

B&C PROFESSOR'S CORNER



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The Basics of Wildlife Education

Professors within wildlife programs are constantly searching for the right courses to teach their students.

While I was at the University of Arizona, this was an ongoing issue. When I joined the faculty at the University of Montana

last year, courses

taught and course content was an important discussion topic.

This search for the perfect mix of classes is ongoing elsewhere. I just received an e-mail from a colleague from Texas Tech asking me to list the 10 most important classes for undergraduate wildlife students. And, the search is not new. As the profession changes, technology advances, society demands on habitat increase, and habitats for wildlife species are altered, it is only natural that professors in wildlife programs should do their best to get the right mix of course work for future wildlife biologists. This search is a trial in progress.

But there is only so much that can be done in a four-year undergraduate program. First, students have to meet university requirements so they receive a solid education. We are educating students, after all, not just training them. If the latter were the case, professors could eliminate the arts, history, humanities, and numerous other classes that bring breadth to an educated citizen.

After the classes required by the university are completed, controversy can still arise when deciding on which technical courses are needed by wildlife students; how many classes are needed in biology, botany, ecology and the other "ologies" (e.g., mammalogy, ornithology, herpetology), economics, habitat, human dimensions, law, management (e.g., wildlife, forestry, range), policy, sociology, statistics, and each and every professor's pet class.

There is often emphasis to develop new classes for the next new crisis on the horizon (e.g., animal damage control, biomimicry, climate change, exotic invasions, urban wildlife) that further taxes the bulging course load of the undergraduate. On top of this, professions have certification criteria that require specific classes to be completed

and state legislatures are demanding that the B.S. degree should be completed in four years. A four-year education is simply not enough to meet the credentials for a professional wildlife biologist.

Even The Wildlife Society, the professional society for wildlife biologists, recognizes the limited education provided by a four-year degree. They require five years of wildlife experience beyond the B.S. degree before one can be certified as a professional wildlife biologist. The reality is this; graduate education is the norm for wildlife professionals in the 21st Century.

One cannot make informed decisions about something as complex as any wildlife species without a basic understanding of how that species interacts with its habitat, and how society influences wildlife and the habitats wildlife depend on.

I believe, and have always told my students, that jobs in the profession are available for those with only a B.S. degree in wildlife. However, the student must be



willing to pack their pony and head off to Alabama, Alaska, Iowa, or wherever the jobs are. But they will likely be entry level and technician positions that do not offer the same professional opportunities for advancement as a graduate degree in wildlife ecology will provide. Many students who obtain B.S. degrees in wildlife never enter the profession, but that is not a loss. Wildlife belongs to the public, and decisions about wildlife will be enhanced when made by informed people.

So what are the key undergraduate classes that should be taught in the wildlife arena? It is critical to the profession to have individuals knowledgeable about wildlife and their habitat, regardless of what they will do in the profession. One cannot make informed decisions about something as complex as any wildlife species without a basic understanding of how that species interacts with its habitat, and how society influences wildlife and the habitats wildlife depend on.

Some students try to ignore the people component of their education as they are interested in the animal, not people. But people dictate how wildlife will be managed; thus, the manager's role in that management. So, these three elements have to be present for the B.S. degree for wildlife students: Studies of the animal, its habitat, and the humans that influence both.

These are the bare minimums in our educational system in North America. At the graduate level, students can build on this course work to delve into how we can ensure the maintenance of viable populations of all wildlife and further develop the scientific management of wildlife. The B.S. degree sets the stage. Courses will change, content will shift a bit, and over time some classes will be substituted with those that are more important. This is the way of a dynamic profession.

And because wildlife belongs to the people it is natural that the profession will shift over time to represent the diversity of the public. Just as biologists (and society) are interested in biodiversity, we should also be interested in the human diversity of the managers of wildlife; another challenge. Education of future wildlife professionals will continue to be a trial. It's one that we must win to enhance the profession and the wildlife resources we serve. ■