

Vol. 13 No. 6

November/December 2019

THE WILDLIFE PROFESSIONAL

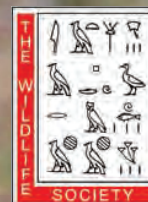
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The Nature of Diversity

DIVERSITY BUILDS RESILIENCY — IN THE WILD AND THE WORKPLACE — BUT IT ISN'T EASY

By Brian F. Wakeling, Amanda W. Van Dellen, Kevin T. Shoemaker, Mitchell Gritts, John C. Tull and Kelley M. Stewart

Natural history is replete with stories of how diversity builds stability and resiliency. Here in the Great Basin, wildfires often replace diverse, sagebrush-dominated ecosystems with monotypic stands of nonnative cheatgrass, supporting fewer wildlife species and succumbing more readily to intense fires. Dense, young ponderosa pine forests, which lack the perennial grasses and forbs found in older, open stands of well-managed forests, succumb to catastrophic wildfires and support far less species richness.

Aldo Leopold started teaching the importance of diversity in natural systems in 1933. It took 31 more years, however, to pass the Civil Rights Act, addressing diversity in society. While we are increasingly reminded that our professional lives can benefit from diversity, half a century after this

landmark legislation, our workplaces still fall short of being as inclusive as they should be. Why?

Part of our challenge is that diversity itself is ill-defined. Conventionally, it tends to refer to gender, race and ethnicity, but it can also include age, religion, cultural background, sexual orientation, birthplace, residence, even immigration status. In our profession, it can include the orientation of our wildlife values, as well as aspects of personal history that shape our perspectives. Some of these are rarely considered in discussions on diversity. Others are only recently gaining attention.

In July 2018, the Nevada Chapter of The Wildlife Society began hosting “Conservation Conversations,” inviting TWS members and friends to enjoy a meal, make professional connections and engage

► A volunteer teaches teens about vegetative communities and wildlife habitats in the Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge in Arizona.



Credit: Steve Hillebrand



in a structured discussion about a critical conservation challenge and its potential solutions. During our first conversation, we discussed the structural and sociological barriers that limit workplace diversity in the wildlife profession, including barriers we may not realize we have erected. Our conversation evolved into a critical self-examination. Together we identified several key barriers to diversity in our profession that should be at the forefront as we engage with colleagues, make hiring decisions and work to improve wildlife conservation.

A foot in the door

The cost of education is one key barrier. Universities and colleges have achieved greater diversity in graduates than state and federal wildlife agencies in hiring (Lopez and Brown 2011, Ceci et al. 2014), yet educational costs may still present a barrier to achieving greater diversity in our field. As higher education becomes more and more expensive, few entry-level positions in natural resource fields are available to someone without at least a bachelor's degree. A 2002 study found that fewer than 5% of employed TWS members lacked a bachelor's degree, while over 60% held a postgraduate degree (Schmutz 2002).

That means that students of lower economic standing face steep challenges getting a foot in the door. A student interested in a natural resource career must have sufficient resources, qualify for grants or scholarships or be willing to incur substantial debt to obtain an education.

The problem doesn't end with graduation. Since employers generally seek employees with the most experience, many applicants have to accrue substantial volunteer hours before their first job. One graduate, whom we'll call KTS, had very little field work experience and was able to obtain a paid position in wildlife conservation only after completing two months of volunteer field work. Obtaining sufficient volunteer experience is difficult for low-income students, however, who must provide their own food and housing while volunteering. If a natural resources job doesn't materialize fast enough, they may end up seeking work in a different field altogether.

Low-income students may also have to repay high education debt, yet they can expect low earnings early on. Wages from entry-level natural resource



Credit: Brett Billings

jobs can be substantially below other fields. The first seasonal wildlife job held by BFW in 1982 paid \$10 a day from the state wildlife agency's petty cash account — \$5 less than the agency allotted for daily horse rental. Although the situation has improved since then, early jobs still limit hours and salaries. Many organizations continue to rely heavily on volunteers. To obtain a position with an adequate salary, new hires must be financially able to hold out as they move up the ladder.

▲ A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee teaches young adults in the field.

Identifying Barriers

The efforts of the Nevada Chapter of The Wildlife Society to identify barriers to workforce diversity helped us to see some root causes that may influence our personal decisions. This exercise did not identify every barrier, but it provided a framework for us to begin:

1. Promoting awareness and interest in wildlife management and conservation, and about the wildlife profession, which may be influenced by bias in how we treat ethnic or economic classes;
2. Recognizing and working to address the relatively low or lack of wages in entry-level positions;
3. Recognizing the cost and inherent bias of our education system;
4. Recognizing internal biases that result in recruiting and hiring only others that think like us; and
5. Sincerely focusing our efforts on increasing diversity in the workplace.



► Members of the Nevada Chapter of The Wildlife Society Executive Board during a Conservation Conversation in 2018 discussing Diversity in the Workplace. From left to right, Mitch Gritts, Professional Development Committee chair; Amanda Van Dellen, newsletter editor; Cody Schroeder, Conservation Affairs Committee chair; Brian Wakeling, president; Kevin Shoemaker, president-elect; John Tull, immediate past president; and Kelley Stewart, past president and representative to the Western Section.



Photo courtesy Nevada Chapter of The Wildlife Society

Less obvious, our higher education system may unintentionally erect barriers to cultural, ethnic and socioeconomic diversity by failing to provide sufficient training to the educators themselves. Higher education produces world-class research scientists, but university professors are rarely trained in how to teach, and they often lack rigorous training in recognizing and countering implicit and explicit biases. Professors, administrators and supervisors are likely to unconsciously perpetuate longstanding biases, and the next generation of natural resource professionals may do the same, letting their biases influence the students they choose to collaborate with or hire.

A value proposition

An important sociological barrier we identified was a desire to hire people who share our core values, goals and beliefs. A wildlife professional may preferentially employ individuals who enjoy hunting, for instance, or share their views about conservation legislation, but this bias can limit workforce diversity.

In Nevada, a recent survey of wildlife values looked at “traditionalists” — people who hold a view of wildlife that prioritizes human wellbeing over wildlife

and treats wildlife in more utilitarian terms — and compared them to “mutualists,” who view wildlife as capable of relationships of trust with humans and desire companionship with wildlife. Among Nevada’s public, researchers with the [America’s Wildlife Values Research Team](#) found, 22% were categorized as traditionalists, while 44% were mutualists. At the Nevada Department of Wildlife, however, researchers reported that 61.6% of the employees were traditionalists, and just 7.6% were mutualists. They found a similar disconnect nationwide.

Wildlife value orientations also differ by ethnicity the team found, with white Americans most closely emulating the value orientations held by most wildlife agency employees. As employers make hiring decisions that support their views, they introduce bias into the hiring process that can influence several aspects of workplace diversity, including ethnic recruitment.

Reaching out

Even our outreach efforts can introduce bias. Many agencies pursue recruitment, retention and reactivation in hunting and angling because they see R3 activities as increasing relevance and funding for wildlife management.



These efforts, however, tend to recruit more traditionalists than mutualists. The classifications are based on core values, and core values influence our choice of activities. Recruit hunters and our customer base is likely to skew toward traditionalists. That in turn can influence our workforce as we hire employees who effectively interact with our customers. While many agencies recognize that our constituency is shifting, vocal segments among our customers can still have an undue influence on agency composition.

This does not mean that R3 efforts are inappropriate. They may effectively bring in more hunters and anglers. If we want to widen our customer base, though, we need to create new relationships in ways that resonate with diverse communities rather than with the agency.

Ethnicity and culture

Differences in how various ethnicities and cultures view nature and outdoor recreation can also present a barrier. White Americans select remote, undeveloped settings for recreation to a greater degree than other ethnicities. African Americans tend to choose more developed settings with facilities for outdoor recreation (Ho et al. 2005). These differences can influence not only how people recreate but how they perceive natural resources careers.

Multiple factors influence how cultures interact with natural resources. People with greater disposable income can afford to recreate farther from urban settings than those with less disposable income, suggesting that income influences recreation. Yet preferences may exist for recreational activities regardless of prior participation (Virden and Walker 1999). White Americans, for example, perceived forests to be safer than did African Americans or Hispanics.

And ethnicity can be complex. While many Hmong immigrants, for example, have a deep connection with the natural world and subsistence hunting and gathering is central to their heritage, they represent an often overlooked group, with cultural traditions that differ from other Asian communities (Bengston et al. 2008).

Are we committed?

Finally, we have to ask ourselves if we have a true commitment to workplace diversity. In our efforts to further our missions, values and goals, we are

often unwilling to embrace the challenges that increased diversity can bring to the workplace. Those challenges may make us uncomfortable.

Maybe we do not give enough attention to differences in age, gender or sexual orientation (e.g., Booms 2019). Or maybe we are insincere in our efforts, whether we are conscious of it or not. Sometimes we choose to hire known entities over individuals who may challenge existing working relationships.

Increased diversity may require increased debate on policy recommendations. It may require a change in how we behave in the workplace. Evaluating competency, fit and diversity during interviews may be challenging, subjective and influenced by decision fatigue (e.g., Vohs et al. 2008).

Initially, commitments to diversity must be deliberate. As efforts like these become more common and organizational culture changes, however, it may become as natural as sagebrush in the desert. ■

The findings and conclusions in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



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