

# The Value of TWS Certification



Courtesy of Thomas Decker

*Thomas Decker is Chief of Operations for the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife.*

## What is the value of TWS Certification?

By Thomas Decker

Recently The Wildlife Society's (TWS) certification program came up in a discussion among members of the Governing Council. The value of certification has arisen before and has been written about at some length. Today, there is certainly a wide set of views on the value of TWS certification.

I have been a certified wildlife biologist since 1993. When I was in graduate school, my advisors encouraged me to pursue TWS certification, not because it would guarantee me specific opportunities or open any particular doors, but because they believed it would be of value to me in a variety of ways over the course of my career. For the past 22 years, I have worked for state fish and wildlife agencies, as a field biologist, a program manager, and now as a department administrator. Some of my colleagues went on in school, got Ph.D.s, got rewarding jobs—and never became certified wildlife biologists. They have contributed to conservation efforts in their areas and have done excellent work. However, my personal experiences have validated my advisors' opinions about the value of TWS certification and I've seen the benefits in a wide variety of ways.

For example, I've testified in courts where attorneys have had me begin by stating that I am a certified wildlife biologist to establish my credibility to the court. I've participated in court cases in which testimony was anchored in conflicting testimony and in which meaningful authority was given to witnesses who were—rather than who were not—certified as wildlife biologists.

At the Department of Fish and Wildlife in Vermont where I work, our staff, most of whom are certified wildlife biologists, routinely testifies at state, local, and regional commissions and boards dealing with energy development and residential growth. Our attorneys tell me that the fact that our biologists are

certified is a valuable asset and greatly strengthens the credibility of their testimony. The staff of our department has earned the reputation of being well-informed and objective and our opinions seem to be valued and respected. Part of this reputation rests, I believe, in the credentials we hold as certified wildlife biologists.

Our department also occasionally responds to editorial or opinion articles in newspapers, particularly when a program or a position we've taken is misunderstood or disputed. When we write such letters, we sometimes purposefully use a certified wildlife biologist as the signatory of the letter to make a particularly strong point. We do this because decision makers in our community—newspaper editors, board members, teachers—have told us that our credentials as certified wildlife biologists raise the status and credibility of our arguments.

Recently, the USDA-Natural Resources Conservation Service in Vermont sent out a Request for Proposals (RFP) to provide technical assistance on WHIP and EQIP Farm Bill programs. This RFP specified that the work had to be reviewed by a certified wildlife biologist. In fact, many consultants are hiring certified wildlife biologists in response to such RFPs.

Our department holds a Government Agency Membership in TWS and also covers the costs when a staff wildlife biologist works to become certified. Like some other state fish and wildlife departments, when we hire a staff biologist, we recruit and rank applicants based in part on whether or not they have certification, and having certification is a notable plus when it comes to the final hire. In short, our department believes that TWS certification adds value, and we back that belief with action. We believe that those who have earned TWS certification add value to agencies that hire them. As an individual, my view is that TWS certification provides a meaningful mechanism that establishes a high standard of excellence for wildlife biologists. This standard is of real



value because we live in a society in which professionals are commonly judged against standards, both high and low.

Certainly, certified wildlife biologists don't have a monopoly on the protection and conservation of our natural resources. Many professionals shoulder this profound responsibility. In my opinion, however, those who have focused and worked to earn certification as a wildlife biologist by TWS have shown not only an unequivocal commitment to the profession, but also have made a public statement about the high standards that they hold. Many decision makers in other arenas, those who look to wildlife professionals for advice, recommendations, and technical assistance, acknowledge and value the high standards that TWS certification represents. ■

## Questioning Certification

By Alan Crossley

I am a certified wildlife biologist. Currently, 22.1 percent of members of The Wildlife Society (TWS) are certified wildlife biologists and another 3.7 percent are associate wildlife biologists. Frankly, I am not surprised that only 26 percent of our current membership has applied for and received some level of certification. The tangible benefits to certification have never been obvious to me.

I have been actively involved in TWS since I was in graduate school at the University of Maine at Orono. While I was finishing my graduate work, I realized that I easily met the minimum requirements for associate wildlife biologist certification, so I submitted my application. I did it with the belief that some day certification would open doors for me professionally, and since I was an active member of TWS, it seemed like the right thing to do.

Not long after, I began working for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. I did not take the next step of applying for full certification because, frankly, it had become obvious to me that there really weren't any benefits of being certified and it was going to cost me a chunk of change that I didn't really have.

I learned in 1992 that the cost of certification was going to increase significantly and the criteria might change enough that perhaps I wouldn't be able to qualify anymore. So out of a desire to get a good deal and concern that I might not meet the future standards, I submitted my application. At that point, my only motivation, other than wanting to take advantage of the good deal, was a sense of professional obligation. I believed in the mission of TWS and felt that if my professional society had a certification program, I should probably participate in it. I got the certificate in the mail, put it in a frame, and hung it on the wall of my office.

I've been in a cube for at least 10 years now and don't have a wall, and so my certificate is filed away—out of sight, out of mind. I have to admit that being certified has meant nothing to me professionally. The few jobs that I have interviewed for in Wisconsin have never mentioned membership in TWS or certification as a prerequisite or even a desirable attribute for consideration for a job. I've never been asked, "Are you a certified wildlife biologist?" in any public or legislative hearing. The fact that I am a certified wildlife biologist hasn't resulted in my getting one penny more in pay than my colleagues who are not. The only tangible benefit I have seen over the past 16 years is that being certified meant that I met the minimum qualifications to be nominated for TWS's Jim McDonough Award.

So why bother? In Wisconsin, the only motivation I see is a sense of professional responsibility and a commitment to lifelong learning. I happen to think those are very good reasons. Yet if the percentage of members who seek certification is to really take off, certification is going to have to produce more tangible benefits than the sense that it is the right thing to do. It has to give one a leg up when applying for a job, or more pay, or a minimum standard for some elements of the job. I gather from some of my colleagues that it does just that in some other states. It doesn't seem to be the case here in Wisconsin or, I am guessing, elsewhere, too.

I think TWS has a fine certification program; what is missing is a reason to apply. Perhaps TWS can create additional incentives for certification beyond eligibility for the Jim McDonough Award. Ideally, employers will begin to use certification as part of their hiring decisions, place value in employees



Courtesy of Alan Crossley

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achieving certification as part of their professional development plans, and use certification as part of their compensation decisions. Call me a dreamer. We're not there yet, at least not in Wisconsin. ■



Courtesy of Michael Hutchins

Michael Hutchins, Ph.D., is the Executive Director/CEO of The Wildlife Society.

## Taking Action on Certification

By Michael Hutchins, Ph.D.

In sharing views on the pros and cons of The Wildlife Society (TWS) certification, Tom Decker and Alan Crossley raise important issues that the TWS Council and I have discussed and are eager to address. Indeed, at our mid-year meeting in March 2008 I presented a report on professional development and certification. At that time I proposed the formation of an ad hoc committee of diverse TWS members to study the issue and offer suggestions on how to improve TWS's certification program to make it more relevant to those who hire and promote wildlife professionals.

The proposal sparked an informative debate. We discussed the merits and drawbacks of certification. Is the application process too onerous? Does certification honor TWS's heritage, while also acknowledging changes to the wildlife profession today? Is the Society's Code of Ethics adequately considered in approving and renewing certification? Should TWS membership be a requirement of certification? Council members, like TWS members themselves, were split on their views about certification's value. One noted an Auburn University alumni survey showing that 70 percent of respondents saw no value in certification, a perception confirmed by Eric Taylor's recent survey of wildlife professionals in the USFWS

and USGS. Still others felt that while certification is not important professionally, it can be very meaningful personally.

Clearly, once an ad hoc committee is formed, its members will have a full plate of issues to discuss. Chief among them:

- Can the application process be streamlined to make it less complex, while still accurately assessing professional education, work experience, and expertise?
- How can we ensure that hiring agencies value certification and factor it into their hiring, pay, and promotional procedures?
- Should those who become Certified Wildlife Biologists also be required to become members of TWS?
- How can we assess the ways in which different states use and support certification?
- Does certification have the "teeth" to address ethical transgressions?
- How can TWS more effectively promote the value of certification to members, state and federal hiring agencies, the legal community, and the public at large?
- Should certification be expanded beyond traditional wildlife biologists to include other relevant disciplines within the ever-expanding wildlife profession, such as technicians, educators, animal behaviorists, reproductive biologists and ecologists?

Three decades ago TWS began its certification program because, as a professional organization, it is committed to the sound stewardship of wildlife resources under the guidance of well-educated, experienced, and dedicated wildlife biologists who meet certain ethical and professional standards. Now TWS Council and staff welcome the opportunity to work with a committee that will address concerns about the certification process and enhance the value of certification for wildlife professionals today and into the future. ■

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- Recognized training & expertise
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To learn about TWS certification, go to [www.wildlife.org/certification](http://www.wildlife.org/certification).