

Seeing the Forest and the Trees

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When someone is so mired in minutiae they miss larger matters at hand, we might say they “Can’t see the forest for the trees.”

Forests and trees have been on my mind of late, and not just because this special issue is focused on aquatic conservation within the U.S. Forest Service. As fisheries professionals, we spend most of our time focused on “trees.” Primary production and PIT tags, CPUEs and sample sizes, BiOps and Bayesian statistics, and on and on. We express our passion, but in the language of our profession. We search the listening faces for appreciative comprehension, but often find bewilderment. We stack the truth of our trees in publications like so much cord wood, but rarely speak of the “forest”—the significance of thriving fisheries.

Fisheries matter in more ways than most of us routinely think of, much less communicate. Fishing provides food in an increasingly hungry world and employs millions worldwide. Fishing is how many of us choose to relax and reconnect with the natural world. Fish support our lives by providing essential ecosystem services, and they are an integral part of the natural and cultural legacies we pass to future generations. Fisheries resources have commercial, recreational, cultural, and ecological relevance—they help to define who we are and how we live. But how often do we see this forest of fisheries? And how many of us can confidently speak to all the ways in which fisheries matter?

We are regularly presented with opportunities to communicate the value of fisheries and the fisheries profession. We may be asked to provide expert testimony or respond to a press inquiry. We may find ourselves in front of a school group or sportsmans’ organization. Maybe we’re just helping friends decipher a restaurant’s menu. Each is an opportunity to share something meaningful about fisheries resources and the vital role they play in society and the ecosystems on which we all depend. Like anyone learning a new language, we are reluctant to speak in anything but our native tongue of fisheries jargon. We may leave our audiences with a few trees’ worth of facts and figures, but unless we speak a common language we have done little to cultivate a lasting appreciation for the forest and its vital importance.

Making fisheries relevant to the public and increasing the accessibility of fisheries science to lay audiences is one of the pillars of my plan of work as your president. I will be looking to the Science Communication Section and the Society’s communications staff for leadership and tools to help us all better

distill and convey our messages. But I will also be looking to you, our membership, to bring the importance of fisheries into focus. Over the next dozen issues of *Fisheries*, I will be regularly dedicating this space to the forest of fisheries resources and their value. With these monthly columns, I hope to provision AFS members with syntheses and sticky ideas they can use to better communicate the messages of conservation.

Like many scientists of my generation, I grew up with Gary Larson’s famed comic series, *The Far Side*. Improbable, irreverent, or just plain silly, these oddball cartoons often depicted the imagined lives of anthropomorphized animals and the very human nature of scientists. In a favorite of mine, one bespectacled scientist uses an underwater microphone to hurl insults at a fish in a bowl while another diligently takes notes. “One, two...testing...one, two...Hey! Hey, you! You little bug-eyed greasy sardine! Let me tell you something about your sister!” The caption? “Testing whether fish have feelings.” Is this really how scientists test whether fish feel pain? No, of course not. But it brilliantly conveys a larger truth about the difficulties of this type of research: it is immensely challenging to assess the responses of fish to different stimuli because they are so fundamentally different from us. This comic was published more than 30 years ago, yet I recall it vividly every time I read a new publication about the sensory systems of fish. With an image and just a few well-chosen words, Larson created a lasting message. You may be thinking that your science doesn’t belong in a comic strip, but what are infographics and visual abstracts but instructive cartoons?

Without trees, there can be no forest. The techniques, technology, and technicalities of fisheries science allow us to understand and manage fisheries. The details matter, as do in-depth discussions of findings and spirited debates of their implications. The language of fisheries professionals is scientific nuance, and detailed particulars are our currency. But just as we trade our money and words for others when we travel to distant lands, we must learn to engage differently with those outside the fisheries profession. Speak simply, use analogies, share pictures and videos of your work—maybe even sketch a cartoon to get your message across—and don’t lose sight of the forest in all those trees. When we show others why fisheries matter, we advance science-based stewardship and encourage the public to act in support of fisheries conservation.

The next year will provide many opportunities to become more effective science communicators. I look forward to learning with you and from you! 