

## America's Great Outdoors and the Next Generation of Conservation Professionals

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### **The Perfect Storm**

We should have seen it coming in 1960. We know that all the Millennials and Gen X'ers are weary of hearing about us. We are just weary. However facts are facts. The fact is that the largest demographic to dominate the American landscape, the one that marched across the political scene in the 1960's, is about to march one more time. We are marching out the door to retirement. In fact, some state and federal agencies believe that half of their work force is eligible to retire right now. Think of the impact of half of the employees of any organization leaving their posts in a short time range. This is one large storm cloud hanging on the horizon.

Another associated issue is that the nature of young people who are interested in careers in natural resource management is radically different than it was in 1970. Historically, natural resource management agencies have had many employees who cycled out of the military after a war, went to school on the GI Bill and moved into the agency on Veteran's preference points. The last cycle like that was post-Viet Nam.

They came from rural backgrounds. They had woods skills, could operate farm or other heavy equipment, had practical knowledge, a sense of direction, hunted, fished, and could find the truck at the end of the day. They understood the meaning of and need for "management." The stereotypical natural resources recruit also may have had some shortcomings in other areas such as communication skills and certainly the computer age has been a challenge for some. That is a discussion for another day.

The good news is that right now, the interest in natural resource education and careers is very high. University enrollments in this area are skyrocketing. In the time of an entire nation panicked by *Last Child in the Woods* and national research that recently shows plummeting involvement in almost every outdoor activity you would think to mention, you might want to ask, "Why would that be?"

Perhaps it is the dire employment situation. So far it has been easier to get a student load than it has been to get a job. That, of course, does not explain the interest in natural resources. Why not go into something where you could actually make some money when the situation improves?

There is a great deal of interest nationally as a result of attention to the climate change issues. Also, the Deep Water Horizon incident has made a large impression on idealistic young people who want to do something to create a better world. I believe that this is creating an interest in natural resources education.

Finally, we have an entire generation of young people who have grown up on cable television programs on Animal Planet and National Geographic. While many of them have not actually been outdoors, they have been entertained by those who have. Their version of Marlin Perkins is “Steve the crocodile guy.”

Added to the impending threat of large banks of experience and institutional knowledge walking out the door, is the problem of leadership succession. Those baby boomers came in and stayed. They have occupied most leadership positions in their organizations for 20 or more years. The leadership and the next level or two down in most organizations will retire at the same time, leaving a leadership gap.

### **Current Efforts**

The national community has not been sleeping while the storm moved in. The Wildlife Society thought this issue important enough to devote an entire issue of the Bulletin to the future of education over a decade ago. There are a number of important programs that are underway to help address some of the issues involved. These programs are well thought out, successful and in need of expansion. Whatever happens in the America’s Great Outdoors initiative should be coordinated with these programs to create a seamless interface that will contribute to the creation of the next generation of resource management professionals.

The national community has created and sponsored a program called the National Conservation Leadership Institute. That program takes the brightest and best young to mid-career professionals from organizations all across the country and exposes them to the most successful current and past conservation leaders. The program is based at the National Conservation Training Center in West Virginia. The funding for the program comes from state and federal agencies as well as conservation groups.

A second program that needs expansion is the Conservation Leaders for Tomorrow program. This program, which started at the Max McGraw Wildlife Foundation, targets college students in natural resource management programs. The Wildlife Management Institute in partnership with 40 universities and 20 government agencies, has contributed to the success of this program. Students are able to spend a weekend learning about conservation history and the North American Model of Wildlife Management. They are also able to learn how to shoot and may participate in hunting on an elective basis. This program is important due to the changing nature of student demographics as previously described in this paper.

## **America's Great Outdoors**

My assignment is to look at how the President's America's Great Outdoors Initiative will contribute to the important efforts already underway. The plan recommends that the federal agencies work to provide quality jobs, career pathways and service opportunities for those interested in a life in natural resource management. This is probably the most important recommendation in the plan, as far as the future of the resource management profession is concerned.

It specifically recommends creation of a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Youth Conservation Corps. This is a great idea. Many current resource management professionals found their way to their career path through one of the past YCC programs. This program needs to be well developed with measurable objectives and high standards.

The report describes the frustration of youth with the federal hiring system. Particularly if we are interested in rural youth, youth from under-represented groups and urban youth, we need to rethink the federal hiring system. There are sociological reasons why we have had trouble attracting certain groups to our youth and career track programs. We are asking our minority publics to trust us with the future of their children. When we tell them that they need to send their application to a city far away, to a person that none of them knows, so that they will possibly get a job in a place far away from home, we have done nothing to engender trust. We are also not offering them anything they are interested in. Their families do not want to hear that they are sending the next generation off to work in other parts of the country. They want to hear that their children will have the opportunity to become part of the community they live in.

While the report focuses, heavily on youth, I think it is important to remind ourselves that the youth themselves told us in the listening sessions that their parents are not facilitating their outdoor activities, and in fact, may actually be keeping them from outdoor involvement. If parents are not part of our recruitment picture, we will fail in recruiting youth.

Finally, there is a great deal of attention in the plan to creating opportunities for youth to enjoy the great outdoors. This is a wonderful goal. If part of that goal is to recruit resource management professionals, our implementation needs to do more than cause youth to love the outdoors. Everyone should love the outdoors. However, those interested in careers in natural resources need to temper their love with the realities of the resource management field. Those realities include advanced education, a science base, the need for practical real world experience and the necessity for an ability to work with a wide variety of opinionated publics. The part of our plan implementation that is directed at work force recruitment needs to include heavy doses of these realities.

For the America's Great Outdoors report to become a working reality, whether your goal is recruitment of resource management professionals or simply healthy active Americans, it needs to be grass roots. We must think federally, but act locally. It requires the involvement of school

districts, parents, local conservation groups, universities, state resource management agencies and federal land managers. The planning and implementation needs to involve constituents at all levels. The federal government has neither the funding and facilities, nor the personnel to carry this out alone. Similarly, the local groups and agencies cannot do anything that is coordinated and far reaching enough to make a national difference. It is going to take all of us.

The America's Great Outdoors Initiative is a good start. It went out to local communities to listen. It distilled the thoughts of thousands of citizens into an idea. That idea needs fleshing out. It needs measurable objectives, funding, and thousands of citizens working to implement it. If well done, it can provide the basis for recruiting a fine next generation of natural resource management professionals.