

Becoming a Wildlife Professional

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BOOK REVIEW

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Becoming a Wildlife Professional. Edited by Scott E. Henke and Paul R. Krausman. John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore Maryland, USA. 2017. 208 pp. ISBN 978-1-4214-2306-7. US\$85 hardcover.

Review by Richard B. Chipman

Back in 1986, Jack Ward Thomas, former Chief of the US Forest Service, speaking at the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference, said “There are very few total victories for those interested in wildlife and absolutely none that are final. We have to win for wildlife and appropriate natural resource management what we can, where we can, how we can and be proud, rejuvenated and encouraged by each success” (Thomas 1986). Thirty years later, creating these wins has become increasingly difficult. As the editors Henke and Krausman point out in their excellent book, *Becoming a Wildlife Professional*, perhaps now more than ever “the profession needs individuals with solid academic credentials who are able to contribute toward conservation and management of wildlife worldwide.” A total of 85 different wildlife professionals collaborated in the writing of this unique and much-needed addition to the wildlife professional's bookshelf. Like the most successful wildlife management projects, this book benefits from varied perspectives and contributions of many. At 12 chapters and 208 pages, *Becoming a Wildlife Professional* is a comprehensive, easy-to-read reference that, for much of the book, has the feel of a friendly but prescriptive counseling session with a valued mentor.

Practicing the art and science of wildlife conservation and management in the 21st century is more complex and challenging than at any other time in history. Wildlife biologists working in today's whitewater environment face the public's growing distrust of science and scientists and mounting public apathy for wild places and wild things. Despite significant progress made in our understanding of wildlife ecology and the development of novel tools and techniques, successfully balancing the needs of people and the needs of wildlife is more contentious—and more in the spotlight—than ever before. The tolerance and appreciation for wildlife can be further eroded if trained wildlife professionals fail to address an increasing demand for resolving human-wildlife conflicts. There is a growing pressure on wildlife biologists and their colleagues in the public health, agriculture, and veterinary medical communities to face the management of wildlife-vectored diseases head-on and focus on developing and implementing novel prevention and control strategies (Jessup and Gillin 2012). The time is ripe for wildlife biologists to double down and increase One Health collaborative efforts to improve our understanding of the basic ecology of diseases in wildlife populations and refining management strategies to protect human and animal health and reduce social and economic costs of living with zoonotic and other wildlife diseases. *Becoming a Wildlife Professional* attempts to address these and future challenges by clearly articulating a path forward for students and early-career professionals by raising awareness of the wide range of employment opportunities for wildlife biologists and providing detailed guidance on how

to successfully navigate the academic and work place environment facing the wildlife professional of today.

To effectively address these growing and complex issues requires aspiring wildlife biologists to be well-trained academically, but also willing to learn the essential trade craft from peers and mentors, while quickly adapting to the cultural and business norms of working in the profession. Fortunately, the first four chapters of the book take a stepwise approach to elucidating key considerations and critical ingredients for becoming a wildlife professional. Chapter 1 underscores the fundamentals and addresses the key question: Why choose a wildlife career? The answer is an unequivocal “because it may well be the most important thing anybody can do.” It reminds us that at its essence, wildlife management is about “animals, habitats, and human dimensions that dictate what is managed and how management will occur” and that the profession is made up of a diverse group of individuals with varying expertise acquired though undergraduate and graduate academic training as well as on the job experience. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on wildlife education and the university curriculum and discusses some key ideas and advice for students entering the wildlife profession. Chapter 4 concentrates on the skills for nonacademic wildlife and conservation careers. These chapters highlight the changing nature of the profession and how much more wildlife students need to learn to be prepared for working in an increasingly complex world of self-proclaimed experts and a “just Google it” environment. The writing and recommendations do not come across as preachy, but instead are a common-sense mix of reminders of things the reader might already know but take for granted, and some things aspiring wildlife professionals should think about more seriously as they move forward through undergraduate studies and into their first jobs in the profession.

For many current practitioners in the field of wildlife management, it becomes apparent quickly that the job involves creativity, patience, skilled bureaucratic boxing, applied scientific knowledge, and managing expectations. It requires resiliency and appetite for

risk-taking and the ability to hypercommunicate while constantly casting a wide net to secure strategic partnerships. The authors emphasize the need for certification through The Wildlife Society and highlight the importance of a balance between disciplinary and nondisciplinary skills and technical and non-technical skills learned during time at the university. Budding wildlife professionals should quickly learn to dance to the drum beat of “wildlife management is people management” and a reminder that wildlife professionals are always in the public eye, so must act and dress appropriately. Other sound advice: it is essential to “develop your ethics and the principles that guide us especially when no one is looking.” Work hard, take responsibility for mistakes, and get the job done well and on time (and have fun along the way).

The real meat and potatoes of this book comes in Chapter 5, where the authors provide a comprehensive overview of what becoming a wildlife professional is ultimately all about—where to find work that best fits your interests to become the professional you were meant to be. As the recently minted, Nobel Laureate Bob Dylan said in 1964, “there is nothing so stable as change” and one primary focus of the book is to “describe the multitude of employment opportunities” available to the up-and-coming wildlife professional or the more seasoned wildlife professional looking for a career change (Sheldon 2011). Nearly 100 positions are described in detail, including a basic job description, background needed for the position, education required, and a pay scale through a filter of 35 government, private, and nonprofit agencies involved with wildlife conservation and management. This chapter serves as a valuable, stand-alone reference that will lead to more informed career decision making.

A whole chapter (Chapter 6) is devoted to the importance and advantages of joining professional societies and how these groups can offer an engine for growth and an edge to help fast-track career advancement. This part even provides thoughtful and prescriptive advice on how to attend a professional meeting. Perhaps the best line in this chapter addresses the “why join” question with the

straightforward answer that it “makes you part of something much larger.” A community of likeminded individuals, committed to science-based management and a future of the natural resources you care about is important.” However, I was disappointed to find that there was no mention in this chapter (or in the book for that matter), of the Wildlife Disease Association and the significant role this organization has played in wildlife management and research and promoting student professional involvement in wildlife disease research and wildlife conservation.

The next three chapters (Chapters 7–9) focus on resumes, interviews, and acting professionally. After reading these chapters, students and job seekers will have clear direction on how to put their best foot forward in applying for a position and, if successful in getting a job, how best to keep it. Chapter 9 will help supervisors and mentors everywhere to better articulate what it means to act professionally in the form of seven traits and cornerstones of professionalism. These entail the following: study the job, know your audience, be prepared, follow through, maintain integrity, admit mistakes and learn from them, and keep the team foremost—all of which are part of the wise counsel outlined in this chapter.

Attending graduate school requires a commitment of time, resources, and talent. Although exciting and fun for most students, effectively and efficiently making the most of this opportunity of personal and professional discovery requires an understanding of the tools and strategies for success. Chapters 10 and 11 provide both a professorial and student perspective on how to do just that. I wish I had read these chapters before attending graduate school myself. These chapters underscore the need for a “strong and transparent relationship” between student and major professor and the crucially important agreed-upon end game that benefits both parties professionally. I wholeheartedly agree with the professor’s perspective of the key characteristics of the successful graduate student of “perseverance, creativity, motivation, resilience, and independent thinking” and the student’s perspective of the need to “balance course work, research, and writing” and taking the

time to “celebrate success.” Surprisingly, however, Chapter 10 is the first real mention of the concept and value of mentoring. The usefulness of seeking out and establishing these formal (and maybe better yet, informal) relationships cannot be understated in helping even the most independent of students and new professionals to find the path to success, avoid the inevitable quicksand, bounce back from temporary setbacks, spend time in the field honing a skill set by watching and then doing, and of course to celebrate milestones along the way.

The final chapter in the book illustrates how diversity, like a healthy ecosystem, will benefit the profession. Establishing a more inclusive workforce through a collective understanding of primary and secondary diversity will help unearth new perspectives that enable us to collaboratively address new and evolving modern-day conundrums. This chapter helps the reader to see how moving the needle in the right direction now and in the future to meet wildlife management goals will demand that the wildlife profession connect with a broader range of traditional and nontraditional stakeholders that “encompasses diverse backgrounds, values, and beliefs.”

Becoming a Wildlife Professional is a unique and valuable reference. It is a must read for those wildlife professionals that have been around a while and are often asked for sage advice by the up-and-coming wildlife biologist. Alternatively, it can serve as a soon-to-be, well-worn reference and “how to” manual for students and recently minted professionals. These are demanding times. This book helps shine a light on the many ways the profession can attract a new wave of ready-to-work career-minded biologists and to help them to succeed in school and the workplace. As editors Henke and Krausman point out, “it is never too late to plan your future and consider career options.” This book is a great addition to the library of wildlife professionals at any stage of their career to help build a robust pipeline of wildlife biologists ready to tackle the 21st century challenges of protecting, managing, and conserving wildlife for future generations.

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