

PANEL: "THE ROLE AND IMAGE OF THE PROFESSIONAL ECOLOGIST IN THE 70'S"

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Once upon a time, when the United States suddenly switched its foreign policy in midstream, then Secretary of State Allen Dulles answered the reporters who greeted his plane in Washington with these words, "Gentlemen, we are undergoing an agonizing reappraisal."

I wonder if this meeting of the two professional societies concerned with fish and wildlife is truly interested in an "agonizing reappraisal" of the role of the professional ecologist in the 1970's?

It takes guts to stand up publically and ask for an outside appraisal of what you are doing, and I congratulate you. Let us hope that what is said here today will be considered seriously, for I really believe it is time for an agonizing reappraisal -- for the profession and for the citizen.

And as our text for this discussion of the future role of the professional ecologist, I can find no more pertinent passage than the one by Robert Ardrey in the Social Contract. "The novice priest, taking his hard earned Ph.D. accepts with his degree the mysteries of the temple. He will be moved by controversy, but he will address only his fellows."

So here we are, in a meeting where the professional ecologists are gathered to address their fellows.

However, there are some significant indications that the scientist is beginning to break out of his self imposed isolation into the real world. We have people who have risked the scorn of their fellows to speak out for what they believe: Paul Erlich, Barry Commoner, John Gofman, and Arthur Tamplin. We have, of course, Rachel Carson and Aldo Leopold, but they were certainly exceptions that prove the rule.

We are beginning to witness a more general outbreak from the priesthood in the last couple of years. The young scientists who disrupted this year's meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science and drove AAAS President-elect Glenn Seborg from the arena before he could speak, are a clear example of disenchantment with the system by the novitiates themselves.

Perhaps you believe they and others like them are acting irresponsibly. I tend to agree with you. And if we carry this already complicated analogy one step further, I am downright afraid of real priests wielding real bombs against society.

But surely there is a middle ground here that lies between quaking apathy and bomb throwing advocacy. And, in my opinion, for those of us professionally concerned with natural resources, that middle ground should be the determined effort to achieve environmental responsibility.

Before we attempt to determine what for this effort should take, we must deal with a couple of questions raised by the people who planned this conference and this panel.

First, what did they mean by a professional ecologist? Judging from the membership of the two societies, perhaps they meant anyone who is trained in one of the natural sciences and practices professionally in that field. In order to apply any of these remarks to a significant number of those in attendance, we will have to accept that definition, inaccurate as it may be.

In fact, of course, an ecologist is a specialist in the interrelationship between organisms and their environment. This is a definition that is being broadened considerably as it is used today. Only recently are we seeing any significant number of "ecologists" graduating from our universities and appearing in the professional world. Most of you "ecologists" out there in the audience are self-made in that field. Perhaps you believe yourself to be one, but you don't tell your kids that's what you do for a living.

There may be a good reason for that. I submit that, with a few exceptions, there are very few places for an ecologist within the structures of our modern society. The role of the ecologist, looked at broadly, is to consider the entire picture. The present structure of administration, public and private, is to prevent exactly that. And this is the second problem that we must consider.

Most professionals are being hired to work in the traditionally narrow aspects of their specialty. The opportunities available to them exist in four broad categories. These are government, primarily resource agencies; universities; private work, either consulting or with conservation organizations; and in industry.

Since most professionals work for government, let us look at that first. Government careers fall into three general areas: the technician who graduates from a field investigator to a staff position dealing with his specialty; the enforcement officer for fish and game, water or air pollution, or what have you; and the administrator whose duties gradually become concerned with supervision, finance, and politics.

The standing rule of thumb in government work "don't rock the boat," has been around so long that we laugh when we say it, but it's not funny. It may be more of a mythical barrier to government employees than a real one today, but it will take a conscious effort to effectively change this way of thinking.

In the university we see some outstanding examples of those who are willing and capable of speaking out. But for the most part we have a closed system, enmeshed in the struggle to succeed within that system and inadequately prepared to carry a message to the broad spectrum of society.

The private consultant must be concerned about finding and keeping clients, and there is no diplomacy to equal that of an ecological consulting firm rationalizing certain adverse effects of its client's million dollar development proposal. And those of us in the private conservation field are frequently guilty of jealousies which impede progress, including the "we invented Environment, who are all these Johnny-come-latelies"? Syndrome.

Finally, those professional ecologists who are hired directly by industry are often accused of being nothing more than "biostitutes." This is not necessarily so, as some companies have discovered to their chagrin, but corporate ecologists, like corporate lawyers, are not usually hired to question their boss' motives.

Now, enough of these negatives. Let us consider what can and should be done about the image and role of the professional ecologist. The image needs a little polishing, as witness my previous remarks, and it can only come about through a change in the role of the ecologist in the years ahead. What can be done to improve the role and the image?

The first and most obvious answer is that the individuals must strive to create a sense of pride in their profession. Among other things, this requires the establishment of a professional society or societies such as those maintained by the medical and legal professions. Obviously, such societies cannot grow and become effective unless they are willing to speak out responsibly from their point of view on the issues of the day.

Next, the leaders in government, industry, and the university community must remove certain sanctions against speaking out publicly on the part of their employees. The individual ecologist should be encouraged to say publicly what he believes. Such a privilege will depend upon his assuming the responsibility of his words. He must be required to be accurate, to be scientifically correct. If he believes that certain environmental actions must be taken, then he must speak out. And he must be willing to leave if his differences with his employers are irreconcilable.

Another trend that I see, and I think it is a healthy one, is a return to the "generalist" concept as professional ecologists begin their careers. We have witnessed the problems of competing "specialists" at the field level which are carried, step by step, into headquarters offices. These are problems which can and should be avoided, particularly since they often result in public squabbles which do little to enhance the public reputation of the profession.

Finally, there is a crying need for the involvement of the professional ecologist in the volunteer conservation community. Why is it that doctors, lawyers, house painters, housewives, and countless others expend many hours of their time in efforts to improve the quality of the environment in their community, their state of their nation and yet the people who are best equipped to work on these problems by and large refuse to get involved? There are, of course, some exceptions and these men and women in your profession are doing a real service to themselves, their communities, and to you. The problem is that there aren't anywhere near enough.

You are no different than any of the rest of us. If you believe in something, you have a responsibility to work to make it happen and that responsibility extends beyond office hours. Scientific detachment is the kind of cop out that is used as justification for the scientist who works in a nerve gas factory.

Let me leave you with two thoughts from two very different men. George Santayana said "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."

And John Galsworthy said "those who don't think about the future won't have one."

Who can afford to "sit out" the environmental revolution of the '70's?

