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Commentary

Corey Rossi replacement must be dedicated to science-based management

Kris Hundertmark | Feb 11, 2012



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By now, the resignation of Corey Rossi from the position of Director of Wildlife Conservation (DWC) 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 Alaska Department of Fish and Game (ADF&G) Commissioner Cora Campbell recently appointed ADF&G Special Assistant Doug Vincent-Lang as acting DWC director, she is still recruiting for a permanent director. They also should understand that the choice is an important one -- for the future of Fish and Game 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

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_____ who is an experienced professional dedicated to science-based wildlife management will ensure ADF&G staff can objectively conduct research and management activities without the undue influence of politics. This will allow ADF&G 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.

Kris Hundertmark, Ph.D. is president of the Alaska Chapter of The Wildlife Society.

The views expressed here are the writer's own and are not necessarily endorsed by Alaska Dispatch. Alaska Dispatch welcomes a broad range of viewpoints. To submit a piece for consideration, e-mail [commentary\(at\)alaskadispatch.com](mailto:commentary(at)alaskadispatch.com).



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