Professionalism, Advocacy, and Credibility: A Futile Cycle?

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It is axiomatic that knowledge is power, especially in politics. Wildlife professionals are sources of political power that results from superior scientific knowledge concerning wildlife policy issues. The wildlife management environment has become increasingly politicized and polarized as interest groups compete for policy outcomes that support their particular wildlife values. As a result, wildlife professionals are tempted and pressured to choose sides and advocate outcomes that favor one set of values over competing values. The answer lies in foregoing issue advocacy in favor of process advocacy. Properly structured and implemented, civic science as a form of process advocacy has the potential to capitalize professional reformation, transform public agencies, and revitalize democracy in action.

Keywords Professionalism, advocacy, credibility, public involvement, civic science, trapping

Professional Advocacy—To Advocate on Not to Advocate

Should natural resource professionals advocate specific policies and policy outcomes? These questions were the subject of a recent membership forum for the Society of Conservation Biologists (Barry & Oelschlaeger, 1996; Lovejoy, 1989; McCoy, 1996; Meine & Meffe, 1996). The discussion is an outgrowth of earlier concerns among political scientists and philosophers that both scientists and technical experts exert an increasingly powerful role within policymaking processes. Some see that role as a threat to democratic institutions and processes because it discourages or impedes active civic participation (Benveniste, 1972; Brint, 1994; Fischer, 1990; Yankelovich, 1991).

Among the arguments proposed in support of professional advocacy are: (1) values are inseparable from science and scientists have values, therefore scientists who believe their work is worthy should advocate for its application to real-world problems (Barry & Oelschlaeger, 1996; Meine & Meffe, 1996); (2) advocacy can serve the interests of scientific objectivity because advocacy can expose value...
judgments that are inconsistent with available knowledge (Shrader-Frechette, 1996); (3) advocacy can serve the “common good” by feeding democratic institutions with a free flow of scientific information and criticisms (Shrader-Frechette, 1996); (4) most research results are not available in a single coherent body of scientific knowledge, thus it is the duty of scientists not only to synthesize what we know but to assure that knowledge is used wisely (Baskerville, 1997).

Arguments opposing professional advocacy include: (1) advocacy can bias the questions that scientists are inclined to address either by attracting them to popular issues or by discouraging them from probing politically sensitive issues (Weins, 1997); (2) advocacy can influence the interpretation of scientific results either consciously, where a scientist selectively presents only those data supportive of advocated outcomes, or unconsciously by influencing scientist advocates to minimize the uncertainties of scientific evidence supporting advocated positions and accentuate weaknesses in contrary evidence (Weins, 1997); (3) advocacy can dissolve professional credibility among interest groups and the lay public; as a consequence, it can erode public trust in natural resource management agencies, which then corrodes democratic processes. Elaboration on the third point is the central theme of this article. I argue that society needs professional scientists to tell them what is true more than what is right, because seldom in history have we needed truth more, yet trusted sages less (Gore, 1992).

**Advocacy and Professional Credibility**

Simply defined, advocacy means to write or speak in support of something (Gurlanik, 1984). Although opinions about professional advocacy abound, few studies have looked at the consequences of advocacy to professionalism. One such study was Hoffman’s (1989) investigation of the relationship between professional knowledge and political advocacy among activist doctors. Her study reaffirmed the observation that:

“... knowledge and expertise are not the neutral scientific elements emphasized by traditional theory but political resources in the battle for power and status...” (Hoffman, 1989, p. 3).

Professional power, Hoffman says, results from special knowledge and expertise, control of the client relationship, and autonomy. The key to all three sources of power lies in professional credibility. So long as credibility remains high, potential power is high.

Yet, a paradox emerges when professionals try to use that power to advocate specific policy outcomes. When professionals decide to use the power of their expert knowledge to control policy outcomes, the public image of professionalism subtly metamorphoses. It transforms the professional’s role from reliable expert into competing interest, and credibility erodes. The erosion of credibility
reduces political power and a paradoxical futile cycle ensues. The paradox lies in the fact that the political power of professionals can be retained only if it is not exercised. This paradox led Hoffman (1989) to conclude, “... it is difficult to be both professional and political at the same time and in the same place. Combining them may be possible under certain circumstances, but will not be stable” (p. 204).

**Advocacy and Public Service**

A majority of wildlife professionals are public employees and thus are bound to public service and working for the public interest. The most recent statistics published by The Wildlife Society indicated 80% of wildlife graduates who found employment as wildlife professionals were employed in the public sector, and 70% were employed by government agencies (Hodgdon, 1986).

The ties binding professionalism, public service, and public interest are professional credibility and public trust. Each bond is strained when professionals advocate specific public policy outcomes. No matter how noble the cause, advocacy forces the professional to choose between opposing public values. Opposing interests counter with opposing expertise. In the exchange, not only does the credibility of public agent suffer, public purpose is obscured and public confidence wanes. Waning public confidence dissolves public trust. This decay is readily apparent in Gallup polls that have tracked public trust in government. Over the past four decades, public trust has declined nearly 50% to the point where fewer than 1 in 5 Americans say they trust government to do what is right “most of the time” (Gallup Poll Monthly, 1996). Advocacy sets in motion yet another futile cycle by eroding professional credibility, which diminishes public confidence and dissolves public trust. Because both public confidence and public trust are essential to professional credibility, the cycle is futile.

**Advocacy and Democracy**

Postmodern philosophers have accused scientists and technical experts for contributing to the relentless decay of democratic political institutions (Fischer, 1990; Habermas, 1971; Yankelovich, 1991). American democracy is founded on three fundamental ideals: truth, justice, and equity. By extension, public servants are expected to be (1) truthful in the sense that they bring all relevant information to bear objectively on public issues; (2) just in the sense that rules of public conduct are administered fairly but compassionately; and (3) equitable in the sense that public administrators maintain a management environment where ideas and ideals compete on a level playing field.

Advocacy by public officials compromises all three ideals. First, it is very difficult for an advocate to analyze evidence objectively, especially evidence that does not support her/his position or beliefs. No matter how fair one tries to be,
cognitive biases pull the advocate to overstate supporting evidence and understate opposing evidence (Yaffee, 1994). Therefore, professional credibility is compromised.

Second, public officials work for agencies that are biased intentionally toward particular constituent groups (Gill, 1996; Twilight & Lyden, 1989; Wellman, 1987). Land management agencies are biased toward commodity interests. Wildlife management agencies are biased toward consumptive wildlife recreation (Kennedy, 1985; Phillips, Boyle, & Clark, 1998). Over time, the relationships between the regulator and the regulated form what political scientists call “iron triangle” relationships which:

. . . tend to develop coincident values and perceptions to the point where neither needs to manipulate the other overtly. The confident relationships that develop uniquely favor the interest groups involved . . . Once molded, the triangle sets with the rigidity of iron (Thomas, 1982, p. 25).

When public officials advocate, it is likely they will advocate for professional values that are remarkably consonant with constituent values and dissonant with public values (Wagner, 1989; Yaffee, 1994, 1995). Both professional credibility and professional autonomy dissolve because they become politicized.

Once the autonomy of public officials is politicized, a veritable cascade of unwholesome events can follow. The equity void created by biased public experts is filled with “interest group” experts. Competition between public and interest group experts polarizes the management environment, which in turn paralyzes political processes that lead to effective public judgment. Paradoxically, instead of stimulating desired social change, advocacy may work to perpetuate the status quo.

If advocacy thwarts effective wildlife conservation, how can wildlife professionals capitalize on the advantages of advocacy and yet not become advocates? I believe the answer lies in foregoing issue advocacy in favor of process advocacy.

**Process Advocacy**

Process advocacy endorses the use of democratic processes selected and developed by the participants of policy debates. The role of professionals in process advocacy is twofold: (1) to bring all relevant scientific information and analyses to the debating table and (2) to work with participants to create acceptable alternatives when the policy debates deadlock.

As we address the debate over professional advocacy, I believe three fundamental realizations will emerge: (1) a need to reform professionalism; (2) a need to transform public agencies; and (3) a need to reaffirm democracy in agency actions.
Reforming Professionalism

Professional participation in policy-making has followed at least three contrasting pathways: synopticism, pluralism, and civic republicanism. Synopticism, the oldest of the pathways, is fundamentally positivistic and proposes “value-neutral” science as the basis for policy analysis (Jennings, 1987). According to synoptics, government experts are best qualified to act in the public’s interests because the public is too naive to understand complex technical issues typical of contemporary government policies.

Within the pluralist school, professional experts are expected to advocate for issues and policies they believe serve the public interest. Many of the papers cited earlier supporting professional advocacy in conservation biology and wildlife management reflect the pluralist philosophy (see also Franklin, 1995). Pluralists are unabashedly ideological and political, advocacy is their hallmark, and the consequences of advocacy, as mentioned previously, are diminished professional credibility, aggravated political polarization, and disdain for government and its agents.

Since the 1970s, a third pathway, civic republicanism, has emerged. “Good” public policies, according to the civic republican school, are anchored firmly in both facts and values. Civic republicans expect professional experts to inform public debate, participate with citizens to shape policy alternatives, evaluate policy outcomes against expected benefits, and help the people decide for themselves the wisest course of political action. Legitimacy, argues Benveniste (1987), can be restored only when professionals forego “partisan advocacy” for public participation, the hallmark of civic republicanism.

Transforming Public Agencies

Bureaucracy, professionalism, iron triangle relationships, and politics all impede this congruence between agency actions and public interest. Agencies are left with conflicting and confusing values of which interests are paramount and which publics to serve. In addition, imperfect communication between public and agent often requires agents to exercise discretion in the public’s interests. Discretion in service of confusion and conflict serve only to further degrade public confidence and trust. Whenever principals distrust agents or agents abuse their discretion, the relationship malfunctions.

Malfunctioning agencies gave rise to stakeholder negotiations as an alternative. The term:

stakeholder has emerged to represent any citizen potentially affected by or having a vested interest (a stake) in an issue, program, action, or decision leading to an action, (Decker, Krueger, Baer, Knuth & Richmond, 1996, p. 70).
In practice, stakeholder processes mainly involve interest groups because inclusion of unaffiliated citizens is difficult and costly. In contrast to agent–principal relationships, stakeholder processes: (1) open the decision processes to a much broader array of interests, (2) provide a forum to educate the public more completely on important issues, (3) promote collaborative problem-solving, and (4) enrich communication between agency professionals and their publics.

Not infrequently, however, stakeholder negotiations also dysfunction when decision-making power is ambiguous. It is often unclear whether stakeholders, agencies, or politicians retain ultimate decision-making authority. According to Arnstein (1969, p. 216) “citizen participation is a categorical term for citizen power.” If stakeholders expect significant decision-making power and agencies fail to deliver, stakeholder processes can actually enhance conflict rather than resolve it.

### TABLE 1 Contrasting Characteristics of Agency, Stakeholder Negotiations, and Stewardship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Stakeholder negotiations</th>
<th>Stewardship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Decision power</td>
<td>Government agents retain decision power</td>
<td>Power relationships are ambiguous—commonly</td>
<td>Power is retained by the people or citizenry</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>stakeholders are invited to advise agency decision makers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Source of authority</td>
<td>Authority of professional expertise</td>
<td>Stakeholders and professionals presumably share knowledge and experiential authority; decision authority is retained by agencies</td>
<td>Professional expertise combines with public values to provide a “civic” authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public participation</td>
<td>Public hearings are common where affiliated and unaffiliated publics are informed on issues and invited to testify</td>
<td>Involvement of unaffiliated public is passive. Aggregation of stakeholder interests are assumed to represent the public interests</td>
<td>Public participation is actively recruited as part of the process.</td>
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Agency managers present an additional challenge to stakeholder negotiations. Although public managers are presumed to be neutral in the negotiations, often they attempt to influence the negotiations to support agency positions. Even when trying to be neutral, public managers influence the dynamics and outcomes of stakeholder negotiations in at least three important aspects. First, by deciding a priori which groups have legitimate stakes in the deliberations, managers influence public perceptions of what is at stake, which issues are legitimate, and who has standing in the process. Second, by selecting groups to participate, managers alter perceptions of relative influence, standing, and political authority of stakeholders. Third, by influencing stakeholder participation and selection of issues, managers influence public perceptions of the importance and legitimacy of some issues over others for public consideration (Reich, 1985).

Revitalizing Democracy in Agency Actions through Civic Science

Current scientific practice sees a conflict between science and values because values are neither objective nor rational (Jennings, 1987). Lee (1993) proposes a new kind of science, civic science, to rescue both science and values from and for one another. Properly structured and implemented, civic science has potential to catalyze professional reformation, transform public agencies, and revitalize democracy in action.

Specifically, civic science proposes to combine the empirical advantages of adaptive resource management with the normative advantages of participatory democracy to promote social learning. Civic science as a means of social learning depends on linking at least five distinct elements: (1) public confirmation to assure that agencies address natural policy issues of widespread public interest and concern; (2) public deliberation to arrive at common goals and accumulate public knowledge through shared values and empirical evidence; (3) public collaboration to develop publicly acceptable alternative courses of action; (4) public affirmation to reach consensus on a preferred course of action and thereby nurture social accountability; (5) public verification to evaluate the success of selected policies and thereby foster social learning (Figure 1).

Most published accounts of public involvement processes fall short of the lofty mark set for civic science. Few overtly attempt to include ordinary citizens in the process (notable exceptions include Fishkin, 1995; Guynn & Landry, 1997; Kathlene & Martin, 1991; Kilpatrick & Walter, 1997). Fewer empower participants to affirm decisions, and virtually none explicitly structure public affirmation into public involvement processes.

To Trap or Not to Trap—A Case History

To illustrate how a civic science process might be structured, consider what happened to trapping in Colorado and what might have happened if the policy pro-
cess had been structured differently. Beginning in 1995, the Colorado Division of Wildlife (CDOW) designed and launched a public involvement process to review and revise furbearer management policy, practices, and regulations.

Stakeholders in the furbearer management process were self-selected. The process was widely publicized and invitations were extended for recipients to decide if they had a stake in the outcomes. Primarily representatives of organizations, interest groups, and agencies participated regularly. Although open invitations were published in newspapers, few unaffiliated citizens attended and fewer participated routinely.

Realizing that controversy permeated trapping, CDOW engaged conflict mediation experts to facilitate and mediate the public deliberations. The goals and objectives of the process were explicit and straightforward. CDOW asked participants to revise furbearer management policies, regulations and practices. Participants were told if they could agree on common proposals, they could expect them to be implemented by CWC and CDOW.

The general public was seated at the table indirectly via a public survey about trapping issues and voting intentions (Manfredo, Fulton, & Pierce, 1997). Data, analyses, and scientific knowledge of the various issues was supplied by three furbearer management specialists (two who were not CDOW employees) and two human dimension specialists. These specialists were expressly enjoined to educate and facilitate, but not advocate.
Biweekly meetings were held between November, 1995 and May, 1996, at the end of which stakeholders deadlocked over four competing options. Faced with impasse, CWC instructed CDOW’s representatives to develop an option that “represented a fair and equitable balance among the competing interests.” CDOW terminated the public involvement process and developed proposals to reform trapping policies, regulations, and practices that CWS enacted with minor alterations. In response, the pro-trapping faction successfully appealed to the legislature, which overturned many of the newly enacted furbearer management policies and regulations, particularly those that mandated padded jaw traps, shorter trap check intervals, and shorter seasons on furbearers such as coyotes and foxes that cause considerable agricultural damage. Likewise, the antitrapping faction placed a ballot initiative before the voters to ban the use of traps, snares, and poisons with few exceptions. The initiative was narrowly approved by the voters in November, 1996.

Four process modifications might have resulted in broader acceptance of outcomes from the public participation effort. First, the intentional inclusion of “average citizens” could have decreased polarization, increased civility, stimulated debate, nourished creativity, and amplified legitimacy. Citizens could have been chosen by random draw in much the same way that Fishkin (1995) and Kathlene and Martin (1991) selected citizen participants, making deliberations genuinely public.

Second, when the process deadlocked over competing options, the citizen contingent could have been called on to function as a “values jury” (Brown, Peterson, & Tonn, 1995; Poisner, 1996) to decide which of the competing options was most consonant with the overall public good. In values juries, each juror is: “instructed to act as agents of society, including all its disparate individuals and groups,” (Brown et al., 1995, p. 252); and either affirm with binding authority or: “create a rebuttable presumption that an agency must overcome to pursue a project notwithstanding disapproval from the jury,” (Poisner, 1996, p. 93). Nor should we have constrained the values to policy options developed in the process. Jurors should also have the authority to collaboratively fine-tune one of the competing options or develop an option of their own manufacture based on information from the deliberative stage of the process.

Third, knowing in the beginning that a ballot initiative was likely, the process could have been structured to produce an alternative ballot initiative. Then, jurors could ask the legislature to refer the initiative to a vote of the people via referendum; or fearing legislative mischief, jurors could refer the initiative directly to the citizenry via initiative for direct public affirmation.

Last, public confirmation could have been structured into the process by including provisions in the initiative for periodic public evaluation and revision. Had these modifications been included, they would have provided for all of the elements of civic science. Moreover, the resultant policy would have been more stable and enduring. Additionally, such a process would foster social learning, which is essential to invigorate democracy (Yankelovich, 1991).
Conclusions

Implementing civic science will require opportunity, imagination, and will. Also, it will require professionals to forgo control in favor of influence and agencies to forgo power in favor of partnership. Therein lies another professional paradox. In foregoing the power to control, professionals enhance their power to influence, which in turn enhances their effective power.

Lee (1993) suggested the marriage of truth through adaptive science and justice through responsive politics may be the best, perhaps only, way to avoid global ecological catastrophe. In the bargain, it also may revitalize democracy, rejuvenate public service, and rehabilitate professional practice. In my view, such a process is worth advocating.

References


