

CONSERVATION COMPASS

From Where We Stand Today – Hindsight, New Understanding, and Prognostication



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Most managers of natural resources in North America, and elsewhere in the Western World, are committed to “science guided” or “science based” approaches to management. That means considering all existing applicable knowledge in making management decisions.

Doing that involves making periodic adjustments in management approaches as experience accumulates and new information emerges from the ongoing efforts of research scientists. Many of those not involved in such efforts on a full-time basis—including political players—sometimes have a difficult time understanding that such changes—sometimes involving dramatic shifts in management paradigms—are the foundation and price of management that is based, significantly, in science.

Many see adjustments in natural resources management guided by experience, monitoring of actions and reactions, and new understanding from research as something to be feared, warded off, and resisted. That is natural enough as most of us abhor change and crave stability and predictability.

Yet, humans have faced these issues over the millennia and various religious texts speak of just such changes. Over a 45-year career in the natural resources management business, I have been involved in a number of controversial management is-

ssues ranging from the most simple—at least in hindsight (the harvest of antlerless deer)—to the most complex (the institution of ecosystem management) that continues to play out. Over those years, in rare moments of reflection, I have noted the wisdom from those various religious texts, comforted and girded myself for conflict, increasingly understanding over time that there is nothing new under the sun related to human behavior in times of stress.

When I emerged from the hallowed halls of the University with the ink drying on my diploma, my erstwhile young colleagues and I were much more certain of our insights and knowledge than most of us are today. Most of us were more idealistic and less pragmatic. And, collectively, we knew just enough to be marginally useful and potentially dangerous. We, most of us anyway, did not understand then that we were in a constant process of reification wherein we mistook, or did not admit, that we pretended something quite abstract—our decisions and our decision process—were real. Perhaps that remains true today to some extent, though I hope the balance is more weighted toward usefulness and there is a clear recognition of the dangers involved in hubris and with full understanding of the dangers of reification.

When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things.
I Corinthians XIII:11

As the years passed, frequent errors and ability to recognize the consequences of incomplete understanding brought us

to listen more, search more widely and more deeply for pertinent information—from whatever source, and to come to grips with the consequences of both success and error. Yet, there was never an escape from the responsibility to make and vigorously execute the best decisions possible based on some acceptable, though changing, combination of underlying “science,” meeting the requirements of laws, economic feasibility, social/political acceptability, and the ultimate necessity to make firm decisions knowing that the science-derived support base for those decisions was, inevitably, rudimentary. That is to say, reification has its place.

If the trumpet give an uncertain sound, who shall prepare himself for battle?

I Corinthians XIV:8

The most difficult lesson was to learn that it is essential to be able and willing to change one’s mind and behavior, from time to time, as new understanding and new information evolves. Admitting to being wrong—or, even, half right—can be a bitter pill unless such is accepted as a routine matter. This problem has been exacerbated by a learning curve that grows steeply at an ever-increasing rate—i.e., knowledge is accumulating at a rate that requires adjustments in management approach at ever more frequent intervals. That necessity, in turn, cuts across the grain of the age-old human love affair with “stability.”

As an aside, it is remarkable that the citizenry will accept changing signals from medical science with little comment—for example, my mother was told that she should feed her children a diet rich in animal fat to include whole milk, eggs, fat-marbled meat, and butter. The government assured that our school lunches were so dominated. Now, such a diet would be considered the opposite of “healthy.”

If natural resource management decisions relied totally on science—which some advocate—and did not consider the needs and desires of the people affected and gain their acceptance, or at least acquiescence in the management of resources that directly affects them, it is more than likely that the plan would fail in the longer term. Yet, when management decisions are made, they must be put forth with an

adequate degree of certainty or be filed away under the heading of “Timidity.”

Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal.

I Corinthians XIII:1

Yet, in putting forth resource management decisions it is essential to let it be known in plain language what the decision is based upon and how the decision was made. This is known in today’s world of decision making as “transparency.” In the realm of most natural resources management in the United States, both federal and state, such is a requirement of law. If the decision does not consider and mitigate the effects on people, it is scientifically sterile and without the compassion demanded of an effective decision that will survive the attacks of those negatively affected.

Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good.

I Thessalonians. I:3

Let all things be done decently and in order.

I Corinthians XIV:40

Clearly, we must recognize, and make certain, that the people, particularly those most affected by the decision, understand that the knowledge underlying natural resources management decisions involves only some fraction of what is already known and an even tinier fraction of what will be known from accumulating hindsight and research underway. Then, it must be understood that the foundations for management decisions are built upon a platform constructed from numerous, discrete, “blocks of knowledge.”

These blocks are formed into planning documents by skilled technicians and readjusted periodically as new relationships between the blocks are described from experience and emerging knowledge. We will never be able to see more than parts, and a fraction of the connections between the parts, of the puzzle that is life. Yet, that cannot spare us from the necessity to make the best management decisions that we can at the moment so that we may live

in the present in what we intend and hope to be a sustainable fashion.

Those decisions always entail a prophecy that lays out the expected result and consequences of management decisions. But, we are forewarned by experience of the ages not to be too certain of ourselves and then, to always be ready to adjust to new knowledge and understanding and, then, to prophesy anew. It is well to remember that, always:

We know in part, and we prophesy in part.

I Corinthians XIII:9

As we, and natural resource managers who function in our behalf, struggle to meet human needs from spaceship Earth in a sustainable fashion it is well to, simultaneously, recognize how far we have come and how little has changed. It has been over 19 centuries since the authors of the quotes made herein put quill to parchment or tanned hides to record the wisdom gained from human experience to that moment. Yet, the observations are as fresh and as insightful today as the day they were recorded. Ancient wisdom that has proven to withstand the tests of the centuries is wisdom indeed.

It is at the intersections of wisdom and accumulating science and experience and development of technology that our hopes lie for collective humanity to live long and well on, so far as we know, the only life-bearing planet among all the stars in the heavens and beyond. And, to a large extent, perhaps, all or most of our earth’s life forms’ survival ultimately depends on human activities—past, present, and future.

That survival, and associated human prosperity, has and will ever entail a race between astute application of accumulating wisdom, new understanding from science and experience, and the capability and willingness to fulfill our destiny still budding first, in our individual minds and souls and, then, in whole generations. We, as a species, have come far in our development over the ever-lengthening parade of generations—likely farther than we can ever know or appreciate. And, yet, there is so far yet to go—likewise, farther than we can appreciate. But, like it or not, we—all who have gone before, those

of us here today, and those who will come after—are participants in a truly grand and ongoing experiment.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as I am known.

I Corinthians XIII:12

We strive for that goal—that of knowing our world and ourselves in totality. Will we ever even approach that goal? Not likely, at least in this world, but the closer we come to full understanding, the more likely that our progeny, and all the life that travels with us on our spaceship Earth, will survive and flourish.

I realize that this treatise is a bit of a stretch from the usual article in *Fair Chase* and, certainly it is something far different from my usual column. But, I think that sometimes it is well to think beyond, far beyond, the hunting and the animals that we cherish and pursue, which binds us, however tenuously, together. Just maybe, those interests and pursuits are, in reality, merely symbols of much larger and time-honored traditions that reveal eternal connections between humans and nature and the experiences that we treasure, seek out, and struggle to preserve. And, it is well to know that others in centuries past have pondered these same puzzles and left us clues and wisdom that may provide solutions for today and all the tomorrows to come.

It is a grand game and an even more grand experiment that stretches backward and forward in time over millions and billions of years. Such recognition can, simultaneously, crush the individual ego and, yet, glorify the whole. For surely, it is in individuals, and individual moments of existence, that the destiny of the whole resides and evolves. And, it is with those individuals who understand those connections and act accordingly, that hope for all of us resides. Is that an honor or a burden? It is, perhaps, both. Surely, it is a grand revelation newly born over and over in the human mind and spirit of the centuries. Such responsibility, once recognized, is a heavy load, but Life is good!

It is good to be zealously affected always in a good thing.

Galatians II:18

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