

COMBAT BIOLOGY - POLITICS,
SOCIOLOGY AND CHANGING ROLES FOR
FISHERIES MANAGERS

BY

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Combat biology is a pseudonym for fisheries management I picked up from an Idaho biologist when I was an undergraduate just breaking into the field. He was a senior research biologist at the time, thoroughly enjoying doing the things that most of us got into fisheries to do. His was an enviable job - sort of like graduate school only without the course work and with much better pay. As the combat biology line suggests, Bert did not speak fondly of the management side of fisheries biology. Surprisingly enough, a few years after I left, Bert moved into a regional fisheries manager job where he continues to practice combat biology today. He changed jobs because he wanted to do something different. He found that he thrives on the challenge of blending fisheries biology, politics and sociology into fisheries management.

The angling public with which we managers must deal is rapidly changing. To begin with, it is growing. Not only the total population, but the percentage of the population that fishes, continues to grow. While the proportion of us that hunt is slowly but steadily declining, the demand for water based recreation is rising sharply.

Today's anglers are also well informed. Unfortunately some of them know just enough to be dangerous. However, a healthy percentage of them understand at least the rudimentary aspects of fisheries management. Thanks to Earth Day and the environmental consciousness of the 70's, the majority of the populace is solidly behind our efforts to protect and preserve quality habitat. We may yet live to see the day when Leopold's land ethic is a widely used practice instead of just a philosophy.

Of course they are not all knowledgeable. But even the shallowest, most self-serving group of airheads in our society today have seen the value of preserving some places to get away from it all. No, I'm not talking about sorority girls. God help us, yuppies have discovered flyfishing. They may be more concerned with cash flow than stream flow, but they have come to realize a float on the Madison is a great way to forget about black monday.

A trend that is clearly emerging among casual and serious anglers alike, is the desire for a quality experience. When we surveyed over 2,000 anglers on 20 of our top trout streams, the top four reasons they gave us for going fishing didn't involve fish at all. They wanted to be outdoors, to get away from it all, to view the scenery and enjoy some solitude. These people are discerning and they are demanding.

And to top it off, these anglers are more involved in politics and resource management than ever before. In fact, they are so involved that when politicians or managers fail to meet their challenge, they take matters into their own hands. The

proliferation of ballot initiatives is a good example of this. Here in Montana, an initiative that would have banned property taxes and thrown the state's finances into chaos came surprisingly close to passing in the last general election. A similar measure will be on the ballot this november. During the most recent fishing regulations setting process here in Montana, sportsman's clubs generated at least as many significant proposals as our biologists.

So the challenge we face is to manage a finite resource to provide a quality experience, for an ever growing number of better informed and more demanding anglers. How do we meet this challenge? Planning. I realize that planning has become a buzz word that most of us wish would just buzz off. But I'm not talking about the kind of planning that means AFA's, job descriptions, budget allocation work plans, project evaluations and reams of other semi-meaningless paper work. I'm talking about grass roots, down and dirty, meet the public face to face management planning.

For many fisheries managers, that means changing the way they do business. Here in Montana, our approach to fisheries management has changed significantly in the last 15 years. Fifteen years ago we were still stocking catchable trout in most of our streams. But Dick Vincent was building a body of evidence on the Madison River that showed we could have better fish populations if we quit stocking. The fish and game commission was more inclined to defer to the judgement of professionals in those days and at our urging adopted a policy banning the planting of catchable trout in nearly all Montana streams. The people in Ennis, Montana were anything but deferent though. Dick and his crew got run out of every bar in town by fishing zealots who were sure we were going to ruin their recreation.

The policy stuck though, and wild trout has become the by word of fisheries management in Montana. But times have changed. Today we would not be able to unilaterally implement a radical change in management policy, even a policy as good as our wild trout program. Even with public involvement, it is tough to sell a change in management policy. That point was driven home to us last November when our commission met to adopt our 1988-1990 fishing regulations. The most controversial proposal up for consideration was one to establish a short special regulations section on the Missouri River between Helena and Great Falls. Our biologists did a beautiful job of collecting data on the fish population and the fishery. They clearly established the need for the regulation. They went through all the public information and involvement processes that we have used successfully for many years. And a clear majority of the users supported the proposal. But the commission voted nay.

The commission turned down the proposal because a vocal minority

of users, the bait fishermen that would have been displaced by the proposed regulation; convinced them we had not considered all the alternatives. They were wrong. We had considered the alternatives. Where we went wrong was in not involving the public until after we considered the alternatives and chose the one we thought most appropriate. We've heard the same arguments nearly every time we have proposed a special management area. This is the first time we've lost a battle of this type. We can't sell a management program like we used to - we must get the public involved earlier to help us select a management strategy rather than approve one after the fact. Times have changed.

We got a glimpse of the future of fisheries management in Montana at that same commission meeting. The commission considered two regulations proposals for the Bighorn River. The department proposed to initiate a catch and release regulation for rainbow trout on the Bighorn. The state council of Trout Unlimited proposed a more restrictive limit for brown trout that the department opposed. The commission adopted the department's recommendations on both proposals. The difference? On the Bighorn we had been through the kind of grass roots planning process I spoke of. We got down and dirty, one on one with the public, agreed on the management goals, proposed some strategies to meet the goals and fought the battles before we went to the commission. With a management plan in place, and knowing that we had been through an extensive public involvement process, the commission was comfortable in deferring to the department's recommendations. As a matter of fact, after the Missouri River battle the commission instructed us to go to the public and develop management plans for our top ten fisheries.

In the future, we will not be going to the commission with substantial regulations proposals unless we have a management plan in place.

The most successful managers in the future will be those that treat fisheries management like a business. The first rule of business is the customer is always right. Anglers are our customers. They have come to expect us to treat them as such, and rightly so. After all, we are the stewards of the fisheries resource, not it's owners.

In our business, a lot has been made in recent years of professionalism. Unfortunately, many people equate professionalism with technical competence. Professionalism doesn't stop at technical training in biology, statistics and computers. The truly professional fisheries manager must be technically competent, but he must also be one who can accurately identify user groups and adequately assess user opinions. He must understand the political process and he must have the same commitment to his constituents that he has to the resource. Those who choose to follow the old path of selecting a management

strategy and selling it to the public display not professionalism, but professional arrogance.

We have been presented with what the chief of our fisheries division likes to call an insurmountable opportunity. We must go beyond the technical training we received in school and we must become educators ourselves. We must resist the temptation to think of ourselves as the decision makers in resource management. Our role as managers will continue to evolve more and more towards disseminators of information, synthesizers of management options and facilitators for the real decision makers, A.K.A. The angling public.

If we do our jobs well, we will be working with an informed public making good, responsible decisions. And if we do our job really well, they will make the decisions we hoped they would make and defend them to their deaths because they are their decisions.

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