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Closing - conference summary

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Closing - conference summary

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It has been a distinct pleasure for me to have attended and participated in each of the previous eight Eastern Wildlife Damage Management Conferences, dating back to 1983, as a member of the planning committees, as well as for this first Wildlife Damage Management Conference. I have enjoyed participating, learning from each conference, as well as visiting with old friends and colleagues and meeting new colleagues. Although I have been around long enough to know that no matter how hard you try you can't please everyone, I ask those of you who enjoyed participating in this Conference to join me in giving a hand to Gary San Julian, Deb Ellis, the members of the planning committee, all the fine sponsors and exhibitors, and the speakers and moderators who made this Conference a success. Thanks also to all of you who attended and participated in the sessions, and I commend those students who presented papers as well as those who assisted in the logistics over the past several days and in handling the audiovisuals and lighting for the sessions.

Among the other benefits of having worked in the wildlife profession for the past 35 years is the opportunity of observing growth and increasing professionalism among my respected colleagues and to, hopefully, have contributed in some small way to this growth and professionalism. I have always felt that as responsible professionals we believe that education is a lifelong commitment, and that continuing education is a key to self-improvement and to the future. I believe this Conference has contributed to

continuing education for those of us in attendance.

Speaking of the future, although I have always been an optimist I believe the future of wildlife damage management and the wildlife and fisheries profession is positive and up to us to continue to develop. People from all walks of life value wildlife and want to enjoy it in a variety of ways. Public surveys indicate that approximately 90% of Americans seek some kind of enjoyment out-of-doors. In addition, I believe that the future of fish and wildlife resources will continue to be dependent upon professional scientific management. There are, however, some real challenges and uncertainties regarding fish and wildlife management in the future. The changing demographics pose large challenges; for example, our human population continues to grow, our longevity is increasing, and more people are moving from the Northeast and Midwest to the South and West. The U.S. population is becoming increasingly suburbanized and urbanized. Those considered minorities today will be the majority in some states during the next 20 to 25 years. Historically, minorities and older Americans have not participated in wildlife and fisheries recreation to the same degree as other segments of the population. These changes along with increasing human wildlife interactions will drive much of what fish and wildlife managers, researchers, educators, and policy makers must face in the new millennium, how well Americans support what we do, and how effectively our profession can address three major challenges:

Impacts to fish and wildlife habitats from development/fragmentation, degradation, and loss.

1. People's changing perceptions of fish and wildlife resources and their management.
2. Shifting cultural and philosophical values about fish and wildlife resources and their management.

Voters of the future will most likely be even less connected to the land and know less about fish and wildlife conservation and management efforts. We will need to further educate the diverse publics about how to maintain a "place" for fish and wildlife in our lives.

We must find ways to convince these publics that there is a need for professionally-based management programs because there is a growing and vocal point of view among some environmental groups that all we need to do is to protect open space and all will be well forever. We must do a better job of educating the public in the future so that they will understand the complexity of human-wildlife conflicts and will positively support professional fish and wildlife management. Our efforts will need to be targeted to specific subsets of the public—our audience is diverse and one message won't reach everyone. We also need to continue to encourage and promote professionalism in wildlife damage management as an integral and essential element of wildlife management.

There also seems to be a growing distrust in government by the public that is becoming a real barrier to agency progress. We must work together with private landowners and managers and with existing and new constituents to regain their trust and

cooperation. We must reach out in the future to all Americans with a persuasive message that relates fish and wildlife health and sustainability to their personal quality of life. In other words, we must find ways for all (or most) of society to support fish and wildlife conservation and management, not just limited segments of society, such as the traditional hunting and fishing community.

We must also develop more innovative approaches to working with and assisting private landowners and we must develop more responsive and user-friendly approaches to meet and serve the needs of our diverse rural and urban clientele. Some other challenges for fish and wildlife management professionals include:

1. Eco-tourism and wildlife watching will increase, and we must recognize and enable the public to gain access to a diversity of outdoor recreational experiences. They are unlikely to support something they can't participate in.
2. Endangered species management, as we presently know it, must change. We must do our work to prevent those species from becoming endangered. We must find ways to make endangered species regulations and alternatives work better for private landowners.
3. Wildlife-human interactions will continue to increase as more and more people urbanize the landscape. We must be able to effectively manage wildlife damage and concurrently maintain the status of offending species as "resources" in the face of changing demographics and shifting public values.

We must improve continuing education opportunities for both new and existing professionals including: New technologies, resource economics; habitat assessment; riparian habitat management; fire management; wildlife damage management; agricultural management; waterfowl and wetlands management, etc. In addition, we need such continuing education programs in the areas of conflict resolution, human dimensions, marketing, interpersonal communication, policy, and public relations.

We must work together and develop and expand partnerships. With responsible management and private landowner interest and cooperation, we can be successful. To gain and sustain widespread public acceptance will take a major educational effort and investment.

We must always remember that we are serving human objectives and that we work for the public. However, we also must remember that there is a line beyond which social issues and pressures must not dictate resource management decisions. We must remain obligated to stand firm in the face of pressures that would significantly degrade resource values and sustainability. And we must fulfill the role of expert and guide public thinking and decision-makers toward conservation programs that are ecologically-sound, sustainable, and in the best interests of the majority of the people and fish and wildlife resources.

We must develop a vision for fish and wildlife resource conservation in the future and develop effective strategies to achieve that vision. We must participate actively and fully in designing those future fish and wildlife management programs and uses that will provide both the desired public benefits and the long-term protection and sustainability of

the resource base. We must strive to achieve credibility within our profession and with the public. Credibility, the first requirement of a professional, is difficult to acquire and can be lost quickly and easily. Credibility is earned by having a thorough knowledge of a field or discipline and applying that knowledge fairly and objectively.

Most of us who have spent our career working in this profession share some things in common, we value the land ethic, we care passionately for wild things and wild places, we recognize that we are stewards only for a short time and that what we leave behind as evidence of our stewardship (good or bad) will be our only legacy to future generations. Our profession is honorable and ethical, but should be formulated and practiced by the individual with no referee but the Almighty. We have lost some true giants in our young profession in the last few years, and we will lose more in the years ahead. They have passed the baton to us just as we will pass it on to those who follow us. I trust that those who receive it will retain a strong land ethic, a passion for wild living things and wild places and for their management for the benefit of future generations. As the Apostle Paul said in II Timothy 4:7 (paraphrased), I have fought a good fight, I have kept the faith, and I have stayed the course. I encourage those of you in this profession to continue to do so. God Bless you all and have a safe trip home. Thank you.