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CLOSING REMARKS

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A NEED FOR PROFESSIONALISM IN WILDLIFE DAMAGE CONTROL
--Third Eastern Wildlife Damage Control Conference--
by James E. Miller 1/

INTRODUCTION

The need for professionalism in wildlife damage prevention and control is more important today than ever before. It will be even more important in the future as we are faced with increasing interaction between people and their interests which includes many different perceptions about wildlife. Wildlife professionals must change their philosophy regarding communication with the public about both the positive and negative impacts of wildlife. We can no longer afford the luxury, if indeed we ever could, of avoiding people and their perceptions about wildlife. We must provide scientific, biologically and ecologically sound information in a form which the public can understand if we are to continue to expect and receive their support for professional wildlife management programs.

If the profession is fragmented over issues and unresponsive to the public's needs, we will see more and more special interest groups having additional influence in dictating what wildlife researchers and managers can and should be doing to manage wildlife resources. These groups will also continue to try to influence which technologies and tools can be used to manage wildlife. They will also continue to misguide the public about the costs/benefits and risks/benefits of wildlife damage prevention and control.

During the past 27 years of my formal education and working experience in the wildlife and natural resources profession, an occasional, somewhat negative

reference to "gopher-chokers" has been heard in conversations among natural resources professionals when discussing those who work in wildlife damage prevention and control. Unfortunately this has most often occurred when in the company of other wildlife colleagues. In fact, as many of us know there have been negative references about wildlife damage prevention and control programs made in some of the wildlife management textbooks and some State and Federal agency personnel and administrators have made negative or apologetic statements about the fact that their agency had such a responsibility. It is not at all uncommon to observe a hint of negativism among some University wildlife faculty and their students when the subject of wildlife damage prevention or control is mentioned. In fact when this occurs it reminds me of POGO's famous statement "we have met the enemy and it is us".

As we pursue the topic--a need for professionalism in the prevention and control of wildlife damage--we need to keep Pogo's statement in mind and proactively strive to eliminate the negative image both within and outside the profession. The wildlife profession of which we are and should be an active part, needs to welcome and accept wildlife damage prevention and control as a positive, essential and beneficial element of any comprehensive wildlife management program. Those of us who work in the profession have a responsibility to conduct ourselves and our programs in a professional manner and to remain persistent and positive in our efforts to strengthen credibility and to eliminate inequities both perceived and real.

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DISCUSSION

There has been some progress in recent years by professionals, organizations and agencies to provide recognition for the area of wildlife damage prevention and control. Some of these examples include: The International Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies (IAFWA), 1981 Position Paper on Animal Damage Control; the Departmental Regulation 9500-4, Fish and Wildlife Policy, adopted by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) in 1983; and the Position Statement on Wildlife Damage Control adopted by The Wildlife Society (TWS), membership in 1985. If any of you have not reviewed these documents or do not have copies for reference in your files, I strongly urge you to obtain them. They are each positive and provide strong justification and need for programs addressing the prevention and control of wildlife damage.

Why then do we need to continue to strive for professionalism in this area? Some examples of this need are evident if we review the disparity of scientific papers published in the TWS Journal. In fact some previous editors of this publication have returned otherwise acceptable papers to the author(s) and encouraged their publication in agricultural or other journals because the paper dealt with wildlife damage control research not wildlife enhancement. How many times have we attended regional wildlife association meetings and not one paper was presented about wildlife damage? Is this a result of no papers submitted or non-acceptance by the review committee? We should also look inward, however, because we might have been remiss in not submitting an acceptable and timely paper on some new or innovative technologies that are applicable to wildlife managers.

It is distressing that so few Universities afford their wildlife students a course on wildlife damage prevention and control in their curricula, either at the undergraduate or graduate level. Very few masters or Ph.D students are involved in research studies which would enable them to present papers at conferences and meetings such as this one. We need to encourage, cooperate with and support University research which affords opportunities to expand student and department knowledge on damage prevention and control. This gap reflects a number of concerns, e.g. the lack of agency, organization or industry funding and support, the lack of interest or leadership by wildlife department faculty and the potential of having the "gopher choker" stigma applied because of research or management efforts conducted in this area.

What then are some of the reasons for encouraging stronger professionalism? The following list is not all inclusive, however, it does delineate some objectives we should continually pursue:

1. To correct the misconceptions by the public, wildlife conservation and natural resource organizations and agencies that wildlife damage prevention and control is negative to wildlife resource management.
2. To eliminate the "gopher choker/black hat" image among misguided natural resources professionals and the public.
3. To encourage the wildlife and related natural resources professions to acknowledge that wildlife damage prevention and control is positive and beneficial to the profession, to private landowners and managers, and to the public management of both game and non-game wildlife.

4. To ensure that those tools and technologies needed in both damage prevention and control are useful for humane and effective management of all wildlife species and are retained and improved where possible.
5. To reinforce the positive benefits of close communication with, and responsiveness to, the damage concerns and management needs of the public.
6. To strengthen the professional visibility and credibility of the wildlife profession to provide management assistance needed to private landowners and managers for helping them with damage problems as well as with wildlife enhancement. Credibility is often destroyed when we have encouraged and provide wildlife enhancement assistance, but deny their requests for help when wildlife damage problems occur.
7. To enhance the support for funding comprehensive wildlife research and management programs which include objectives for damage prevention and control.
8. To encourage submission of quality research and management papers to the TWS Journal and Bulletin editors as well as to other professional society and peer review publications and meetings.
9. To participate actively in professional continuing educational programs and to encourage other professionals to become involved. It is easy to be critical of the quality and usefulness of other programs if you are ignorant of what they actually do, who they serve, and what their management objectives are.

As wildlife professionals who devote a portion of, or all of our official working hours to the prevention and control of wildlife damage, we often mislead professional colleagues, and certainly many others who are interested in wildlife and natural resources when we talk only of objectives that protect crops and livestock. Admittedly, that is a major objective but surely not the only one. What about the protection of human health, the resolution of urban problems, benefits to the community and to the management of other natural resources?

Without question, those of us who have worked in this area for a number of years are knowledgeable of the many benefits that accrue to wildlife enhancement for other species as a result of assisting landowners in prevention or control of wildlife damage. If there are some in the audience who doubt, or might not understand this, maybe it is an indication that we need to do a better job of documenting and publicizing this part of our avocation. As examples, let's consider the benefits to wildlife from helping a landowner control a serious damage problem by removal of a few target species causing the damage. This assistance may have prevented the landowner from using some other technique he or she had heard about that might pose significant hazards to non target species or to people. Another scenario occurs where without access to appropriate education or assistance, landowners often decide to remove existing wildlife habitat out of frustration, because they do not know how to prevent or control serious damage. The other benefits that we all know occur are the many spin-offs where a landowner with a damage problem is really interested in improving the habitat for other, more desirable species but doesn't know how to do it nor where they can obtain appropriate assistance.

Maybe at this point it is appropriate to remind ourselves of our chosen profession and what our professional society, The Wildlife Society objectives are:

1. To develop and promote sound stewardship of wildlife resources and of the environments upon which wildlife and humans depend;
2. To undertake an active role in preventing human-induced environmental degradation;
3. To increase awareness and appreciation of wildlife values; and
4. To seek the highest standards in all activities of the wildlife profession.

TWS states that "a professional wildlife biologist is a person with demonstrated expertise in the art and science of applying the principles of ecology to the sound stewardship and management of the wildlife resource and its environment." Although each of us probably would have written these objectives and this statement differently, they do identify what we profess to be, given that the prevention and control of wildlife damage is an integral and essential element of wildlife management. The commitment to be a professional, however, does not come from belonging to a professional society or organization, nor from who you are employed by. It must come from within the individual--it is a part of ethical, responsible, continuing growth and commitment to become a better professional steward. It begins to occur and to be strengthened when the individual realizes that the job they have been doing has become more than a job. It has become an avocation that creates a sense of making a contribution, continual professional growth, enjoyment and confidence in doing ones best.

If we are honest with ourselves we all would like to improve our skills, capabilities and acceptance by others, however sooner or later we realize that we don't know it all, that we aren't perfect and that we must continually discipline ourselves to work toward improving our professionalism. The following statements reflect my perceptions of some tools and attitudes for professionalism in the area of wildlife damage prevention and control:

1. Avoid being negative about what you do, others you work with, and life in general. Maintain a positive and proactive attitude and remember that your avocation is a chosen one.
2. Wildlife damage prevention and control should be afforded appropriate research, educational and technical assistance support. It should be done without apology or excuses, but with appropriate management justification.
3. Wildlife damage prevention and control is as complex, challenging, enjoyable, scientific, productive, and positive to wise resource stewardship as any other area of wildlife management and should be afforded the same consideration and respect. To be referred to as a gopher choker may be acceptable to some people but it sure fails to engender respect or professional credibility.
4. Scientific information on wildlife damage prevention and control is important to managers and to other users and should be published in appropriate scientific journals, proceedings and in textbooks. If we do not encourage this by preparing and submitting such papers, being persistent, and achieving publication we are only hurting ourselves.

5. Conduct your programs as a professional, dress like a professional when appropriate, think of yourself as a professional, avoid apathy, and be productive and proud of what you do.
6. Care deeply about the work you do and the advice you give. Make your work your vocation and develop a strong sense of commitment if you do not already have one. If you cannot achieve this you may indeed need to pursue another vocation.
7. Don't overlook or pass up the opportunity to speak to audiences who may be opposed to what they think you do. You may be surprised at their reaction and support if you do it professionally.
8. Recognize that an effective wildlife professional is knowledgeable about biological principles, prevailing circumstances, legal and ethical constraints and the public attitude. We must become more competent in biopolitics and economics.
9. Develop your skills as an effective communicator, be able to get your major points across without talking down to, offending or boring your audiences.
10. Be credible, if you don't know the answer to a question admit it, try to find out and respond later if it is important. Be truthful to yourself, your colleagues and your constituents. Your advice is valued, don't give it carelessly.
11. Take full advantage of opportunities for continuing education for professionals and participate fully. Some of the brightest, most competent and effective wildlife professionals I know are full participants in continuing educational programs at every opportunity.
12. Consider the work you do to be important, do it the best you can and support professionalism. Your work is important because it benefits the public interests, the wildlife resource and best serves your agency and its objectives.
13. Respect the competence, judgment and authority of other professionals. Share your expertise and knowledge with young people when they request it and help them whenever possible. Most of us owe a great deal to friends and mentors in the profession who extended their time and interest to help us.
14. Do not reveal confidential information about your employer's business. If you don't like what's happening, work hard within the system to effect change.
15. Don't brag about your abilities. If you are an effective professional, others will respect, recognize and appreciate your capabilities.
16. Work hard and be persistent at building and maintaining liaison and cooperation with other organizations and agencies. Working cooperatively with others if really effective, means having respect for their competence and their trust. It will increase your and your agencies capabilities, effectiveness and credibility.
17. If you see a problem or issue that is serious and needs to be addressed, but all you do is sit around complaining and making negative statements, you really have ignored your responsibility as a professional. Study the problem, get your facts together, and pursue effective and constructive changes. It may take a lot of your time and

energy but you can make a difference if you deal with it as a professional and are persistent.

18. The only thing that is individually yours and yours alone, unless you give it up, is what is in your head and your heart. The final measure of professional success is a demonstrated effectiveness in achieving positive objectives.

CONCLUSION

I am pleased with the professionalism observed at this meeting, the growing expertise of bright young professionals, the sense of commitment, comraderie, and continuing spirit of cooperation. It is very encouraging to observe and feel like we are beginning to move away from the non-professional "Us and Them" turf battles of the past and realize that we are professionals with a common commitment. We need to strengthen our efforts in working together. I hope you will join me in encouraging and striving for professionalism as a personal goal throughout our career.

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