The issue of SAF membership: An elite or broad organization?

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I n 1948 a group of consulting foresters sought to become a division of the SAF (something skin to one of our working groups); however, Henry Clepper, then SAF’s executive secretary, believed that there were too many divisions already, so he decided not to approve the proposal. The result of that denial, according to the organization’s history, was the birth of the Association of Consulting Foresters (ACF).

Today, there are two strong professional organizations representing professional foresters in the United States, the SAF and the ACF, and the decision that led to the creation of the latter has had a significant effect on SAF's evolution and development. In retrospect, it appears that the decision that led to the ACF's creation was made with little concern for its potential implications. Whether or not indeed the case is a matter for historians, but what's not up for debate is the fact that so called safe decisions, intended not to "rock the boat," may have greater consequences than more proactive alternatives.

Last March, the SAF Council approved development of an accreditation program for Natural Resources Management (NRM) programs. These are not the old conservation majors of long ago—typically, NRM programs have rigorous science and math requirements, as well as resource management major requirements just as sophisticated as forestry's. The Council's approval was based on the findings of the Task Force on Accreditation of Territorial Ecosystem Management Programs, which recommended accreditation of NRM programs because it saw a void—not unlike the one in 1948 that resulted in the ACF—both for some sort of credentialing of NRM programs and their graduates, and for a professional society to give NRM graduates a home. The Council agreed and voted in favor of the accreditation of NRM graduates. Now, in the wake of the Council's decision, a second void has appeared. Where are these newly credentialed professionals going to find a home? Will they organize their own professional society like the founders of ACF, or will an existing society embrace them? The questions seem kind of foolish, since you'd expect the professional society to be the accreditation to also become the professional home.

SAF membership has been declining by about 3 percent annually. That continuing trend has created an SAF that is not sustainable. The SAF Council is working hard to reverse the trend, and the Society has welcomed professionals from the "broad area of forestry" for quite awhile. However, these closely allied professionals have not been flocking to SAF and do not see us as a professional "home." To see what we mean, consider SAF's recently developed accreditation program for urban forestry programs. The early trend is not encouraging, which suggests that developing accreditation programs without developing the organizational infrastructure to embrace those who enroll in them is self-defeating. After all, would you want an accredited degree from a professional society that did not have membership categories and organizational divisions that embraced your professional discipline?

The professional societies and educational programs that encompass forestry and other natural resource management subject areas are changing fast. According to a 2010 study of undergraduate enrollment at the National Association of University Forest Resource Programs (NAUFPR) by Terry Shirk and Patricia Layton that highlights current trends in natural resources education, in 1980, forestry programs accounted for about 47 percent of natural resources program enrollment; wildlife and fisheries programs, about 16 percent; NRM about 15 percent, and others (wood, recreation, water, soils, range, etc.) about 22 percent. In 2009, forestry was down to 22 percent, wildlife and fisheries was up to 22 percent, NRM rose to 37 percent, and others were at 15 percent. Now, combine these numbers with recent Bureau of Labor Statistics that project 20,500 employed in NRM in 2018 and 12,500 foresters in the same year.

Given this data, the critical question for SAF members is whether we should try to broaden our Core Values, Mission, and membership, while simultaneously holding fast to our forestry identity and heritage. The SAF Council has been addressing these strategic planning issues via the framework outlined in Go to Great, a book by Jim Collins (HarperCollins Publishers, 2001) that describes the planning process used by successful organizations. The core process addresses three circles: what the organization is passionate about, what the organization is best at, and what drives its economic engine. Collins calls this the "Hedgehog Concept," and our broader view of SAF envision a hedgehog like the one in Figure 1, where we best connect all three circles to reinforce each other in determining SAF's future.

Obviously, the Council must address the implications of accrediting NRM programs, as doing so will lead to a set of related dynamics that goes something like this: SAF fills the void for accreditation of NRM programs; a second void develops, and some organization fills the need for a home for these professionals; if SAF also fills the second void, the question is, "To what extent will SAF have to change?" Is SAF willing to make the necessary changes, including developing broader Core Values and writing a new Mission Statement as shown in Figure 1? That is a question for the membership. But the question also needs to be addressed forthrightly and in terms of our strategic plan.

President Dzengelskii recently summarized this situation succinctly and asked, "Who do we want and need as members?" He described two options that contrasted the organizational dynamics well, while recognizing there are many options. We'll refer to them as an "Elite SAF" and a "Broader SAF." The first option means SAF with traditional forestry graduates and a few allied professionals as members. Membership of this SAF would be small, close to what we have now (although we don't know exactly when membership will bottom out). The other option is a broader SAF that truly embraces all allied professionals. It would not just include NRM graduates, but likely would incorporate some of related professional societies. Could we even reverse that decision of 1948 and find a home for ACF within SAF? Table 1 illustrates possible differences between the two options.

Of course, forestry is distinctive in that it alone emphasizes forest sustainability and management of that resource's ecological, economic, and social parameters. Foresters are the experts on forests and timber, and society's fundamental need for wood and timber is the foundation.
University of Idaho SAF Student Chapter Holds Seminar Series on Current Natural Resources Issues

Faced with waning interest in and attendance at its bi-weekly meetings, the SAF Student Chapter at the University of Idaho decided it needed to do something if the chapter was going to survive. So, after much discussion, the chapter’s remaining members decided to launch a Graduate Speaker Seminar series, which they hoped would spark greater interest in the chapter and its activities, bring people from the university’s natural resources-related disciplines together, and get graduates and undergraduates together to discuss scientific topics.

The chapter’s efforts paid off so well that, Anthony S. Davis, co-faculty adviser to the student chapter and an assistant professor in the College of Natural Resources, believes that this approach could serve as a model for other chapters faced with declining participation.

“Attendance at meetings was weak; we were down to fewer than 10 people at our meetings,” he said. “Our leadership group convened and felt that a unique approach (like this) needed to be taken to overcome the reality that seems to run throughout our student body. Now, attendance has been between 25 and 40 people, and membership is up to more than 20 students.”

Each seminar highlights a graduate student’s research in a natural resources-related subject, such as forestry, fisheries, wildlife, and range science and management. Then, after each presentation, there is an informal question-and-answer session with the speaker.

Graduate students in the SAF chapter appreciate the opportunity to hone their public speaking and presentation skills.

“As a graduate student, I was given a chance to work on a premise and see my work become more familiar with the brethren of cutting-edge research of my peers,” said Claud Hoffman, a doctoral student studying fire science.

Davis agrees and says the experience is invaluable, especially for these students who haven’t had the chance to present their work.

“Our graduate students are able to present in front of an audience that is interested in the subject matter, aware of many facets of natural resources, and non-threatening,” said Davis. “For some graduate students, this may be their first time having to not only present their research, but defend it through a question-and-answer session. By increasing their comfort level in front of an audience, our graduate students will be more effective at communicating their findings.”

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