

CAPITOL COMMENTS



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Washington, D.C., like most major metropolitan areas, is a culturally diverse city. My first experiences on the Metro subway gave me an appreciation for what it felt like to be a minority. However, that illusion quickly faded when I left the subway station and

entered my workplace. Conservation agencies and organizations are typically a fairly homogenous group of people. Early in my career, I remember attending conferences when only a few women were present. Other minorities were almost nonexistent. Fish and wildlife management was predominantly a white male profession.

Fortunately that has changed in my 30-year career. At our last North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Denver, there were many women professionals and numerous minorities. Mind you, the wildlife profession still consists predominately of white males, but as a profession we are making strides to “look” more like the public we serve. I believe federal agencies have done a better job of embracing the cultural diversity of our nation when it comes to staff recruitment and hiring. However, state agencies are quickly making up for lost time as they recognize the necessity to mirror the diversity of their constituents. The transformation of agency culture has not only been centered on staff gender and race; it has also involved alignment of agency staff and programs with the changing face and urbanization of America.

During the last few conferences, the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) hosted agency transformation workshops. Numerous experts in our community described the need for transformation, the process of transformation, and the goals of

transformation. Aligning agency programs and budgets to adapt to changing demographic trends are necessary tasks to remain relevant to the public. Efforts are underway to expand stakeholder involvement, expand partnership opportunities, embrace social science, and incorporate quality-of-life factors into agency structures, functions, and programs.

We are all aware of changing demographics in our nation. But how dramatic are these changes? Since 1970, the Hispanic population in the United States has increased sixfold to 53 million. Since 2000, Hispanic populations have increased 50 percent, while the rest of the nation has

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increased only 12 percent. According to William Frey from the Brookings Institute, as reported in February 2011, “... the Census Bureau released its new statistics on the nation’s children and school enrollment, and it showed something momentous. For the first time since this annual data series has been released, fewer than half of all the children (49.9 percent) in the youngest age group shown, 3-year-olds, were white.” These children are now of kindergarten age.

But it is not only Hispanics that should drive our agencies’ transformations. Women and minorities demand and deserve our attention. At the last WMI conference, I asked attendees to look around the room and gauge if our profession is a cross section of the American public. It clearly is not. How do we relate to people outside our race, religion,

gender, age, or place of residence? Recognizing this disparity and at the request of female colleagues, WMI was proud to have hosted the first “Women in Conservation Networking Luncheon” last year. This year WMI joined other sponsors of a workshop entitled “Navigating Career Paths for Women in Conservation Leadership” at the conference.

Conference plenary speakers encouraged attendees to return to their agency or organization with a new sense of urgency based on the need to make their organization relevant to the entire population and not just those associated with fish- and wildlife-related recreation. We realize that the diversity of the American public demands transformation in our profession. We realize that transformation is necessary to maintain relevancy.

As a profession we have to become more culturally and economically relevant to our entire population. The early heroes of our profession—people like Marsh, Grinnell, Pinchot, Roosevelt, and Leopold—had it relatively easy to convince society that conservation was relevant. They had a more homogenous population with which to deal. In their day, the great majority of Americans lived in rural areas with strong ties to and an understanding of the land. The excesses of market hunting, unchecked resource use, and the catastrophic drought event of the 1930s clearly defined the need to transform how we treated land and wildlife.

Today, our challenge is to make the connection between fish and wildlife conservation and the well-being of our nation’s culturally diverse population. Our political, social, and economic support depends on our ability to be relevant to all citizens. In the future, our success will depend not only on our ability to transform how we treat land and wildlife, but also on our ability to transform how we treat people. ■