

A Question of Relevance: For Whom and of Whom Do We Work and Serve

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Thank You

Thank you Rex for that very kind and generous introduction. Needless to say I am delighted to be here in your home ground, just up the flyway so to speak from mine.

Introduction

In all seriousness, I am most honored to be a part of this panel and particularly to listen and learn from those both inside and outside our professional realms about these rather significant social, cultural, and demographic matters that have such pronounced influences on all of our work– financially, politically, programmatically. And, admittedly this is an area where we have struggled and must improve upon.

As a point of departure for those of us in the trenches of fisheries and wildlife conservation, there are a couple of cold, hard immutable truths that are here and are here to stay:

1. Natural Resources– the lands, waters, fish, and wildlife that we all hold so dear are threatened by things that are bigger, more complex, and at scales that are unprecedented than we have witnessed in the past– that is true whether we are talking about energy development in the Marcellus Shale, wind energy development on the Great Plains, rising sea levels along the Gulf Coast, water allocation wars out west, or extent of habitat fragmentation and the specter of trying to put humpty dumpty back together again. Bottom line is that the things we love and steward are being nibbled, and some cases, gobbled, to death by 1,000 paper cuts;

2. Relevance– So, while we must contend with all those threats, the thing that really keeps me laying awake at night in a cold sweat is the fundamental question of Relevance— our relevance in this ever-changing social, cultural, and demographic fabric and our connections to a population that we serve, depend on, and that we probably don't understand nearly as well as we should.

One of the recurring criticisms of ours that always pops up is the suggestion that we as professional fish and wildlife managers and biologists are inadvertent and indifferent to the changing demographics around us. Now for the record, I don't believe that and neither should you.

But in fairness to the criticism, we should be asking ourselves much harder questions about how are we applying the basic tenets of science and adaptive management to truly understand our diverse audiences and their relationship to our mission, our programs, our services, and our products.

Because here's the deal– this matter, this question, this challenge of relevance isn't new to any of us in this room. We know the trends:

- We are largely a country of more urban dwellers and less rural residents (in Texas by the way, where the deer and antelope play, 85% of us live in 9 major metropolitan areas– And, in spite of popular convention, don't kid yourselves, we've been an urban state for 50 years.);
- Hispanic population in U.S. has grown almost 50% in last 10 years, 4X growth rate of rest of nation and has increased in all 50 states, and by the way, this is by no means a simple matter of immigration;
- As a country, we are by no means homogenous in race, ethnicity, income, gender, and lifestyles;
- Adults and children spend vast majority of time (90%) indoors;
- Use of electronic media has gone way up;
- Participation in sheer numbers in our bread and butter outdoor recreation activities, such as hunting and fishing, have remained about flat since the 1950's, while the overall population has grown 100%;
- And, as participation in the out of doors has gone down, natural resources illiteracy among children gone up

Have I told you one thing you did not know before now? Of course not. Again, we know these trends.

Now, the good news, if such news exists, is that in spite of all these changes, every attitudinal survey that gets done still, thankfully, continually shows strong, bi-partisan, cross-demographic public support for concepts of fish and wildlife conservation, healthy water and watersheds, open spaces, parks, and so forth.

David Case of DJ Case and Associates and Dr. Steve Kellert from Yale have launched a new initiative they are working on that I believe has great relevance to what we are discussing this morning- "A National Initiative to Understand and Connect Americans and Nature." There are many dimensions to this Initiative, but as an initial part of that, they just completed a national study of 1,000 U.S. adults in which they asked a series of questions including,

"How would you describe your interests in nature, wildlife, and the outdoors compared to your other interests?" 3 out of 5, (60%) indicated they were either the "most enjoyable" or "among the most enjoyable," another 25% were kind of ambivalent about where they stood, and the last 15% described them as "less enjoyable."

So, as a foundation for all of this, at the very highest 30,000 foot level, we still have a public that by and large cares and supports what we do, and we still have a majority of Americans that value their time in nature and out of doors.

Fundamental Questions

So, where are we falling short?

Well, the nagging question we have to ask ourselves when thinking about our audiences our public if you will, is the 30,000' level an acceptable level to be resting on our laurels. I'll argue it is not.

And, here's my basic thesis, and it involves basic fundamental questions:

- Can we really define with any clarity who is and are our audiences?;
- Do we even really know and understand the most basic of information about the populations we serve with our mission, programs and services?;

- Are some audiences, are some demographics, more important to us than others, and if so, who are they and for what reason(s)?;
- How will we reach them and connect them with the outdoors and inspire them to engage and invest in conservation?;

In my case, in my little part of the world, is it all 24 million Texans or is it the 1 million hunters, 2.5M anglers, and 7M park enthusiasts who pay for the Department's work. Is it the 85% of us who live in 9 major metropolitan areas? Are they as important as the 200,000 Texans that own and manage 90% of our land base?

Let's take it to another level: Is it young, affluent families living in the suburbs or middle class blue collar families living in the rural areas of the state? Is it aging baby boomers about to go from 64 to 65 or is it the increasing number of lower to middle class Hispanic families?

The answer of course is yes, yes, yes, yes, and yes. But, to what degree and priority of relevancy are a whole other series of questions that we are woefully unprepared and unequipped to try and answer right now.

Urban Public

Let me give you an example, for years, we have been saying we have to be relevant to the urban public. Now, we have never really defined who exactly is this urban public, other than being the presumed unwashed masses that live and populate large, urban areas and are presumed to be the ones who are disconnected with the out of doors and are ones we must influence if we are to have their support for conservation. And, our premise has been a laudable, if not a particularly well delineated one.

We must take our work and our programs to them. And, so we have. In Texas, in the last 10 years, we have thrown everything but the kitchen sink at them:

- We've hired urban biologists and outreach specialists and placed them in every big city in the state;
- We've launched great programs like the Archery in Schools program in cities like Houston;
- We've created neighborhood fishing programs in big and mid size cities around the state;

- We've invested in local and state parks in and around the state's urban areas;
- We've leased public hunting lands within 30 miles of big cities to promote access;
- We've created wildlife viewing, birding trails, and paddling trails in and around the big cities;
- We've invested millions of dollars in grants to non-profits to get disadvantaged children into the out of doors through hunting, fishing, and other outdoor recreation families;
- We've created new family mentor programs for hunting and camping;
- We've launched regional Children in Nature partnerships.

I could go on and on about our investments. But, here's the deal. If you ask me, are your programs making a difference in changing attitudes about conservation, in fostering support for the conservation title in the Farm Bill or funding for Teaming with Wildlife, in retaining existing hunters, anglers, and park users, and/or recruiting new ones.

If so, are they young or old; families with children or without children; affluent or middle-class; urban, rural, or suburban; white or non-white, hunters and park users, or just anglers.... Here's my answer,

I Don't Know.

Do You?

Do you really know what is happening in your agency in your state with your customers and your constituents and which programs and services are working well for which audiences?

Can we even define what success looks like for us in these realms?

Let me be clear, these are not rhetorical questions that should be shuffled off to some human dimensions scientist in a cubicle somewhere. These are fundamental to our future relevance and fish and wildlife and conservation agencies.

Politics

Now, this is a precarious place to lapse into a discussion of anything that smacks of past Presidential politics. So, I will tread here with an abundance of caution.

But, as we are full throttle in the maelstrom of election year politics, there are some political science tools that we need to borrow from. And, of all the political masterminds out there—you can love him or hate him, agree with him or disagree with him, I don't care.... But, the fact remains, Karl Rove has mastered the fact that elections are not won or lost at the scale of regions of the country, or states in the country, by county or township, city or town, they are oftentimes won by neighborhoods and individual demographic and social clusters, or tapestries.

They are won by knowing your audience at a very deep level.

Elections as Mr. Rove has all taught us are won by a systematic, scientific, quantitative, methodical application of a targeted, disciplined focus on certain individuals who live in areas that share similar lifestyles, behaviors, consumer preferences and then working to reach out and influence their votes with tactics that are as well placed as the bullets coming out of Curtis Taylor's deer rifle.

Let me not equivocate. There's nothing soft or "touchy feely" about this science.

It involves utilizing the very same tenets of adaptive management and rigorous scientific, statistical, and predictive modeling tools that the biologists and community ecologists who work with all of us use on a daily basis to help inform decisions about how, where, when, and how much to invest in any given management regime to address fish and wildlife species and populations of interest.

Texas Examples

As leaders, hopefully we all recognize that the best innovation, the best adaptation, the best efforts to get at this question of relevancy come inside our agencies from the bottom up, from the early adopters among us who have figured out these trends and then brought forward ways to implement and execute new measures to reposition our agency's programs and services to respond more effectively to them.

Business Analytics

One of most strategic investments we have made in recent years as an agency came in no small part due to the work of TPWD colleagues in

marketing and Inland Fisheries, who got all this stuff and who brought forward ways we could work a lot smarter.

And has been in the purchase of sophisticated business analysis and optimization software (in our case software designed by SAS) that gives us the ability to link and analyze all of our various customers, from those who buy all our 200 types of various hunting and fishing licenses, who subscribe to our magazine, who visit our parks, who receive our email alerts, who receives a citation for violating our fish and game laws, essentially anyone who does business with the Department and how they overlap with one another.

And, for the first time we can create individual customer profiles through Customer Relationship Management software that is geographically referenced by which neighborhood they live in, so we may better understand their affiliated recreational, leisure, and purchasing patterns. And by knowing where those in similar demographic tapestries are likely to reside, we can much more effectively focus our marketing and program delivery.

The applications to programs in all this are essentially endless, and, we have just started, but already it is making a difference in the way we think, plan, and deliver programs. I'll give you three quick examples:

1. **Neighborhood Fishing**– we have a wonderful neighborhood fishing program designed to offer ease of access to anglers in 4 major cities in Texas, which is where 70% of our fishing license purchasers live. One of our targeted audiences was middle class, Hispanic families, who reside in Houston, or in the parlance of ESRI tapestry designations, Southwestern Families.
 - a. ----- So, when we embarked on the program we picked an urban lake on the west side of Houston, relatively close to our hatchery, and near one of our District fisheries office. We stocked the lake and waited for the Hispanic families to come out and enjoy the lake. And, we waited, and waited and waited. Our mistake was not analyzing where exactly those targeted Hispanic families resided in the Houston MSA, who by the way, by and large, lived on the exactly opposite side of Houston. So, we have now added lakes closer to the targeted neighborhoods and all is well with the world;
2. **Big Time Texas Hunt**– this is a promotional program in which we essentially sell chances to be drawn for special, one of a kind hunts

for everything from bighorn sheep to trophy white-tailed deer. Important revenue generator for our public hunting program. In using the business analytics software, one of our marketing specialists identified the profile of those individuals who were most likely to buy chances at this lottery. And, she identified that most of them were more persuaded and more easily reached by email pitches than by direct mail. She radically revamped our marketing efforts, got rid of the direct mail, went to email marketing only, and ended up increasing our gross revenue, and reducing our marketing costs by 90%. The result—MORE money to invest in public hunting lands, thereby addressing one of the principal barriers to hunters that are within the span of control of a state fish and wildlife agency;

3. **Hunting/Fishing Licenses**– all of us in the domains of state fish and wildlife agencies spend a great deal of time analyzing license sales, as we are dependent upon that revenue. And, at least at some level, we believe, at least in Texas, who the average hunter, angler, and park enthusiast is:

Major revenues for fish and wildlife in Texas come from sale of Super Combo license– combination hunting, fishing, with all the requisite state stamp endorsements . On state park side, much of revenue comes from sale of annual park pass. Here are demographics of core individuals buying Super Combos and Annual Park Passes:

- Young, affluent suburban families;
- Baby boomer, blue-collar rural families;
- Growth Opportunity for both– middle class Hispanic families.

Their attributes do not exactly comport with the average demographic. Who cares? We do, because now we know that an annual state park pass holder has a propensity to buy our Super Combo license and vice versa, and we can target our marketing accordingly, as we can similarly target outreach through a variety of means to middle class Hispanic families who have been long in our sights but out of range.

The bottom line is we can get a lot smarter about the social and human dimensions side of our work, and through use of science and statistical tools we already essentially use we can be more effective to our customers and to our public whether it involves outreach, education, program delivery, or sale of our products.

We are literally just scratching the surface with this in Texas, but already it seems like a potential game changer for us.

Conclusion

So, here's my point in all this, and I'll tie it back to the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation and the charge given to all of us by former AFWA Presidents John Frampton, Rex Amack, and Corky Pugh in the roll out just a couple of short years ago in the North American Conservation Education Strategy.

The fish and wildlife of this country that are stewarded by all of us and our partners using the best science available to us, are held in public trust. We are the public's fiduciary of these resources. As such, doesn't that deep and longstanding responsibility demand that we really know and understand the audiences we serve equally as well, if not better, than the fish and wildlife we oversee and steward?

I believe it does.

Thanks for caring about your wild things and wild places. All of us in Texas are proud to work with and alongside of you.

