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# What Makes a Wildlifer Stand out from the Rest?

## WE FOUND 29 HABITS AND PRACTICES ADOPTED BY EFFECTIVE FISH AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT PROFESSIONALS

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Credit: Wendy Sue Gilman

▲ Fish and wildlife management is complex and budgets are shrinking, but some key practices can make managers more effective.

**W**e've all worked with people who are exceptional at their jobs. Such seemingly gifted people may be a peer, someone you supervise, your supervisor or your conservation partners in another agency or NGO. These are the fish and wildlife professionals who, in addition to being good biologists, technicians or researchers, routinely accomplish program or project objectives in ways that leave you thinking, "Wow, that was really good work! How do they do it?"

Ever wonder what sets these people apart? How do they think and what do they do to create habitually effective strategies? Ever wished you could help yourself or others be that effective? We have! Our curiosity led us to try to identify the habits and practices of fish and wildlife professionals that made some of them consistently high performers.

The complexity of fish and wildlife management felt by professionals working at all levels in state

and federal agencies and conservation NGOs, combined with a shrinking workforce and simultaneous loss of seasoned professionals, fueled our inquiry. Consequently, a daunting challenge — delivering consistently excellent performance at all levels — is facing public wildlife management at a time when most workforces and budgets are shrinking. This challenge is multifaceted, so we set out to illuminate habits and practices contributing to reasoning and judgment exercised by professionals of all ranks in a fish and wildlife organization, not just the highest echelons. Identifying and cultivating these habits and practices (or recruiting people who possess them) is necessary if state and federal agencies and conservation NGOs are to adapt to meet current and future conservation challenges with success.

In practice, developing reasoning and judgment skills among fish and wildlife professionals at all levels in an organization is largely relegated to on-the-job training. This often means trial-and-error learning and, if one is fortunate, informal mentoring by more experienced and successful colleagues. Such a hit-or-miss approach to learning vital habits and practices is not a reliable strategy for achieving consistent personal or organizational excellence. We can do better.

Leadership and management effectiveness has been discussed, studied and taught in training sessions offered to fish and wildlife professionals for decades. Though it seems the topic has been dealt with exhaustively, most of the available insight and training on leadership and management effectiveness targets mid- to upper-level administrators. Some aspects of management effectiveness and opportunities to encourage personal and organizational



improvement in agencies and NGOs have not been addressed. This situation can be rectified by a more egalitarian, inclusive approach focusing on quality of reasoning and judgment exercised by professionals at all levels, whether or not they hold formal leadership positions.

### Professional reasoning and judgment

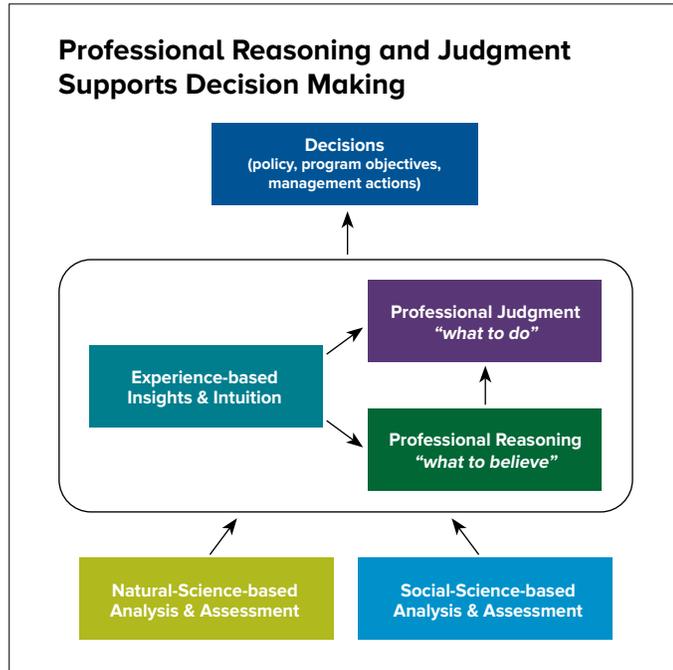
Professional reasoning and judgment go hand in hand. They are different but interdependent processes. They are skills needed by professionals of any kind to be consistently effective. In our conceptualization of decision making, professional judgment is supported by reasoning and experience-based intuition. Reasoning is informed by scientific theories and facts, context-specific observation and research and consideration of pertinent ethics. Intuition is informed by internalized knowledge and unconscious processing of experience to produce insight. While intuition involves an unconscious process, these habits and practices can improve it.

We interpret professional reasoning to be the process whereby practitioners put specific evidence and general knowledge into a form useful for judgments about fish and wildlife management in a particular situation. We see judgment as the ability to make well-thought-out decisions or draw sound conclusions — a process where an opinion or evaluation is arrived at by discernment and evidence. You can think of professional reasoning as the process one uses to come to an understanding regarding *what to believe* about a particular situation, whereas judgment is the process of making a conclusion about *what to do* in that situation.

Based on the premise that high-quality reasoning and judgment are vital assets for effective performance, we sought greater understanding of these processes among consistently high-performing fish and wildlife professionals. We also believe that value accruing to an organization from staff possessing such competencies is not limited to formal leaders. Anyone making decisions or contributing to decisions of nearly any type, at any level, can benefit themselves and their organization by improving quality of reasoning and judgment.

### Top habits and practices

Our project drew upon the insight of fish and wildlife professionals considered to be highly effective



Credit: Decker et al

and successful. We sought their ideas about what constitutes consistently excellent performance by public fish and wildlife management professionals. We emphasized professional reasoning and judgment, not leadership, per se. The basic question we posed was, how do highly effective public fish and wildlife professionals think and what do they do (their habits and practices) that results in their being regarded as consistently successful? By effective and successful, we mean consistently contribute to or make well-reasoned, durable judgments that solve both modest and complex problems and achieve objectives.

We conducted a two-round, expert panel study during spring 2019. High-performing professionals were identified by our team and by referrals made by others with broad experience in fish and wildlife management across the U.S. The sample of experts included staff from state (mostly) and federal agencies and conservation NGOs. Collectively they resided in 35 states from all four administrative regions of the Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies. We received input from 71 respondents in the first round and 61 in the second. Although we focused primarily on state fish and wildlife agencies, the results will likely apply throughout the conservation community.

Panelists identified 29 habits and practices that contribute to reasoning and judgment of consistently high-performing fish and wildlife professionals.



We clustered these habits and practices into five categories:

- Critically inquisitive and continuously learning
- Multi-level, integrative systems thinking
- Self-disciplined
- Balanced approach
- Interactions with others

Each habit and practice is described briefly below.

### Critically inquisitive and continuously learning

Panelists indicate that fish and wildlife professionals who demonstrate consistently effective reasoning and judgment might be thought of as “critically inquisitive and continuously learning.” That is, they think or act:

1. **Skeptically/critically:** constructively critical; skeptical; not accepting assumptions, data, analyses or conclusions uncritically.
2. **Reflectively:** routinely being self-critical and evaluating performance for the purpose of adapting and improving.
3. **Open-mindedly:** taking a fresh look at a situation and searching for factors that may have been missed in the past in an attempt to improve understanding of the social-ecological system in which the management problem is embedded.
4. **Flexibly/adaptively:** always reserving the right to change their mind (and expecting others

to be able to do so) if new understanding of a situation indicates that is prudent.

5. **Inquisitively/curiously:** learning as much as possible about an issue in order to understand how the social-ecological system in which the management opportunity or problem is embedded works and to identify probable impacts of manipulation; asking lots of “how” and “why” questions and seeking new evidence to support or refute existing perceptions.

### Multi-level, integrative systems thinking

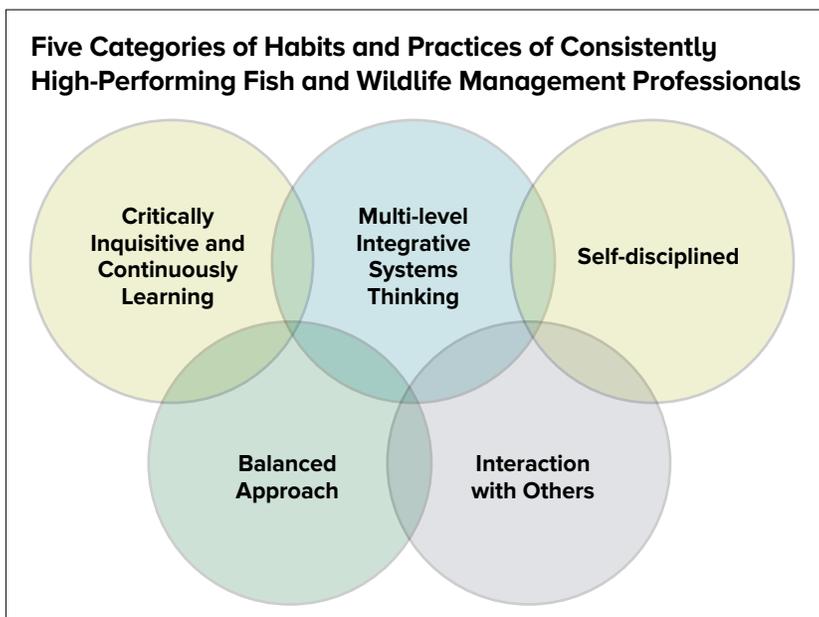
The panelists associate “thinking big” with fish and wildlife professionals who demonstrate effective reasoning and judgment. These professionals are interested in both the trees and the forest. They think or act:

6. **Holistically/broadly:** being mindful that any specific situation is embedded in a larger context that either affects or is affected by management actions at any level; being able to see the whole situation by studying its parts, to understand how they all fit together and identify what’s missing.
7. **Broadly/inclusively:** seeking information about and trying to include any primary and secondary stakeholders (potentially affected persons) in a management decision or action, attempting to secure their input and involvement.
8. **Creatively/divergently/imaginatively:** looking for opportunities to adapt or create entirely new solutions to a problem at hand without undue concern about diverging from conventional practice when situations call for it.

### Self-disciplined

The panel study revealed that several habits or practices indicative of being motivated to bring organization and rigor to a task in order to see it through and doing so with impartiality and sensitivity to competing ethical considerations are critical to effective reasoning and judgment. Thus, consistently high-performing fish and wildlife professionals think or act:

9. **Scientifically:** approaching technical assessments by means of scientific methods and principles; evaluating the scientific methods used to address an issue to ensure the conclusions or recommendations are sound.
10. **Logically:** seeking understanding of a problem in a way that shows clear, sound reasoning



Credit: Decker et al



and is obviously sensible to others under the circumstances.

11. **Systematically:** approaching technical assessments following a predetermined plan in a fashion that can be recognized as methodical (e.g., manager’s model, structured decision-making), with clear focus on stated objectives.
12. **Analytically:** examining things very carefully by taking an organized, thoughtful approach that helps define complex issues and resisting an unorganized stream-of-consciousness approach to thinking about a problem.
13. **Economically/efficiently:** working in a well-organized and competent way that gets good results using no more funding, time, social capital or other resources than necessary to achieve the desired outcome. Concepts like “return on investment” are considered in the appropriate social and ecological context.
14. **Impartially/clearly/objectively:** recognizing and avoiding being influenced by one’s own personal feelings or opinions or by others who expect special treatment at the expense of being unfair to others or dismissive of undesirable effects on the resource.
15. **Ethically:** operating in a morally good or correct manner that avoids or minimizes harm to people or the environment; routinely considering disparate ethical positions in relation to a management issue.
16. **Patiently:** tolerating delays and problems without becoming overly annoyed or anxious and continuing to work on a project with a positive attitude despite difficulties encountered.

### Balanced approach

Panel study participants observed that effective fish and wildlife professionals take a “balanced approach” to their exercise of reasoning and judgment. Such professionals think or act:

17. **Pragmatically:** operating in a sensible and realistic way that considers both practical and theoretical perspectives.
18. **Proactively/strategically:** anticipating and being ready to control a situation rather than just responding to it after the fact and doing so in a way that contributes to the achievement of long-term or overall aims and interests.



Credit: Decker et al

19. **Purposefully:** being oriented toward achievement of established objectives rather than being overly focused on process.
20. **Politically:** building a clear understanding of political ramifications of alternative choices without allowing those realities to reduce integrity of the biological, ecological, social and ethical assessments conducted to serve decision-making.
21. **Flexibly/adaptably:** accommodating change in process, protocol or program as needed to adapt to changing circumstances.

▲ This word cloud visualization shows the relative importance of 29 habits/practices of consistently high-performing fish and wildlife management professionals.

### Interactions with Others

The panelists associate several habits/practices that might be considered “emotional intelligence” with fish and wildlife professionals who demonstrate effective reasoning and judgment. Consistently high-performing professionals think or act:

22. **Attentively/listening actively:** asking stakeholders, co-workers and partners to share their thoughts, as well as listening to those offered unsolicited, whether or not they come from familiar or novel sources or whether they represent views consistent or inconsistent with agency policy, professional convention or one’s own beliefs.
23. **Collaboratively:** working in teams, populated with individuals from within and outside the agency who are willing to work together to achieve shared conservation goals.
24. **Humbly/respectfully:** showing politeness, deference and humility when working with others, thereby avoiding appearing self-important or better than others.



## Highest Priority Habits and Practices

Habits/Practices	Description
Thinking/acting <b>skeptically/critically/reflectively</b>	Constructively skeptical; not accepting assumptions, data, analyses or conclusions uncritically and <i>being self-critical</i> for continuous improvement.
Thinking/acting <b>open-mindedly/flexibly/adaptively</b>	Taking a fresh look at a situation and searching for factors that may have been missed in the past to improve understanding of the coupled social-ecological system in which the management problem is embedded; always reserving the right to change their mind if new understanding of a situation indicates that is prudent.
Thinking/acting <b>holistically/broadly</b>	Being mindful that any specific situation is embedded in a larger context that either affects or is affected by fish and wildlife management actions at any level; being able to see the sum for its parts and how they all fit together and to identify what's missing.
Thinking/acting <b>ethically</b>	Operating in a morally good or correct manner that avoids harm to people, wildlife or the environment; routinely considering disparate ethical positions vis-a-vis a management issue.
Thinking/acting <b>proactively/strategically</b>	Anticipating and being ready to take action to control a situation rather than just responding to it after the fact and doing so in a way that contributes to the achievement of long-term or overall aims and interests.
Active/attentive <b>listening</b>	Asking stakeholders, co-workers and partners to share their thoughts, as well as listening to those offered unsolicited, whether or not they come from familiar or novel sources or whether they represent views consistent or inconsistent with agency policy.
Thinking/acting <b>collaboratively</b>	Working in teams, populated with individuals from within and outside the agency who are willing to work together to achieve shared conservation goals.
Thinking/acting <b>transparently/truthfully/honestly</b>	Being truthful and candid, lacking obfuscation or deceit and behaving in a way that expresses honesty.

For the “top-5” rating, “skeptically/critically” and “reflectively” were combined because they were together at the time panelists were asked to prioritize. We separated them afterward based on subsequent review of comments that suggested enough difference in them to warrant making them distinct items.

- 25. Transparently/truthfully/honestly:** being truthful and candid, lacking obfuscation or deceit and behaving in a way that demonstrates honesty.
- 26. Compassionately/empathetically:** readily comprehending and genuinely identifying with other people’s feelings, attitudes and circumstances.
- 27. Appreciatively/supportively:** showing gratitude for contributions to conservation made by others.
- 28. Passionately:** openly conveying strong feelings, emotions or beliefs without intimidating others.
- 29. Optimistically/positively:** taking a favorable view of events or conditions and working in a way that expresses hope and confidence about the future.

Not unexpectedly, given our method, all habits and practices were assessed as moderately or very important by a majority of panelists. Even so, eight of them received a top five priority ranking by 25% or more panelists.

In addition to identifying these 29 habits and practices, some other potentially valuable observations are evident from the input of the expert panel. For example, comments indicate that some agencies need to consider how they do their work (openly and collaboratively) and with whom they do it (the breadth of stakeholders involved). Members of the expert panel also emphasized the need to improve the culture of fish and wildlife agencies by incorporating the identified habits and practices



into agencies' processes and procedures, including hiring qualifications and performance expectations of employees.

The challenges fish and wildlife professionals face may be daunting, but they are not insurmountable. Our study identifies professional habits and practices that are believed to promote consistent success in developing recommendations, making decisions and implementing actions of all types and at all levels in public fish and wildlife management. Agencies and NGOs may be able to accelerate development of highly effective staff by offering training and establishing work protocols that encourage staff to incorporate these habits and practices.

Our inquiry was made possible by support from the Cornell University Center for Conservation Social Sciences, an Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies multistate conservation grant and our employers. As a follow-up, we are currently working on self-assessment tools and a guide to aid individuals in professional development focused on the 29 habits and practices. ■



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