation to a group, or a broad range of subject matter for a diverse audience. A funding stream can define a program. A diverse, complex “program” is wildlife damage control. I define a program, for the purpose of this article, as selected subject matter presented to a particular audience.

Questions, Information, or Answers?

I would rather have a good question than a good answer any day. Once a question is clearly defined, an answer will follow. The internet is full of information of every kind and quality. We are drowning in information. A good subject matter specialist can quickly sort through a vast array of information to supplement his own ideas and develop a new and original answer to a new problem. A website full of research summaries and general information is often useless to the average web searcher. A question such as “what is the best bait for rats,” as anyone familiar with rodent control can tell you, is probably the wrong question. A specialist can ask a series of questions of a caller to determine what is the real question, before formulating an answer, as to whether bait or an array of other controls is likely to solve a rodent problem. I always aimed to encourage as many questions from agents as possible. It is a kind of market research that allows one to see developing subject matter areas, and also to see in which areas demand is fading.

Aim to develop a cadre of extension agents who have a strong interest in various aspects of wildlife management to keep you informed on what is going on around your state. There are some ways to speed up this process. One is to send a packet of information of program ideas to new agents shortly after they are hired. New people are looking for ideas, and shortly you will be asked to come to the county to give a program. Some of these new folks will become “your” people.

In the process, you will develop new pamphlets, bulletins, information packets, and other ready-to-use information. Please avoid what has become a standard practice in some states of putting your name on your predecessor’s work. Add your name as a contact and source of further information.

Choosing Subject Matter – Choosing Audience

I prefer to receive a wide range of calls and other individual requests from the public as well as from extension agents. These requests serve as the foundation of needs assessment and market research. Being sensitive to these requests is an excellent way to spot new fads and trends. By doing so, it is possible to develop knowledge and opinions before having to face large audiences.

Likewise, you will see demand slacken for some information and shift away as demand falls. Always be committed to being accessible. If you get the reputation of being slow to respond, important sources of information will dry up.

An Extension wildlife specialist must choose audiences and organizations carefully, as time is limited. An Extension poultry scientist, soybean specialist, or other single crop specialist, by comparison, has few options. In my state, there are organizations aimed at the management of deer, turkey, quail, gopher tortoises, and many others. Which ones to join? I think in a field as broad and diverse as wildlife that county agents should remain the most important audience.

A quick look at a directory of wildlife organizations, such as the Conservation Directory, shows that there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of organizations with an interest in wildlife and wildlife management. Many are aimed at a single species, some at natural areas, and some at particular kinds of problems or

opportunities. Some are very focused, others general. All organizations are interested in recruiting help. All are interested in money. An Extension wildlife specialist is often invited to help and join various organizations. Often these organizations want the credibility that is associated with the Extension Service. University administrators may encourage the wildlife specialist to focus on organizations that serve their interests. Organizations are a good source of recognition, awards, and political support in times of need. They can also bite back and do harm if they feel their needs are not being met. A common conflict can occur when your information competes with other organizations or with companies selling services. Wildlife damage control is currently such an area. Extension, USDA Wildlife Services, and commercial wildlife control companies may compete for the same audience. There are wildlife management consultants and magazines that aim at popular and profitable subjects such as deer, turkey, quail, and other popular game. Choose carefully before you invest your time and energy.

In my work, I evolved four major headings for subject matter: wildlife damage control, game management, backyard wildlife management, and wildlife-based business. I tended to aim at landowners and agents and avoid certain professional groups, such as the well-organized hunting industry. I enjoyed speaking and interacting with wildlife damage control professionals and I learned a lot from them, but I did not make them a target audience.

Administrators in other fields may not understand the diverse nature of wildlife resources. One such person told me that he wanted *focus and impact*. He was unwilling or unable to define what he meant in terms of subject matter or audience. Perhaps, secretly, he meant, “Get me a grant for a million dollars and I’ll give you a big raise and leave you alone.” Today American universities are more interested in fundraising than identifying new needs. Specialists can be tempted to focus on areas with available funding and ignore agent needs.

Helping the Industry

Be wary of the temptation to become a personal consultant for appealing or influential people. They may seek you out, or administrators may direct you to do so. Everyone needs to do this now and then, and it can be a lot of fun, but don’t let it get out of hand.

There are highly specialized fields where the specialist’s role has evolved to the point where they serve as free consultants to a narrowly-focused industry. Poultry scientists serve in such a role in some states. This works in narrow fields, but it does not work for wildlife management. Some Extension specialists can find themselves working narrowly in the service of a specialized industry. In wildlife management, it would be hard to define what the industry is, although some sectors are beginning to call themselves an industry. Wildlife damage control is an example. There are at least two national associations, and many states have an organization. They refer to *the industry* as the wildlife damage control field.

Here is a little story to show how variously *the industry* can be defined. I used to write a regular column on wildlife management for *Southeast Farm Press*. I devoted one article to the value of managing winter annual weeds in the context of hayfields and pastures. Some winter annual weeds are high in protein and palatable for cattle and deer. With some small changes in management, a pasture can make a good food source for deer and a good place to hunt – sort of a large food plot at little or no expense. An owner of a seed company who had been one of my supporters wrote the director of the Extension Service to complain, “Jeff wasn’t helping the industry.” Agriculturists were supposed to be fighting weeds, he said. I would guess that he saw growing weeds as competitive with his wildlife food seed business. Obviously, he had a very narrow view of what was the industry. I personally feel that in the field of wildlife management extension efforts are often better spent working with groups that are less developed.

In the last two decades, industries have developed to serve game management enthusiasts. There are general organizations and private organizations that sell magazines to specialized interests such as whitetail deer, wild turkey, and bobwhite quail. They employ wildlife biologists and others. They may be active in politics. They all want the Extension wildlife specialist to help them. Once organizations are so well developed that they can buy and sell you, then they do not need you.

Where to Assign the Extension Wildlife Specialist

I think the concept of “WHOLE LAND MANAGEMENT” so eloquently stated at our 2006 meeting by Paul Coreil, vice chancellor and director of the Louisiana Extension Service, is a good one for the wildlife management field. There is no part of the land that does not harbor some kind of wildlife and its associated problems and opportunities. The Smith-Lever Act, which founded the Extension Service, limits the service to “useful and practical information on subjects relating to agriculture, home economics, and rural energy. Agriculture was what people wanted most at the time, and we tend to think of Extension in that context. Today there are many opportunities for Extension in fields only tenuously related to agriculture that are within the context of whole land management. Whole land management applies to subdivisions, agricultural land, wasteland, and every kind of land. Wildlife and its associated problems and opportunities occur throughout.

Extension wildlife specialists have developed programs within zoology departments, forestry schools, range management departments, entomology departments, and others. I think a freestanding department titled “fish and wildlife”, “wildlife”, or similar title conveys the idea. When diverse wildlife programs are added to other, better-developed fields, they can have a powerful influence on the scope and nature of wildlife programs. Alternatively, wildlife programs can get a free ride financially if they are compatible with the parent department. The Georgia Extension wildlife program was assigned to forestry and sometimes suffered because it was viewed by the department head as not sufficiently related to the main goal of the department. During times of tight budget, department heads may tend to cut off faculty that are perceived not to be in the mainstream. During such an emergency at the University of Georgia, the department head cut all of its wildlife faculty and two-thirds of its fisheries faculty, so as to not lose any foresters. Fortunately for me, county Extension agents complained, and my Extension wildlife responsibility was restored on a half-time basis. The other half was teaching, where I developed new courses for the school of forest resources. Some aspects of wildlife management can fit in various fields. A specialist in rodent control might find a good niche in an entomology department, or a game management specialist might fit in a department aimed at outdoor recreation.

Split Appointments

A current trend for American universities today tend to put fundraising ahead of identifying new needs. In line with this is the trend is to combine extension with research, and to require the specialist to get funding via research grants. Another trend is to scatter partial service assignments among academic faculty – after all, any good faculty member should be able to deliver information to the public. Extension funding thus becomes sort of an extender, a kind of “hamburger helper” for academia. I do not favor this approach. If extension is important, it should be the most important thing for a specialist.

After cuts in the Extension budget, I found myself assigned to the forestry school where I was half-time Extension and half-time teaching. This arrangement worked reasonably well, and I was seen as being an asset to the school. When I came up for post-tenure review, I received a compliment “ Jeff is helping the school,” said the evaluation. That was nice, but soon I was being directed to reduce my responsiveness. My large number of requests was viewed by the dean as being “reactive” and therefore a waste of time. I should “focus on research done by the school,” said the associate dean for research and service. This approach has reversed the aim of helping the agents or helping the public, and instead aimed at helping the school.

When an Extension worker is full time, the job and the mission are clear. When the job is blended with research, extension tends to fade. The reorganization at the University of Georgia in summer 1991 brought this into focus. Zell Miller, a politician, organized a large budget cut. This came after some years of shrinking budgets. About 100 Extension agents lost their jobs. Tenured faculty were at risk. The decision was made to add extension workers to academic departments. I overheard one department head in the home economics department say of her new department members from extension, “These people aren’t scientists! What am I going to do with these people!”

Once in the academic sector, there is a tendency to be pressured to get grants and do research. This may make sense for narrowly-focused specialists working on a single crop – say cotton, chickens, or pork. It tends to dilute broad fields such as wildlife management where the specialist works on a broad array of topics.

Managing Programs, Setting Objectives

I wish I had some simple advice for this, but I do not. I have become weary and wary of management fads aimed at conducting programs. We have seen *management by objective*, *the one-minute manager*, *total quality management*, and other recipe approaches to managing organizations. These books contain some good ideas, especially for the private sector where profits are the focus, but when carried to extremes, they can do harm to good Extension programs. A management fad or an oversimplified approach can become a substitute for sincerity and common sense. This happened after responsibility for service programs at the University of Georgia shifted away from the Extension Service and into the academic sector. Certain administrators condemned good programs because they were labeled “reactive” or “responsive” rather than “proactive.” Proactive was considered good; responsiveness was bad. One of our administrators demanded “impact and focus,” yet was unable to define his terms. Faculty members passing in the hall would joke to each other, “have you had a focused impact today?” In Georgia, demand for “focus” has, at times, removed Extension specialists from 4H programs where they served a valuable role, to have them focus on activities that are “more important”.

Jim Jenkins, a professor of wildlife management, told me that he had the extension responsibility in addition to his academic role. There have been six Extension wildlife specialists with that title since 1947. Except for myself, all left for greener pastures within a few years. I wonder why extension wildlife management in the service sector has never grown at the University of Georgia.

4H Programs

In the late 1970s, youth programs aimed at 4H youth were an important part of my activities. At that time, there were four week-long 4H camps: forestry camp, the marine science camp, the wildlife conference, and a raft trip called the “natural resources adventure”. I spent a week in the field each summer with each of these activities. Also important was judging wildlife projects at the district and state level, which took a combined time of a week and a half. From time to time, agents would call and ask for specific advice on certain projects. During the 1980s, a new department head, an economist, reduced this time, and over the next several years the time spent on these activities was reduced to zero. He was a “management by objective” enthusiast and he did not see 4H activities as an objective of the department. Youth programs are difficult to evaluate, especially in the short term, and are likely to suffer when placed under pragmatic, short-term, dollars-and-cents evaluation. The various camps have disappeared and have been replaced with new ones led by 4H staff.

The 4H wildlife habitat management competition, developed by Jim Byford, at that time Extension wildlife specialist in Tennessee, became an important part of 4H wildlife programs in the 1980s and was very successful. This project needs expert guidance and has remained part of the Extension wildlife program. Georgia was one of the top competitors during my tenure and once won the national competition.

4H programs related to wildlife in Georgia have shifted a bit away from “management” toward “environmental education,” and have been very successful at becoming self-funded. They are led primarily by young people within the 4H sector. On occasion, I became involved to give programs for the leadership, when issues arose such as controversies over timber harvest. Prior to one such meeting, I asked the administrator in charge to profile the group. Slightly more than half the group were vegetarians. I see nothing wrong with vegetarians, but the group did give the impression of being out of touch with adult specialist leadership.

I find involvement with 4H programs to be personally rewarding and long lasting. Often I run into grown-up 4H students, and they remember happy days we shared. Memories and connections made during childhood years are profound and enduring.

Here is one of my favorite stories. I was asked to be an instructor for a university wildlife management class that was going to South Africa. As our departure date neared, my friend, the lead instructor, became ill. I would be in charge. Our arrangements seemed to have been lost or were, at best, confused. I was worried. And then, I remembered that one of my former 4H wildlife students had become a professor at a major university in Johannesburg. How to find him? I called his mother and got his phone number. He had wonderful connections, and within two days we had new arrangements made. He had his own class planned and arranged for our group to share his camp and outfitter. We arrived to find an elaborate safari camp set in the bush of Kruger Park ready-made for us. His class and our class joined. It was a treat to meet again my now-grown-up colleague and reminisce about the values of the 4H program. I shall remember that happy, well-organized day... forever.