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October 1997

Conference Summary: What Have We Learned? Where Do We Go From Here?

James E. Miller

USDA/CSREES, Natural Resources and Environment Unit, Washington, D.C.

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CONFERENCE SUMMARY

What Have We Learned?--Where Do We Go From Here?

JAMES E. MILLER, National Program Leader, Fish and Wildlife, USDA/CSREES, Natural Resources and Environment Unit, Washington, D.C.

Since I am charged with providing some closing comments this morning, let me begin by having those of you who are still with us to join me in providing a round of applause to Jim Parkhurst, Phil Eggborn, and Martin Lowney, the Conference Planning Committee, and to those on the Conference Program Committee; to the sponsors, exhibitors, speakers, session moderators; and to all of you as participants who helped make this 8th Eastern Wildlife Damage Management Conference so successful. And, as most of you know who have ever planned and conducted such a conference, there are always a number of people who work behind the scenes to help make everything go smoothly; we want to be sure to express our appreciation to them as well. Thanks to Barbara Falls, from Virginia Tech, and to her husband, who pitched in to help prepare the barbecue and serve all of us who participated in the field trip Friday afternoon and evening. Barbara did an exemplary job in handling reservations, coordinating with the hotel on rooms and arrangements, and helping Jim Parkhurst with other conference functions and activities.

I also want to express my appreciation to those students who presented papers at this conference. You all did a great job, and I commend you for your great preparation and delivery. As one who has been around for a long time and attended many such conferences, I appreciate your interest, your effort, and your commitment, and I am pleased to see the growing interest among students in the area of wildlife damage management. I won't attempt to speak for each of you in the audience, but the professionalism demonstrated by the students attending this conference helps me to continue to feel confident about the future of the wildlife profession.

I'm not going to attempt in these brief closing minutes of this very successful conference to reiterate the important points or highlights from the presentations made here over the past few days, each of you can do that for yourself, and we would probably not all agree what these were

anyway. Rather, although I have taken extensive notes for my own use and edification, let me try to summarize briefly some things I think we have heard, and hopefully absorbed, that may be useful to us now and in the future.

But first, let me ask a question. How many of you are members of The Wildlife Society? Please raise your hands. For those of you who are not, I have about 25 copies of the application form, and I encourage you and welcome you to take one, fill it out, put a check with it and send it in, become a member of The Wildlife Society's very active Wildlife Damage Management (WDM) Working Group, and help us lead the profession. Currently, the WDM Working Group has sponsored and conducted excellent technical sessions at each of the Society's four Annual Meetings and has submitted a proposal to host yet another session at the Annual Meeting in Buffalo next fall. Join up, get involved, and help us change and improve the profession. If you don't like something that is happening within The Wildlife Society or in our related areas of the profession, don't sit on the sidelines and bitch and gripe. Get involved and help us make positive changes. It is surprising how much better you will feel about yourself if you know you've given your best, even if your perspective changes once you've gotten involved or if your suggested changes are not always endorsed and/or adopted.

Now to my suggestions for consideration about some of the things we may have learned from our participation at this conference and how we can use what we have learned to move forward. Let me just list a few of these for your consideration based on my observations:

- 1) Remind yourself often of what brought you to this profession. I can't speak for you, but, for me, it was a deep and abiding love for wild, living resources, and a call for wise stewardship. After a 35-year career as a professional resource manager, that love and

respect and striving to be a wise steward is stronger than ever. If you do not have this love or commitment or striving, you may be in the wrong profession. If you doubt that we are all charged with being wise stewards of the wild, living resources God has blessed us with, I urge you to read Psalms, Chapter 8.

- 2) Recognize that our profession is still young and growing and will continue to change, hopefully with your involvement and help. I can sure tell you that it has changed during my 35-year professional career. As Dr. San Julian mentioned in his keynote remarks, I can remember when The Wildlife Society leadership viewed what we call wildlife damage management as black hat and hardly worthy of consideration as a recognized area of the wildlife profession. Has that changed? Absolutely, and we have predecessors, like Jack Berryman, John Gottschalk, and others who were persistent and eloquent and effective in changing those misperceptions. Not only is wildlife damage management well recognized in The Wildlife Society today, it has become one of the largest and most effective working groups in TWS and its sessions at the annual meeting have all been well attended. The Wildlife Society Southeastern Section and the TWS Council approved and provided support for this Conference we're attending. To me, that is clear and substantive evidence that the WDM area of the wildlife profession is recognized as an important and integral element to be incorporated into future wildlife management/planning and programs.

Don't fight change—it is inevitable. You can expend all your energy and creative juices being negative and defensive. Embrace change and work in a positive, progressive manner to make the change compatible with where you want to go and what you

want to do with your life and what you care passionately about. If you can't do this, you will be miserable and probably should look for a different line of work. I can vouch for the difficulty I and others of us experienced over the years, trying to be proactive, yet patient, understanding, and positive in effecting a changing, more positive image of WDM within our profession. Constructive change does not often happen overnight and often requires strong partnerships and great persistence.

- 3) Be aware that some of the current and future changes that are being affected will definitely change the way we do business, who our clientele are, and how we will have to change to be more effective in serving them. For example, demographic trends are toward an even more urban society, one that is progressively more diverse, not only in racial composition, but in objectives and cultures. In addition, even though private landowners and managers still control almost 2/3 of the land base in the contiguous U.S., the size of ownership is decreasing and urban sprawl is growing faster than ever. Increasingly, the majority of the public will become farther removed from the land and any understanding of the land ethic. We must work toward finding innovative solutions to future wildlife management problems and needs. We must add and embrace the social and human dimensions research and education knowledge to our bag of tools and techniques, as well as to monitor new and developing technologies so that we might adopt and implement those that are efficacious and use them to help us do our job more efficiently. I'll have to admit to you that I am electronically challenged and intimidated by computers, but I have learned to utilize some limited capabilities to help me, and will continue to learn.
- 4) We will not and should not be

apologetic for the work we do. It is important, challenging, stimulating, and will become even more so in the future. Strive to give it your very best every day, and I am confident you will feel good about what you do and who you serve. We can and should be positive and proud of the work we do and the resources we care about and strive to be wise stewards of.

- 5) Remember that the future of wildlife conservation in America depends on land-use decisions of private landowners, public land managers, and policy-makers at the community, state, and federal levels. Decisions that these people make will benefit wild, living things only if they have the proper knowledge, incentives, and assistance from wildlife professionals, natural resources agencies, and government. It will require trust, confidence, and partnerships. I am confident that by striving for excellence and progressive partnerships, we can meet the challenges and changes of the future and proactively ensure the sustainability of wild, living resources for present and future generations of Americans to use and enjoy.

Regarding where and when the next of these Eastern Conferences will be held, at present that is undecided. If any of you from other states would like to host this 9th Eastern Wildlife Damage Management Conference in your state in 1999 or 2000, please contact Dr. Jim Parkhurst or me as soon as possible. We do have some guidelines that we will be glad to share with you, and there is likely to be some available up-front money for your use in planning and conducting such a conference.

If you haven't yet completed and turned in your evaluation and "What's Your Opinion" sheets, please take the time to do so before you leave. Your input is valuable and needed for the current and future program committees. I hope you all have a safe trip home, it has been a pleasure to see and visit with friends and professional colleagues, to meet new friends, and to continue to learn more about this complex and controversial profession we have chosen as our life's work. I look forward to seeing many of you at other future meetings and conferences and at this conference, whether it is held in 1999 or 2000. To this point, I have been fortunate to have been involved in all eight of these Eastern Conferences beginning back in 1983 in New York, and I look forward to attending at least one more, God willing.