

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Scientists as Conservation Advocates



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The writings of the late Aldo Leopold, Boone and Crockett Professional Member and the “father” of wildlife biology, contain many ideas that remain timeless in their continuing

relevance. One particular quote resonates strongly among the community of wildlife ecologists today:

“One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds... An ecologist must either harden his shell and make believe that the consequences of science are none of his business, or he must be the doctor who sees the marks of death in a community that believes itself well and does not want to be told otherwise.”

Ahead of his time in his understanding of ecological systems, Leopold must have had many lonely moments as he contemplated the effects of over-grazing, unregulated logging, farming of unsuitable lands, and other widespread practices of that period. Whether to speak out or not, and in what manner, remains a difficult question for wildlife professionals today.

This past March I was honored to participate as a panel member at a Wildlife Society conference in Alberta. The topic was “Advocacy by Scientists: Civic Responsibility or Career Suicide?” Alberta is experiencing an enormous surge in oil and gas development. Biologists, while recognizing the benefits these developments

bring to the economy and communities of Alberta, are concerned about the rapid pace and the vast scale of habitat change that is occurring. The large audience was fully engaged, indicating the level of interest and concern in this question of advocacy roles. All members of the panel agreed about the acute need for scientists to serve as advocates for healthy ecosystems and science-based management. I cautioned, however, that every scientist needs to be both smart and cautious in how to go about this touchy business.

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It’s a matter of crossing lines. If truth be told, few people enter the wildlife profession just because they have a scientific interest in the subjects to be studied. Most are driven by a deep personal interest, often a passion, for the animals and environments that become their professional focus. Between the extremes of detached objectivity and passionate subjectivity there is a broad continuum, including an indistinct line that the scientist must be careful not to cross. I cautioned the Alberta scientists as follows.

On the right side of that line, you will be recognized as a credible and objective expert. Cross that line and you will be regarded primarily as an activist.

On the right side of the line, others will assume that you are motivated to seek the truth through an objective rendering of facts. Cross that line and others will assume you are motivated by the desire for a particular policy outcome.

And here is the most important point: On the right side of the line, your opportunity to be a trusted source of scientific advice remains high. Cross that line and you not only risk career suicide, but even more sadly, you lose the potential to make a positive difference.

Can a wildlife professional weigh in on policy choices without compromising his or her reputation as an objective scientist? Certainly, if done carefully and correctly. One way is to be part of a common and influential voice; for example, by helping organizations such as The Wildlife Society and the Boone and Crockett Club develop position statements that are based on the best available science. This

allows individuals to apply their expert knowledge to effective purpose in the policy arena, without risking their image as an objective scientist.

Earlier in my career, advocacy — the “A” word — was taboo in the lexicon of wildlife scientists. I’m glad those days are over, and that wildlife professionals now openly discuss their roles not only as providers of objective knowledge, but as forces for good policy choices in the interest of wild creatures and the people who use and enjoy them. ■

Past B&C Club Member Aldo Leopold hunting for Coues’ whitetail in Chihuahua, Mexico, in 1938.

