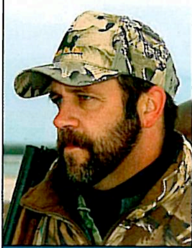
# For Everything There is a Season



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**As fall's embrace turns to winter's grip, I am reminded of the seasons' change within the wildlife profession. Hundreds of baby boomer–generation fish and wildlife biologists and administrators have retired, or are preparing to do so. These professionals have created major accomplishments in fish and wildlife conservation.**

If you talk to these retirement-age professionals, you might be surprised by their concerns about the future of wildlife conservation. The concerns range from the sustainability of hunting and fishing, the financing of non-game management, the litigious nature of conservation, the role that science plays in management, and handing over the reins to a younger generation. As an older baby boomer, I share many of these concerns. When I think back to my early mentors, I am struck by changes in the profession.

I joined the wildlife biologists' ranks at a time when it was commonplace and acceptable to end a day of field work hunting with gun and dog from a government vehicle. Our recommendations and decisions were largely (and often begrudgingly) accepted by the public. We managed wildlife as we knew best and would decide what resources and opportunity the public needed and deserved. We practiced "command and control" management and it was relatively simple.

Just as fall turns to winter, so does one generation of biologists turn to another, and the practice of wildlife management has turned dramatically. Consider that our nation's growing population is becoming more urban each day, computer technology has transformed the business of wildlife management, public oversight and involvement in agency decisions is encouraged, and agency missions have broadened from the days of "game management." Many of these changes are good for wildlife conservation. Computer technology, generally unavailable on biologists' desks until the mid-1980s, is now in common use. Since we manage according to the public-trust doctrine, the public should and must be involved in our decision-making process. Concern for all species of fish and wildlife is necessary for conservation to be effective.

However, the change associated with retiring agency staff is different. These veteran professionals hold much of the agencies' institutional memory, have developed important skills, have faced adversity, and have decades of practical fish and wildlife management experience. Agency administrators are genuinely concerned about filling these positions and hiring new staff into an agency culture that probably is very different than what new employees have experienced and expect.

The current agency culture was formed, in large measure, by the rural upbringing of existing staff, the generalist nature of their work, and a mission focused primarily on game species and management. Currently 80 percent of our population lives in urban areas. In contrast, agencies spend most of their efforts in rural areas with people and issues associated with a rural lifestyle. Expecting staff from an urban upbringing to effectively interact with and understand rural lifestyles may prove ill-advised. In addition to this clash of cultures, most agencies are adjusting to an increased complexity in wildlife-human interactions, management of species at risk, declining revenue and budgets, increased training requirements, and integrating new employees into a veteran workforce. The future of wildlife management will depend on how we weather this storm.

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What will be required of these new employees? Of course they must be well grounded in the science of wildlife management. Communication skills are vital because much of the business of fish and wildlife management is people management. Analytical skills are called on every day to make difficult decisions and recommendations to decision-makers. Conflict-resolution skills have become critical as human-wildlife conflicts continue to escalate.

On the positive side, our universities provide students with a sound scientific background steeped in theory. They teach communication, analytical and conflict resolution skills. Today's graduates can access more scientific information than could possibly be imagined by students who graduated 30 years ago. They rightfully challenge conventional wisdom. But there is more.

What concerns retiring biologists and administrators, is the relatively low level of practical experience that today's students bring to the job. University wildlife programs are filled with students who have never experienced a rural lifestyle. Many have never operated a tractor, boat, chainsaw, or truck. Some universities continue to provide practical experience opportunities, but their numbers are declining. Surveys indicate that more than half of these students have never hunted or fished. The lack of these traditional skills and traits will challenge the practice of real-world wildlife management.

Let us anticipate that as agencies transition from one generation to the next, time will be available to teach and train new staff, institutional knowledge will be passed on, practical knowledge will be learned, and the transition will be smooth. Universities and agencies could engage retired professionals to serve as mentors for aspiring biologists.

As Boone and Crockett Club members, we should be concerned about passing the torch to the next generation. Instead of the profession being left in the cold of winter, we should prepare for the transition to spring—a new season for wildlife conservation, where we maintain traditions and practical knowledge but continue to expand our wildlife conservation efforts. ■