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Finding Managers for the Next Wave of Conservation

The decade of the 1930s produced the movement that became professional wildlife management. We celebrate the Pittman-Robertson program and its successes that focused

sportsmen's dollars on state-based wildlife restoration and enabled the development of the current hunting traditions and opportunities.

A vital contributor has been the Cooperative Wildlife Research Units. Famous Iowa conservationist and B&C Member Ding Darling brought together Land Grant universities, state wildlife agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), and the Wildlife Management Institute (WMI) to provide scientific information to manage wildlife by training students in conducting studies of management interest to the agencies. Fisheries Research Units were added in the 1950s, and the programs combined in the 1990s as the current Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units Program (Units).

Wildlife management evolved on a parallel track with the formation of state wildlife agencies that depended increasingly on science for their management actions. The return of depleted species (elk, pronghorn, wood duck, wild turkey, and many more) was enabled by the growing cadre of professionally trained biologists, many from the Cooperative Wildlife Research Units. Those trained managers evolved into leadership roles in the state and federal agencies.

Our world has changed. We know the story — expansion of human endeavors affecting the landscape has reduced habitats and

wildlife, especially those not managed by programs like Pittman-Robertson. More people come from urban backgrounds, believing in protection as a solution, when we believe the problems may more readily be solved by careful management. Professionals trained in the early conservation movement, my generation, are retiring in large numbers.

We know that wildlife management is far more than biology and must include economics, business, sociology, and conscious compromise; that is why the Boone and Crockett Club has supported first the Montana and now Oregon and Texas graduate programs. But by sheer numbers, the now 70-year-old Cooperative Units Program holds great promise to produce the next crop of professionals to manage our wildlife and maintain our traditions. It needs our help to be successful.

The removal of research functions from the FWS a decade ago to a Biological Division of the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) tested the cooperative partnership. B&C Member Steve Williams, as Director of FWS, has brought FWS back to 21 of the 40 Units and the rest should follow. Many state wildlife agencies still do most of their research through their Unit.

Originally, the FWS (and now USGS) housed the base budget for salaries so scientists familiar to the Club, like John Craighead and Bart O'Gara of Montana, were federal employees. Over time, there have been recurrent problems meeting the salary costs of those key people because the federal government let the other cooperators do the work to keep the budget.

Of greater significance is that university education has changed, and many locations no longer teach or emphasize management of habitats and wildlife. Many students (and professors!) have no field experience with agencies (a former strong suit of the Cooperative Units) and do not leave school wanting to manage wildlife.

A new National Cooperators' Coalition has been formed through the help of WMI. Its purposes are to solve short-term problems with the budget that currently prevent vacancies from being filled and to develop a long-term strategy for the program to ensure a stronger future. The Club has added its name to the Coalition in recognition of the role the program played in the past and can play again in the future.

The short-term objective is to return full staffing. That means we need to add \$2.5

million to the \$14.5 million budget for the Units for Fiscal Year 2006. The long-term objective is working for a research funding base and more staff and money to work with modern problems. Realistically, we have to work harder to get what we need (managers) than we did 70 years ago when Unit training began. University curricula do not necessarily balance science and theory with practical application; with the many advances in science and technology, they focus on training generalists and assume the smart ones with experience in the scientific method will become managers. However, management as a discipline has also advanced, and much can and should be taught if the students are to assume the all-important role of replacing the 50 percent or more of state and federal managers soon to retire.

Through direct involvement in developing the strategic vision and plan for the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units this year, the Club can shape the outcome very much like Ding Darling and others did 70 years ago.

We need a Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units Program that provides science, but also a management mindset in its graduates. Through federal and/or private dollars, we need to financially support training at selected Units that provides the right focus in solving practical problems. The Club needs to export its experience from the Montana program.

Those of us in the hunting conservation community, such as the American Wildlife Conservation Partnership (AWCP), have a strong interest in the next generation of managers. AWCP needs representation on the National Cooperators' Coalition. We also should consider becoming active, paying cooperators in all or some of the Units to help keep the focus. Money talks. We can ensure that our voice will be heard if we can give modest support for targeted management training.

The future of our hunting tradition is not easily defined or assured. Past successes can show us how to proceed in our own interest. The Wisconsin Unit has pioneered a mentoring program to assure that wildlife graduate students leave with an appreciation for the role of shooting and hunting. This model can be applied to other educational needs — with our support and involvement. If we want enough people in the next decade trained as we believe they should be, we have an opportunity to do so, but we must be ready to invest in it. One way is through the Cooperative Fish and Wildlife Research Units. ■

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