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Reforming Student-Professor Relations: Personal Qualities to Improve the Wildlife Management Profession

Author(s): Eric G. Darracq and Christopher E. Moorman

Reviewed work(s):

Source: *Wildlife Society Bulletin*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Autumn, 1997), pp. 748-750

Published by: [Allen Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3783532>

Accessed: 11/04/2012 09:38

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# Reforming student–professor relations: personal qualities to improve the wildlife management profession

The relationships that wildlife students develop with professionals while in college will help to foster valuable insights and future successes. Though difficult for students, especially those who are younger, attempts to establish relationships with many faculty and other wildlife professionals are important. The university setting provides a unique opportunity for students to broaden their knowledge through exposure to both technical and philosophical viewpoints of experts in wildlife-related disciplines. However, recent interest in the wildlife profession has resulted in an increase in the number of applicants to university wildlife departments, students in wildlife programs, and graduates from these programs. This growth makes it difficult for students to develop relationships with professors and receive personal attention and guidance. We have compiled some personal qualities of professors and students that could improve their relations despite this growth and, therefore, improve the wildlife management profession. Obviously, we do not know and cannot effectively articulate all factors which are characteristic of successful human relationships. Rather, our overall objective is to provide opinions and to stimulate thought and self-examination of our individual roles in the wildlife management profession.

## *Professors*

Professors enhance their students' educational experiences by serving as mentors, role models, and friends, as well as in their traditional roles as teachers. Many important lessons are learned outside the classroom. As mentors, professors increase the probability that students will grasp these concepts and evolve into well-rounded wildlife professionals. Furthermore, friendships between mentors and protégés can invoke thought and promote contributions by students outside the realm of research projects or classroom studies. These friendships help foster the mutual trust and respect important to strong relationships.

Professors should give their students personal attention. Positive contributions by a professor to a

student's growth include giving spontaneous and immediate advice, establishing regularly scheduled meetings to discuss student progress (e.g., 1 hr/week), continuing involvement and interest in the students' projects, and helping the student make contacts with professionals. Verbal interaction promotes intellectual maturity in the student and allows professors to fulfill their responsibilities. Communication maintains a bond and helps to ensure a quality experience for both. Additionally, a professor's efforts to increase a student's involvement and cooperation with other professionals will help the student gain experience and self-esteem.

Students seek out professors that they can trust and respect. Ideally, these professors are involved in extracurricular activities (i.e., membership and leadership in professional societies). They have a broad range of interests and are ambitious for, as well as concerned about, the well-being of their students. Furthermore, students find a professor with a friendly face and unpretentious, studious nature easily approachable. These qualities create a favorable impression and, later, serve to strengthen developing relationships.

## *Students*

Students who actively participate in outdoor activities and have a passion for their studies will contribute more to wildlife management than those who merely go through the motions to earn an academic degree. However, it is not enough for an aspiring wildlife manager just to appreciate nature; most outdoor recreationists do this. A student should belong to wildlife-related organizations and societies, take initiatives that will benefit wildlife and wildlife managers, and advocate public appreciation for natural resources. While involved in these tasks, students should attempt to develop as many relationships and make as many professional contacts as possible. For example, activity and leadership in a student chapter of TWS provide opportunities to meet students and faculty from other universities and professionals from state and federal agencies.

Just as students seek out respectable professors, professors search for students that they can respect. Desirable students are honest and have a strong work-ethic. Work-ethic means acquiring a self-discipline that facilitates academic and experiential learning in an in depth, open-minded, and timely manner. Students who are open-minded to a range of ideas and are willing to accept constructive criticism will be more likely to learn in an academic environment. Students with a deep-rooted passion for their interests, along with a directed work ethic, are most likely to be productive.

Students should continuously review their interests and professional goals. A student with a vision is a student with a future. First, students must consider whether graduate school will be necessary for their desired career. Before searching for an advisor, potential graduate students must take it upon themselves to establish a firm foundation of knowledge. Graduate students need a background that enables them to interpret specific theories and concepts underlying wildlife management and think in general terms of how these conceptualizations interrelate with society. Developing a strong work ethic as a student, volunteer, or temporary employee in a wildlife-related job should help students establish this necessary background. The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) and grade point average (GPA) are scholastic measures that are weighted heavily by graduate programs and professors when considering acceptance. The GRE is a standardized test of intelligence, but we feel that the GPA may be a better predictor of success, because it indicates initiative, intelligence, and a work-ethic throughout the student's educational experience.

### ***Student-professor relations***

A strong relationship will benefit both parties. The student will become a well-rounded professional with a sharp mind, positive attitude, and good work-ethic. Professors learn from the variety of viewpoints and research studies that they come in contact with during their careers. The many relationships developed in academic environments provide professors with future contacts for research funding and students with alternative pathways for career opportunities.

Although positive qualities may be inherent, breakdowns in the graduate student-professor relationship still may occur. Problems in the relationship may develop before the 2 begin to work together. Often, university professors accept a potential graduate student out of convenience or solely based on test scores. Little attention may be devoted to the student's personality traits, work ethic, goals, or outdoor interests. Often, graduate students choose a

university that is convenient or has assistantships available rather than investigating a potential adviser's interests, experience, qualifications, or personal qualities. This may result in personality conflicts, unfinished research projects, and unhappy students and professors.

We recommend that both students and professors investigate a broad range of people and alternatives before making a final decision to work together. The choice of a major professor and the resulting relationship may be the single most important factor determining the student's future. Graduate students should be matched with research projects closely related to their interests and experience. Before accepting a student, the professor should schedule a personal meeting and possibly a trip for the student to visit potential research areas. Before accepting the position, the student should investigate the teacher's history, including opinions of previous students, publication record, and previous positions held. Student's should consider the existing program and its reputation, as well as extracurricular activities on the campus (e.g., TWS student chapters). The search by students for graduate positions and the search by professors for potential students should remain competitive.

Although it is important for universities to promote higher education, neither wildlife programs nor professors should accept too many students. Under such circumstances, professors do not have enough time for scheduled meetings, personal attention, or spontaneous advice. Students may become bitter and dissatisfied, and their educational experience may be compromised.

### ***Conclusion***

Wildlife students and professors have tremendous responsibilities. Neither attending school (whether as an undergraduate or graduate student) nor teaching should be a chore. All wildlifers, especially graduate students and instructors, should want to learn, teach, and contribute to their profession. Otherwise, the wildlife management profession and its present and future advocacy will be compromised.

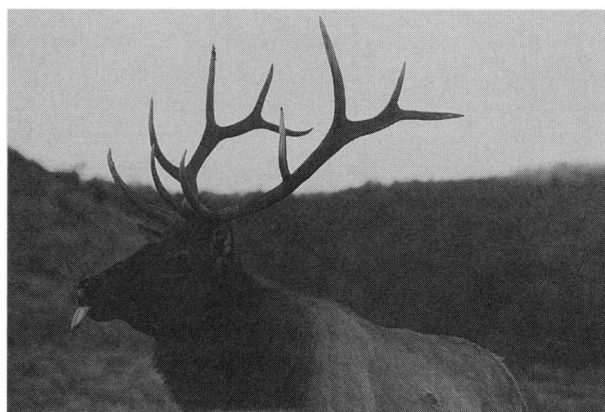
Perhaps, a professor's most important responsibility is to carefully search for and select quality students and offer them opportunities for fulfilling educational experiences. It has become increasingly necessary for students to earn an advanced degree if they are to be competitive for positions as biologists with many private and most state and federal government agencies. Students accepted into a wildlife graduate program must commit several years to their education. Likewise, university professors and departments should be committed to helping success-

ful graduates attain professional positions. However, the number of wildlife-related career opportunities available is not increasing as quickly as the number of undergraduates accepted into wildlife programs. Immediate consideration needs to be given to the acceptance standards of university wildlife programs and the imbalance between numbers of students in school and numbers of career opportunities in the field. Wildlife faculty should be willing to develop lasting relationships with their pupils, and vice versa. These relationships are important in shaping the future of college students and, therefore, the future of the profession. Historical and current successes in

the wildlife management profession were made possible by professionals who were once students; today's and tomorrow's students will be relied upon to do the same.—**Eric G. Darracq** is a Ph.D. student in the Department of Parks, Recreation, and Tourism Management at Clemson University. **Christopher E. Moorman** is a Ph.D student in the Department of Forest Resources at Clemson University and is the Southeastern Section Representative of the Student Affairs Committee of The Wildlife Society.



## The Lighter Side



### Predator–Prey Relationship

(photos by Steve Steinert, Colorado Division of Wildlife)