

## SHOULD FISH AND GAME COMMISSIONERS BE POLITICALLY ACTIVE?

Samuel J. Harbo, Jr.

Alaska Board of Game

The question is easily answered as to whether or not Commissioners should be politically active. They must be politically active. The salient question really is, what kinds of political activities should Commissioners undertake? That is, how can Commissioners be most effective politically in aiding our fish and wildlife resources?

I define political activity to be any activity that is undertaken primarily to influence the political process. Influencing the end result of the process - the establishment of budgets, law and regulations - is, of course, the ultimate objective.

My thinking as to the best approach to take has been influenced by a discussion I had nearly two decades ago with a major professor of mine at one of the universities I attended. That major professor was politically active with a state legislature, as well as with the U.S. Congress. Based on his political interactions with legislators, he observed that the political process's only concrete accomplishments for fish and wildlife resources were the laws and regulations enacted. I disagreed, contending that state and federal administrations exercised a leadership role that influenced the public's perception of, and values regarding, fish and wildlife. My major professor strongly contested my assertion, emphasizing that legislators are followers, not leaders, insofar as fish and wildlife matters are concerned; rather than leading by word and deed legislators tend to do exactly what they perceive the public wants.

Although there are some notable exceptions, I believe, in general, my major professor was correct. I now agree that most legislators are followers, not leaders in matters involving fish and wildlife legislation. That aspect, which I will return to shortly, influences what I think Commissioners should emphasize in their political activism.

Another aspect of importance when considering political activism has to do with the kinds of conflicts arising in the nation regarding fish and wildlife resources. Most of the popular conflicts - popular in the sense that those conflicts have the most effort directed at them and the most people actively involved with them - are resource use allocation problems. Of late, they center on consumptive use versus non-consumptive use. Such issues tend to be popular because basically they are emotional issues. They are emotional because they involve clashes between individuals due to their differing value systems.

I believe there are several recent outstanding examples of emotion-based conflicts arising from resource use issues. Several have been very energy consumptive conflicts - energy consumptive in terms of the man hours and dollars spent in their resolution. Some have been resolved in law courts; some, of course, have been resolved in legislative halls somewhere. For emotional issues, I'm not sure which is the most dangerous end point -- the courts or the legislative halls!

Examples of emotion-based conflicts that come to mind are the wolf reduction controversies that Alaska experienced within the last seven years, the ongoing controversial harvesting of harp seal pups in the St. Lawrence system and the recent white-tailed deer hunt in the Everglades of Florida.

The really unfortunate aspects of many of the emotionally charged conflicts is that they are environmentally trivial! An excellent example is one particular research program in Alaska that involved reducing the wolf population in one study area by thirteen percent; shooting from aircraft was the method of reduction. A terrific controversy ensued, yet the proposed action was negligible in terms of its environmental importance or of its longterm impact on wildlife resources. Nonetheless, the controversy required the Alaska Department of Fish and Game to devote a considerable amount of time and money to counter the expensive efforts waged by several environmental groups and individuals. We cannot afford the luxury of wasting our limited resources for environmental concerns on those kinds of trivial issues. I believe the Commissioners have a role to play in that particular arena.

The role that Commissioners should play is influenced by who is a Commissioner. Hence it is useful to consider the composition of the group of individuals called Commissioners. By and large, it is a group of lay people from nearly every walk of life. They become knowledgeable in fish and game matters through their constant interaction with fish and wildlife resource problems and with fish and wildlife professionals. In addition, Commissioners have considerable authority with respect to fish and wildlife matters. That authority, coupled with the knowledge, gives stature to Commissioners, making their pronouncements attention-getting ones. Because most Commissioners are not professional biologists or managers, in their vocational and private lives they interact with different organizations and individuals than practicing professionals do. In effect we have a potential group of contacts that is unavailable to the practicing professionals. We need to utilize effectively this potential in the political sphere. How should we do that?

The political activity that first comes to mind is direct contact with legislators and administrations on both the state and federal level. Commissioners should consider that important activity a routine one; it should be an ongoing activity for them. Although that kind of political activism is important, it probably isn't the most important nor the most difficult one that Commissioners should undertake.

I believe a more important and more difficult task involves effectively utilizing those unique contacts of Commissioners to resolve resource issues before they become expensive conflicts. We cannot continue to remain in a reactive mode regarding conflicts, especially when so many are emotional ones of trivial environmental importance. Most of the individuals and organizations involved in those conflicts are sincere; they truly are concerned for the welfare of fish and wildlife resources. Unfortunately, many are so ill-informed regarding wildlife ecology and management that they cannot differentiate between the substantial issues and the trivial ones. Hence they concentrate on the emotionally appealing issues that may have little importance so far as the future welfare of our wildlife resources are concerned.

Because our legislators tend to be followers of public opinion, rather than leaders, they also get caught in the same trap. The result is that efforts and energies that wildlife managers should direct elsewhere are spent in countering unneeded and undesirable legislation.

Commissioners should utilize the unique contacts they have in an attempt to focus public attention on the important and constructive resource issues. Unfortunately, many of the substantive issues, most of which are habitat related, are not exciting or emotionally stimulating. Hence active stimulation is needed to direct attention to these issues. Commissioners as a group can help by using the unique contacts they have to further agency information and education programs. It is not a glamorous task, but it is an important one that needs to be undertaken.

The task facing us is formidable. That was vividly illustrated by a recent controversy, the white-tailed deer issue in the Everglades. I first heard about the controversy - and that is how it was characterized - over Cable News Network (CNN). The issues received prime time, nationwide coverage several times. The central theme of the announcements was that some environmental and conservation groups and individuals were attempting to stop, as the CNN announcer said, "senseless killing" of deer in the Everglades. That editorial comment undoubtedly convinced many people that the Florida Freshwater Fish and Game Commission was doing the wrong thing. Prime time nationwide coverage several times! There isn't a single information and education effort in any state or federal agency that can command that kind of media coverage.

Those of us from Alaska can recall similar situations during the height of the wolf control controversy. The prime time television coverage on a number of networks included editorial comments that tended to mislead the viewer and that tended to focus the issue on aspects that really weren't germane but that make the issues emotional and very appealing. I guess that is a sound business practice when you have a news program that is competing with other networks. The point is, however, we need to counter such influences.

I believe Commissioners should use their influence with the individuals and groups with which they come in contact to inform and educate them regarding the substantial issues in resource management. Those of us having contact with sportsmens' groups, animal welfare groups, and conservation and environmental organizations hopefully can influence the leaders of those groups, so that their overall, nationwide wildlife conservation effort is better directed. Although the task is formidable we must at least try.

Commissioners must be politically active. Anyone who accepts an appointment as Commissioner should consider political activism as part of the job.

# **WESTERN PROCEEDINGS**

**62nd Annual Conference  
of the  
Western Association of  
Fish and Wildlife Agencies**



**Las Vegas, Nevada  
July 19-22, 1982**