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AFS Making History During a Historic Year

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For 15 long decades, the American Fisheries Society has struggled to ensure that science forms the cornerstone for managing North America's priceless aquatic treasures. Our members formed the Society 5 years after the U.S. Civil War, acknowledging the need to share and promote science, even during the challenges of Reconstruction. The Society continued to share science and promote the scientific method when fisheries research vessels were turned into weapons of war during the Spanish American War and World War I. During all the years of the Great Depression, when people worldwide struggled for sustenance, the science of fisheries and AFS continued. Annual Meetings were not held during World War II, but the science continued, and studies were published in AFS journals after the war. In the latter half of the 20th century, and the first part of the 21st, AFS science presentation and promotion was not delayed during the Vietnam War, the 9/11 attacks, nor the 2008 Great Recession.

Now, we face the challenge of a world pandemic, and the American Fisheries Society perseveres. We know the importance of using aquatic science to feed the world, provide outdoor recreation for millions, and protect the aquatic treasures of our planet. No matter the challenges, the AFS will enable scientists to share their research to help manage our marine and freshwater ecosystems.

Therefore, I was proud that the Governing Board, AFS officers and staff, and the local organizing committee decided to provide a virtual meeting during this year's pandemic in place of an in-person meeting. I was pleased for two reasons: We listened to scientists—those in other professions such as human health—to weigh risks and benefits of having an in-person meeting in Columbus, Ohio. We can't expect people to listen to fisheries science if we do not heed the findings of scientists in other disciplines, and our members did a fine job considering this information. Furthermore, instead of simply cancelling the meeting, the governing board voted to conduct our annual meeting entirely on-line for the first time in the history of the Society. For a meeting of this size, including international participants, the planning involved is unprecedented. Nevertheless, the vote to have a virtual meeting, and the associated comments and discussions were almost unanimously positive. I believe the unanimity of the vote was encouraged by the fantastic job of students, biologists, and staff who successfully convened this spring's Chapter and Division virtual meetings. The energy and dedication of these people paved the way for our larger virtual event at the end of this summer.

As a Governing Board member stated, we are making fisheries "history" ourselves by convening our Annual Meeting in this format. Development of new means of communication advances fisheries science. The availability of new forms of meeting technology gives us exciting new opportunities to test and refine the use of virtual platforms to share fisheries science. Science communication has been emphasized by the last several AFS administrations for good reason. The lives of all people in North America depend on the maintenance of healthy aquatic ecosystems. Yet, we increasingly see peer-reviewed scientific findings drowned out by communication that expresses only political concerns and dismisses science. Improving tools to communicate widens the reach of our scientific findings, allowing them to be incorporated in decisions.

Why is using science to manage aquatic ecosystems obvious to us, but is often not apparent to others? Using census data, I once did a "back of the envelope" calculation to estimate the proportion of the population in the United States employed in a field even remotely associated with natural resources conservation. I was very generous in who I included—for example, a member of the list could have been a natural resources librarian. After doing the calculations, I found that <3% of the population was employed in a profession that had some connection with conservation. The other 97%—even though they depend on natural resources for their food, recreation, and general well-being—were involved in unrelated professions. This data suggests that we, as part of the "3%," need to be very good at communicating with the other 97% to have our science considered.

Being forced by the pandemic to have a conference online has many drawbacks. We can't see others, we can't have discussions in the hallways about our activities, and we can't enjoy a lot of the camaraderie of meeting in-person to catch up on the latest advancements. However, we will use this new tool to reach audiences who couldn't attend an "in-person" meeting, and in the future, we will be able to offer our science in conjunction with in-person communication techniques to educate people who have different learning styles. Because we are a people familiar with research and development, we will discover additional ways of using online platforms that we had not considered earlier. Having one more platform—virtual communication—at our disposal brings our 3% that much closer to educating a wide variety of people about the importance of science-based management of our natural resources, including others in the 3% *and* the remaining 97%. If there are any benefits to surviving a world pandemic, the opportunity to expand the approach and reach of science communication is certainly one. AFS

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DOI: 10.1002/fsh.10482