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Ronald A. Howard Jr.

The State 4-H Office, 7607 Eastmark Drive, Suite 101, Texas A&M University System, College Station, TX

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EXTENSION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT: EVOLUTION IN CHANGING ENVIRONMENTS

RONALD A. HOWARD JR., The State 4-H Office, 7607 Eastmark Drive, Suite 101, Texas A&M University System, College Station, TX 77843-2473

As I was developing these brief comments, I considered using the title, "We're not in Kansas Anymore, Toto." While some of the things we need to do are the same ones we have been doing for the past 30 years, others are quite different—primarily the environments, audiences, or types of requests. Some of that is adaptive reiteration. We have needed to learn new things to treat the needs of new audiences. Perhaps we use wood duck nest structure experience to assist an urban homeowner in placing bat boxes, or answer questions about how to colonize a pond with snakes and frogs rather than managing it for fish production. Perhaps we hold for landowners meetings to a Wall Street hotel meeting room or to a Dallas convention center rather than to the willing minds and rough hands of dairy farmers, ranchers, and woodland managers. Perhaps we face "hobby landowners" who had wildlife conservation or some personal interpretation of that term on their minds. We employ the classical music approach of theme in variations by adapting presentations to the sites and the potential audience.

Some of us are involved in complex computer modelling of projected economic returns or population dynamics rather than maintaining an acute and persistent relationship with natural history in our areas. We may be more involved with multimedia programs for distance learning than we are with creation of publications for public consumption. Our capabilities as statisticians are often required for evaluations of program impact, rather than the analysis of biological data to determine impacts of management practices. Research has become, of necessity, increasingly basic with funding coming increasingly from grant funds. Doing good things for good people, while still the essence of our professional careers, now requires documentation in triplicate for the auditors or regulators who determine whether we are worthy of continued funding. All of us work with some audiences contaminated with the results of a 25-year campaign to anthropomorphize wildlife and the multiple challenges that presents to education in either management or biology of wildlife. In spite of the "Rodney Dangerfield syndrome" we still wind up on Unabomber hit lists or as the targets of the alphabet soup anti-management organizations or as the conscience of the agriculture programs in land grant universities.

While all of this is happening, we are watching real funding shrink. Availability of graduate assistants or technicians continues to be a challenge unless we are entrepreneurial enough to generate the soft funds to cover them. The young guys we knew as mentors have become

the grand old men of the business whose expertise entered retirement with them. Our numbers shrink, our duties multiply, our audiences expand, and the demand increases both in keeping up with the changing knowledge base and in servicing a growing and demanding population.

I recall standing thigh deep in a long, alder-lined pool casting to rising brook trout while a sport coat-clad photographer gathered shots for a developing slide set. The angler who splashed around the bend below us watched before asking what we were doing. I explained that we worked for Cornell Cooperative Extension and that we were working—getting photographic footage for a training slide set we were building. He watched a while, then wandered off upstream saying, with obvious envy in his voice, "working—man, that must be one helluva job!" That has not changed. Ours is not a job or perhaps even a profession. It is a calling or a passion for things wild and the appreciation and stewardship of those things. We differ from the plunderers (they have not gone away) in having a long-term bottom line—still uncommon so long after Earth Day. We differ from the protectionists in considering people part of the equation and wise use as a viable option. Many of us differ from a growing proportion of our professional colleagues in knowing the difference between a #4 Newhouse and a 3N Victor, the need for ground truth and site specificity, how to bag a buck or a turkey with a topographic map, the artistry of tying and casting a fly, how to tint a snare coffee brown, pale amber, or white to blend with the background, and how to talk to the resource users from a base of shared knowledge and skill. Part of our challenge is to convey that knowledge to the next generation of specialists, many of whom lack the backgrounds we take for granted.

On the 4-H side, we find ourselves needing to remember that the combination of life skills, sound and understandable subject matter, and audience interest are all key ingredients in effective sneaky prophylactic education. We cannot simply dump subject matter and expect the youngsters or their leaders to absorb it. We must provide the mechanics to get our programs used. Many of the "old" programs are still valid with a willing audience of young people if we can sell agents or teachers on them.

Certain principles emerge from these situations:

1. Reiteration is an outstanding strategy in stable environments, but it must be balanced with innovation in changing environments. We can take a lesson from salmon here. Returning to a natal stream to spawn is an excellent strategy IF the stream remains a viable

spawning site. You made it, therefore your offspring should. Having a few mavericks in the bunch who try something new could save the entire population, however, if conditions changed too much to support life.

2. We need to learn to make others wizards for the things that we do, rather than being the wizards that address all the problems people encounter with wildlife. Some of our tasks will never change or disappear, but locating fertile ground for creating new leadership and concentrating on creating leadership in the areas we serve is essential. This task is much more difficult and less rewarding than being the direct audience contact, but it adds degrees of freedom in interesting times. Having a high colonization rate for new habitat is vital to our success, and that cannot be accomplished without sending substantial numbers of propagules. Those propagules need to be spread to the non-participating states as well as to new program areas.
3. The potential for failure exists with any “new” program. A modest amount of risk is essential if we are to experience success with emerging audiences. At the same time, it is wise to consider the strategies used by successful species over evolutionary time—protecting those features that have been important in the phylogeny of the species while adapting to new conditions. Overspecialization can lead to the saber cat syndrome, leaving us in a niche that leads toward extinction.
4. We must meet, not only among ourselves, but with many other groups of professionals, while trying to

keep up with the growing knowledge base in our fields and those that support them. Although this task will continue to grow in difficulty as the doubling rate of knowledge increases, our survival and the quality of our information depend upon it. Failure to do so approximates the genetic load or founder effect observed in populations founded by small samples of a gene pool and prevents us from reaching the potential we have in meeting our target audiences.

5. Winning in the game of Extension is like winning in the game of life. It only means we have the option of continuing to play in the game. Like survival, the victory must be won on a continuous basis.

Every person in this room and many who wish they could be here understand these principles both in wildlife and, at least intuitively, in their Extension careers. We are only as good as the last program, bulletin, or presentation. At the same time we are adopting new technologies and generating new programs to fit the needs of new audiences, many of the “old” challenges have become more acute; and most of us are under pressures to do more with less and fewer. A few promising signs exist. We are in the federal budget. We have a position in the small number of goals CREES has published, even if some of our production agriculture colleagues interpret it to fit their particular niches. We have had an impact and carry strong influence within the profession and with state and federal agencies. But we cannot stand still and reflect. As missionaries for Leopold’s concept of environmental stewardship we must adapt, adopt, modify, and press on.