

KNOWLEDGE BASE

The Changing Climate for Climate Change



Winifred B. Kessler
PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
Boone and Crockett Club

On March 17, I experienced two “eureka moments” while attending a workshop on Climate Change and Managing Fish and Wildlife. The 74th North American Wildlife & Natural

Resources Conference in the Washington, D.C., area featured leaders from key federal agencies outlining strategies for managing wildlife in a changing climate. Each in turn—speakers from the National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and National Park Service—described their agency’s approach for anticipating effects of climate change on wildlife and responding through management strategies and actions.

My first “eureka moment” was a realization of the difference that five years can make. Back in 2004 the agencies were mostly silent on the subject of climate change. Certainly, wildlife scientists were reporting many observed changes in species distributions, timing of breeding, migration onset, and other phenomena that were consistent with a warming climate. It took a partnership of non-governmental organizations, The Wildlife Society and the National Wildlife Federation, to pull the existing science all together in a *Technical Review on Global Climate Change and Wildlife in North America*, released in 2004. This was followed by other reports,

mostly from non-governmental scientific and conservation organizations, further accentuating the silence of the agencies.

Three major developments in 2007 were catalysts for government engagement.

In August, a report by the Government Accountability Office concluded that resource managers lacked specific guidance for incorporating climate change into their management actions and planning efforts, and that this constrained their ability to address climate change and effectively manage resources. Then in November, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released its 4th Assessment Report. Whereas the fact of rapid climate warming had been established in earlier assessment reports, the 4th Assessment Report included a consensus of more than 2,500 scientists from over 130 countries that human-caused greenhouse gas emissions were very likely the main driving force (more than 90 per-

The first component—mitigation—deals with management strategies and operational changes to help reduce the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The second component—adaptation—includes strategies and management approaches to help species and ecosystems adapt to climate change and related threats such as wildfires, invasive species, and drought. The third component—communications—seeks to improve public understanding about climate change and develop alliances and partnerships.

cent chance) behind global warming trends of the past 50 years. In a third significant development that year, the U.S. Geological Survey established the National Global Warming and Wildlife Science Center.

The Center’s aims included research and monitoring to project future impacts on fish, wildlife, and habitats; assisting federal agencies to develop adaptive management strategies; and creating partnerships to further the Center’s reach.

The presentations at the March 17 workshop showed that the agencies are now deeply invested in climate change thinking, and along similar lines. One by one, the agency leaders outlined strategies that have three major components in common. The first component—mitigation—deals with management strategies and operational changes to help reduce the buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. The second component—adaptation—includes strategies and management approaches to help species and ecosystems adapt to climate change and related threats such as wildfires, invasive species, and drought. The third component—communications—seeks to improve public understanding about climate change and develop alliances and partnerships.

The speakers seemed genuinely surprised that their strategic approaches were so similar. One speaker remarked, “you might think we’d gotten together beforehand to compare notes.” That’s when my other “eureka moment” struck. *Good grief*, I thought, *don’t these agencies talk to one another?* Issues do not get any more global than this one. So why is each agency developing a strategy that applies within its own geographic and administrative boundaries, rather than joining forces for a comprehensive strategy that encompasses all the federal

lands, waters, and natural resources? I’ll interpret the similarity among approaches as a positive sign that convergence is inevitable, and hope it happens sooner rather than later. ■