

Ode to the Civil Servant

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“How is your fishing?” I used to ask people as a state fish biologist doing creel surveys. One response: “You are a f#\$ing waste of my f\$%\$ing money.” Another said, “You G#d@#n ecologists are filled with more s#\$t than the Christmas goose.” At a meeting when I was a professor: “You pointy-headed liberals are indoctrinating our kids” (I must admit my head shape is somewhat pointy, but I classify myself as more of a moderate than a liberal. I do plead guilty to indoctrinating students—in the methods of fish biology, fish management, and statistics). These comments were puzzling. As the saying goes, “How did they know all this about me when we had only just met?”

If you are a biologist, game warden, educator, or work for the government in some other fashion, you are a civil servant. Probably at some time in your career you have received feedback from the public akin to what I described in the paragraph above or maybe worse. As we move toward the AFS 150th Anniversary, let me counter these comments by offering a hearty thank you! for all the good civil servants have done for our Society in North America for the last 150+ years. Let me also encourage you younger folks who are thinking about a career to know how much good you can do in a civil service position and how rewarding it can be.

With the scientific method itself under fire, with human-caused climate change being denied in the highest circles, with protests against vaccination (i.e., a practice that has immeasurably helped our wellbeing since the 18th century), and the work of so many environmental professionals in the government being criticized like never before, civil servants may feel sometimes that the world has gone mad. Has it? (Yes... just kidding!) Deep down some of you might be thinking, “Is what I do or want to do really that important?”

You bet it is! However, because we are a science-based group, let’s take an objective look at the importance of your profession. What is the evidence for the need of a strong government, staffed by talented professionals?

First, if you visit a country with a poorly-functioning government, you quickly realize the importance of well-functioning civil servants, including natural resource professionals. I visited many such places, including a former communist country soon after the fall of the Soviet Union. The people were kind and generous, yet my impression was that the country resembled movie scenes of the Wild West—few regulations and everyone for themselves—a true tragedy of the commons. I snorkeled in the adjacent Black Sea and saw no large fishes. Human excrement dotted the beaches. On a plate at a local restaurant, tiny fishes comprised the evening meal. This stark example showed me that without regulations,

and well-paid, competent fisheries and environmental managers, fish stocks quickly dwindle and pollution holds sway.

Next, look at the benefits provided by work of individual civil servant professionals, their respective agencies, and the laws they enforce. Where would we be without the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency, which helped clean up point-source pollution on the Cuyahoga River? The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to remove cancer-causing agents from chemical waste sites in Love Canal, New York, and in Times Beach, Missouri? The Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Management and Conservation Act, which allowed NOAA fisheries professionals to restrict fishing and allow stocks to rebuild before they could be fished to extirpation? The work by myriads of environmental civil servants that protect our way of life is as important as the police (also civil servants) enforcing laws against robbery or murder. Furthermore, the literature is rife with stories of heroic acts and contributions by individual civil servants. We know about the contributions of Rachel Carson (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service employee), Aldo Leopold (U.S. Forest Service employee), and of course Theodore Roosevelt. However, what of the soil conservation professionals who traveled across the Great Plains and their tireless speaking engagements to show America’s farmers new soil protection practices following the Dust Bowl; of the countless U.S. Forest Service, Mexican, and Canadian fire fighters and smoke jumpers who have given their lives to contain some of North America’s most intense wild fires; of the game rangers and wardens who have busted poaching rings that stole tons of Sacalait (Crappie) from Louisiana swamps or caviar from giant West Coast sturgeon; and of the fisheries biologists who research and build fisheries stocks and habitats? All have made our lives better. If you are a current fisheries professional, like your forbearers, you can be proud of following the North American Model of Fish and Wildlife Conservation, which spreads the resource around so all can enjoy it and conserves it for future generations.

Given the strong contribution of civil servants, why does a significant portion of the population have an unfavorable view of them? Sure, many regulations could be improved or streamlined. Government employees exist who goldbrick and do not do their job. Yet, the overwhelming majority are quite competent and do their job enthusiastically. Author Michael Lewis describes the current “war” on civil servants and its employees (Lewis 2018). In it, he introduces Max Stier, the lead of Partnership for Public Service. Stier examined those who made the greatest strides in government and found a pattern. Many civil servants who made great accomplishments were first generation Americans who came from nations with

poorly functioning governments. They saw the need for a strong, competent government and supported its goals. Based on my interactions with recent immigrants from all over the world, I have seen almost none that have criticized our western governments. Alternatively, many of those who consistently criticize civil servants take for granted how good they have it because they don't know anything different. Furthermore, they are swayed by the massive well-orchestrated communication programs by those who want to discourage government regulation. With this in mind, here are a few perspectives, both on how to work with civil servants, and for the civil servants themselves:

1. *Government work is a noble, important profession; treat employees accordingly.* Give employees an upside to government work. Pay a livable wage. Give them respect and a competitive salary. Thank them.
2. *If you work for the government, don't take criticism personally. Fight it if unjust.* Realize that with the internet and all the other myriad forms of communication, people are bombarded by propaganda showing only the problems in government, and why this or that agency should be abolished. Funny how this information is often spread by individuals and groups regulated by the very laws that these agencies are meant to enforce. Funny also how many of those sharing this propaganda have extensive sales or marketing experience. Many of you are trained educators. Fight back (politely) with the correct information.
3. *Give people the entire picture about what you do for the government.* You are not *just* building back a population of salmon or conserving the coral reef. Some people interpret this as you care more about animals than

people. Caring for animals and plants *is* caring for people. You are ensuring people's families have jobs (e.g., fishing, diving operators, etc.), you are giving them a clean environment, you are ensuring they have enough to eat, you are educating the continent's next generation, and you are giving their kids the same opportunity to enjoy the fabulous outdoors that your generation had. If people criticize you, give them the entire picture of why you are doing something—not that you are only trying to save an animal, plant or ecosystem.

4. *Tell your success stories and that of your employees.* Do it often to others and the media.

Finally, take heart. You can sometimes convince the most intractable critic. The old man who told me “Ecologists are full of more s%t than the Christmas Goose” was a frequent angler where I worked. One day, when I was wearing my diving gear, he asked me if I could retrieve a fishing lure that he had hooked on an underwater log. I gladly agreed and dove down to the sunken log offshore, which turned out to be carpeted with lures. I retrieved all of them, including the one he lost, came to the surface and gave him the bag full. He said “Wow! Thanks so much! Let me get you a beer!” I said, “Nope, just consider it a helping hand from your local government ecologist.”

Know that the government ecologist who is writing this column is proud to serve with you.

The opinions and tips given here, like all my columns, are mine and do not necessarily represent AFS or my employer.

REFERENCE

Lewis, M. 2018. The fifth risk. W.W. Norton and Company, New York. **AFS**

AFS Journals and Fisheries Magazine to Mail Without Polybags

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I am pleased to announce that *Fisheries* magazine and American Fisheries Society (AFS) journals will soon be mailed to U.S. addresses without a polybag wrapper. Instead of a polybag containing a paper carrier sheet with the recipient's name and address, our publications will now have a paper label affixed on either the front or back cover.

In the September 2019 issue of *Fisheries* (Lerner 2019), I provided background on AFS efforts to eliminate polybag mailers, given the adverse effects of plastic waste on the world's oceans. In our case, the largest obstacle to dropping polybags stemmed from requirements that wrappers be placed on periodicals mailed from the United States to other countries. The printer used by Wiley, our journals publisher, was unable to separate these mailings, requiring wrappers for the U.S. as well. I'm happy to report that this problem has been solved, allowing us to eliminate polybags sent to U.S. addresses. Unfortunately, mailings sent outside the U.S. must continue to use the polybags due to international mailing requirements.

Thanks for your letters of concern regarding polybag use by AFS. I am pleased that we are able to make a small contribution towards reducing the amount of plastic waste in our environment.

REFERENCE

Lerner, A. 2019. Why are we using plastic to mail *Fisheries* magazine? *Fisheries* 44:395. doi:10.1002/fsh.10337.