Wildlife Education: The Saga Continues

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This past year I served on a Wildlife Society (TWS) team investigating the state of wildlife education in North America. Our task was to revisit a question that Dr. Jim Teer, B&C professional member and renowned leader in the wildlife profession, had raised in a publication 20 years ago: "University education in wildlife biology: what's given and what's needed?" Our team began by surveying universities and colleges, employers, and wildlife professionals in all sectors to determine how the answer may have changed in the past two decades.

Our review delivered good news and bad news. On the positive side, surveys of employers affirmed the importance of the "core" subject areas—such as ecology, wildlife management, habitat ecology, mammalogy, and ornithology—that have defined wildlife education since Aldo Leopold launched the first graduate program in 1933. Employers also rated their new hires as proficient in these subject areas, confirming that the schools remain strong in delivering the basic sciences and ecological theory that are foundational in the wildlife field.

Aldo Leopold (in white shirt) and grad student Ellwood B. Moore (with hands in pants pockets) discussing the construction of a wildlife feeding-shelter with a Riley farmer and his sons in 1935.

On the negative side, employers assigned high importance to other areas of competence while giving their new hires low proficiency scores. What are those deficiencies, and why do they persist? Let's look at the top three.

Field-worthiness and hands-on skills

From the beginning, Aldo Leopold emphasized a connection to the land as essential for developing an understanding of how nature works and responds to management. Today, both professors and employers report that many students lack the outdoor orientation and basic skills of previous generations. They enter with less, and receive less in their years as a student. The causes range from too much television and too little time outdoors, to risk-averse university administrators, to the high cost of field-based courses. The consequences are significant. Field-unworthy students may be passed up for seasonal jobs, experience difficulty in completing field assignments, be poorly prepared for entry-level jobs or graduate research, and miss out on the joys of fieldwork.

Communications and interacting with stakeholders

Agency and private-sector employers alike named these as essential areas of competency that wildlife graduates often lack. New hires are not expected to arrive with highly refined skills in these areas. But they at least should have a realistic understanding that most wildlife problems, while appearing technical on the surface, are confounded by political, cultural, ethical, or economic issues that must be worked through. It appears that some students still choose the wildlife major because they "don't like to deal with people." Worse yet, some educators are failing to disabuse them of those naïve views. Aspiring professionals must understand the importance of engaging with stakeholders of diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and interests. Development of critical interpersonal skills should begin early rather than later.

Problem-solving in interdisciplinary teams

As in previous surveys, employers emphasized the need for critical thinkers who can grasp the full scope of complex problems and collaborate across disciplinary lines to arrive at solutions. While employers do not expect new hires to arrive with a full range of problem-solving skills, they do need them to be reasonably informed about what approaches are required. Most problems today are too large or complex to be solved by any one discipline. Rather than pursuing their education as an individual endeavor, students need opportunities to tackle complex problems in team environments that better reflect the real world they will function in as wildlife professionals.

My assignment on the TWS team was to lead the section on "what universities can do." This fit well with my experience as an educator and allowed a positive outlook. In our report, we call on educators to change from passive to active formats with greater emphasis on hands-on and problem-based learning in contexts relevant to career choices in the wildlife profession. That's easier said than done, however, since academic programs are under pressure to graduate more students faster, at less cost. Thus we also call on students to look outside the classroom for opportunities to build competencies that employers say are lacking. For example, students could participate in outdoor programs, orienteering classes, hunter safety courses, and other pursuits to build skills and confidence for working in the field. By attending public hearings, roundtables, and other citizen forums, they would learn much about stakeholders' interests and roles. We also call on professionals to pitch in by providing field experiences and hands-on training, helping design and execute case studies and class projects, and advising programs on how to make curricula more relevant to the needs of employers and the profession.

Our team recognized that, more than ever, the years in an academic program are just the beginning of a long road of continuous learning. We call upon educators, students, and employers alike to commit to lifelong learning as an essential element for career success. ■ W. B Kessler