



A Call to Action for Our Profession

TO PROTECT NATURAL RESOURCES, OUR PROFESSION MUST
CONFRONT THE THREATS IT DEALS WITH HEAD ON

By Gregg Servheen

Credit: Gregg Servheen

The ideas and concepts in this course of action were shared with The Wildlife Society's Council and the leadership of some TWS working groups for consideration of implementation. You are encouraged to find ways to execute the recommendations in this article and to contact your TWS Council representatives and TWS working groups with input on how TWS can help advance the profession and the improved conservation of wildlife.

When I look in the mirror, I sometimes have this conversation with myself. “Did I do my best?” “Yes,” I answer. “Is the resource better or worse than when I started?” That is a more troubling question.

I am a retired professional wildlife biologist. I spent 34 years as a practitioner with a state fish and wildlife agency, and I have been a member of The Wildlife Society for at least that long. I believe there are strong reasons for concern about our ability to preserve, protect and perpetuate wildlife and their habitats.

For many of the resources we manage, the situation is worse, I fear. Biodiversity, bird numbers, and habitat abundance and quality are all in decline.

Invasive species, wildlife disease and human development pressures are on the rise. I know many others agree with this assessment and its global implications ([Ripple et al. 2017](#)).

How can we make things better? The answer to this question is why I am reaching out to my fellow wildlife professionals by writing this article.

I believe we need to significantly refocus and reposition the wildlife profession, its culture, and its conservation and management strategies. I propose to my fellow professionals — and soon-to-be professionals — a call to action. Let us create the change we need at every level and every scale — local, regional, institutional, national and global — and make our profession more inclusive, holistic and

▲ There is no species or habitat that is not being impacted by climate change and continuing growth and development. What is our path ahead?



collaborative; confront climate change; challenge growth for its own sake; and promote sustainability.

If the wildlife profession intends to meet its mission and maintain the public trust of wildlife and wildlife resources in perpetuity, then the profession — and The Wildlife Society — need to act. I recommend the following to start on this critical path.

A course of action

Take the lead: The Wildlife Society should take the lead in reaching out to our fellow professional societies involved with all aspects of natural resources: forestry, range, conservation biology, wildlife, fisheries, botany, ecology, soils, water, air and more. TWS should create a task force composed of our fellow natural resource professional societies to improve our transdisciplinary collaboration — making it more synergistic, aligned, accessible and action-oriented.

A multidisciplinary task force could identify common priorities and ways to improve collaborative science and research. They could help build a collaborative system that helps research and management overcome existing administrative, political and cultural limitations. They could begin with national or continental efforts to make geo-referenced data and information available within a single combined and distributed system. Such a system would help us determine which resources have the highest priority and the greatest value, and it would help us identify synergies among our fields. This system could also provide context to questions surrounding climate change and sustainability and help identify needed actions.

We must collaborate in developing a new and integrated approach to manage the systems upon which all natural resources depend. We must stop managing individual pieces and look instead at the broader systems that perpetuate the resources we manage. We must overcome and change our professional cultures to help advance a combined and greater good.

To do this, we must work together in ways we never have before.

Imbed climate change in our profession: The Wildlife Society should adopt an overarching policy that every paper, publication, management strategy, action and policy recommendation be considered in the context of climate change — and encourage others to do so, too.

Human-induced climate change is impacting every species of wildlife. The vast majority of effects are unknown. Changes are accelerating and will have to be adapted to in real time while more coherent and integrated models for management and policy are developed. But despite overwhelming scientific evidence, climate change is often presented as controversial and ignored or misunderstood by the general public, media, policy makers and elected officials.

As wildlife professionals, we must factor in climate change in all we do — no exceptions. We could advance this thinking by including a “Climate Change Implications” section in each paper of the *Journal of Wildlife Management* and the *Wildlife Society Bulletin* that addresses the climate change implications — or lack thereof — of the work and its results. TWS could help increase understanding of our own profession’s impact related to climate change and the

▼ Looking back at my career, I believe I did my best. But is the resource better off than when I started?



Credit: Gregg Servehen



public's understanding of what we do understand about climate change and its effects on wildlife. We need to promote a greater focus on climate-related communication, science, research and management and build credibility with the public.

We must prioritize educating the public about the many ways climate change is affecting wildlife and their habitats. The public needs this information to understand what actions are required and why. To do that, we must talk about climate change and its impacts on natural resources in everything we do.

Adopt sustainability: The Wildlife Society and its professionals should incorporate sustainability and its measures into all activities. TWS should adopt a policy that emphasizes sustainability within every education course, degree, budget, study, management action and policy. We can begin with TWS integrating sustainability – and measures of sustainability – into everything it does, including its operations, program activities, budget, meetings and courses, policy statements and communications.

▼ Resource professions and professionals must combine efforts to realize the ability to sustain earth's natural capital for human health and quality of life.

If wildlife professionals believe a more sustainable human society is part of what is necessary for perpetuating wildlife and for TWS to achieve its mission, then TWS should model that sustainability. TWS should strive to become increasingly carbon neutral (or negative!), including our affiliated conferences, travel and activities. TWS should set goals, objectives and measures that support environmental and social justice and increase our capacity to quantify and meet sustainable measures and outcomes.

Accelerate diversification of our profession: The Wildlife Society should collaborate with and lead wildlife management and conservation agencies and organizations in improving our ranks' diversity.

We can do this by developing objective measures of how diversity is represented in hiring, promoting and in the profession – and use these measures to evaluate professional wildlife organizations and agencies.

The lack of human diversity within the profession has long been recognized but changes have been

slow. It is apparent that our existing and historical professional culture is resistant and inhibiting our ability to diversify across all lines of genders, the LGBTQ+ community, races, religions, ethnicities and nationalities for a larger benefit to wildlife. We can no longer assume the status quo is good enough. It is time for TWS to define what it envisions the profession looking like in terms of human diversity and take the measure of that across wildlife organizations and agencies. In doing so, TWS would make the public aware of the status and progress of diversity in the profession and provide a measure by which continuing efforts could be gauged. This would make real the connection between social justice, environmental justice and preserving, protecting and perpetuating all wildlife.



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Face the threats: The Wildlife Society must adopt and endorse the precautionary principle and emphasize that all human development must have either a net positive or neutral effect on native wildlife and wildlife-related resources.

It has long been tradition, culture or good business for human and economic growth to have priority over perceived abundant wildlife resources. While regulations now protect game species for continued use by sportsmen and other laws protect species nearing the brink of disappearance, these advances have frequently pushed wildlife conservation and management to its lowest common denominator. As a result, human development and growth continue and no wildlife are free from human impacts.

In adopting the precautionary principle, TWS would help ensure that human development is increasingly restorative to wildlife and natural capital and that public trust wildlife resources are to be protected and restored by human action. TWS could help improve policy, regulation and legislation recognizing wildlife as natural capital and necessary for sustaining human health, quality of life and resilience.

Improving scientific understanding and certainty of the threat to wildlife from human impacts should not be put ahead of protecting and restoring wildlife resources. As wildlife biologists and natural resource professionals, our obligation is not unlike a physician's. Our charge is to fix, heal and protect wildlife in perpetuity. The precautionary principle would empower our profession to do that.

A public trust

Our current economic model and social organization is based on continual growth and development. Neither the wildlife profession nor individual professionals doing their best is up to the task of meeting TWS' vision to be "a strong and effective voice in representing wildlife conservation and management and ensuring sustainable wildlife populations in healthy ecosystems" ([TWS Strategic Plan](#)) under this system. Our profession must face our limitations and help build a better system. Implementing these recommendations can help us do both these things.

None of what I pose here threatens the strong scientific and objective values prized by our profession.



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But our profession and Society need to be clear and urgent about the seriousness of the problems we face and with the public whose trust we manage. We have often deferred strategic action for tactical reasons. That time is over. The time to act as a profession is now. If we do not, we are surrendering to those who do not have the best intentions for wildlife and nature.

▲ Selkirk Mountain caribou were once the focus of my research. Now, they are extinct in the Lower 48.

I know our professionals are doing their best every day, but our *profession* must go beyond where we thought we could go to make a real difference. Our *profession* must take action.

I hope these recommendations are a catalyst for action by the Society and its members. I know you can build on and improve them. We have little time to waste. Failure to act is not an option. It is our action as a *profession* that will help sustain the wildlife legacy this earth has given us. ■



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