

TIME TO REFORM WILDLIFE GOVERNANCE

GUEST OPINION

By Chris Bachman

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The recent resignation of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife Commissioner Fred Koontz, Ph.D., exemplifies the inevitably fatal outcome when a compassionate centrist enters a polarized conversation and attempts to build a bridge, bolstered with peer-reviewed science, to preserve our dwindling biodiversity.

On Earth, our home, conditions at the poles are hostile. To survive in these conditions requires special adaptations that most species lack. Life thrives at the middle latitudes which support a broad diversity of species that, like cogs in a machine, are dependent on one another for proper functioning.

The same holds true in politics and policymaking.

There is little accomplished in our polarized political arena. Policymakers and ideas that exist at the far right and the far left accomplish very little. The hostile conditions in these extremes allow little opportunity for an idea to flourish.

When we lose diversity of opinion, everybody loses. These days we are all very quick to retreat to the comfort of our corner and surround ourselves with those that share our opinions and ideals. Real growth and real change only comes when we listen to those whose opinions differ from our own and find common value and work together. We may not always get everything we want, but we need to differentiate what we want from what we need and yes, we need to prioritize preserving dwindling natural resources.

Taken literally, bridges join

two separated points, metaphorically bridges reconcile or connect differing ideologies.

It is apparent many on the commission, and in the public, prefer not to cross any bridge to find ideological common ground, while others go a step further to burn bridges as quickly as they can be built rejecting any idea that does not align with their world view. This literally gets us nowhere, and in the case of the Fish and Wildlife Commission, is undertaken with no accountability to the general public.

Our wildlife governance system must change and move away from the nine-member appointed – not elected – commission with its polarized positions and lack of public accountability. A commission which repeatedly fails to reach consensus to protect the public wildlife trust for future generations of people and for all species.

For Fish and Wildlife man-

agement to truly reflect the will of the people, we must embrace a new model that holds wildlife management leadership accountable to Washington voters. We must move to a model that elects a commissioner of Fish and Wildlife, much like we have a commissioner of Public Lands.

A commissioner of Fish and Wildlife would be an elected state executive position in the Washington State government and held accountable to the citizens of Washington. The commissioner would oversee the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife which is responsible for conservation of wildlife and fish in a manner that does not impair the resource and that authorizes the taking of wildlife and fish only at times or places, or in manners or quantities, that does not impair these natural resources. When we have an official elected by the people and held accountable to the people,

wildlife management will reflect the will of the people.

The fundamental issue is not conservation or wildlife management, it is democracy, a system of representative governance based in social equality. The commission has long been, and is currently, dominated by special interests focused primarily on the use of animals and is not representing the common interest.

Dr. Koontz's resignation must be a wake-up call to Gov. Jay Inslee, the legislature, our civic leaders, and the public that it is time to rethink the mandate and governance structure of the Fish & Wildlife Department. It is time to rethink the priority and design of all our state natural resource agencies. We have kicked the can down the road for far too long for fear of the economic and social impacts of prioritizing protection of our natural resources. Now is the time. It is too late for later.