

# Leadership in the Hurricane of Change

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The winds of change in our conservation arena have accelerated into a veritable hurricane as the economic well-being and associated political and funding priorities change at the state and federal levels of United States Government. The passage of H.R. 1 ([thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/thomas](http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/thomas)) along with its policy riders that would negatively impact the environmental protections passed by the U.S. House of Representatives in 2010 was a shock to our conservation community. The fiscal year 2011 budget that HR1 put forth to help address the increasingly large federal budget deficit required massive cuts in federally mandated and funded conservation programs. In addition to these proposed cuts, the conservation community has experienced significant declines in general fund allocations in most, if not all, states, and declining fishing and hunting license revenues. This combination of proposed budget cuts and rollbacks of environmental protection regulations, deemed by some politicians and industries as “job killing,” represents the greatest threat to the conservation of fish, wildlife, and water resources since the time of Spencer Baird and Theodore Roosevelt.

The serious consideration by our legislative stewards of such conservation-killing budget and policy initiatives is something that most fisheries and wildlife professionals considered unthinkable at one time. As such, we have noted that some in the profession react as many people do when a huge storm comes ashore—they hunker down, believing that it is a passing threat, not a permanent life-changing event. Others resign themselves to the inevitability of smaller budgets and less relevancy in the future, whereas others, like ourselves, refuse to sit down, shut up, and roll over in the face of these challenging times. In fact, we believe that this is no time to shrink into the fetal position, but it is time for new, bold leadership, akin to what we saw demonstrated by such great conservationists of the past century as Theodore Roosevelt and Aldo Leopold. We must use this moment to transform our federal and state agencies to prepare for renewed relevancy to these conservation challenges and economic realities. We need to speak out about the importance of conservation and outdoor recreation in the prosperity of our local, regional, and national economies and in our quality of life. The time to act is now. We must forge new partnerships if we are to meet the conservation challenges

of the future, including the lack of fresh water, loss of biodiversity, climate change, and the landscape impacts of development associated with human population growth on ecosystem goods and services.

## LEADING CHANGE

Dr. John Kotter of Harvard University, an expert on organizational transformation, outlines eight phases of change in his book *Leading Change* (Kotter, 1996) that we can use to empower our profession to evolve and meet present and future challenges.

1. Create a sense of urgency.
2. Develop a guiding coalition.
3. Develop a vision for change.
4. Communicate the vision.
5. Empower broad-based action.
6. Generate short-term wins.
7. Don't let up.
8. Make it stick in the organizational structure.

Today's conservation professionals are faced with a sense of urgency like none other before, caused principally by two major forces: significant reductions in budget and expanding conservation challenges at all levels of governance. The traditional state-by-state approach, primarily focusing on hunting and fishing programs, will not meet the challenge of climate change and landscape development trajectories nor the expectations of the public, which interacts with nature in different ways than previous generations. Hunting and fishing fees cannot possibly keep pace with the challenges of conservation in the future, especially when participation in these types of activities continues to decline. The prospect of general tax dollars or new fees filling the gap is bleak without broad public support. A key to this support is communicating the value of natural resources in a way that is relevant to consumptive and nonconsumptive users today. As conservation professionals, we must communicate how healthy environments—and conservation programs—allow for a higher quality of life and prosperity for the nation. New, bold leadership and meaningful engage-

ment with our policy makers and constituents based on science and business metrics is needed in our profession now more than ever.

## **HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE—THEODORE ROOSEVELT**

Authors Timothy Egan (*The Big Burn: Teddy Roosevelt and the Fire That Saved America*, 2009) and Douglas Brinkley (*The Wilderness Warrior: Theodore Roosevelt and the Crusade for America*, 2009) detailed the story of conservation at the turn of the 20th century and the crucial leadership role that Theodore Roosevelt played in laying the framework for natural resource conservation in America. Roosevelt partnered with other visionary and courageous leaders like Gifford Pinchot, George Bird Grinnell, John Muir, and John Burroughs to develop and communicate a vision for conservation. This vision ultimately included protection of public lands, fish, water, and wildlife and the development of a scientifically trained workforce to protect and manage the public trust assets for the future. Collectively, these men built a community of partners, such as the Boone and Crockett Club ([www.boone-crockett.org](http://www.boone-crockett.org)), to lead political change in times that were dominated by big business, hyper-rich tycoons, political corruption, and patronage. Roosevelt and his partners produced far greater change under more trying circumstances than we face today and they did it with boldness and courage. They did not shrink from the challenges of the day related to the sustainability of our lands and associated biota but rather boldly and unapologetically laid the framework for conservation of the public's assets based on scientific principles and ethical underpinnings that we are now faced with defending. Roosevelt spoke out from his "bully pulpit," delivering hundreds of whistle-stop speeches and using the media to carry his conservation vision to the public. Can we stand by and watch this conservation legacy be systematically dismantled in our time? Can we watch as the public trust resources we value so highly be undermined due to a lack of understanding about conservation's direct link to our economy, jobs, and our quality of life? No, we should not and will not!

## **THE EXTERNAL MESSAGE— THE ECONOMY AND QUALITY OF LIFE**

In today's political climate, communicating the important role played by conservation, tourism, and outdoor recreation in our economy and our quality of life is critical. Programs that create jobs, contribute to the economy at the local and national level, match funding from partners, and produce returns on investments will survive, and those that cannot will be lost. The good news is that there are excellent examples to cite from leading economic research studies (e.g., Southwick Associates 2011). The bad news is that the public and our legislative leaders, for the most part, do not understand the facts and will not, unless we do a much better job of reaching them through the media and by offering reliable statistics about the business of fisheries and wildlife ecosystems goods and services. Only

then, by effectively communicating the link between a good quality of life to the economic importance of natural resources for outdoor recreation, livelihoods, subsistence, and ecosystem services, will we save and enhance the conservation framework that Roosevelt built.

A broad coalition of natural resource conservation, historic preservation, and outdoor recreation interests has come together to start to tell this story. Examples of this include the following:

- Conservation, recreation, and preservation, connected with 1,000 other organizations with the same interest, recently sent a letter of concern regarding federal budget priorities (see Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership article at [www.trcp.org/media/press-release/massive-new-coalition-stands-up-for-federal-natural-resource-conservation-o](http://www.trcp.org/media/press-release/massive-new-coalition-stands-up-for-federal-natural-resource-conservation-o))
- According to Southwick Associates (2011), conservation, recreation, and preservation contribute roughly \$1 trillion per year to our national economy.
- This contribution accounts for support for an estimated 9.4 million jobs—far more jobs, for instance, than residential homebuilding in the United States (Southwick Associates 2011).
- Annually, hunters and fishers spend about \$76 billion dollars on the outdoor sports they love ([www.nssf.org/PDF/research/bright%20stars%20of%20the%20economy.pdf](http://www.nssf.org/PDF/research/bright%20stars%20of%20the%20economy.pdf)).
- The federal budget for conservation is roughly 1.2% of the total budget. It is down from double that percentage over the last 10 years.
- Hunters and anglers put roughly \$1 billion a year in licenses and excise taxes on equipment toward conservation and management of fish and wildlife. This comprises a huge match for federal dollars invested in fish and wildlife conservation. (For more information please visit [www.ncsl.org/issues-research/env-res/ron-regan-q-and-a.aspx](http://www.ncsl.org/issues-research/env-res/ron-regan-q-and-a.aspx).)

The facts above will not impact political decisions relating to conservation budgets unless they are effectively communicated to policy makers, together with a broad and diverse partnership of advocates. Together their partners must develop the local and regional facts that supplement the messages of America's Voice for Conservation, Recreation and Preservation (see Teddy Roosevelt Conservation Partnership article at [www.trcp.org/media/press-release/massive-new-coalition-stands-up-for-federal-natural-resource-conservation-o](http://www.trcp.org/media/press-release/massive-new-coalition-stands-up-for-federal-natural-resource-conservation-o)), and communicate how those facts are meaningful to society today. Teddy Roosevelt used his bully pulpit to communicate a vision for the future and now we must follow in his footsteps and achieve goals for tomorrow's conservation agenda.

## LEADERSHIP—THE AGENT OF TRANSFORMATION

As we fight to sustain resources for future generations, we need to focus on the leadership of our agencies and conservation organizations. There are four key jobs for every leader right now, whether you are an agency director, a leader of a small team, or an individual professional. Today, everyone must be a leader, title or not.

1. Reinforce the values of our profession and your organization. Whether talking about budget or work priorities, now is the time to relate each decision to the values of the organization and its mission. Values form the bedrock of our profession and should guide prioritization, staff training, and recruitment.
2. Prioritize efforts and shift resources to accomplish the most critical work. We cannot do the new work if we are completely consumed with the old work. Leadership is about deciding what is most important and what needs to be deemphasized, allowing the organization to shift to emerging priorities. Anticipate the information needed to support important decisions in the future relating to climate change and development of land and water resources. Management of hunting and fishing based solely on the assessment of population numbers is not as critical today as it was in the era of market hunting and highly exploitive commercial fishing. It is time to shift the work priorities of our organizations to ensure relevance to the issues of the future and to broaden the constituency that will fight for resource survival and effective management programs.
3. There has never been a more important time for internal and external communications than now. This means broadened and expanded internal communications with our employees. They are afraid and likely do not understand the gravity of the situation yet. They need to hear from leaders as to how to deal with these unprecedented times and the potential for budget and socially driven change. They need to know how our actions will correspond with our values and our view of the future. We must remember that stakeholders include the public—not just fishing and hunting license purchasers—and act accordingly. Expanded communications with constituent partners and with the public through the media are especially critical. Only those programs that are relevant to constituents who will support and fight for them are likely to survive the current crisis. We must broaden the constituency and our message if we are to create a movement and be relevant to a broader work plan. Fish, wildlife, and the sports person, along with the public's interests, are founded on healthy ecosystems—something everyone has a stake in. We have to reach beyond traditional constituencies if we are to build a coalition that is powerful enough to fight for the needed budget and the correct environmental policies.

4. We must develop new approaches to funding natural resource management and protection. Hunting and fishing fees are declining annually. As a result, most agencies are losing capacity, as our system is principally fee based. The funding structure must change or we believe that the entire system will likely collapse nationwide within 25 years; some state agencies are near this point today. Thus, if we are to be relevant in the future, we must broaden the conversation and the constituency in order to develop new funding mechanisms that provide for sustainable conservation.

Over the last 5 years, even during the recession, a number of bond issues have overwhelmingly passed elections to fund open spaces, parks, and clean water initiatives. Each of these has benefited fish, wildlife, and people. None of these initiatives, however, were sold or framed solely around our traditional utilitarian values. Instead, they were supported by broad, diverse coalitions of sporting, environmental, and outdoor recreational interests. The message these groups communicated reflected a broad vision of healthy communities, open spaces, and intact watersheds, all of which are critical for a higher quality of life and more prosperous economy. The best example of this is the round table discussions conducted by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources over the last 10 years. This led to the campaign to fund bond issues that have expanded fish and wildlife funding. Without the round table forum, there would never have been the broad-based public support required for the passage of this bond issue. There is an important message about constituency here. If we want to succeed in the future, we will need to fight for the budget required to do the important work. In this way, we will perpetuate the legacy propagated by our fearless conservation leaders of the past. To live on the shoulders of giants means that you must act like a giant when given the opportunity or the voice to make a difference. The time is now; if not you, then who?

## MOVING FORWARD

Without the urgency created by the current federal and state funding crisis, it might have been difficult to shift the priorities, expand the diversity of the workforce, and broaden the constituency, as we must now do. This might be the silver lining of the storm cloud.

In Roosevelt's time, the leaders were united by a sense of urgency and a new vision for conservation. They moved that vision into action and developed the organizations to institutionalize it "to make it stick," as mentioned by Kotter (1996). We need to determine whether our organizations are still relevant to the challenges of the future and whether we can afford to fund them. If so, what do we expect from them? This articulation and need for meaningful societal-driven metrics will likely result in the transformation of organizations and agency structures.

Most important, we must maintain our passion and commitment to conservation. It is easy to become depressed with the prospect of budget cuts, staff reductions, and the loss of programs that we have spent a lifetime building. The energy of the leader is especially critical in influencing the morale of the team. Without energy and optimism, the team will falter and the opportunity for new possibilities will be missed. Above all else, leaders need to maintain their energy, their creativity, and their commitment to frequent energetic communications, internally and externally.

The metaphor of the storm still applies. Storms create fear. Storms create change. Storms destroy infrastructure. And from the rubble, new structure is built—stronger than ever. This hurricane of change, though scary for many, is the beginning of a transformation to new relevance and effectiveness for fish and wildlife management and a higher quality of life for all citizens. Today is the day that we must seize the moment! Our future and future generations depend on it.

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## NEW AFS MEMBERS

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