

## Are We Goblins or Gurus?

By Dave Person

As wildlife scientists we labor in relative obscurity. Most politicians, policy makers, and the public don't have a clue what we do. To them we are "animal counters" and the most important question they can conceive to ask us is "well, how many (moose, deer, owls, little brown birds, etc...) are there?" Like goblins in Harry Potter's Gringott's Bank, we are expected to provide information upon request and then, without comment, sink back into the bowels of the earth to await our next summons. The politicians and policy makers take our information, interpret it as they please, and use it to arrange (or derange) the affairs of their "wizarding" world.

Such is the essence of our role in managing natural resources recommended by Mills and Clark (2001), an opinion piece reviewed by Tom Paragi in a previous issue of this newsletter. We inform the decision makers about the science and then let them assess the information, risks, and prospective actions. Unfortunately, there are serious flaws in that perfect world. If we expect our science to contribute to solutions of ecological and environmental problems under the scenario promoted by Mills and Clark, we must assume decision makers actually understand the science behind what we tell them, that they are at least minimally capable of using the information in rational and logical ways, that they realize there are some things (concerning ecology) they need to know that must be learned after kindergarten, and that they actually give a damn. Those assumptions are problematical and therein lies a tale.

The tale is Ronald Pulliam's story of his time as head of the National Biological Survey described in his essays "*The political education of a biologist, parts I and II*" published in the Summer and Fall issues of the Wildlife Society Bulletin in 1998. Pulliam's tenure at the star-crossed agency was frustrated by disinformation that abounded within Congress about NBS, poor understanding by politicians of the agency's scientific mission, and general ignorance among the public of scientific methods and biology. There was outright hostility toward the agency and information it produced. Any expectations he had about the capacity of politicians to understand and apply sound science were dashed along with his hope that NBS would serve as a clearinghouse and source of reliable scientific information. The end result was that NBS was zero funded and eventually ceased to exist. As Pulliam learned, the objectivity and detachment of the messenger did not save NBS from boiling in the leaky cauldron of public policy making.

Should we be goblins, trying to find security in our vaults of irrelevancy and never attempting to influence policy makers by using our science to assess the risks and consequences of their actions? Or should we be gurus, using our talents, knowledge, and experience to advise and mentor policy makers? Should we teach them about the value of scientific enquiry and to be cautious when reliable information is lacking? Perhaps as an antidote to Mills and Clark, it would be well to review the Fall 1995 issue of the Wildlife Society Bulletin, which contained a series of papers concerning advocacy and wildlife science. Of course, if we dare to meddle in the affairs of wizards (or are they muggles?) we must be prepared for the charges of special interest and bias. To that I say emphatically "YES, I am biased". My special interest is the belief that ecosystems and wildlife are important to human well being and that science is the most efficient and effective pathway to reliable knowledge. I am also biased in the belief that for every complicated question or issue, there is a simple, easily understood, and completely wrong answer that will be irresistible to policy makers and the public. Of course, that point of view probably would turn any "Decider" into a raging "Dementor".