

Now is the Time for Action

Scott A. Bonar | AFS President. E-mail: Scott_Bonar@msn.com



Eighty years ago, a few scientists possessed information that would change the world. They had to get it to the right people—policymakers who would take them seriously and act. They worked in a discipline where calm, theoretical debate and lack of intensely heated controversy was previously the norm. However, their most recent findings had blown the lid off all of that. The scientists, Enrico Fermi, Edward Teller, Eugene Wigner, Leo Szilard, Albert Einstein, and their colleagues were physicists who had discovered how to split the atom (Rhodes 1986). Events in Nazi Germany suggested a group of scientists in the Third Reich were working on similar research. The split atom could provide useful power, but also start a chain reaction that could destroy a “whole port together with some of the surrounding territory” according to a letter that Szilard and Einstein penned to President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Because of the gravity of their findings, arguments we ponder today such as advocating for a position, and reluctance to sway policymakers, did not slow their momentum. The scientists lobbied governmental officials hard that something be done to avoid catastrophe, and that something was the Manhattan Project, which produced a bomb that ultimately ended World War II.

Sometimes the implications and consensus of scientific findings are so great, so important to our way of life that scientists must act forcefully. For these issues, the time has passed for endless arguing about minutiae; evidence leads to action as the primary path forward. In this moment in the history of fisheries science, we have reached a point of action on several important issues. Peer-reviewed, careful, objective science must continue to be our focus, but it is ineffective without action based on its findings. Unfortunately, we now live in an era when our ability to forcefully speak up to use scientific findings to help conserve our continent’s aquatic treasures needs a nudge or maybe more.

We scientists pride ourselves on our stoic nature and ability to not get flustered. We are reluctant to advocate for a position, but this reluctance cannot paralyze us. Our reluctance to hold strong positions can be misinterpreted by the public. When I told a family member that “Scientists typically don’t advocate. We give our science to policy makers and they then take it forward to do with what they will,” their comment was not, “Wow, I appreciate your objective research!” Their comment was “If scientists don’t care enough about these issues to weigh in on them, why should we (the general public) care?” That comment made quite an impression on me.

Advocacy is frowned upon by some scientists, but action is not necessarily the same as advocacy. Advocacy states that someone “must” or “should” do something—i.e., “You must not jump off that cliff.” One can act but avoid scientific advocacy by stating the finding, and the implications of the finding—i.e., “If you jump off that cliff you will die.” No matter if we choose action, advocacy, or a combination of the two, we must state our findings clearly, strongly, widely, and often.

I have enjoyed almost 35 years as a member of the American Fisheries Society, and at no other time have I seen such a compelling need for strong management action to preserve our continent’s fisheries, fish populations, aquatic systems, and frankly, our way of life. Our aquatic treasures are under a threat like never before. Many members have told me that they expect AFS to be a voice for them because they cannot provide a strong voice in their jobs. We must ensure we are fulfilling this role.

I appreciate your support for my election to the Presidency of AFS; a high honor. I am privileged to work with you. You are the best scientists and managers of aquatic systems on this continent and, for many disciplines, in the world. In this year of my presidency, I will call on the membership to act more forcefully on several fronts that are dramatically affecting our fisheries resources. These include the lack of policymaker and public action in many circles on climate change, the reduced use of objective science in decision making, and the need for communication and education on every front about the importance of healthy aquatic ecosystems. Action is critical, so we can hand off a healthy planet to our children and grandchildren.

I cannot do this alone. I am asking you to speak out, act, and encourage others to act to save our priceless aquatic ecosystems. I am asking you to risk the comfort of the status quo and be courageous. AFS will require the efforts of every member and unit if we wish to succeed. You will need to use your energy and great minds to move forward, typically on your own initiative. My series of President’s Hooks will focus on options for action on some of these most important issues. Our goal will be to move into the 150th Anniversary of AFS with a proud list of accomplishments on both the scientific and action fronts. There is much in our history we can be proud of, and yet we still have further to go.

I am lucky to follow outstanding AFS Presidents such as Steve McMullin and Jesse Trushenski who have pushed for increased communication of fisheries science in their presidencies. I am excited to work with your new President-Elect Brian Murphy and First and Second Vice Presidents Leanne Roulson and April Croxton. These officers are gifted in communication, science, and dedication to involve students and other international entities to enhance and conserve our continent’s fisheries. I am also looking forward to working with our excellent Executive Director Doug Austen and his talented AFS staff, and our fine Governing Board. Finally, I am proud to lead you, our membership, into the 150th Anniversary of our Society. Thank you for your support and I look forward to embarking on this exciting journey with you. Now let’s move forward and *act*.

REFERENCES

Rhodes, R. 1986. The making of the atomic bomb. Simon and Schuster, New York. [AFS](#)