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Wildlife division needs a scientist: Commissioner should appoint director with a qualifying resumé

by Kris Hundertmark

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Community perspective

By now, the resignation of Corey Rossi from the position of director of the Division of Wildlife Conservation at the Alaska Department of Fish and Game is old news to most Alaskans. The news may have dropped from the headlines, but should not be out of mind. The task of selecting a director to lead one of the most respected wildlife agencies in the country continues.

Alaskans should understand that, although Commissioner Cora Campbell recently appointed her special assistant, Doug Vincent-Lang, as acting Wildlife Conservation director, she is still recruiting for a permanent director. They also should understand that the choice is an important one — for the future of the department and for all Alaskans. The director holds considerable influence over wildlife management and has the potential to affect all who value and depend on the diversity and abundance of Alaska’s wildlife resources.

As the only professional organization of wildlife biologists in the state, the Alaska chapter of The Wildlife Society promotes the training of wildlife managers in the sciences and the application of science in wildlife management. It was with this focus in mind that the Alaska chapter sent a letter last month to Commissioner Campbell asking her to carefully select a new director who would value science above political considerations.

A little history might help explain: In 1933, Aldo Leopold, one of the founders of modern wildlife management, wrote that managing wildlife for sustainable harvest was an art achieved through its practitioners’ knowledge of the land. Almost 80 years later, there is still an element of art to wildlife management, especially when managers must seek a balance among competing demands for wildlife resources. Since Leopold’s era, however, science has played an increasingly important role in our field. Training in ecology, genetics, physiology, mathematics and other related disciplines provide the many and varied skills wildlife managers must bring to the job to make sound and objective decisions. It is from this perspective that we offered our view to the commissioner on the necessary qualifications for the next director.

In our opinion, management of Alaska’s wildlife must be based in science to be successful. We acknowledge that social, political and economic realities must also be taken into consideration. However, it is critical that knowledge gained through science form the basis for management decisions; failure to do so too often results in ineffective or ill-guided programs that waste effort and money. Choosing a director who is an experienced professional dedicated to science-based wildlife management will ensure department staff can objectively conduct research and management activities without the undue influence of politics. This will allow department biologists to openly collaborate with biologists in other agencies and academic institutions, freely communicate their findings and incorporate the best science available into their management recommendations.

Technical expertise is also an important qualification for the next director. The director should have sufficient training and professional experience to advise and interact with state and other

biologists at a scientific level, to understand the basis of their recommendations and to accurately communicate state findings to others.

Demonstrated leadership, professional integrity and organizational competence are essential skills for the next director to be effective. The director will lead a staff of highly trained and dedicated wildlife biologists to whom professional ethics and integrity are important. They should have a leader of equal caliber that will demand and demonstrate high professional standards.

We Alaskans deeply value our wildlife resources. Those resources also provide important and sustainable economic worth to our economy. In order to maintain those resources, it is vital that the director of Wildlife Conservation be dedicated to science-based management, have the technical competence to direct science and management programs and demonstrate a level of integrity equal to that of the division's staff. We strongly encourage all Alaskans to insist on those characteristics in our wildlife leaders and to call for a curbing of politically driven appointments at Fish and Game. The state and its wildlife deserve no less.

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akdarkhorse | February 12, 2012

Poppcock! Alaska doesn't need a "Scientist" with a "qualifying resume" (meaning an elitist Ph.D.) as Director. We need a manager. Not someone who studies things to death, who needs to confer with other Ph.D.s to see if they agree with the decision they refuse to make because we just don't have enough "science" to make a decision, who needs more money to hire more people who can't make decisions.

The Alaska Constitution gives us clear guidelines about managing for sustained harvest. Thank God we have had recent Directors who have implemented management plans meant to restore and enhance populations for just that constitutional directive.

Please, no more elitists who find joy in research but never boil that research down to action.

Mr. Rossi, bless his heart, was an effective manager regardless of any other shortcomings. Find us someone who can do likewise.

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merian | February 15, 2012

You seem to be rather alone describing Mr Rossi as an "effective manager". The take of the people who had the misfortune to work with him is not along the lines of someone who understands what it takes to manage people, including resources more qualified technically than he is (which in itself is a normal situation). [Quoting from another article, easily googled:]

"The picture most people paint of Rossi is of a world-class schmooze who became a tyrant when promoted to management. One state employee who used to work with Rossi described him as a friendly guy with whom you could discuss anything until he



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