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Confessions of a wildlifer: if I only knew then what I know now!

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THIS PAST JANUARY, I retired from a career as a wildlife professional after 43 years working with wildlife management agencies in 2 states. I look back on my career with great satisfaction and cannot imagine having a job that would be more enjoyable or rewarding. I left not because I was sick and tired of the job but because I wanted to try some new things and let the wonderful new group of professionals move into leadership positions and take programs beyond what I could ever accomplish. Unfortunately, I see fellow professionals retiring with bitterness and frustration over their agency, their treatment, or their future in retirement.

I can remember advice from my mentors, including John Hunt, Ken Anderson, Lee Perry, and Fred Hurley at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife, and I know that their taking time with me was a major reason I was able to retire happy. So, in continuing this tradition, I want to share some of the things I learned from these individuals and other great professionals I worked with over the years. I readily admit that my view is biased from a career working for and with state wildlife agencies.

Wildlife management is complicated in a state wildlife agency. There are different roles and responsibilities, beginning with the wildlife biologist but including agency administration, the public, landowners, businesses, advisory councils, and finally the wildlife board or commission who makes the final decision on rule or policy. With so many players, it is inevitable that disagreements will arise and sometimes become heated. To stay productive and content, a biologist needs to identify

their role in the process and then do the best they can in fulfilling that role. In most cases, the wildlife biologist or manager collects and analyzes data, makes recommendations within the policy or management system (more on management systems in a minute), and then presents those recommendation to peers, the public, and decision makers.

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The wildlife professional has so much ownership in the recommendations by the time they are presented that any criticism or questions about your conclusions end up being taken as a criticism of professional competence and integrity. This gets worse when the decision makers go a different direction than recommended by the wildlife professional. This is when the professional needs to recognize that their responsibility was to make the best recommendation possible with the information available and within the constraints of the system and not to win a contest with the other players involved in the process. Fortunately, wildlife populations are generally resilient, and adoption of a “bad recommendation” by a decision-making body often has little consequence in the long term. In my career, some of these “bad decisions” actually turned out better than my initial recommendations.

With all of the directions our management programs and recommendations can go, it is critical for our well being as a profession, as well as for the public trust, to build a management system to guide our management programs and narrow the scope of our recommendations. I could spend pages describing the details of a good management system and the successful management programs that have come from

that approach. I encourage anyone interested in learning more to begin with a paper titled “Piggery perspectives on wildlife management and research,” certainly among the best titles ever for a journal article on wildlife management (Fraser 1985). It is easy reading and gives the reader the information needed to build a system for any species or program. The basic concepts are: 1) set measurable objectives, 2) decide beforehand what data will be used to make decisions, 3) decide beforehand triggers that will be used to guide recommendations, 4) decide ahead of time what management actions to recommend when a trigger is reached, and 5) once the decision time is over, review and modify the system (variables, triggers, recommendations) when not facing a decision deadline.

Finally, teamwork and partnerships are critical to successful management. These partnerships include fellow wildlife professionals and all others involved in the decision process. We talk about facts and science a great deal in our profession, but despite the great progress we have made with research, I think Leopold’s definition of wildlife management as an art and science is still true today. The successes I have enjoyed in wildlife management over my career embraced building and maintaining relationships with the public, fellow professionals, and decision makers. If in a supervisory position, this applies to your staff as well. One of the principles I always tried to use as a wildlife chief, assistant director, and program director was to empower my staff. Most supervisors were promoted into management positions because they were good problem solvers. Many supervisors have a hard time giving up that role when they become agency leaders. Because I am a fairly simple person, I needed a way to remind myself and my staff of our respective roles. I did this by having an open-door policy with them, but with a condition. Any staff member could come into my office and ask a question as long as they told me the right answer before we discussed it. It is a very liberating approach for both the wildlife professional and manager, and it saves a great deal of stress and time. It can also be very rewarding for all involved.

This is as close as I am going to get to writing my memoirs, so I hope you can find a few

helpful ideas as I share my thoughts with you on the Back Page.

Literature cited

Fraser, D. 1985. Piggery perspectives on wildlife management and research. *Wildlife Society Bulletin* 13:183–187.

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