
THE OUTLET

October 1998

NEWSLETTER OF THE MONTANA CHAPTER AMERICAN FISHERIES SOCIETY

President's Corner

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Managers as Shamans

In the rush to meet the next deadline, it is easy to lose sight of what our job of fisheries professionals is all about. If someone asks us "What does a fishery manager do?", it is common to list the many activities that managers undertake -

developing regulations, enhancing recreational fisheries, protecting native fishes, conducting research, etc. When I list these activities to a class of students to describe to them what fisheries management is all about, however, I have never been completely satisfied that this list accurately portrays what the true responsibilities are of us as fisheries professionals. In his beautifully written book on the history of fishery management in California "The Fisherman's Problem", historian Arthur McEvoy writes of the Northwest Indian tribal shamans, who in addition to their better-known roles as healers and spiritual leaders, also set fishing practices and supervised the distribution of salmon among tribal members. McEvoy likened shamans to early fishery managers who "interpreted for their communities the capacity of the natural world and ensured that their communities used its resources in prudent ways." While the tools of fishery management have certainly changed over the centuries since shaman days, it seems our responsibilities as fishery professionals are essentially the same. Jim Lichatowich provides another view of our professional responsibilities in his article "Managing for Sustainable Fisheries: Some Social, Economic, and Ethical Considerations." He writes that "The role of technical experts, the professional fishery biologists, is to ensure that the debate over conflicting values (in resource management) is carried out at the highest level of understanding by agency administrators, fish and wildlife commissions, and the public. It is our responsibility because we possess the knowledge to evaluate the outcomes and risks of management alternatives. Our challenge is to be sure that administrators, commissions, and the public understand the issues and consequences so they can make the most informed choices for us and our descendants."

Certainly, these statements about our responsibilities are daunting, but also very gratifying, and likely why most of us are in, and enjoy, the fisheries profession. So what is the role of the Montana Chapter in all this? The Chapter has a long tradition in helping ensure that our state uses its aquatic resources in prudent ways. This past year the Chapter provided information on a large number of fisheries issues ranging from bull trout restoration to reservoir management. The many letters prepared by our EXCOM and Committee members on resource issues each year help decisionmakers and the public make more informed choices on how our fishery resources are allocated and conserved. Workshops and annual meetings help make us each of us better 'interpreters.' Membership by Chapter members on resource management committees secures a 'voice for fish' during resource debates. The many educational products developed over the years—the Fishes of Montana video, the coldwater poster, the aquatic trunks, to name a few—help make the public better informed about the diversity and value of aquatic resources in Montana. We also have spent tens of thousands of dollars of hard earned Chapter dollars to support educational projects and restoration programs that further our goal of conservation and wise use of aquatic resources in the state.

So, fellow shamans, as I take on the task of Lead Shaman this year, I want to first thank all those past presidents and committee members since 1967 for passing down the strong tradition that we have in our Chapter of helping us meet our responsibilities as Chapter members. Thanks to your efforts, we have earned a very solid reputation as 'interpreters' on fisheries issues. I will do my best to continue it. My goals for this year are to: maintain and enhance committee membership on vital committees such as Land Management; support continued development of the webpage as a clearinghouse for fisheries information for the Chapter and state; begin planning for the next regional/national symposium sponsored by the Chapter; and ensure the Chapter is involved in providing information to legislators so that they can make 'informed choices' on fisheries issues in the upcoming state legislative session.

A special thanks to past president Mark Lere for his leadership and example on how to keep the Chapter doing what its been doing so well over the years. Please take time to thank outgoing committee heads Brian Sanborn, newsletter editor for the past four years, and Eric Reiland, land management committee co-chair for the past three years. Be sure to also welcome new committee members who are graciously offering their services: Bill Gardner, co-chair for Species of Special Concern Committee; Scott Snelson and Igor Suchomel, co-chairs of the Land Management Committee; Jerry Wells, Chapter lobbyist; Pat Byorth, Awards Committee Chair; and Don Skaar, who kindly agreed to continue serving as Environmental Concerns Committee chair. Despite the added work, a true benefit of being involved in the Chapter is the opportunity to learn from the unique knowledge and skills contributed by each EXCOM and Committee member. Your skills and knowledge are needed to keep up the tradition!