

# B&C PROFESSORS' CORNER



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## Open Letter to Aspiring Wildlifers: BE IN THE BIG PICTURE

I often start my wildlife lectures at the University of Montana with an open-ended question to students: “What is in the news about wildlife you want to discuss?” This approach accomplishes two things. First, it calls attention to the numerous wildlife-related issues that people are reading or hearing about. This is important because wildlifers need to know what the public is being told about wildlife. Second, it provides for an in-depth discussion of current topics that students should be interested in. Many of the topics intertwine and sound depressing because they usually involve human activities that have negative influences on wildlife. A few examples include altered and fragmented habitats, climate change, competition for land use, conflicting policy, connectivity, decreasing biodiversity, endangered species, energy production, predator control, resource extraction, and urbanization. And all of these, plus others, are on the rise as the human population continues to grow.

Around the middle of the semester, students typically ask: “In the face of all the negative influences working against wildlife, what can we expect to do to ensure the sustainability of our nation’s wildlife and their habitats?” This is a good question, a very good question, but not one with easy answers. Then again, if the questions were easy, they would already be answered and we would have different discussions.

A good question deserves a thoughtful answer. Here is my response, offered as an open letter to my students and all who wonder about the future of wildlife.

Many scholars and popular writers

dwell on our planet’s dwindling wildlife and what is being called the Sixth Extinction. Previous widespread extinctions in Earth’s history have been tied to natural phenomena such as climate change and asteroid impacts that eliminated most flora and fauna of the time. Evidence also exists that our early ancestors had a hand in the demise of some species. The Sixth Extinction is distinct from the previous five extinctions because it is caused primarily by humans. We are causing the conditions leading to this extinction, and through management and conservation we will contain it or be swept up in the dustpan of geological time. All is not lost, however, and progress can and is being made—by you.

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**Work hard, don’t compromise wildlife for negative impacts or economic gain, and realize that conservation and management take time and cooperation with all stakeholders.**

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First of all, by earning a wildlife management degree from a North American university you are one of the best-educated wildlifers on the planet. Others around the world do not have the opportunities you already have, and they are not exposed to the best conservation plan in the world, the North American Model for Wildlife Conservation. That is a start but more is needed.

If you have not already thought about it, think of obtaining a graduate degree. The profession is at that point where the graduate degree is indispensable. I am a firm believer that anyone with an average intellect in the United States can do whatever he or she wants—but it will take more work if you do not have the right credentials. With a bachelor’s degree in wildlife, you will be limited, and most of you will want to advance throughout your careers, so get that graduate degree.

Learn all you can about the species and topics you are interested in. Do not wait for others to give you information; get it yourselves. You know how. Be competent in the life-history characteristics of the species

including diet, reproductive characteristics, habitat use, productivity, mortality and survival, movement, and other pertinent aspects of a species’ life. Any discussion of management will be much more interesting and informative with this knowledge. Wildlife is your passion, so be passionate about it. Continue to be passionate about learning throughout your career and use your knowledge to help with conservation and management.

That still will not be enough. All systems are governed by money. Wildlife is no different, and money is needed to continue effective conservation. An easy start is to simply buy a state hunting and fishing license. State game and fish agencies are the heart and soul of management and conservation, and the revenue from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses are matched up to 75 percent by funds from the federal government via the Pittman-Robertson and Dingell-Johnson acts. That is a bargain in anyone’s book and provides needed resources for all wildlife. These funds support most of the budget for state game and fish agencies.

Keep abreast of organizations that truly have conservation and management as their mission and support them. It is much easier to fight for resources when you are part of something larger than yourself or your organization. Of course, while you are a student, you should join student organizations concerned with wildlife conservation. But also join national organizations like The Wildlife Society, Boone and Crockett Club, Ducks Unlimited, Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Partnership, and the Wildlife Management Institute. These top-notch organizations are all fighting for wildlife and its habitat in a variety of effective ways. And don’t just join; be involved in their activities, meetings and causes. It will give you a broader view of the wildlife world and expand your horizons. No one individual or entity is equipped enough to fight this battle alone. Wildlife needs all the help we can provide.

Vote and know whom you are voting for. This may not seem important, but consider that nothing gets done without laws and policies; the individuals you vote for are the policymakers. Understand their positions on the issues you cherish. If they do not have a good record, or even appear to have a weak record on wildlife conservation, look for

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different candidates to support. Wildlife management and conservation is too important to leave it to incompetent legislators.

Another solid contribution you can make is to support diversity in the wildlife profession. The demographics of the U.S. are changing rapidly, and the culture and races that started conservation movements are, or will soon be, in the minority. Wildlife in North America is owned by the public, and thus, it is critical that a cross-section of society be involved in its management and conservation. If they are not involved, we will all lose. Actively support women, minorities, and others in the use and management of wildlife. As we strive to enhance the biodiversity of our natural world, we need also to enhance the diversity of those who use and manage the resource.

We are at a point where wildlife management and conservation has to be culturally relevant. To be culturally relevant goes beyond including only those who actively have a professional wildlife job. It includes

everyone, thus, it is important to bring all society into the conservation and management of wildlife. When the profession was just beginning, Leopold advocated that wildlife research should be embraced by any interested mind. He explained his views in *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River* in the chapter on wildlife in American culture. "The more difficult and laborious research problems must doubtless remain in professional hands, but there are plenty of problems suitable for all grades of amateurs" and some have become authorities on bird behavior (Margret Morse Nice), local botany and wildlife cycles (Norman and Stewart Criddle), and mountain lions (Elliott S. Baker). Leopold made the point that amateur wildlife research should be hailed as a new recreation that has no downside and retains cultural values. In Leopold's opinion, "...the promotion of wildlife research sports is the most important job confronting the profession of wildlife management." Thus, even if you do not obtain a

degree in wildlife, or move from wildlife to another profession, there is plenty to do. The value of wildlife for "wildlife research sports" is of "...potential importance to the whole human enterprise."

Still want something more concrete? Work hard, don't compromise wildlife for negative impacts or economic gain, and realize that conservation and management take time and cooperation with all stakeholders. Your dedication cannot be a flash in the pan, whether as a professional or amateur—you need to be committed for the long run. We need to build blocks for the conservation machine; most will be small and take decades to construct. But if the conservation movement does not continue to move forward, where will we be? You are dedicating your professional life to wildlife. Do the best you can in whatever job you have and do it well. Your commitment to wildlife conservation and management is as critical as anything you will ever do for our wildlife resources and for humanity. ■

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