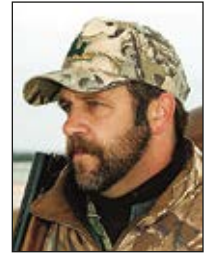


RELEVANCY OF CONSERVATION

CAPITOL COMMENTS



Steven Williams, Ph.D.
B&C PROFESSIONAL MEMBER
PRESIDENT
Wildlife Management Institute

Although it is a cliché, it is true, our world is changing rapidly. Consider first that the United States' population has doubled since I was born in 1957. This population doubling has increased the demand for food, fiber, energy, and water throughout the nation. The nation's demographic changes have been startling. Today's incoming minority pre-school students constitute the majority of their classes. We continue to become more urbanized and more technologically dependent. Our children have competing interests that did not exist when I was a child and most have become detached from nature and consumed with social media.

Given this changing world, how has the conservation profession adapted? Do we even understand the social dynamics in play as we manage society's resources? To be fair, some individuals, agencies, and organizations have taken steps to transform the way they respond to the changing public culture. However, as a profession, fish and wildlife conservation appears to be irrelevant to a broad segment of the public. I base that statement on a number of facts. The declining financial support for conservation funding is undeniable. Federal funding for conservation has decreased from around three percent of the federal budget to less than one percent in the last 40 years. The 50-year-old Land and Water Conservation Fund has been temporarily reauthorized and only once fully funded. Urbanization

has removed people from rural settings where much of the conservation work is actually done; therefore, removing them from observing the benefits of conservation. The nation's fishing and hunting participation rate have declined dramatically for decades.

By all measures, it appears that conservation has lost relevancy to the public. Perhaps the environmental successes associated with legislation passed in the 1970s, such as the Clean Air Act and Clean Water Act, have achieved such success that we as a nation believe that the important environmental issues have been addressed. As a profession, we have done an admirable job improving our biological science knowledge. However, the loss of relevancy is a function of our inability to understand the social impacts of a changing world. There are the social sciences to consider.

We have not taken advantage of the disciplines of economics, sociology, demography, public health, childhood development, or urban planning to inform us about the relevancy of conservation. Rather, most professionals rely on past experiences to design and implement programs and labor in agency structures that were formed decades ago in response to decades-old issues. Our own professional jargon is wild-life-centric even though we live in an increasingly human-centric world. We talk of ducks produced per wetland acre, bucks produced per square mile, fish produced

per stream mile, and on and on. Those metrics are largely lost on a public where more than 85 percent of people live in urban areas with little or no appreciation for hunting or fishing.

If we want to enhance the relevancy of conservation I believe we need to communicate the benefits of conservation in a way that garners people's attention. Our conservation programs should be culturally relevant, address issues of public concern, engage technology in outreach, base public opinion on scientifically sound measures of human desires, employ marketing, and consider the economics of conservation. Financing natural resource conservation provides a large return on investment because of the multitude of public benefits provided.

Conservation will remain relevant if we design agency structures and programs with an understanding of the public's needs and desires. We will remain relevant if we explain the spectrum of benefits provided by habitat conservation in terms that people relate to. The public benefits of conservation are necessary for all life forms:

clean air, clean water, flood retention, water filtration, ground water recharge, climate regulation, biodiversity, pollination, storm surge protection, outdoor recreation, and physical and mental well-being. These benefits resonate with the American public, rural and urban alike. These benefits will drive public engagement, political support, and financial support for conservation. They will provide public health benefits, quality of life benefits, and ultimately enhance further conservation efforts. It is a matter of increasing conservation's relevancy to the public. It is very simple, if we are not relevant to society, we will be irrelevant. I leave you with this quote from General Eric Shinseki "If you don't like change, you're going to like irrelevance even less." ■

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