

What Does It Mean To Be A TWS Member?

“Social cohesion demands a creed, or code of behavior, or a prevailing sentiment, or, at best, some combination of all three; without something of the kind, a community disintegrates...”

Bertrand Russell, *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938)

Upon discovering that one could join a TWS section or chapter, but not be a member of the so-called “parent organization”, that is, of TWS as a whole, I’ll admit to being very surprised. In fact, it has been estimated that as many as half of the individuals participating in “our” organization currently limit their involvement and support exclusively to the regional or local level. One reason for my surprise is that our sister organizations, the American Fisheries Society (AFS) and Society of American Foresters (SAF), both require membership in the parent organization in order to participate in chapters and/or sections.

The reasons for TWS’ situation appear to be complex. First, this has apparently been going on for a long time, so there is historical precedence. Second, it certainly costs quite a bit more to become a member of the parent organization compared to a section or chapter. Another possible reason is distance and lack of connection—it is certainly harder for members to feel connected to an organizational headquarters hundreds or thousands of miles away than to their local friends and colleagues. Last, but not least, some TWS section or chapter members might simply feel that the benefits of membership in the parent organization do not outweigh the costs. However, these perceptions appear to be changing. As TWS has begun to improve its membership services, embrace positive change and increase communication with its sections and chapters, one chapter (Alaska) recently voted to require membership in the parent organization. Other chapters (e.g., Texas) have not gone so far as to make it a requirement, but rather have educated and recruited so actively that the vast majority of its members are also parent-society members. While I applaud the efforts of these highly successful chapters, we obviously still have a long way to go. This started me thinking about what it means to be a member of TWS, or for that matter of any professional organization. My intent in this essay is to share some of my thoughts on what it means to be a member of TWS, including some of the many benefits that are derived from membership in professional societies. In doing so, I also touch on what it means to be a wildlife professional.

Influencing Legislation and Public Opinion

Many individuals join professional organizations to become part of something bigger. Individuals can certainly make a difference in democratic nations. However, in today’s complex and highly politicized world, effective action is often only possible when people put their collective voices together in a unified fashion. Put more simply, there is strength in numbers. TWS represents and serves thousands of wildlife professionals—the people that manage, conserve, protect and study wildlife in North America and beyond.

As such, it represents the views of a community of experts. As a science-based organization that values dialogue over confrontation, TWS has the potential to exert a powerful influence on legislation and public opinion affecting wildlife. In fact, with all of the extremism and partisan bickering going on, there is a crying need for a more reasoned, science-based approach to wildlife management and conservation. TWS is uniquely positioned to fill that niche.

TWS is very active in the legislative arena, commenting on pending legislation, communicating with and educating elected representatives and developing policy statements on relevant issues. TWS members are encouraged to become involved in the development of draft policy statements in their area of expertise and, when appropriate, to contribute to technical reports that provide the scientific foundations for policy development. Some of our members have expressed concern that TWS might become an “advocacy” organization. While some individuals and professional organizations do advocate for extreme, often unrealistic, positions, I have pointed out that “advocacy” itself is not a bad word. It’s important that we stand for something. We are indeed and must be advocates for a science-based, commonsensical approach to wildlife management and conservation policy. TWS also hopes to increase its exposure to the media and public within the near future by producing regular press releases and expanding its web site to include a section designed specifically for public consumption.

One of the things that initially attracted me to TWS was its courage in standing up for what wildlife professionals and wildlife really needed, such as appropriate state, provincial and federal funding for wildlife and natural resources programs; the control of feral cats and other introduced animals; a more reasoned approach to the U.S. Endangered Species Act—an approach which retains the legislation’s strengths, while shoring up its weaknesses; and a recognition of the growing challenge of global climate change. TWS’ ability to influence decisions on a local, national and international stage will only improve as its membership numbers grow. Numbers tend to impress elected representatives, and when we can say that TWS represents 15,000 wildlife experts instead of the current 7,000 plus, the organization’s political clout will clearly grow. Simply put, our collective voice will become stronger the bigger we get. That alone should be sufficient reason to join a professional organization with which one shares common interests, values and goals.

Information Sharing and Communication

Knowledge is power, and one of the primary functions of scientific and educational organizations like ours’ is to share information. In 2007, TWS will deliver peer-reviewed scientific and management information to its members through its technical publications, *The (new) Journal of Wildlife Management*, *Wildlife Monographs* and technical reports. The journal and monographs, including legacy publications going back to 1937, will soon be available to members online. Furthermore, TWS realizes that many of its busy, non-academic members have little time to study TWS’ technical publications, but still would like to be kept up-to-date with information relevant to their profession. More

specifically, they want practical, management-related information that will help them in their day-to-day work. In order to meet this demand, TWS will launch its new member magazine, *The Wildlife Professional* in early 2007. This popular publication will be a source of timely news and information on a wide variety of topics of interest to a broad range of people working in the wildlife and natural resources fields. Last, but not least, the TWS Web Site is being redesigned to become an essential source of information for wildlife professionals. Furthermore, all of TWS' information resources, both on and off-line are being fully integrated. For example, some articles published in *The Wildlife Professional* will be linked to expanded information resources on the web site.

Knowledge is also shared among members at TWS conferences and workshops. The TWS Annual Conference regularly attracts over 1,500 delegates annually, who participate in panel and roundtable discussions, paper and poster sessions, working group meetings, and training workshops.

Professional societies also have an important role in facilitating communication among their members. The installation of a new server will give TWS the capability of creating e-mail list servers for our working groups, chapters and sections, thus greatly facilitating internal communication. In addition, new web site templates are being built for chapters, sections and working groups that could also revolutionize communication at the local level. When completed, these sites will be managed at the grassroots level, with headquarters providing appropriate support through training. Informational feeds directly from headquarters to subunit sites will also be possible, thus resulting in improved communication at all organizational levels. In short, such changes will continue to bring our widely dispersed community even closer together.

Participation, Networking and Professional Development

Members of professional societies are a community of experts—a group of people that have assembled due to their shared values, goals and interests. Since TWS members are wildlife students and professionals, the primary interests of our members include wildlife biology, management and conservation. TWS members value healthy and diverse ecosystems and wildlife populations and recognize that humans play a vital role in restoring and sustaining native wildlife and natural systems. Furthermore, TWS recognizes the importance of science and education in developing sound stewardship policies. TWS members represent a broad range of expertise, ranging from wildlife ecology to land use planning to human dimensions to wildlife damage control and beyond. A wide range of organizations employs our members, including state, provincial and federal agencies, private industry, non-governmental organizations and colleges and universities. This diversity clearly is a strength, as it offers tremendous opportunities for participation, networking and professional development.

TWS offers members many opportunities for participation. Members are encouraged to either run or vote for elected offices and help shape the future of our organization. Recently, members were asked to provide input on TWS' strategic plan; they are also

encouraged to participate actively in a diverse range of expert working groups that provide advice and consultation on important relevant topics, such as introduced species, urban wildlife, international wildlife management, biodiversity, and gender and ethnic diversity. Participation in local sections and chapters allows members to keep informed about relevant issues in their own communities, facilitates interactions with colleagues, and provides access to local networking and training opportunities.

Networking is often a critical component of professional development. No one ever gets to where they are without the help of others. Whether your goal is finding relevant information, locating potential collaborators, identifying a mentor, or finding your first job, relationships with colleagues can be critical. Professional societies are the ideal places to develop such connections. As a community of professionals, most TWS members are ready and willing to help colleagues when asked. Students, in particular, have much to gain from their involvement in professional organizations. An ability to meet and speak with active professionals that have similar interests can be invaluable in the early formative stages of one's career. In addition, such interactions are often the source of jobs and/or educational opportunities, such as graduate student positions or projects.

In recent years, TWS has done much to increase involvement by students, fully recognizing that they are the future of our profession. This includes the formation of a Student Professional Development Working Group and focused annual conference activities, including a grant program and volunteer opportunities to help defray the cost of attendance, a student-professional mixer, a student dinner, a "Quiz Bowl" contest and a mentoring program. Expansion of these efforts is a high priority of the new strategic plan.

But, what if you've completed your education and already have a job? Your situation may have changed, but that does not mean that your involvement with TWS should suddenly cease. Indeed, as wildlife professionals, we all have an obligation to help develop the next generation of wildlife managers, researchers and conservationists. The opportunity to interact with and offer advice and assistance to student members through TWS mentoring programs can be very gratifying. Furthermore, in order to continue to be effective in a rapidly changing world, wildlife professionals must keep up-to-date with recent advances in their field of expertise or gain new skills. Workshops at the TWS annual conference can provide specialized training in a wide variety of relevant topics and TWS publications also help to keep members informed of the latest developments in the wildlife profession. TWS' Certification Program is a way for wildlife professionals to demonstrate their expertise and receive recognition for their continuing education efforts. Discussions are now underway between TWS and state and federal agencies about how certification can be made more relevant to hiring and promotional practices. In addition, work is also underway to expand certification to cover a broader range of wildlife professionals, beginning with wildlife technicians.

Professional Debate and Collective Problem Solving

I've always believed in the expression "more heads are better than one." Membership in professional societies, especially those that are science-based, offers tremendous opportunities for collective thought, debate, analysis and problem solving. TWS Working Groups provide a forum for such activities, as do technical report preparation, and TWS conferences. The 2007 TWS Annual Conference in Tucson, AZ will be the first to include panel and roundtable discussions, formats specifically designed to increase opportunities for professional debate and discussion. Engaging in productive dialogue about the many complex and important issues facing wildlife professionals today is a major benefit of belonging to a community of experts. TWS is committed to taking advantage of the innovative thoughts of its diverse and highly trained constituency by facilitating such interactions. It is also committed to bringing together experts from a diverse array of relevant disciplines, as this is the crucible from which true innovation often arises. For example, TWS recently co-hosted a planning meeting for the Human-Wildlife Conflict Collaboration-a diverse collection of individuals dedicated to finding effective solutions to this growing and global conservation challenge. Many innovative ideas emerged for how to improve the way that wildlife professionals think about and deal with this exceedingly complex issue.

Professional Recognition

Individuals that make significant contributions to their profession deserve recognition for their efforts. A critical function of professional societies is to honor such individuals accordingly. TWS has many award programs that honor excellence in the wildlife profession, including awards for chapter and student chapter of the year, significant publications, conservation and research, educational and media efforts and so forth. The highest award given by the Society is the Aldo Leopold Memorial Award, a special honor reserved for those who have made outstanding contributions to the wildlife profession.

Preserving History

The existence of professional organizations, especially long-established ones, allow their members to continue to build on the traditions established by and the many significant contributions made by those who came before them. In a sense, it allows them to better understand and participate in the history of their profession. TWS has a proud and venerable history, going back to the mid-1930's. Its membership and founders included many of the giants of the wildlife profession, such as Aldo Leopold, J.N. (Ding) Darling, and Olaus J. Murie. As in any organization or profession, change is inevitable. But the contributions of our forerunners should never be forgotten. TWS has helped to track the history of our profession and assist us in remembering what we might otherwise forget. Such continuity is comforting and reminds us that we are part of something larger than ourselves, something that began before we were here and will hopefully continue long after we are gone.

Ethical Codes

Every community needs guidance on what is acceptable behavior and what is not, and this is especially important in professional communities. The credibility of an expert community can rise or fall depending on how well it addresses such issues. TWS has developed a code of ethics for certified wildlife biologists and a standardized and fair mechanism for assessing the validity of complaints when they arise.

Cost Sharing

One little appreciated benefit of joining a professional organization is cost sharing. TWS could not afford to support government affairs, publication and information services or conference programs without the combined support of its members. Indeed, one incentive for growing our membership as quickly as possible is that we may eventually be able to afford to cut costs to individual members. Currently, only a small percentage of wildlife professionals are supporting these critical services for the entire community. In fact, if TWS were to double in size tomorrow, there is a good chance that we could afford to ramp up membership services and, at the same time, cut costs of membership to individuals. This is especially true if we were to improve our outside fund-raising. A recent example of cost sharing by members was support for the upgrading of TWS' technological infrastructure and web site, which was the focus of this year's annual member fund-raising campaign. The generous contributions of members allowed TWS to upgrade its IT infrastructure, begin overhauling its web site and digitize its legacy publications. All of these positive changes will lead to improved membership services.

Conclusions

I began this essay by posing a couple of critical questions: What does it mean to be a TWS member and what does it mean to be wildlife professional? Furthermore, are individuals who join *only* their local chapter or section participating fully in or supporting the "community of experts" we call TWS? After reading the above essay, I leave it to you to form your own conclusions. The fact that nearly half of TWS chapter and section members do not belong to or support TWS as a whole has been a significant challenge for this organization. A recent survey also indicated that only a quarter of federal biologists belong to TWS and the proportion of state and provincial biologists may be even lower. As we ramp up our member services, I sincerely hope that more wildlife professionals will begin to understand and appreciate the many benefits of and obligations associated with belonging to a "community of experts." I look forward to working with current members to help educate those individuals about the many positive changes taking place at our organization. TWS deserves to survive and thrive, but it cannot do so if large numbers of wildlife professionals choose to withhold their support and participation. This is *your* professional organization and Council and staff cannot face this daunting challenge alone. Existing members must help convince their colleagues that they have much to gain from joining. In other words, we both want and need them to be members of our community—a family of highly trained experts that is deeply dedicated to its core

mission of ensuring a future for wildlife in a human-dominated world. That task is not going to be easy, but the more people we can convince to participate actively in TWS, the stronger and more effective we will be.

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