

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER

Emphasis on the Basics



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It was an honor to accept the Boone and Crockett Professorship in Wildlife

Conservation at the University of Montana in July 2007. Moving to Montana after 29 years at the University of Arizona in Tucson will be an exciting

challenge, but the path has been well paved by the previous chairs: Drs. Hal Salwasser (1992-1995) and Jack Ward Thomas (1996-2006).

However, as I discussed my new position with friends and family not intimately familiar with wildlife management, and even some that should have been, I heard comments like, "Will you have to wear a coon-skin hat?", "Will you have to measure everything you shoot now?", and "What is the Boone and Crockett Club and what's a Boone and Crockett Professor?"

Every wildlife professional has had to answer similar questions about their profession. Aldo Leopold's classic book, *Game Management*, was published nearly 75 years ago, but the public is still not tuned into the efforts of thousands of wildlifers that have devoted their lives to the conservation of wildlife and their habitats. These questions and others provide a great opportunity to educate the unknowing about the B&C Club.

The eye-opener for me was that most did not know that the B&C Club even existed or was the oldest operating conservation organization in North America (1887), second worldwide only to the Bombay Natural History Association (1883). I was often stopped at this point to be "corrected" with statements like, "You mean it's a hunting club don't you, not a conservation organization?" or "Oh yeah, those are the guys that keep records of trophy animals." At times I felt like I had to defend one of the world's oldest conservation organizations because of ignorance and misconceptions, which caused me to ponder the image created in the minds of the American public regarding the Club's role in wildlife conservation.

Do we have an image problem at a time when interest in things wild is shifting away from wildlife? Wildlife in the United States belongs to the public, and the public dictates how that resource is to be managed. The public should also know who the key players are. This is especially important now as participation in hunting continues to drop as federal agencies and organizations are concentrating their efforts elsewhere.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service publishes the National Survey of Fishing, Hunting, and Wildlife-Associated Recreation every 5 years, which provides

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information on the number of participants in hunting and the amount of time and money spent on outdoor activities. The latest survey (2006) revealed that 5 percent of the U.S. population under 16 years old hunted (12,500,000 people). Overall, the number of hunters declined by 4 percent since the last survey, but "the number of big game hunters held their own." Migratory bird hunting declined by 22 percent and small-animal hunting declined by 12 percent.

There are numerous reasons for these trends, including a more urban society, less habitat for wildlife, increased competition for land use, increased indoor recreation,

negative attitudes about utilization of wildlife, limited funds, and legislation requiring time to be spent on areas dictated by the courts. The trend even extends to universities that are reducing emphasis on the life-history characteristics of wildlife; traditional classes like big-game ecology, waterfowl ecology, and others are being replaced with other important classes but at the expense of ignoring the basics. Certainly the field is changing, and new classes and technology have to be included in curriculums.

However, how can biologists effectively conserve species without knowledge of the animals' life-history characteristics? These are the basics of wildlife management that cannot be ignored if the next generation of wildlifers is to continue the efforts of the past. I had a student come into my office a couple of years ago and asked if the habitat described in a paper she had written was accurate for a particular species. It was, and I told her so. She was relieved because she had never seen the habitat and was using me to "field check" her work. The species resided less than 160 km from the university, and this student never stepped foot on the area or even attempted to do so. Models are necessary, but not as a replacement for field work. We need to maintain the basics, not lose them, as new technology arises.

The same can be claimed for conservation organizations; we need to remember the basics that make them valuable. The Boone and Crockett Club's basic vision includes international leadership in conservation; national leadership in research, education, and demonstration of sustainable conservation practices; improved wildlife habitats; and respect for the rights of future generations. Years ago, Teddy Roosevelt said, "Wild beasts and birds are by right not the property merely of the people alive today, but the property of the unborn generations, whose belonging we have no right to squander" is as true and important today as it was when spoken. I will do my best to enhance the road set before me, and we all need to be solid and informed ambassadors to those that own our wildlife heritage—the American public. ■