

Why We Need a Canadian AFS Office

W. J. Christie

The issue of Canadian association with the American Fisheries Society (AFS) has probably been addressed many times over the years, but my personal experience with it has been limited to two occasions: in 1964 and 1982. In the first effort, Ken Loftus and I made an appeal for AFS sponsorship of the Canadian Committee for Fisheries Research (CCFFR), but nothing came of the effort. In the second case, I worked on an AFS Self-Evaluation Committee which expressed considerable interest in developing the Canadian wing of the Society. This led to a telephone poll of Canadian biologists that, while admittedly limited as a sample, revealed little interest in greater involvement in AFS affairs. In different ways both examples indicated that Canadians were concerned about losing something important by being absorbed in the large American membership. Since we offered no real strengthening of the Society in either case, it is not surprising that there has been no formal Section or Division status defined for Canadian members. There have been many important changes over the past 8 years, however, and it seems very appropriate to me that the Canadian Concerns Committee is currently addressing itself to this thorny but important question.

I haven't seen the figures, but there is little doubt that the emergence of five (all or partly) Canadian Chapters reflects a recent increase in Canadian membership in the Society. It matters, of course, whether this is an absolute or proportional increase but it is even more important to know how many potential members there are. A "snapshot" look at that question suggests it is a large number. The *Canadian Directory of Fisheries and Aquatic Scientists* (CJFAS Spec. Publ. 1986) lists 2,351 names, while the 1988 *AFS Membership Directory* gives only 522 Canadian names. There were 192 co-occurring names. There are people on both lists whose professional orientation would limit their interest in AFS to the *Transactions*, and I equally believe there are AFS members who quite likely were not reached by the survey on which the Canadian list of scientists was compiled. If 192 is a reasonable approximation of the AFS membership identified (38%), the data suggest a potential AFS membership in the order of 900 names, or double what we have now. That is obviously a risky extrapolation, but it does support my personal observation that there are many Canadians involved in fisheries-related work who could be AFS members if they saw advantage in joining.

There is a "Catch 22" in our situation: it is doubtful that we have yet enough members to convince the Society that there are deficiencies in the present north-south linkages via the Divisions and Chapters, and we won't get more

members until we can assure the missing participants that their concerns can be met by special status. I'm convinced we can rely on the support of the Society for any reasonable arrangement which will expand the membership, and deal with the concerns, but it seems to me that the solution will lie with taking on the latter issue first. A very basic approach to providing assurance to the Canadian hold-outs that their distinctive needs will be met is to establish a Canadian office. It would be a "risk capital" investment for the Society to some extent, but it is one worth (say) a 5-year trial, in view of the potential strengthening of the Society and the potential benefits for Canadian professionals.

The concerns vary across our country, but there are some common threads in the comments I hear. Consider the three related but basic arguments for having a professional association:

1. *Continuing the "Learned Society" tradition.* Applied aquatic ecology emerged later in Canada than in the U.S., and still remains closer to the academic and research traditions. The trend towards the applied side has been evident to the north of the border as well, and the total number of non-academic biologists has increased by several orders since the 1950s. By contrast, their participation in CCFFR has not increased proportionally over the last 3 decades, and this can be attributed to factors such as our geographical isolation from one another and government reluctance to fund attendance at professional meetings. In my view, the emergence of the AFS Chapters was both a consequence of the professional growth and a reflection of the persisting desire in our ranks to retain the scientific tradition which has distinguished CCFFR from its inception.

The first "F" in CCFFR was changed from "Freshwater" to "For" some years ago because many of us wanted to see a better linkage between the freshwater and marine scientists. The effort was not particularly successful, and it remains a problem that part of the issue of low AFS participation relates to the failure of these two groups to find "common cause." The numerical disparity between these two groups is relatively larger in Canada, and I argue that this is a significant item in the list of our national concerns on that account alone.

2. *Promoting professional standards and development.* High standards of training and professional performance ensure adequate public service and everyone subscribes to the idea. Professional associations also exist for more selfish reasons: applied ecologists have historically received little recognition and inadequate remuneration. In Canada "union-style" activities by small groups such as ours have been frowned on by government employers, and they are particularly impractical because of our national geography. This in itself should have made AFS attractive to many potential members, except for the fact that we don't use lobbying as a (visible) part of the political process in this country. Also,

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there is a feeling—not widely talked about—that professional standards are not identical on the two sides of the border. It is hard to tell how large a factor this is in the low Canadian interest, but it can't help if potential members are not joining AFS because of lack of respect for certification.


3. *Expressing environmental concerns in ways that are not constrained by policies of the government employers.* The first two items above are areas in which AFS should acknowledge and accept that Canadians are a little different, but this issue is the one in which we can all find "common cause" and through which we can strengthen the Society continentally. The formation of the Canadian Society of Wildlife and Fishery Biologists and its successor, the Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists (CSEB), reflected the deep concerns of biologists that they are not heard in environmental matters. I believe the frequent articles in *Fisheries* on endangered species and other environmental topics reflect the real concerns of both national groups of biologists.

There is a large group of applied ecologists across the continent that lacks a coherent voice in environmental matters. This has been particularly the case in Canada because of our national geography, but this may change soon. The three main associations representing professional aquatic interests (Canadian Society of Limnologists, CSEB, AFS) are now recognizing Environmentally Sustainable Economic Development (ESED) as the appropriate contemporary focus. As a group, we are familiar with the recommendations of the World Commission on Environment and Economy (The Brundtland Commission), understand that ESED is now policy across the country, and are ready for the next logical step, which is to define organizational objectives. Until now, the flow of information about the implications of the Brundtland Commission findings has reached more Canadians than U.S. counterparts. This suggests two things: that AFS can play a profoundly important role in disseminating ESED information to fishery biologists everywhere, so that they can play their natural and important role at this critical moment in global time; and that Canadian governments have created infra-structures (multi-sector Round Tables) to create Regional and National Conservation Strategies. The time for Canadian AFS members to become

involved in the whole consultative process is *now*. If this point needs any further emphasis, I can remind Canadians that the National Council of Resource and Environment Ministers recommended the formulation of a National Strategy for Sustainable Fisheries at its May 1989, Victoria, British Columbia, conference. The hope is that this can be completed and made part of the Canadian contribution to the 1992 World Conference on Environment and Economy in Brazil. This process is just now getting under way, and it urgently needs the active involvement of fishery biologists.

In the past, environmental issues per se have not tended to provide unification for the associations of biologists. Local "Save the . . ." campaigns obtain support from us, but it is hard to make our contributions to any particular issue proportional to our knowledge and backgrounds because we only mobilize sporadically and reactively. Even more important, these have almost invariably been "environmentalist vs developer" issues which forced us to be protagonists and advocates, rather than advisors who could collectively work towards the reduction of adversarialism in the broader public interest. This can be changed once biologists identify ESED as a means of personal participation in the fascinating new business of environment-economy policy formulation.

I see the general process of involvement in ESED first as an outwardly flowing communications system in which the biologists mobilize and then combine views with other aquatic interests, including native peoples, sport and commercial fishermen, unions, academics, naturalists, and governments. Obviously the views of any of these interest groups can and will be registered in various ways, but an effective approach will be to try to achieve consensus on policy advice within the aquatic group, and then to enter discussions with other economic sectors.

In Canada this should occur via the Round Tables. It needs to become a fast communications loop which recovers and disseminates information from the global arena and all intermediate levels back to local scene. The Sustainable Fisheries Network has been formed as a National and Regional facilitator for just such a purpose. The role of the professional in this process is going to be vital, and I am confident that a strengthened Canadian AFS cadre will be in the forefront of the whole exciting enterprise of defining an ESED future. 



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