

CAPITOL COMMENTS

The Next 100 Years of Wildlife Conservation Will Be Different!



Rollin D. Sparrowe

President
Wildlife Management Institute

Professional Member
Boone and Crockett Club

The turn of a new century evokes recollections of the conservation heritage of Theodore Roosevelt, the establishment of the first National Wildlife Refuge at Pelican Island, the formation of the first Forest Reserves (which became the National Forests), the flowering of National Park concepts, recognition of over-exploitation of wildlife, and the need for legal frameworks within which we manage our wildlife. We enter a new century in an unparalleled era of financial prosperity in the United States. We have the ability to use that prosperity to shape the future of wildlife conservation in our country. Will we do it? And if so, how? How will the next wave of conservation be different from the last?

WHO WILL BE THE CUSTOMER FOR WILDLIFE CONSERVATION?

In the time of Theodore Roosevelt 100 years ago, "gentlemen sportsmen" became the conservationists who took action to protect wildlife, restore habitats, and start a movement that has endured, developed, and evolved for the past century. Perhaps the dominant issue we are facing for the next 100 years is change in the human population.

Last October the world population exceeded 6 billion people. In 14 years, the figure will be 7 billion. There were about 30 million U.S. citizens 100 years ago, and in 1999 we exceeded 272 million in the United States. Our population centers are shifting west and south, and California alone will reach 50 million in the next 20 years. These changes will affect everything about wildlife conservation in the future.

These people will not be the "gentlemen sportsmen" of the turn of the last century. They will not "look like us" who are currently in the wildlife management profession. Nor will they compare with the current population of

America. Within 25 years Hispanics will be the largest minority group in the United States, followed by Black and Asian in that order. This will vary regionally, with much stronger majorities in some regions of the country. By 2025, more than a third of the U.S. population will be over the age of 50. The population over 65 years old is currently 24 percent of the voting public, and in 50 years it will be about 35 percent. These various groups of Americans will think differently about wildlife, and their traditions will not be the same as ours.

We know that presently the greatest portion of the U.S. public is growing up in cities, has little involvement in the outdoors, never sees a wild animal live or die, and is increasingly disconnected from many of the pursuits that we, as hunters, value most. We worry about whether those who manage wildlife through our agencies are hunters or not. We know that these differences are already affecting wildlife programs.

We must conclude that the customer of tomorrow is unlikely to look like us, the readers of *Fair Chase*. They will be a much more diverse public with a legitimate interest in the future of their wildlife, and we have to learn to deal with that.

WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE FUTURE OF WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT?

Those of us in the profession of wildlife management have been subject to internal evaluation in recent years. We know we are not a cross-section of America and it is smart business to realize that. Some of our literature is beginning to show that we tend to be more utilitarian in our outlook on wildlife, think and care about wildlife significantly more than the average citizen, and focus on concerns about habitat and population more than individual ani-

mals. At the same time, the American public learns about wildlife from television and is baraged by the fund-raising appeals of environmental groups.

The questions that arise for professional wildlife managers are not unlike those that should be of concern to the Boone and Crockett Club. Are we equipped to connect and achieve rapport with other cultures, age groups, and diverse interests that don't have the same priorities that we do? Is it just a need to "educate" and make others see it our way? Studies are starting to tell us that maybe that isn't the winning strategy. Focus groups reveal that a person's values concerning wildlife are not due to a lack of understanding about hunting or conservation traditions. They have real, underlying differences in how they feel about wildlife. Wildlife managers are learning that they must deal with their diverse public in different ways if they want something to say about what the future will be for wildlife in America.

A 1998 session at Wildlife Management Institute's North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference traced the development of "human dimensions" in wildlife management. This concept deals with the application of information about people and their needs and wants in fish and wildlife decision making. Wildlife professionals who work with human dimensions have developed a journal, published writings, developed programs at universities, and directed partnerships with state agencies on the subject. In New York, Colorado, Mississippi, Michigan, and other states, universities and state wildlife agencies have developed partnerships with shared funding and staff to study the needs of this changing human component of wildlife management. The Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies de-

veloped a program called Responsive Management, which has devised approaches to the use of focus groups and contact with these new constituencies who have a stake in wildlife. The information coming out of these programs is invaluable in coping with demographic changes that will chart the course of the next century of wildlife conservation.

WHY ARE DEMOGRAPHICS SO IMPORTANT IN WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT?

With demographic changes come shifts in political power in the public domain, and also within agencies. This is critical because federal and state agencies that deal with wildlife do not represent a cross-section of America. Many of the federal agencies have an average employee age of close to 50, and are projecting massive turnover with retirements over the next decade. Some of this has already begun, and is affecting the state agencies as well.

Cultural changes will profoundly affect the next 100 years of wildlife conservation. New

folks coming into agencies bring new science and new management perspectives. Also, their different cultures and ethnic backgrounds come closer to matching the real face of America in the future. But the experienced wildlife managers who got us where we are today understand how wildlife has been restored and how to get things done. A professional challenge is to build on the programs that restored wildlife in America while we embrace the new demographics and cultural change. The future means demographic and cultural changes, and we must work with them as a cost of doing business.

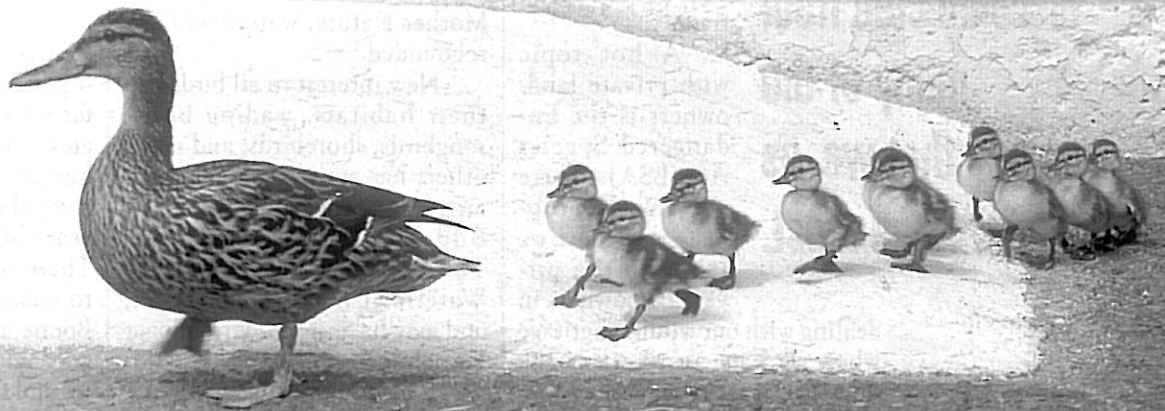
At a recent professional gathering I dubbed this issue concerning the aging population of wildlife biologists in state and federal agencies as the "geezer factor." We in the Boone and Crockett Club fit that mold. Moreover, the Club's demographic structure looks nothing like the rest of America. If we are going to remain relevant, we need to understand the changing

face of our country and avoid the trap of being "geezers" who cannot or will not recognize change.

WHAT ARE THE PRIMARY ISSUES FACING US IN THE NEXT 100 YEARS?

One question will be how to work more effectively with private landowners. A recent article by Jack Ward Thomas and Kaush Arha in this magazine pointed out the importance of private lands, often in combination with important public lands in the West. Keeping people on farms and ranches, and

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improving land stewardship are very basic goals. There has been considerable progress over the past three decades in farm legislation. Farm programs have had a positive impact on the recovery of North American duck populations while benefiting other wildlife. We now need additional provisions to help ranchers

directly. New approaches to grassland easements may help. We are currently in a cycle in which farm and ranch economies are in trouble and conservation programs are being bypassed by Congress to give money directly to the farm community. In return for federal dollars spent to help farmers and ranchers, wildlife and habitat should receive comparable public benefit using a consistent, reasonable approach. This would be a fair trade.

A hot topic with private landowners is the Endangered Species Act (ESA). There are clearly problems with how we relate to the private landowners in

dealing with our wildlife heritage when we have to resort to the ESA and listings for protection. We who work for wildlife need to change the equation and help landowners do the land stewardship and make the trade-offs necessary to avoid listings. The combination of public lands and private lands in the West is facing huge potential for listing in the near future. Blacktail prairie dog, sage grouse, upland plo-

ver, lynx, and a whole array of aquatic species are at risk. Undeniably, there will be disruption if these and others are listed. Equally undeniable is our moral obligation to help forestall the need to list these animals. America collectively has not done that. We need to retain this focus in order to deal with the important tasks ahead.

The power of coalitions and partnerships is making itself known in both private and federal land management for wildlife. This requires setting aside differences, being willing to come to the table to identify issues, working toward common objectives, and overcoming conflict. Easy words to say, but difficult in many cases to carry out.

Some current examples of working together for conservation may be a road map to the future. The North American Waterfowl Management Plan combined with voluntary partnerships in managing and restoring wetlands has had a positive effect on millions of acres of habitat, expending more than a billion and a half dollars in 15 years. With some help from Mother Nature, waterfowl have rebounded.

New interest in all birds and their habitats, wading birds, songbirds, shorebirds, and many others has started a new movement called the North American Bird Conservation Initiative. This movement goes beyond the Waterfowl Management Plan, and may have significant impact on habitat for all types of wildlife. Just think, folks who care about warblers and vireos and sandpipers will be involved in large-scale habitat work across the country, affecting not only songbirds but big game as well! Here is a good example of cultural change that doesn't match our past vision for wildlife conservation. On the other hand, an expanded vision of habitat

may be just what we need. The wave of the future for wildlife conservation cannot solely be to manage "just for deer," or "just for deer and turkeys." We must manage habitat for *all* the wildlife that exists in a particular ecosystem. The success of the Waterfowl Management Plan in wetlands and other habitats is due to the fact that it considers all the wildlife found there, not "just ducks." This means trade-offs, accommodations, and some different approaches for the future.

How better to ensure the wrong outcome than by not being involved? With these new movements starting, the mandate is clear. Traditional wildlife managers and the Boone and Crockett Club had better take note and be a part of whatever is going on, especially if big game habitat on private lands may be decided, to a greater or lesser extent, by bird conservation initiatives. This should be viewed as opportunity, not threat.

What is likely in specific accomplishment in the coming year? In the last issue of *Fair Chase* we traced the development of the Conservation and Reinvestment Act and all that it portends for improved funding for state fish and wildlife agencies. This is the sort of step that has to happen in America to pave the way for the next 100 years of wildlife conservation. There is opportunity for leaders to come forward, including the Boone and Crockett Club in its particular role in promoting ethics and fair chase. The hallmark of the Club's conservation premise has to be conservation first, and enjoyment of the resource as a dividend. In this there is stability of purpose as change occurs. We have an obligation to step up and learn to deal with the changes in our country that will chart the course of wildlife conservation for the next 100 years. ▲▲▲