

On being heard (and understood!)

It is a rare individual who can invoke, within one presentation, all of these: vampires in the closet, lyrics from one of Robbie Robertson's tunes, the image of pillows over your face at 5:00 a.m. to explain fluctuations in diurnal dissolved oxygen concentrations in a river, failing to see the fish for the forest as a way to broach land use issues in our forested lands, death by a thousand cuts to make us feel empathy for the last goldeye swimming in the Battle River, bumper stickers like "Plants and animals disappear to make room for your fat ass" and Edward Abbey's advice on being a "half-hearted fanatic." I have watched multiple audiences listen, enthralled, to presentations by Dr. Michael G. Sullivan: his enthusiasm for the topic and his evident grasp of the science never fails to engender a similar response in audiences. The world could definitely stand more Michael Sullivans.

But many in the public have never listened to or interacted with a biologist. Part of this is that many biologists are uncomfortable speaking to an audience. Sometimes who they work for discourages this type of interaction, and lack of contact with a biologist hasn't stopped politicians, industry moguls and members of the public from castigating the profession and individuals in it.

R. B. Miller, University of Alberta professor and Alberta's first, part-time fisheries biologist, observed, in 1956: *No professional occupation is so constantly belittled by the public as that of fish and wildlife management. And this despite the fact that qualification for such a profession requires long, specialized training comparable to the education of doctors and lawyers. People who will accept the word of their physician without question will publicly brand biologists as impractical, theorizing eggheads and challenge or contradict every statement they make.*

Biologists work tirelessly to change that impression, but in some ways, what R.B. Miller wrote over 60 years ago seems still prevalent and current. When I began my career, I was admonished by an older and maybe jaded colleague to be wary of hunters and anglers, who I supposed were our allies. "Not so," he said. "Many think they have an automatic Master's degree in the management of fisheries and wildlife because of their recreational activities."

This sparked some reminiscences of my earlier life as a member of a local Alberta Fish and Game Association club. There were recurring derogatory and demeaning comments about biologists at every change in hunting and fishing regulations. I remember one of the curmudgeons, in a debate over whether or not to support a doe deer season, saying, "I don't know how I'm going to vote on this but I know I'm going to be mad about it!"

Little seems to have changed in current debates and invective towards biologists over fish limits, season dates, or opening a hunting season on threatened species like grizzly bears. A colleague of mine had to duck dinner buns hurled at him during a presentation at a hunting group banquet. Providing data on the over-harvest of walleye from a southern Alberta reservoir turned into a fractious affair: One individual stood up and announced he knew the "true facts" because he was

“from a large family.” Opinions based on limited and often erroneous observations, solidified over coffee (or stronger liquids) become entrenched and difficult to counter with facts.

Pursuing a biological career represents the addition of another brick in the wall of ecological literacy, building a constituency of people who know, care, and are willing to do something for the fish and wildlife resource. But it is an endless, uphill battle. It requires each biologist, despite the fear and aversion to speaking to an audience, to steel themselves to do so.

As Steward Udall, a former US Secretary of the Interior, observed about the profession: “Over the long haul of life on this planet, it is the ecologists, and not the book keepers of business, who are the ultimate accountants.” It’s not only critical habitats and their wild inhabitants that are saved by an engaged, concerned constituency – it may well be biologists themselves.

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