

A VISIT TO THE HILL

Wildlife management has long been described as a three-legged stool supported by wildlife, habitat, and people. Our profession has an incredible understanding of species and their habitats, the processes and dynamics that drive them through annual cycles, the biology, genetics, ecology, and inter-relationships between plant and animal. Hundreds of thousands of scientific articles have been written in professional journals to inform decisions about habitat management, population control, diseases, and the natural world. Where we come up short is an in-depth understanding of the “people” leg of the stool.

Some of us have had the privilege and responsibility of acting as stewards of public resources. The public trust doctrine establishes that government agencies conserve natural resources for the benefit of those resources and for the public. In my career, I have worked with many knowledgeable wildlife and habitat biologists. At one time I actually knew quite a bit about biology and ecology. Unfortunately, years of administrative, policy, and legislative work have seriously dulled that knowledge. However, I have developed a keen appreciation of the importance of understanding the people-part of the conservation equation. I believe that a wildlife manager must have an understanding of and experience with ecology, sociology, economics, and politics to be a well-rounded wildlife professional.

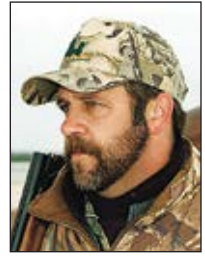
Because this column is titled “Capitol Comments”, I

thought I would relay a short story about my most recent political trip to Capitol Hill. I was there to talk to congressional staff about amendments to the Appropriations and Defense bills currently in Congress. These amendments would derail current efforts to conserve sage grouse across portions of 11 states—an unprecedented conservation plan with partners from federal and state agencies, industry, and private landowners. The implementation of this plan just reached its first-year milestone. We have an opportunity to conserve not just sage grouse but the sagebrush landscape necessary for more than 350 species of wildlife, including mule deer and pronghorn. However, the amendments in question alleged that this plan would deter military training and readiness and would defer any decision on the sage grouse’s status for years.

When I mentioned to a staff member that I had previously published letters from the assistant secretary of defense, and the departments of Army, Navy and Air Force that stated the sage-grouse plan would not interfere with military training and readiness, he replied that they were all written by politically appointed civilians so their statements, presumably, were dishonest. I paused and thought about the military chain of command and the fact that, by design, our Department of Defense is run by civilians. Later in the discussion, I brought up the fact that the Endangered Species Act has a provision (ESA Section 7j) that states that in the event of a national security issue,

the secretary of defense could request and would be issued an exemption under the ESA. The same staffer then informed me that that would require agreement between the president and secretary of defense (both political). Discretion being the better part of valor, I held my tongue and did not point out that if the president and secretary of defense were not authorized or capable of determining if a prairie grouse would threaten national security, then God help us all. I also refrained from sending him my 9th grade civics textbook (do they even make them anymore?). I am happy to say that the rest of our numerous meetings with congressional staff consisted of respectful questions and responses that would help inform future congressional decisions.

Meetings on Capitol Hill are an important part of the democratic process. I believe the majority of congressional staffers are hardworking individuals who spend long and late hours working on legislative issues. They are dedicated public servants, well versed in their subject area, and strive to provide the best information to their bosses. However, I have also experienced a few whom I believe place political ideology above sound public policy—some who get caught up in the rarified, political atmosphere of DC and fawn over



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their bosses (who, by the way, are political, themselves). True public servants strive to conserve national resources for the benefits of those resources and the people, not to score political points based on lies and innuendos for personal gain.

I told you that story to tell you this one. During a past (read “beyond the statute of limitations”) congressional staff meeting, I experienced the personal gain approach by a staffer. At the end of the meeting, I found myself taking matters in to my own hands by applying pressure to the staffer’s throat while I safely held him against a hallway wall. After clarifying my position to the staffer, my actions had the desired intent. They say politics is a rough and tumble world, but there was no tumble involved in that situation. I would like to think that situation did add to the political experience necessary to be a well-rounded wildlife professional. Based on my recent visit to the Hill, I know I am getting older and maybe wiser. ■

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