

Conservation Leaders for TOMORR

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(housed within the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation)



OW and the Changing Faces of Wildlife Management

Who manages our wildlife resources today, and what drives their passion for their chosen field? To answer this, you must first look at how wildlife management in North America has changed during the past 50 years. Following the “birth” of modern wildlife management in North America in the 1920s and ‘30s, most of those attracted to the new profession were from rural backgrounds, well-versed in hunting or angling, and male. They set about the important goals of growing game populations, regulating harvest, improving habitat, and developing the needed science to ply their trade. Thus the stage was set for the profession’s first half-century of leadership in wildlife conservation and habitat management.

When my generation entered the profession in the 1990s, things had dramatically changed from what a young wildlifer would have found 50 years prior. The profession has been shaped by policy developments, scientific discoveries, and public engagement revolving around wildlife, natural resources management, and environmentalism. The profession’s responsibilities have diversified and evolved, and so, too, has the wildlife workforce. As new backgrounds and skills were brought to bear, there emerged an apparent divide between traditional wildlife management ideologies and modern expectations.

This is the story of Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow (CLfT), an education and professional development program dedicated to narrowing this divide in the wildlife profession.

Confronting the Generation Gap

I became aware of the “wildlife professional divide” while working as a wildlife habitat extension specialist at Purdue University. My job responsibilities were evenly split between applied research and outreach education, with much of my work focused on the nuts and bolts of habitat management. Daily I worked with wildlife professionals and practitioners in the agencies, non-government organizations, and private sector who performed the work of wildlife habitat management. Over time, it became clear that what

employers expected and desired of new employees was not always available from the pool of graduates.

At Purdue, my frequent interactions with students revealed what many others had already noticed. Not long ago most wildlife students possessed skills and know-how acquired through hunting, fishing, farming, and working outdoors. The value of these outdoor experiences was taken for granted at the time, a sort of “institutional knowledge” common in previous generations of wildlifers. I observed that students today often lack the know-how that their predecessors obtained from hands-on experiences. Many seem unprepared—even at risk of causing harm—due to a lack of basic field skills, orientation to the outdoors, and awareness of rural culture. Perhaps more concerning was the students’ lack of understanding about hunting and hunters, who remain key constituents of the wildlife profession and the economic engine for so many conservation efforts.

Increased urbanization and decreasing hunter numbers are shaping a society that is disconnected from wildlands, food production, and wildlife pursuits. This trend is evident in the young people today who enter the natural resource management fields with little or no exposure to hunting or other consumptive uses of wildlife. They arrive on campus ready to devote their careers to wildlife science and conservation. However, their wildlife frame of reference is a non-consumptive view shaped primarily by the Discovery Channel, Disney, and the Internet. Many have had meaningful and highly formative outdoor experiences such as bird watching, summer camps, wildlife hikes, or visits to parks and nature centers. The knowledge and skills gained, however, are very different from what their predecessors entered the profession with 30 years ago. This “generation gap” has been addressed in reports by The Wildlife Society (the profession’s premier scientific and professional organization) and the various agencies and organizations that employ wildlifers.

Shouldn’t the universities strive to remedy these shortages of field skills and practical know-how? Unfortunately, this is less likely than ever. The demands of an ever-broadening ecological workforce are driving change in the natural resources curricula. With more time devoted to climate change, genomics, human dimensions, and preparing for graduate study, the mainstays of a traditional wildlife education such as habitat management, taxonomy, and field techniques now receive less time in the curriculum. Graduates of the top universities typically possess a broad understanding of key ecological and environmental principles, but may lack depth and practical skills in any one specific discipline. They are expected to fill in the gaps through work experience, internships, or graduate study in a specialized field.

The foundations of wildlife management can be a casualty of these curricular changes. Therefore, the history, culture, and economics of hunting—and the important roles that hunters serve in conservation today—remain unexplored by many graduates who aspire to manage natural resources.

Society's Expectations: A Moving Target

Are today's wildlife students inferior compared to those of the past? The short answer is no, not at all. The best among them are bright, well-grounded in ecology, and far more "computer savvy" than most of us ever hope to be. They have a familiar passion for the natural world and are poised to bring fresh new perspectives, talents, and technologies into the profession. And that is a good thing, because the demands of the job and society's expectations have also evolved in ways that some senior-level biologists may find difficult and distracting to what they perceive as the core job of conservation.

Today's state and federal wildlife agencies have an expanded scope of operations that goes well beyond the nuts and bolts of game and non-game management. The regulation, monitoring, and sustainability of wildlife populations remain important responsibilities. In addition, agencies are challenged with intricate ecological, environmental, and social issues that exceed the bounds and methods of traditional wildlife management. To keep pace with society's expectations, agencies must devote time and resources to emerging challenges including ecosystem services, "green" industry, marketing, human-wildlife conflicts, and workforce recruitment and development. These demands reflect a society that has experienced major shifts in the past half-century, with a complexity of expectations placed on natural resource management.

In some ways the graduates of today are better equipped than their predecessors for the diverse and evolving demands of the profession. They graduate with confidence in solid ecological theory and up-to-date technological skills obtained through their university education. But as well, they may be ill-prepared to succeed in a profession in which understanding of the historical and cultural context is extremely important. The university experience did not teach them that "there is this whole culture (even beyond hunting) at the heart of wildlife conservation and management that you must

engage with to be successful. Without understanding the complexities of hunting and its specific role in wildlife conservation, you are at a real disadvantage."

Having realized this gap between education and practical management skills, what could I do besides lament? Opportunity came in 2008 when I trained as an instructor for an emerging education program, Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow (CLfT). The impetus for this program came from agency administrators, professional biologists, the hunting constituency, and even university faculty. They all saw a real need to connect the new generation of wildlife professionals—those who someday will fill leadership positions in the natural resources—with the

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culture and constituents of hunting. Eighteen months after becoming an instructor for the program I had the opportunity to leave my university post and work full-time as the national coordinator for CLfT. Today I proudly serve as the program's director.

Crossing the Divide

The Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow program was established in 2004 through a partnership of the Wildlife Management Institute and the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation. The well-designed pilot programs generated immediate praise from participants, instructors, and participating universities. When I came on staff in 2009, CLfT set out to fine-tune the curriculum, broaden opportunities, and create a standardized conservation education platform that could be extended to other locations across the U.S.

The CLfT program isn't designed to be a hunting program; it is a conservation education program that deals with the role of hunters and consumptive uses of wildlife in relation to wildlife conservation and society. CLfT's educational goal is to "identify future and current leaders of the natural resource profession who do not hunt and provide them with an understanding of the diverse values and important roles of hunting

and its impact on conservation." Its highly interactive curriculum is derived from the leading science and theory of natural resources administration and wildlife management. Currently CLfT is active with 45 universities, 25 state agencies, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service—and still growing.

CLfT workshops no longer are limited to university students. Because of CLfT's impact and popularity, state and federal agencies requested that we offer programs for their current employees who might also benefit from the opportunity. Thus, outstanding early and mid-career professionals are also selected for participation in CLfT.

Eligible participants must be identified as talented leaders who have no firsthand hunting experience, or otherwise have minimal exposure to the culture and practice of hunting. This highly selective program enlists academic advisors and agency administrators to help identify outstanding candidates. There is no cost to the participants. The Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation shoulders the costs of running CLfT with the assistance of our key partners, host facilities, and the generosity of dedicated conservationists.

CLfT's instructors, now numbering over 150 nationally, represent the very best of what the community of wildlife professionals and hunter-conservationists has to offer. To qualify as an instructor, one must be an experienced hunter, a dedicated conservationist, and an expert communicator. Currently 44 percent of instructors are agency personnel, 41 percent have university positions, and the remaining 15 percent are hunter-conservationists who earn their living as tradesmen, retailers, consultants, stay-at-home parents, or any number of occupations that may not be directly associated with natural resources management. That these volunteers find the experience rewarding is evidenced by their continuing participation from year to year. The benefits run both ways. While helping prepare the participants for success in the profession, instructors are enriched by new perspectives and knowledge brought to the program by the participants who represent the best and brightest.

Teams of 10-12 CLfT instructors at each workshop use open and interactive presentation styles that promote critical review of information and an exchange of perspectives. Topics vary widely and include hunter demographics, motivations and ethics; the role of hunting in society; firearms handling; and wildlife ecology. CLfT doesn't avoid tough questions or sugar-coat

controversial issues; we simply rely on the best current information and the expertise of our instructors to deliver the program. The credit for success goes to our dedicated instructors who tirelessly deliver the educational components of CLfT.

Working with trained CLfT instructors, workshop participants have the opportunity to experience a variety of field activities relating to firearms safety and practical skills required by hunters, including the option of a mentored upland bird hunt. Many participants report that the hunt, paired with the classroom discussions, is a highly valuable experience that broadens their understanding and perceptions.

CLfT is not in any way intended to train or otherwise recruit people into hunting. The purpose is to provide current and future leaders with a personal and meaningful orientation to hunting and hunters, who are key stakeholders and partners in wildlife conservation. The hunting experience is a tangible part of this orientation.

“Offering our participants an opportunity to experience the hunt exposes them to these skill sets and allows them to better understand and relate to hunting through experiential learning,” says CLfT National Coordinator David Windsor. Experiencing the hunt registers with participants in various ways, ranging from a purely academic learning experience to a high-energy outing with deeply personal meaning.

Over the years, our participants have related the hunting exercise to be just one of many lasting experiences they gain during a workshop. A recent student from a south-central CLfT workshop offered that “the hunt was different than I thought it would be, I see how it can get exciting and I’m glad I went. I now have a better appreciation for the process of hunting and its contribution to conservation because I was finally exposed to it hands-on. The significance of the activity is hence more profound.” Regardless of what impression the hunt or any other curriculum component has on the participants, the important thing is that people completing CLfT are better able to grasp what hunting and hunters can mean for conservation and their ultimate career responsibilities.

Is CLfT Making a Difference?

Only time will reveal the exact impact of this program, but in the meantime the participants and their colleagues can provide insight into how we are doing. All CLfT participants complete an anonymous exit survey upon program completion. Ninety-five percent report a deeper understanding of why regulated and ethical hunting is an

essential component of wildlife conservation, and of the importance of hunting in the culture and economic fabric of our society.

Seeing the CLfT program in action, a chief of wildlife from an eastern state shared his impression that “this program is a real active tenant positively addressing these things [an education gap]...the interactions the participants have here make stronger natural resource managers for the future.” This comment was affirmed recently in an unsolicited email from a Midwestern agency division chief whose employee attended a workshop last year. He offered, “in case you are interested in feedback on your program, [our employee] loved it last year. He stated that he has a much deeper understanding and appreciation of hunting and the culture surrounding the sport.”

A recent female graduate from the doctorate program at the University of Wisconsin offered that “the instructors are incredibly knowledgeable. They challenged us to think critically and opened up their personal and professional knowledge to us. I would recommend this program to anyone looking to gain an increased awareness and knowledge about conservation and the link/application of hunting.”

These are a just a few of the many comments we receive about the program. They help us envision the impact that CLfT may have in the future of conservation.

So far over 400 participants have completed the program. We know that demand exceeds supply. But given the need to wisely use available funding and resources, “controlled growth” must be our mantra for expansion. In the year ahead, CLfT will conduct 14 workshops at nine locations across the U.S., providing professional development opportunities for approximately 240 top candidates in the profession. It’s the aim of CLfT to ensure that tomorrow’s leaders understand the historic role of hunters and hunting in wildlife management—and most importantly, to envision how the hunting heritage fits into the future of conservation.

To learn more about the history, impact, and future of CLfT please visit www.clft.org. ■

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