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Keynote Address

Playing with Fire: Trust and the Credibility of the Profession

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Abstract: I discuss the concepts of trust and credibility in relation to the wildlife profession. Using the recent Canada lynx monitoring controversy in Washington State, I demonstrate that innocent actions have consequences that erode trust. Effective natural resource management requires that we, as individuals, agencies, and a profession, maintain high levels of credibility with the general public. As scientists and educators (and as opposed to elected officials), we enjoy relatively high levels of trust. It is critical that we maintain what we currently have, and that we develop programs and strategies to increase our credibility and the trust obligation that society requires from us.

Key Words: trust, credibility, wildlife profession, lynx

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INTRODUCTION

What is the fabric that makes people – our friends, our neighbors, our leaders, and our critics – believe us, and trust us? What makes us trust them?

On December 17th, 2001, *The Washington Times* ran a story that started a chain reaction: “Federal and state wildlife biologists planted false evidence of a rare cat species in two national forests... Had the deception not been discovered, the government likely would have banned many forms of recreation and use of natural resources... “ (Hudson 2001). The following day, the *Seattle Times* reported “U.S. Forest Service officials leapt into damage-control mode yesterday after a disclosure that federal and state employees on Washington public lands had sent bogus lynx-hair samples to a lab” (Mapes 2001).

U.S. Senator Larry Craig and Representatives James Hansen and Scott McInnis called for the firings of the federal wildlife biologists involved. Representative Hansen, in a press release, stated, “Planting false evidence of lynx presence would limit the use of natural resources in forests wrongly believed to be lynx habitat... It would limit people’s access to those forests. It would virtually destroy recreational opportunities here. That, in turn, could be devastating to nearby local economies that rely on business from tourists and recreationists. This hoax, if it hadn’t been discovered, could have wrecked some people’s way of life. These involved employees should be promptly fired and the entire national inventory reviewed for *proven* accuracy” (Hansen 2001).

Dr. Jeffrey Koenings, Director of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife, was blunt in his assessment: “I’m angry and dismayed over the fact that two Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) biologists were involved in a breach of proper scientific protocol while involved in a continuing, multi-year joint lynx study for the U.S. Forest Service. As a

biologist myself, the behavior of these biologists is not only extremely embarrassing, but unprofessional and cannot be tolerated” (Koenings 2001).

I’m not from Washington. I’m not a lynx biologist. And all I know about this situation is what I read in the newspapers, the various press releases, and the official Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife web site. The reason that these biologists were testing samples from captive lynx and tanned pelts was because they had concerns over the accuracy of earlier DNA tests. The chief scientists for the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife issued their own press release, making it clear, to me at least, that the mistakes these biologists made were not related to questioning the accuracy of the DNA analysis, but rather the way they went about testing the methodology (Pierce et al. 2001). No one has been arrested. An investigation by the US Department of the Interior concluded that no law was broken. A Board of Inquiry appointed by The Wildlife Society (TWS) concluded that the two biologists involved who were members of TWS were innocent of charges of violating TWS’s Code of Ethics (Anonymous 2002). Williams (2002) castigated the agencies involved for the way “... the agencies cringed, groveled, and cheerfully sacrificed the biologists’ careers.” And we haven’t heard the last of this case. As wolf biologist Mike Jimenez says, “Scat happens.” In this case, the scat seems to have wings.

For me, the key issue here was summed up nicely in an editorial for the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer*: “It hardly matters whether it was simply a well-meant attempt to test the accuracy of laboratory DNA analysis or a dishonest attempt to place the Canadian [sic] lynx into forests where it has not been found. The damage is the same. The perception that something dishonest was afoot is hard to counter even if that perception is wrong” (Seattle Post-Intelligencer Editorial Board 2001). I would add that it does matter whether it was intentional dishonesty or not

(and I absolutely do not believe it was, agreeing with Williams), but I agree that the perception that something dishonest was afoot is hard to counter. Or is it?

As individuals, as agencies, or as a profession, do we have credibility? Do people trust us? Does it even matter? Seeing is believing. The Washington State lynx controversy is a hairy experience. Who is telling the truth? Who can we trust? Who do we trust?

“Trust” has many nuances, but fundamentally it involves assured reliance on the integrity and veracity of a person or thing. Its synonyms include confidence, reliance, and assurance. Antonyms include distrust, suspicion, and apprehension. Trusting implies relying on others’ actions that one does not control or necessarily understand, or even while one does not pay attention (Wildavsky 1979:209). When I say, “I trust you,” I am depending on you. The more credibility a source has, the more trust I put into information from that source. And all sources of information are not the same.

HARRIS POLL: WHOM DO WE TRUST?

A Harris Poll involving a telephone survey of 1,011 adults and conducted in December, 2001, focused on the professions Americans generally trust (Taylor 2001). When asked, “Would you generally trust each of the following types of people to tell the truth, or not?” they responded that they would trust clergy (90% of respondents would trust), teachers (88%), doctors (84%), police officers (78%), professors (77%) scientists (76%), and judges (75%). Seventy-four percent of respondents said they would generally trust the “ordinary man or woman.” Trusted the least were pollsters (51% would trust), journalists (49%), business leaders (43%), members of Congress (42%), and trade union leaders (37%). Note this poll was taken after the events of 11 September 2001 and the collapse of business giant Enron. In relation to wildlife managers, it is both encouraging and discouraging that scientists and professors were trusted no less than the “ordinary man or woman.” I see this as a hint that, for us, trust is something we do not have a monopoly on, and that we must be attentive in how we protect the trust we retain.

PROFESSIONS RANKED FOR HONESTY AND INTEGRITY

Patterson and Kim (1991:141), using a self-administered questionnaire given to 2000 randomly selected adult Americans, ranked 73 occupations for their honesty and integrity. The top 10, from the top, included firefighters, paramedics, farmers, pharmacists, grade school teachers, letter carriers, Catholic priests, housekeepers, baby-sitters, and college professors. Scientists were ranked 13 out of 73, between rabbis and chefs. The bottom 10, from the bottom, ranked for their honesty and integrity, included drug dealers, organized crime bosses, television evangelists, prostitutes, street peddlers, local politicians, members of Congress, car salespeople, rock and roll stars, and insurance

salespeople. Again, it is instructive that scientists and professors do not have a monopoly on honesty and integrity, and that baby-sitters and housekeepers rank higher.

WHAT ABOUT OUR LEGISLATORS?

In both the Harris Poll (Taylor 2001) and the work by Patterson and Kim (1991) noted above, members of Congress do not rank high on a trustworthiness scale. In Utah, a 1994 *Salt Lake Tribune*-sponsored telephone poll of 450 adults asked Utahns whether their state legislators took bribes (Shelley 1994). Thirteen percent said almost all Utah legislators took bribes, 40% said some did, and 29% said a few did. Only 7% said none did, while 11% were unsure. This same survey asked who the respondents felt their specific legislators represented most often. Thirty-nine percent said Utah legislators represented their own personal interests most often, 29% said legislators represented lobbyists, and only 22% said Utah legislators represented their citizen constituency (8% were unsure, and 1% reported that legislators represented no one). It is an interesting phenomenon that we elect people we don’t trust to represent us in government. Apparently, trust alone, or the continuation of trust post-election, is not a requirement for our elected leaders. People seem to be either tolerant or accepting of self-serving behaviors from legislators. Wildlife managers, on the other hand, do not receive, expect, or want this luxury. They want to be believed at all times. I want people to believe me.

JUST WHOM DO WE BELIEVE?

Patterson and Kim (1991:209) ranked “moral authorities:” sources that we will allow to tell us what is right and wrong. The percentage of respondents stating that a particular source has some right to tell them what is right or wrong included: spouse/lover (77% agreed that this source has some right to tell them what is right or wrong), parent (71%), grandparent (58%), best friend (57%), the *Bible* (52%), religion (52%), personal doctor (51%), and a child (51%). Thirty-seven percent agreed that a college professor has some right to tell them what is right or wrong, and decreasing amounts were noted for co-workers (28%), the press (21%), and movie stars (19%).

For the percentage of people who accept source’s moral advice without question, the percentages are lower, but the order is practically the same. People trust their families. While many millions of Americans utilize our wildlife resources, relatively few have a wildlife biologist in the family.

WHAT IS CREDIBILITY?

Credibility can be defined as believability. “Credible people are believable people; credible information is believable information” (Fogg et al. 2001:61). Two key components of credibility are trustworthiness and expertise (Fogg et al. 2001:62). A

credible source is one having high levels of trustworthiness and expertise.

The Public Relations Society of America (PRSA) has developed a National Credibility Index for public figures (Public Relations Society of America Foundation 2001). According to the PRSA, the 6 most credible public figures are Supreme Court Justices, teachers, national experts, members of the Armed Forces, local business owners, and “ordinary citizens.” The 6 least credible sources are TV or radio talk show hosts, famous entertainers, public relations specialists (!), political party leaders, heads of national interest groups, and “famous athletes.” From the pattern noted here, wildlife biologists and managers are more similar to credible figures than the least credible sources.

Sheldon Rampton and John Stauber (2001) have authored a revealing book on how bogus experts, doctored data, and manufactured facts are used to manipulate the public into believing whatever industry wants us to believe. “That we live in a world of media manipulations is understood almost instinctively by the public. Whether we see through a particular propaganda campaign or not, we all know that we live in an age of half-truths, weasel words, and slick image campaigns. When someone says, “That’s a bunch of PR,” they rarely mean it in a positive sense” (Rampton and Stauber 2001:29).

We constantly are bombarded with messages telling us that if we love our children we will take them to a Ronald McDonald Playland. That forest fires are bad, except when they are good. That scrambled eggs are like our brain on drugs. That professional basketball players really like to read. That white-tailed deer need to be hunted for their own good. We try to sort out these messages. What is truth? Which ones are credible? We depend on our family and friends to help us sort this out. We use our own intuition. We look up to credible sources. And we make conclusions and decisions. Monica Lewinsky and Bill Clinton? They were not just friends. The habitat of Smokey the Bear sometimes needs a good fire. And wildlife biologists in Washington were not trying to close off the public lands by faking the presence of Canada lynx in national forests.

As individuals, as agencies, or as a wildlife profession, do we have credibility? Do people trust us? The answer to these questions is unclear, and certainly must be case-dependent. If we have credibility, and the public’s trust, we should value it. If we don’t, we should work on developing it.

We must always be vigilant and protective of our credibility. This includes a constant policing of our own ranks to excise the actions that tear away the credibility we have. We must continually be truthful. To err is human. To admit it, is superhuman. Recognize that when we play with fire there are multiple outcomes. Some are harmless, and some are catastrophic. We recover quickly from a first-degree burn, and we probably can recover quickly from a minor manipulation error in what we say

or do. But as the fire gets hotter, or our exposure gets greater, that fire – playing with trust and credibility – is something that can be life or career threatening. We must be observant and alert.

What makes a dangerous fire grow? Plenty of fuel, and a strong wind. Keep these thoughts in mind when you evaluate your own actions. Never say, “I’m a scientist, and I am never biased.” Rampton and Stauber (2001:2) criticized scientists when these scientists believe their analyses were “rational, objective, and reasonable, while their critics were deluded, prejudiced, and even emotionally unbalanced. They were the experts, and the public merely needed to be ‘educated.’” This is an extreme example, but still a dangerous mind-set, and a trap to avoid. We cannot always see our own biases. And what we see as a rationale action, or statement, or defense, might not appear that way to others. This was a problem in the Canada lynx survey controversy, and is the reason the *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* Editorial Board (2001) stated, “The damage is the same. The perception that something dishonest was afoot is hard to counter even if that perception is wrong.”

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