

Exploring the Gender Gap in Leadership

A SURVEY OF THE WILDLIFE SOCIETY'S LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE ALUMNI

By Kerry L. Nicholson



Courtesy of Kerry L. Nicholson

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Last year, at The Wildlife Society's (TWS) annual conference in Milwaukee, I gave a presentation on the number of women with wildlife-related degrees or employed in wildlife jobs, including those in leadership positions. To gather data, I surveyed 13 high-level administrative positions within organizations critically intertwined with natural resources and wildlife and roughly 400 leadership spots within TWS including positions with Council, in sections and chapters, and on TWS's journals. The data showed an overwhelming dearth of women in wildlife leadership—less than 5 percent of 708 positions surveyed.

The lack of women in influential positions within the wildlife field is sobering, although there does seem to be a hint of change on the horizon. In 2009, 61 and 52 percent of undergraduates and graduate

students, respectively, receiving a degree in biological sciences were women (NSF 2013), though how those numbers flush out into employed women with wildlife biology degrees is not well documented. Still, the overall low representation of women in the profession reflects an underutilization of potential and perspectives and denies role models for female students in wildlife programs (Nicholson 2009). Given the retirement bubble facing the wildlife profession today, it's important that we address this "leak in the pipeline"—a concept that refers to the steady attrition of girls and women in fields related to science, technology, engineering, and math (Pell 1996). Unfortunately, only a few studies have explored the gender differences in capitalizing on opportunities for career advancement. As a result, I thought I would examine how the early career professionals of today are using their training to become the leaders of tomorrow. I began by looking at our own Society.

My Personal Story

I joined the Alaska student chapter of TWS in 1997 while I was an undergraduate in the wildlife ecology program at the University of Alaska, Fairbanks. I attended my first TWS annual conference in Reno, Nevada in 2001, thanks to encouragement and support as well as a plane ticket from my advisor, Eric Rexsted. The experience opened my eyes to the possibilities and opportunities that can be obtained from organizations like TWS, the Ecological Society of America, or the American Society of Mammalogists. These societies not only offer professionals the opportunity to attend training and workshops on current and timely issues, but they also serve as a venue to express one's opinion, provide valuable feedback, and create a network of individuals that are critical for continued professional development.

In 2009, I applied to TWS's Leadership Institute (LI)—a program that provides members in the early stages of their careers with some basic leadership training to help them advance in the workplace. As part of the program, participants immerse



Courtesy of Mindy Rice

Mindy Rice, Leadership Institute alum and president of The Wildlife Society's (TWS) Colorado State Chapter, cradles a newborn black bear as part of a study of urban black bears in Durango, Colorado. Rice credits the Leadership Institute for introducing her to senior members of TWS, which subsequently led her to engage in the Society's local and state chapters.



themselves in a variety of projects—both at the individual and group level—such as interpreting leadership materials, exploring leadership issues, and participating in intensive mentoring activities and workshops at the TWS annual conference.

As a young scientist looking at career options and ways to advance my career, I thought participation in the LI would be an excellent opportunity to gain insight into the behind-the-scenes operations of TWS. In addition, I was curious about other people's reasons for applying and what they gained from participating. I saw the LI program as providing potential career advantages and wondered if others saw the same benefits. In looking back at the most tangible influences on my personal advancement, the LI provided some facial recognition and networking opportunities I could not have managed easily on my own.

Leadership Institute Survey

In January 2014, I conducted a short survey of my fellow alumni about how they have leveraged the LI experience in their lives. From its launch in 2006 until 2013, the LI has had 204 applicants. Notably, 137 of those were women and 67 were men. Of the applicants, 90 were accepted: 73 percent women (66) and 27 percent (24) men. I surveyed those 90 people, of which 55 (or 61 percent) responded: 41 women and 14 men. At the time of the survey, 33 percent of the respondents were associated with universities (as a student, faculty, or researcher) and 55 percent worked for government groups (13 in state, 11 in federal, and one tribal).

I asked for their top three reasons for applying to the LI. The most popular reason for both men (71 percent) and women (59 percent) was to obtain or strengthen their leadership skills. The second and third most popular reasons differed slightly. Fifty-seven percent of the men said it would benefit their career goals, whereas 40 percent of women wanted to become more involved in TWS. This is more in concordance with the gender socialization model that says women place greater importance on social aspects and working conditions with a greater emphasis on relationships than on competition for rewards; whereas, men tend to express greater concern for income, job security, and advancement (Rowe and Snizek 1995, Hagstrom



Credit: Jesse DeVoe/Montana State University

and Kjellberg 2007). In my survey, men (43 percent) wanted to improve their professional network and women (44 percent) thought it would benefit their career goals.

Salary appeared to play only a small part in motivations. In fact, the only participant to mention the need for a training segment on salary negotiations happened to be male; however, many of the participants of both genders agreed it was a necessity after the initial suggestion was made. Still, studies show that women lack confidence in their professional abilities, particularly when it comes to salary negotiations—men have confidence in their skills while women undervalue theirs (Babcock and Laschever 2009). So, by the time they are firmly established in their careers, roughly 40 to 49 years, a man's yearly salary in the biological sciences field is \$80,000 compared to a woman's salary of \$65,000 (NSF 2013).

More interesting is what was *not* selected as an option. None of the men said they participated in the LI to build self-confidence, felt the need to prove their leadership abilities, or improve their current situation, whereas 20 percent of the women selected these options.

Benefits of the Leadership Institute

I asked the participants to pick five direct consequences of participating in the LI program. Men and women agreed on all five of their top reasons:

- Increased leadership skills
- Became more involved with TWS national level

Julie Cunningham, president-elect of The Wildlife Society's Northwest Section and wildlife biologist with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks, addresses agency personnel, sportsmen, landowners, university students, and other volunteers about to partake in a bighorn sheep capture. A recent survey of Leadership Institute participants revealed that more than 70 percent of women felt that the experience provided them with confidence in their leadership abilities while 78 percent of men were motivated to move to a higher position in their career.



- Improved professional network
- Became more involved with TWS state level
- Learned strategies and operation roles within TWS

Again, what is interesting is what was *not* considered as a consequence between men and women. Men did not think there was any improvement to their personal life, to their relationship skills, or an increase in being perceived as a leader, whereas women did. Further, respondents cited a number of other benefits of attending the LI.

Increased Interest in Leadership. Both men and women agreed that after participation in the LI, their interest in leadership increased, and they felt more connected to TWS and their local state chapter. In addition, 39 percent of the women and 21 percent of the men who went through the LI increased their leadership roles within TWS after participation. The following is a sampling of comments from LI alumni.

- **Julie Cunningham.** After participating in the LI in 2008, Cunningham became president of TWS's Montana State Chapter and recently became president-elect of the Northwest Section. The "Leadership Institute helped me understand TWS on a deeper level and strengthened my loyalty to our organiza-



Credit: Stu Tuttle

Rachel Williams, a recent graduate of the Leadership Institute, and then partner biologist with the Arizona Game and Fish and the Natural Resources Conservation Science, conducts an ecological assessment of the health of a stream in Arizona's Indian Creek. For Williams, the Leadership Institute provided her with the confidence needed to run for chair-elect for The Wildlife Society's Wildlife and Habitat Restoration Working Group.

tion," Cunningham says. "TWS invested in me, and I will continue to work to return that investment. The leadership training, plus the exposure to Council's activities, helped give me the background to confidently serve the Society in leadership roles."

- **Mindy Rice.** Rice completed her LI training in 2009, became president of the Colorado State Chapter in 2012, and intends to run as the Central Mountain and Plains section representative. "The Leadership Institute gave me the opportunity to meet and learn from more senior members of TWS, which I wouldn't have been able to do on my own as a new professional," she says. "This led me towards getting more heavily involved in my state and regional chapters, and I consider the relationships I made while part of the Leadership Institute a continuous support in my career."

- **Kent Fricke.** A 2010 LI alum, Fricke became chair-elect for the Student Development Working Group in 2011, served as the student representative to Council in 2013, and was elected to be a member-at-large in the Nebraska Chapter in 2012. "The LI helped me to improve my relationships with leaders and mentors in my college department, increased my research collaboration with other members of TWS, and enhanced my ability to see myself in a leadership role in my career," he says.

Still, it appeared that more men (78 percent) than women (65 percent) were motivated to move to a higher position, where they wanted to take on more responsibility. Liisa Schmoole (LI 2012) said that she wasn't motivated at the time to move to a higher position for several reasons such as feeling the need to establish herself solidly in her current job as an endangered species biologist. Additionally, Liisa did not want to rush moving up the ladder because the higher you advance, the more your job becomes a desk job and less connected to field work.

Confidence. More women (70 percent) strongly felt that they gained confidence in their leadership abilities whereas only 50 percent of the men agreed. Rachel Williams (LI 2013) said she had "gained enough confidence" to run for chair-elect for the Wildlife and Habitat Restoration Working Group.

Career Advancement. More of the men (57 percent) felt that after participating they achieved an increase in job responsibilities and their careers

advanced, whereas the women (51 percent) saw little to no increase in responsibilities and no direct advancement in their career. In a follow-up, several noted that it could be due to timing—they were not in the right position at the right time—or advancement within their workplace is based on a set schedule, so no direct correlation could be observed.

Leadership Styles

As a part of the survey, the participants took a test to determine their classic “leadership styles”—authoritarian, participative or democratic, delegative, and situational or adaptable. The women graduates of LI were evenly split on leadership style between delegative or democratic leaders, whereas the men tended to be predominantly democratic leaders. This is a slightly different result than expected of men, because many studies described men as tending to manifest task-oriented and autocratic styles, while women tend to be more democratic (Eagly et al. 2003). Research shows that the middle ground between democratic and autocratic tends to be most effective. Often women have better practice at finding that middle ground because they have faced a double standard, where women experience backlash if they are considered too authoritative or masculine in their approach or ineffective if they are too feminine (Eagly et al. 2003, Eagly 2013).

Kelly Douglas (LI 2008) has a democratic leadership style in which she strives to be supportive and encouraging of all group members. Her challenge, though, is often being too hard on herself. She consistently ranks her performance lower than those she works with because of her high standards. “Basically, I have a really high standard for myself, which can affect my confidence level when leading a group. But I always take on leadership roles in my career and keep asking others to evaluate my leadership style/skills, so I can continue to improve.”

Stepping Up

In her recent book, *Lean In*, Sheryl Sandberg rephrased what my mother frequently told me while growing up, which was to “stop sitting on the sidelines and step up to the plate,” though Sandberg phrased it as “sit at the table.” Sandberg, formerly of Google and now COO of Facebook, says that you should not expect to get the corner office by sitting on the sidelines.

In looking at anyone who has succeeded into leadership positions, I would imagine none were



Credit: NEBRASKAland Magazine/ Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Kent Fricke releases a marked river otter at its capture site in a restored wetland along the Platte River in central Nebraska. Currently a Ph.D. student at the University of Nebraska, Fricke found that Leadership Institute training helped improve his relationships with mentors in his college department.

waiting around to be told what to do. Those who participated in the LI have taken that initial step, bolstered their self-confidence, and made those personal connections of which some seem to have far reaching consequences. For some women from the LI, maybe it has helped reduce the leak in the pipeline by strengthening the ties to the wildlife field through participation in the Society at a critical junction or provided that self-affirmation needed to pursue increased job responsibilities or experience that sense of accomplishment.

Though women differ from men in how they perceive and use the benefits from leadership training, they are not likely to differ in their ability to perform leadership roles. Rather, women bring a different perspective to the decision-making process, which should be developed early to get the true potential and longer-lasting effect of female leadership talent. The next step, then, is to move forward despite potential or existing barriers or professional challenges. I believe bravery can be refined to create brilliance; we just need patient mentors and supportive peers. So, be brave, step up, or sit at the table—I will join you. ■

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