

Lessons of a Fish & Wildlife Commissioner

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After a 35-year wildlife career I was appointed last year to the Washington State Fish & Wildlife Commission, the nine-member board overseeing the wildlife department. This opportunity followed a decade of department experience as a collaborator and advisor on budget, policy, and nongame. Regrettably, I resigned after only 11 months citing that unresolved conflict caused a “political quagmire” preventing the Department from protecting all Washington’s wildlife. While my story is limited to one state, the same tension disrupts many state wildlife agencies.

Washington’s commission struggles to address growing disharmony surrounding its decisions. Conflicts at public meetings typically emerge when testimony divides into two camps: preservation versus harvest. Arguments erupt over the perceived benefits and risks that harvesting fish and game, or lethally managing predators, pose to wildlife populations, ecosystem health, and animal well-being. Each side spars with “best available science,” often continuing debate in the press and online. Commission decisions rely on science and values and here lies the quagmire’s cause: Whose values count most in determining fish and wildlife priorities, regulations, and policies? Traditional stakeholders and an expanding group of biodiversity and animal wellbeing advocates promote their values by pressuring the governor over commission appointments and lobbying on pending votes. For many this is an existential battle, driving passion, polarization, and increasingly uncivil behavior. The commission attempts to find direction by relying on its legislated mandate.

Washington law instructs the commission and department to: Protect, perpetuate and preserve the state’s fish, shellfish and wildlife; conserve and authorize take so as not to impair the resource; seek to maintain the economic well-being and stability of the fishing industry; and attempt to maximize hunting and fishing opportunities. The result is a duality that unfortunately is the same preservation-versus-harvest dichotomy producing conflict. I witnessed that, with a dual mandate, reaching consensus on controversial wildlife decisions is unlikely because it accentuates divergent values and fuels division. Unfortunately, the science on specific management situations often is incomplete and open to opposing interpretations. Many hunters and anglers fear that any change from status quo diminishes harvest opportunities and undermines the North American Model of Conservation. Others counter that the Department’s actions have always been aimed on resource extraction benefiting hunters and anglers at the expense of nongame and ecosystems.

The Washington Fish & Wildlife Department is obligated to protect the public wildlife trust for current and future generations. Sadly, we are failing. The Department’s historic focus remains fixed on sustaining a modest number of food fish and game animals, despite knowing more than 260 other Washington animals are in conservation need and that common species also require attention. The inconvenient truth is that the current mandate and department tradition is weighted heavily toward recreationally and commercially valuable animals. Consequently, long-term biodiversity health is jeopardized. The commission, department staff, governor, and legislators have been unable to break the

stalemate between preservation and harvest because of a political calculus that avoids confrontation and undervalues biodiversity protection.

Science tells us that biodiversity is declining at an unprecedented rate (Global Biodiversity Outlook 5. 2020). Soaring species extinctions coupled with climate change threaten human and nonhuman well-being. Today's poor wildlife prognosis was not present 100 years ago when wildlife agencies were established to sustain fish and game harvest. Their "wise use, without waste" purpose made sense in that earlier era. Times are different now and the public's needs, values, and concerns have changed (Manfredo et al. 2020; Bruskotter et al. 2022). By giving precedence to our contemporary environmental knowledge and changing social values, the Washington Legislature and Commission ought to clarify the Department's purpose around a top priority of conserving wildlife. This adjustment from the dual mandate will provide a clear, unifying direction for the floundering Commission and strengthen the Department's biodiversity mission. Shifting the Department toward a more ecologically focused agency protecting all Washington's wildlife does not mean eliminating hunting or fishing, simply that our relationship with animals and responsibility to nature is evolving.

The WFA's membership of academics, NGO scientists, and agency staff provide an important opportunity to speak collectively for the urgent and timely need to prioritize biodiversity conservation and climate change in the missions of state and federal natural resource agencies. Such a statement could also recognize the necessity for new biodiversity funding, for example from the Recovering America's Wildlife Act, but acknowledge that additional funding alone is not sufficient to set wildlife agencies on a straight path to protecting wildlife for current and future generations: Needed is clear agency purpose to conserve all wildlife for all people.

WFA's newsletter has not previously provided any discussion on governance, but it is "where the rubber meets the road" in wildlife management and conservation, so it is timely that we present such pieces to stimulate discussion and other points of view. We invite other professionals to write "in response" to this article, to obtain other perspectives and encourage dialogue.

Literature Cited

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Global Biodiversity Outlook 5. 2020 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity. Montreal, Canada. Accessed April 2022, <https://www.cbd.int/gbo5>.

Manfredo, M. J. et al. 2020. The changing sociocultural context of wildlife conservation. Conservation Biology, Volume 34, No. 6, 1549–1559.