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

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In 1948 a group of consulting foresters sought to become a division of the SAF (something akin to one of our working groups); however, Henry Clepper, then SAF’s executive secretary, believed that there were already too many divisions and 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 forest managers 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 that is indeed the case is a matter for historians, but what is 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 Terrestrial 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 the newly accredited 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 welcome 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 SAF as a professional society that goes something like this: “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 embodied your professional discipline?”

The professional societies and educational programs that encompass forestry and other natural resource management subjects are changing fast. According to a 2010 study of undergraduate enrollment in forest science, about 47 percent of natural resource program enrollment, wildlife and fisheries programs, and other (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 data on the Bureau of Labor Statistics that project 25,500 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 Good 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 decisions” 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 SAF will 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 Dziengelski 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, recognizing there are many options. We’ll refer to them as an “Elite SAF” and a “Broader SAF.” The first option means an 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 what 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 founda-
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 advisor 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 would be needed to keep the people coming."

Each seminar highlights a graduate student’s research in a natural resources-related subject, such as forestry, fisheries, wildlife, 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 present their public speaking and presentation skills.

As a graduate student, I was given the chance to work on presentations in an NAUFRP graduate program, which 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, graduate students will be more effective at communicating their findings.”

Has your SAF chapter done something new and noteworthy? If it has, then let us know about it. Simply contact Society Affairs editor Joseph Smith at (866) 897-8720, ext. 134 or smithj@anfsnet.org.

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