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EXPECTATIONS AND OPPORTUNITIES—VIEW FROM THE PROFESSION

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Extension Specialists are in a unique position to address what may become the most significant issue in professional fisheries and wildlife management in the last 50 years—the erosion of public support and confidence in government agencies to manage natural resources.

The fisheries and wildlife fields comprise a diverse community of professionals—biologists, managers, decision-makers, consultants, researchers, educators, and others. In this country, the foundation of our field is based upon the Public Trust responsibilities for wild animals. State and federal governments share the role of trustees.

Rural America faces a crisis in natural resource management. Natural resource-based economies have suffered with increasing costs and shrinking demand relative to their ability to produce commodities. Increasingly large numbers of agricultural producers are having a difficult time making the kind of living we have come to expect in contemporary America. Rural communities and cultures face extinction as local businesses struggle to compete with the “big boys.” Expectations from government also have changed. New regulations and less support have helped change the one-time partnership between private landowner and government into an adversarial relationship. Now enter the fisheries and wildlife **professional**—representing the “common interest” in the fish and wildlife using private land or otherwise affecting private enterprise interests.

We generally all came to the profession with common interests in working with, and for, wild animals in a reasonably natural world with human beings as an integral part. We identified with Leopold who began *A Sand County Almanac* with the statement, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.” We tend to conduct our activities in such a way to develop his land ethic among the people we serve. Although there are some who work at their job strictly for its paycheck, by-and-large we consider our profession to be a “calling.” The Extension Specialists I have known exemplify this perspective about their work.

Because we have all been educated in the ecological sciences, I’ll use an ecological metaphor to continue. The fisheries and wildlife community comprises a diverse set of professional “species”. It is a reasonably stable community, and most populations have steady growth rates. Over the decades, some new “species” have arisen

and occupy new niches—as both the ecological and the social environment have changed. Other “species” have been around for decades pretty much doing what they always have done. The Extension Specialist is an interesting species indeed. It has been a member of the community since the beginning; it has always been relatively rare in its biome; and its function within the ecosystem is unique.

Visualize this species’ niche in terms of Hutchinson’s “n-dimensional hypervolume”—a limitless set of curves each expressing a relationship between the organism and some component of its environment. Let’s consider 2 of its niche dimensions—its employment dimension and its intellectual (or subject area) dimension. Future challenges relate to both.

The employment niche dimension of the Fisheries and Wildlife Extension Specialist is shared with all the other employees of USDA Cooperative Extension. Fisheries and Wildlife Specialists and their programs, however, are a very small part of this curve—probably <1%. The other individuals may be competitors, or may have symbiotic relationships with Specialists. I suspect that many of the competitors feeding off the same limited prey base might think that extinction of Fisheries and Wildlife Specialists would help the curve better conform to their environment. And the symbionts recognize mutualism doesn’t have to be that weird. Regardless of the relationship to others, Cooperative Extension remains an institution that is responsive to the interests of the clients. Despite occasional rhetoric to the contrary, most of Cooperative Extension seeks to help agriculturists make money. By and large, success in the Employment niche has been measured by profitability of agricultural enterprises—dollars in the client’s pockets. Fish and wildlife have been considered amenities to tolerate, pests to eliminate, or products to sell (at least indirectly). Such a notion is not necessarily bad—just narrow-minded.

The Intellectual niche dimension is shared with all the other fish and wildlife professionals around the world. Extension Specialists are also a very small part of this curve. In general, Specialists are cooperators with others who function in this dimension, often faculty or agency staff. Fish and Wildlife Extension tends to draw its sustenance from a different prey base than do other fish and wildlife professionals; thus the interrelationships within this dimension are not competitive. Success is typically assessed by the health of fish and wildlife populations and the environments in which they live, and it embraces the multiple values of the clientele. In this

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country—where wild animals are a public trust resource—dollars do not provide a satisfactory measurement unit. The clientele are not particularly interested in whether or not a particular agricultural producer makes money—nor for that matter stays in business. This too is a narrow-minded view.

Flexibility is one of your greatest assets.

I believe that the foundation of our system of fish and wildlife management may be threatened by recent antigovernment sentiments in rural America. The Wise Use Movement, the Montana Freeman, the Oklahoma City bombing, and many others, organized and unorganized, are indicators of frustration with changing times. **The profession must reaffirm its integrity in the eyes of the public. Extension Specialists are in a unique position to contribute and lead.** The intersection of the two “niche dimensions” described above provide just the kind of framework needed to facilitate relationships between the public and the trustees of fish and wildlife resources. By virtue of your position within the Extension infrastructure and your credentials as fish and wildlife biologists, you have both trust and credibility among the players.

What are the opportunities to facilitate trust in the professional trustees of fish and wildlife?

- Become involved in Public Issues Education, such as those being discussed later in this workshop.
- Facilitate connections between County Extension staff and agency professionals.
- Involve local agency staff in educational programming—coach them how to be educators and not advocates of agency policy.
- Develop continuing education programming in “public relations” for fish and wildlife professionals.
- Involvement in AFS/TWS as a means for other professionals to find out what you do.

I believe that the fisheries and wildlife professions must take proactive measures to address the erosion of public confidence in their ability serve as resource stewards. We will need to rely more on education and less on regulation. At this time, there is no institution than Cooperative Extension better positioned to take the lead in that effort.