

THE PROFESSIONAL BIOLOGIST'S ROLE IN CONSERVATION CONFLICT

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The role of the professional biologist in the conservation conflict is my assignment. First, a word about the conflict. Even as recently as twenty-five years ago the average biology student and his professor felt that conservation had a place in making this country a pleasant place to live. Few realized the accelerated rate causing the objective to change from one of a pleasant life to that of stark human survival. Even today, in spite of recognizing the problem and the passage of certain legislation, we are still losing the pollution battle. Average life for average persons, where 150 million of them live together in uneasy urban areas, becomes increasingly unpleasant for a number of reasons. Almost every school boy knows these facts if he watches TV or reads popular magazines including "Playboy".

Let's examine the main elements of the conflict. Failure to do a better job in conservation comes about because not enough of the general public are aware of the need. Sufficient numbers of people in specific areas become aroused only after they are personally affected or threatened. Public apathy in numerous forms is the enemy in the conflict. Lack of scientific knowledge in the conservation struggle is easier to overcome.

The recent highway legislation that contained weakening language was discussed by a few leading conservationists and Former Secretary of Transportation Alan Boyd. Boyd told those in attendance that the cause of the conservationists was correct and just, but the reality was that they simply did not have enough political muscle. Efforts to ease the situation by administrative order seems in doubt. While America is becoming increasingly annoyed with bill-boards, junk yards, and destruction of scenery and trout streams by highway construction, they are not yet enough annoyed to get that political muscle. The conservation conflict, at it's best?

The individual role of the professional in the conflict can very quickly be

stated. He should widen his horizon, become acquainted with all of the elements in the broad picture and get used to thinking at least ten to twenty years hence. If he does this, he should convey these thoughts to laymen less able to do this. He should urge them to get into the conflict. The professional should consider himself as a vital individual in the fray. His educated letters, his qualified testimony and his genuine concern is indeed impressive to key people on all the legislative and administrative shelves of government from the top to the bottom. The professional should indeed consider himself as a citizen concerned over the welfare of America.

In the official or professional role, the biologist, who remains strictly a biologist, will have to take his place on a well-organized team involving a host of disciplines. It has been demonstrated now that a wide variety of skills are necessary to get people to realize they must actively fight for a liveable environment. Professional biologists must study hard and work diligently to keep up-to-date with the knowledge explosion. Failure to do so, of course, is harmful to the entire profession.

But not enough professional biologists are even aware that they have a role in this conflict. As a group, people with a scientific background are largely introverts, shunning people outside their intimate niche. Many are content to sight in on small segments of the total environment and pleased to know that segment well, not being very interested in the big picture.

On December 12, 1968 the National Wildlife Federation invited sixty-three (63) scientifically oriented biological organizations to participate in a conference. The object was to explore ways wherein the biological scientific community could help organize lay citizens interested in conservation action. While a few expressed a desire to explore the idea, many representatives said "no thanks". They felt lay citizen groups are victims of propagandists and of little value. They felt such association would be beneath their dignity.

Not all professional groups feel this way. The American Fisheries Society, organized in 1870, encourages its members to be useful to society in the conservation conflict. Individuals from the society have been very helpful, joining citizens' committees and lending expertise, on power plant problems on Cayuga Lake and at Turkey Point. Last September in Tuscon this group adopted a legislative policy which clarifies their position and allows their Executive Secretary, Dr. Hutton, to lend a hand in the conservation conflict.

It is my understanding that The Wildlife Society hasn't as yet taken this approach. I believe this to be most unfortunate. As a member of this Society, I shall do what I can to work with other members in developing

whatever plans are necessary so the society can indeed help the cause where the need is so desperate.

Not long ago the heads of representatives of Natural Resource Management schools within the university system, nation-wide were asked what they thought of Aldo Leopold. The answer was that they felt he did indeed bring forth a most interesting philosophy, but they would not hire him to teach in their schools because he lacked a realistic economic viewpoint in resource management. If this is the true attitude of administrators of schools where large numbers of resource managers will graduate, then there isn't much use in expecting these people to play significant roles in the conservation conflict.

The National Wildlife Federation receives a great deal of correspondence everyday on a wide variety of conservation subjects. Surprisingly few are from professional biologists offering sound suggestions. In the recent grazing fee increase controversy, if we were to judge the effort from the copies of carbons received in our office, we'd have to say that the bulk of letters from biologists were from those now retired, and precious few of these. The majority came from lay citizens.

Since the 16th of December, 1968, and thereafter, citizens of this country must fill out form 4473, which registers all firearms legally purchased after this date. Very recently the Supreme Court ruled that in certain circumstances it is illegal for criminals to register their firearms on the grounds it may incriminate them. At the same time, increasing nationwide reputable news media are directly - and by innuendo - attempting to give America the impression that hunters are foul folk and dangerous to society. In some states and certainly on a national level this conflict has the hunter on the losing side. Not many more defeats might see a whole army of professional biologists paid from license fees seeking employment elsewhere. I'd like to think this unfortunate circumstance would cause these professionals to re-examine their individual role in the conservation conflict.

The civil service or merit system has necessarily stabilized employment in the public institutions where many professionals dwell. But at the same time, it isn't especially noted for motivating people to personal sacrifice just for the cause. While individuals much more influential than I can make speeches and write articles about the role of the professional biologist in the conservation conflict, I doubt that many professionals will change their ways substantially.

Speaking with candor, it's easy to become a genuine conservation hero in the conflict. You must change your personality, put in eight more hours of work every day, prevent the boss from firing you, get your wife active in

the League of Women Voters, or something, and talk conservation to everyone until even your best friends will hate you.

Climb down out of that ivory tower and get your feet wet in the muck of public controversies. This is where your battles are being won and lost.