

KNOWLEDGE BASE

Got Wildlife Professional?



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In my last column I wrote about the newest evaluation of wildlife education by The Wildlife Society (TWS), the professional organization for researchers, educators,

and practitioners in the wildlife field. One of the report's most surprising findings came from a survey of colleges and universities conducted by Mark Wallace, a professor in the Department of Natural Resources at Texas Tech University. The survey found at least four times as many programs offering some form of wildlife education as had been previously listed by TWS. In the U.S., the survey identified 334 programs offering Bachelor of Science (BS) degrees, 184 offering Master of Science (MS) degrees, and 99 offering Doctorates (Ph.Ds). In addition there were 20 Associates of Applied Science (AAS) programs, 57 Associates of Science (AS), 26 offering wildlife as a minor, and 19 with a Master's degree other than the Master of Science. Other U.S. schools claimed to offer one or more courses in wildlife biology or management. In Canada, the survey found 50 universities and 42 colleges that offer courses in the wildlife field.

How do these programs compare as to the quality of their wildlife graduates? This raises the more basic questions, what is a wildlife professional, and how do you recognize one when you need one? This could be really important if, for example, you have a major project or lawsuit hanging on the services of a "professional wildlife biologist."

The easiest answer is: a professional wildlife biologist is one who has been certified by The Wildlife Society. In this program, in place for more than three decades, TWS maintains a Certification Review Board of accomplished professionals who carefully review each applicant's qualifications against education and experience requirements. When I went through the process 30 years ago, the result was "certification for life." Subsequently, the program added training and professional development requirements to ensure

that certified professionals stay current in their field.

How effective is the program?

The answer varies by employment sector. Certification is popular with private-sector wildlife consultants as a key element of their bonafide credentials. Some state wildlife agencies emphasize certification as an important consideration, if not requirement, in hiring decisions. Federal agencies must use the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) standards for the wildlife biology series—standards that share similarities but have no direct linkage with TWS certification. So the bottom line is, certification is not a requirement for entering the

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profession and therefore many wildlifers do not see benefit in pursuing it. This has generated discussion in TWS on whether accreditation of academic programs, rather than certification of individuals, might be a better way to distinguish the profession. Those discussions continue.

Is there any jurisdiction where wildlife biologists must be licensed to practice, as is the case for professional foresters in many states and provinces?

The closest example I know of is British Columbia, where an act passed in 2002 was described as "the first legislation of its kind in North America...[whereby] applied biologists have been granted full professional status through self-governing legislation" (<http://www.cab-bc.org>). The College of Applied Biology Act applies to the full spectrum of applied biological scientist and practitioners, not just the wildlife field. The College of Applied Biology sets conduct and performance standards to which members are held accountable and ensures competence of its members through compulsory continuing professional development, audits, investigations, and disciplinary procedures. Registered biologists are issued a registration number and a stamp, which they apply to reports and other documents they have produced or reviewed.

Is this system helpful? Given the large amount of wildlife work done by private consultants in British Columbia, it does offer some level of assurance and a way for clients to sort through the biologist listings when searching for professional services. On the other hand, my British Columbia colleagues question whether it actually has raised the quality of biological work.

So for now, the jury is out. ■

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