



PROTECT • CONSERVE • ENHANCE

The Case for Autonomy

by *Ralph W. Abele, Executive Director 1972-1987*



Reorganization, by whatever name, usually involves consolidations and the inferred promise that “this is just what is needed and all will be well.”

As one of the few truly independent administrative agencies left in the country, we think - no, we firmly believe - that the Pennsylvania system of separate independent agencies charged with the protection and management our fish and wildlife resources is right and that the multi-agency department is wrong. We base that conviction on the following reasons:

EFFICIENCY: We maintain that the smaller the organization, the easier it becomes to supervise and train employees so that they perform their assigned tasks at peak efficiency. Communication between its members is quicker and in general we believe that the smaller the organization, the easier it is to control and the closer knit it becomes.

EXPERTISE: We live in an age of specialization, not because it is magic, but because it is humanly impossible to be proficient in everything. The world is full of “environmentalists” today but show me a single person who knows all there is to know about every element of the environment. When we get sick, we want a team of specialists to repair our human ecosystem: likewise, all the backup of specialists needed to find the cure. I have yet to see a wildlife biologist who knows much, if anything, about making a stream or lake survey - nor do we have any fisheries biologists on our staff who are totally capable of making a waterfowl census. Our law enforcement officers have more than enough to do year-round related to

fishing, boating and water pollution abatement, yet I know that in many states conservation law enforcement officers are now expected to enforce the laws and regulations dealing with not only game, but fish, snowmobiles, boats, all-terrain vehicles, littering, forest fire prevention, water pollution, air pollution, and so on, as well as being the primary contact with the public. This is far too much to expect from any one human being no matter how intelligent and capable he may be. The result is that no single phase of the job ever really gets completed.

ECONOMY: There are some who believe that we can save money by consolidating natural resource agencies. I doubt that any state or federal government cost analyst can ever prove it. An in-depth study was made in Pennsylvania in the 50’s and the early 70’s. Among the conclusions reached in the studies was the fact that consolidation would accomplish no significant savings in money.

EFFECTIVENESS: Although within the Fish Commission we do have disagreements on management policies, programs and priorities - not always do all staff members, employees, or the Commissioners agree with our decisions, but I do know that when the chips are down every single one of us is united in our desire and dedication to protect, preserve and produce the best water quality possible in our rivers, streams and lakes, as well as to provide the best fishing and boating opportunities for all who are interested in those types of outdoor recreation.

Extracted from “Straight Talk,”
Pennsylvania Angler, April 1978

In November 2003, the Legislative Budget and Finance Committee released its report updating the “Feasibility of a Combined Fish and Wildlife Commission for Pennsylvania.”

We invited a guest author to provide this issue’s “Protect, Conserve and Enhance” page in response to the new merger study. Ralph Abele wrote “The Case for Autonomy” in April 1978, but his observations are still valid today. In terms of the organizational structure of state fish, wildlife and boating agencies, little has changed in the last 25 years. Pennsylvania was unique then, and we are unique now. In fact, the vast majority of states have always had single agencies for fish and wildlife functions, and they have never experienced the costs and challenges of consolidation.

Ralph made a strong “case for autonomy.” He listed four “Es” in his column as reasons to keep separate, independent agencies: Efficiency, Expertise, Economy and Effectiveness. If he were writing in response to the 2003 Report, he would undoubtedly have added a fifth “E” to his list: Enforcement. Here’s what he might have said:

ENFORCEMENT: The Report suggests cutting the conservation officer force in a combined agency by restricting its duties to police-type work. We attach great importance to the district conservation officer concept. We believe a district conservation officer, familiar with the waterways and sportsmen of his or her district, is the bulwark of sound conservation law enforcement. By attending sportsmen's meetings, meeting the public at sports shows and county fairs, working with conservation groups, participating in youth field days and envirothons, being involved in education programs, and stocking fish, our officers have a far broader and far better perspective on the aquatic resource and the anglers and boaters than they would if their duties were restricted to patrols, office work and court time. The district officer concept, and district officer participation in "non-enforcement" activities, is the foundation of an effective enforcement program.

Ralph W. Abele was, of course, no stranger to this spot in Pennsylvania's Official Fishing and Boating Magazine. His "Straight Talk" column was a highlight of the magazine from 1972 until his retirement in 1987. Ralph had an unequalled commitment to conservation. His column offered astute insights as he tackled big issues that went beyond day-to-day concerns. His clear—often blunt—messages put the "resource first" and told it like it was (and, in many cases, still is).—*Dennis Guise, Deputy Executive Director and Chief Counsel.*