

UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS

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Historically, the Boone and Crockett Club and the conservation movement have benefitted from the expertise of professional members. Many of them have come from natural resource management agencies or university wildlife management programs. These professionals provided the science that club members needed to make wise investments in the policy side of the conservation equation. Where will these leaders come from in the future? The changing face of the population of North America is a major challenge the Club must face to remain relevant in the future.

There is a perfect storm upon us right now. We (the Baby Boomers) should have seen it coming in 1960. We know that Millennials and Gen X'ers are weary of hearing about us. However, the fact is the largest demographic to dominate the American landscape, the one that marched across the political scene in the 1960s, 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 ramifications of losing half of the people in any organization in a short time period. The potential impact on conservation leadership is staggering.

While the specter of mass retirements is upon us, 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-Vietnam. They came from rural backgrounds. They had woods skills, could operate farm or other heavy equipment, had practical knowledge and 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."

Today's crop of future natural resource managers and conservation leaders is a very different demographic. They are more likely to be suburban or even urban. While they may know their way around all the latest electronics (important skills to be sure), they generally lack the practical woods and waters skills that their predecessors gained from the farm and forest environments that they grew up in. They may also have a much different view of what wildlife management means. That view may be largely based on cable television. They have not likely heard of the North American Model of Wildlife Conservation, let alone subscribe to it. This creates educational challenges that did not exist 40 years ago.

At the same time university wildlife management programs are facing major challenges. Just when we have a population of students who, while they may be intelligent and willing, likely do not

possess field skills, many university programs have phased out the field studies side of their curricula in the face of budget challenges. The current trend is to "environmental science" types of programs rather than more expensive field approaches. The facilities and faculty that it takes to sponsor a rigorous field program carry a steep price tag. Finding field-based faculty is itself a major challenge. These days you cannot assume that applicants for academic positions know how to trailer and launch boats, run chainsaws, or use any field tools common to the profession. Many come from the theoretical side of things only.

Fortunately, young people are still interested in the natural world. They are still idealistic and hoping to make the world a better place. Enrollment in the remaining field-based university programs is growing. Working with these young people every day is an honor and a privilege, and cause for optimism. At a time when we will need to replace more managers and leaders in a shorter time frame than we have ever had to, this is the "good news."

The challenge for the conservation community is to support programs and experiences that contribute to the growth and development of well-rounded, practical scientists and managers who can step up in this time of transition to a new generation. The need is great and the price tag significant. However, the price of not shaping the future leaders of the conservation cause is too high to contemplate. I believe the Boone and Crockett Club is up for the challenge. ■



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