AN OBLIGATION TO PUBLISH

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To be justifiable any wildlife study should strive to attain and describe new knowledge or refine existing understanding. Published results of field studies are often the products that conclude the study, though not always. But, as E.O. Wilson wrote in Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge, “One of the structures of the scientific ethos is that a discovery does not exist until it is safely reviewed and in print.” Putting knowledge to page requires effort and, frequently, the abandonment of ones own ego. However, ego notwithstanding, this is not the only reason to publish research findings. Whether we are trying to improve the management of a hunted population or to restore an endangered one, we should want to elucidate what we have discovered. This collected wisdom is the science of wildlife management and it is what society depends on to progress up the ladder of understanding and resource preservation. Science as a discipline cares little what we think, and only slightly more about what we know. In reality science only fully accepts what we can prove, and we can consistently prove only what is true. The body of science is formed from layers of collaborative knowledge. Each of study, whether innovative or prosaic, dazzling or mundane, should become part of the body so others can draw upon it, as we have, to move understanding forward. The need to inform others of the truths we have found is perhaps our first responsibility to the natural resources we study.

A second responsibility is for us to account for the capital used to find the answers to the questions we posed. Put simply, we must justify the money we have spent. Most government agencies or granting entities have built-in reporting requirements, which minimally address this need. But we should strive to go beyond the minimum accounting responsibility and make our new knowledge available to the broadest audience possible. Using scarce conservation dollars also carries the responsibility to maximize the benefit through the publication of study results in rigorously reviewed journals.

Many of us were drawn to wildlife biology because of an interest in life beyond our own species. Whether we came to the profession through an enjoyment of the out-of-doors, or through an abiding concern for natural resource conservation, in the end we wanted to work with wild animals and, for those of us participating in these proceedings, those animals are cranes. Irrespective of whether we work with captive flocks or with wild populations there is a debt we owe to these animals we study.

Management efforts to reintroduce or enhance lost or depleted crane populations, anywhere in the world, would be impossible without prior study. If we took the shot in the dark approach to population restoration, success would be less assured, and the amount of endangered resources that would be lost in the process would be hard to justify. Prior study is needed to develop new techniques as well as to establish milestones by which we can mark progress or redirect efforts. Preliminary investigations may involve many of the recognized tools of scientific study, beginning with the application of the scientific method as part of the planning process. The field phase might entail capture, banding, color marking, and transmitter attachment: all these manipulations involving some degree of risk. Monitoring methods could include the use of radio telemetry, either conventional or satellite based. Data analysis would perhaps be based on global positioning systems and satellite imagery for habitat mapping. Analysis might also employ the latest statistical techniques. No matter how sophisticated the methods we are using, or whether we are using them to describe, sustain, or restore a population, in the end we are working with free-living cranes. Even with the protocols developed as a result of concern for the animal’s welfare, our research activities interfere in the life of the birds we study. It may take several hours for a crane to recover from the effects of capture and handling or to adjust to the unfamiliar weight of an aluminum leg band, color marker, or radio transmitter. Such effects may well be negligible and, in the long run, have no adverse impact on normal activities or survival. But, no matter how benevolent the intent or important the outcome, our actions are still intrusions. Even if we are simply observing the movements and behavior of unmarked cranes in a natural setting, we may be inadvertently influencing their activities by precluding an animal’s access to that location.

No matter how benign the method, recognizing that we are having an impact on the individuals we are sampling brings us to another obligation, compensation to the species in reparation for our impositions. A fundamental ethical tenet of our profession dictates that we respect the animals we study. A manifestation of this level of respect is to make certain that the projects we undertake, no matter how little risk they seem to involve, are necessary and worthwhile. We must be certain the information we collect will balance the interference our actions will cause. If the study is not going to produce new scientific truths, then it probably ought not to be undertaken in the first place. A properly designed project should bring new information to light that equalizes the impacts to the individuals studied. It is our ultimate obligation to make sure the knowledge gained is used to the benefit of the species. To do otherwise would be irresponsible and arrogant.
If we study cranes and interfere in their self-directed behaviors, we should be committed to making sure any interruptions and risks we have forced on them return value to their kind. We must repay the debt to the lives we have disrupted. The debt has not been completely fulfilled until we have shown others what we have derived from our research, so this additional knowledge can help to firm the foundation for the future.