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Expectations of Tomorrow’s Federal Biologists

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ABSTRACT This paper provides a brief overview of the relevant and critical job skills and educational background of federal biologists, with a specific focus placed on the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and the agency’s present hiring needs. Of particular interest in this highly competitive and dynamic field are the differences between the educational and professional background of current USFWS permanent employees and the education and skills that future agency biologists will need to be competitive in the hiring process. Lastly, I address what present agency biologists have identified as the key skills and knowledge that prospective USFWS biologists will need to be effective scientists and wildlife managers.

KEY WORDS Bachelor’s Degree vs. Master’s Degree, communication skills, conservation biology, federal biologist, people skills, social responsibility, wildlife management vs. people management.

It is no small wonder that permanent positions within the US Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) are hard to come by. Direct contact with wild animals in outdoor
settings and the reward of contributing to the management and preservation of endangered species and their habitats are highly valued. Like many government jobs, permanent positions also offer competitive salaries and benefits, as well as job stability. A 2002 survey of federal biologists who were members of The Wildlife Society (TWS) found that 33\% of permanent employees held a Bachelor of Science as their highest level of education, 45\% held Master’s degrees, and 21\% had earned Doctorates (Schmutz 2002). San Julian and Yeager (2002) and more recent colloquial evidence indicate that those numbers have been and will continue to shift strongly in favor of those with Master’s or Doctoral degrees in wildlife biology.

One bright spot amid an increasingly gloomy job market is that significant numbers of federal biologists and managers are retiring or approaching retirement. Coupled with the possibility of this greater opportunity will be much greater responsibility. When surveyed about this massive turnover, over half (56\%) of the agencies indicated that these employees will not simply be replaced, their job descriptions will change substantially in response to changing needs and policies (San Julian and Yeager 2002).

What will these new job descriptions entail? In short, everything the retiring biologists did, plus a whole lot more. Knowledge of natural history, scientific methodology, and field skills will always be important, indeed, these are practically considered rudimentary qualifications (Bleich and Oehler 2000). What makes the new generation different from the previous is a greater emphasis on the social sciences, what we call “human dimensions of wildlife management.” Indeed, some professional
societies have gone so far as to suggest that resource management is really people management (San Julian and Yeager 2002).

For a federal employee who works with taxpayer funds and varying levels of public interaction, skills in communication, conflict management, and public education are needed in all positions. These skills were historically expected for only middle and upper management positions, while biologists learned “people skills” on the job. Today’s competitive applicant to any permanent position will already possess technical, scientific, and interpersonal skills. They need to be critical thinkers and team players. They must be able to deal with highly complex data sets, but make their work approachable to the public when necessary. The challenges are truly daunting, but if a would-be federal biologist has enough of what Aldo Leopold deemed the first essential: a pre-existing enthusiasm for wildlife and its conservation (Leopold, 1933, cited in Bleich and Oehler 2000), achieving the rest is simply a matter of investing enough time and effort. The rewards of a career with the USFWS are worth it.

LITERATURE CITED

