

PROGRAM CHAIR'S OPENING REMARKS NWSGC SYMPOSIUM 2004

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"Clement Greenburg wrote the gospel and the word on universal form and beauty. Since the post moderns came, its never been the same, 'cause they don't give a flyin' fig newtie. From No-Fi Soul Rebellions "The Artists" (The Chocolate Demos, by No-Fi Soul Rebellion, 2001)

While it may be seem harsh to suggest that wildlife biologists or agency leaders "don't give a flyin' fig newtie," I argue that wildlife management is now in what we may properly understand as a "postmodern" period.

The term, postmodern, reflects divergence from the observational, experimental, and sensual bases which have characterized what we (at least the living fossils among us) were taught define the "scientific method." Most basically, postmodern thinking does not recognize truth or fact as existing apart from the observer. Instead, the basis of postmodernism is the concept that the "scientific method," while an interesting concept, is functionally obsolete, and that a higher and purer truth is defined by each individual for him or her self. Plainly put, intuitive feelings trump data-based facts (which can always be interpreted by any observer through his subjective lens). Postmodernism has demonstrably affected every discipline from art to theology. In these disciplines postmodern influences have redefined "beauty" and, in the end, "truth" in subjective rather than objective terms.

Having progressed from, art ("A") through theology ("T") it would be highly unusual in the human experience if wildlife management had escaped the effects of postmodern thought. It seems bound to have happened sooner or later. I suggest it happened "sooner," and our collective profession simply failed to recognize it. I think we, collectively, overlooked the postmodern influence because those of us in the field considered the scientific method above question. Our naivete as compounded by idealistically-driven disciples [Alaska friends: here I think of Haber, Joslin, Kline, Cline, Vanballenberghe, Schoen, etc.--it may be possible to relate this (postmodernism) to the emergence of "conservation biology" as an alternative to wildlife management WEH] of postmodern thought who argued, while cloaked in their scientific credentials, that data mean anything any "scientist" wants/interprets it to mean. Hence, we struggle to make fact-based management relevant to a postmodern world. It's a tough job.

Through archaic application of empirical observations, I hypothesize the impetus for postmodern thought in wildlife management came from postmodernists who rose to leadership positions in management agencies. This, I suggest, was not a conscious abandonment of their training as scientists, but a subtle erosion of "modern (but socially

archaic, i.e. scientific), principles occasioned by the perceived need to make their agencies appear relevant to a sociopolitical system which was generally trending toward postmodernism. This sociopolitical system has influenced our profession because it controls budgets and allocated effort. I suggest our leaders simply didn't recognize it for what it was.

The relevance of these societal trends to this symposium is that they define the context of the working hypothesis concept embraced by this (and the Desert) Council in 1999 at the 2nd North American Wild Sheep Conference.

One of the primary goals for our "drinking together" (the literal meaning of the Greek word, symposion, from which we derive the English, symposium) of ideas is articulation of a working hypothesis for mountain goats. The other is to share new findings from our collegial efforts to better define and refine the working hypotheses articulated previously for wild sheep.

In retrospect, I see the conception and evolution of the working hypothesis as the field biologists' attempt to mitigate the effects of postmodernism in wildlife management.

Wildlife management may fairly be said to have begun with the Roosevelt Doctrine. This Doctrine held that the best management would be based on the best science. This would be archaic "modern science" as opposed to what has resulted from the marriage of science with postmodernism.

Well after postmodern thought had begun to affect wildlife management, the first definable call back toward "modernism" was Val Geist's notion of managing within the framework of species adaptation to environment. This call to manage on the basis of species autecology was all but lost on the management community because it had, by then, set its course toward ever iterative definition of the responses of populations to stochastic events. That is, "our professional focus" had been narrowed to defining the statistical probability of occurrence or recurrence of measurable individual or population behaviors to environmental variables.

Without the guidance of a broader, "modern," but not necessarily contemporary perspective of species management, "ecosystem management" became the postmodern manager's mantra. As a result, our discipline, lead by its researchers began to drift from what we would call "applied research" today. Collectively we began to pursue the esoteric.

I argue this charge, while it may rankle us collectively, should be considered as though legitimate; and should come as no surprise. The trend toward the esoteric research is, after all, a natural result of life in those academic institutions that trained and credentialed us as scientific wildlife managers. These colleges and universities are, after all, modeled on the great German research universities where learning for its own sake was initially codified. The results have included ever-more iterative quantitative studies cloaked in the rubric of "hypothesis testing," which came into vogue almost 20 years ago.

At the time, "hypothesis testing" seemed a rational return to the then-dying "modernism" of the scientific method, but the effort did not produce the anticipated results. In broader retrospect, I suggest management success declined due to absence of a vision with greater breadth than "doing the next experiment" required by the logic of sequential learning.

Through bitter experience, I finally tumbled to the notion that the search for a safe probability envelope in which to manage was not succeeding. Without any clue as to the cause (postmodern influence) I speculated that management success would follow a return to the "modernism" of a working management hypothesis. I argued management success should attend synthesis of the species-specific knowledge generally predicting responses of any managed species to the challenges/opportunities which seemed certain to arise in the course of day to day management. Our existing working hypotheses for wild sheep were designed to fill this need for a "digest" of what we know, and what a manager or planner unfamiliar with species autecology might expect from any challenged species based on its suite of adaptations and specific case studies.

There are, however, at least two weaknesses in this system.

First, we may succumb to our inherent prejudices and simply define a working hypothesis as a listing of facts or studies which have the imprimatur of reviewed publication. The great risk here is that we may come up with a composite recipe for species management that may not be consistent with the suite of adaptations evolution has broadly conferred on wild sheep and mountain goats. Most of these studies are "small" and site specific, and produced focused results. Should we pursue this course increased management success will be unlikely to follow.

The second great risk is that we will simply give up on management according to the Roosevelt Doctrine because it is considered archaic in the postmodern world. Attempting to turn the clock back almost a century to reestablish "modern" scientific management as foreseen by Teddy Roosevelt and his Canadian friends is an arduous task, and could prove hazardous to your career.

With these perspectives and possibilities in mind, let us continue the great adventure which has always been, and remains modern (but is now considered archaic) science. It has, after all, been the engine producing the most productive wildlife conservation system in the history of our planet.

Let the games begin!

