

# Leadership in Conservation: A Bird in Hand is not Enough

Leadership Education Program Contributes to Conservation Community



by Sally Guynn, Ph.D.

Whoever said, "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush" probably didn't own a good shotgun. Neither was this person thinking about the problem of finding qualified leaders for wildlife agencies. A good leader who retires cannot simply be replaced by just any good biologist from the ranks. Currently, many conservation leaders are retiring while demands for wildlife conservation are multiplying beyond strapped budgets.

Acting on this problem, several of the most respected conservation organizations and agencies in America have created an exceptional leadership development initiative – the National Conservation Leadership Institute (NCLI). The founding groups included the Boone and Crockett Club, the Conservation Fund, the Izaak Walton League, the Wildlife Management Institute, the Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation.

They gathered in 2004 to consider data on upcoming retirements: more than 75% of those in state fish and game leadership positions were planning to retire by 2015. Now in its fourth year of operation, the NCLI has become natural resource conservation's leadership development strategy, and is far exceeding initial expectations.

## NCLI is Unique

Several things distinguish NCLI from other good leadership development programs: its design, participant diversity, and significant departure from teaching leadership as a set of traits or skills. The curriculum is anchored by two men from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government: Marty Linsky and Hugh O'Doherty, who teach an adaptive leadership™ focus along with prominent conservation leaders who ground the subject matter.

NCLI equips future leaders with a different lens – seeing leadership as learnable actions instead of inherited traits of personality. Fellows are trained to discern the difference between maintaining routine functions and engaging forces of change. They learn to apply appropriate technical skills to issues of routine and adaptive leadership skills to the issue of change – however dynamic, messy and nonlinear they are. As graduates of NCLI can tell you, leading requires much more than a tidy toolbox of leadership tools. Alumnus

Chris Jensen of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service says, "For conservation leaders facing dramatic changes in demographics, resource constraints, and looming global issues with few concrete answers...this is a program that can reorient your leadership perspectives."

Each year, from February to mid-May, individuals are nominated online at [www.conservationleadership.org](http://www.conservationleadership.org) by their Executive Directors of state fish and wildlife agencies, federal natural resource agencies, NGOs, tribes, and natural resource-related industries to compete for one of 36 spaces in NCLI. The nominees are screened for high potential to apply new leadership skills. Once accepted, Fellows join in two weeks of residency and six months working on a project. In their projects, they engage real issues or challenges facing their organizations and apply adaptive leadership principles to solve them.

## Return on Investment

Short-term measures show improvement in the Fellows' leadership performance, interpersonal skills, managing change, ability to create a motivating work environment, and their professional networks. Considering that Fellows are already high-performers, these improvements are quite amazing.

Dr. Jon Gassett, Director of Kentucky Game and Fish and a graduate of NCLI describes, "For me, NCLI was a life-changing experience and I'm sending as many of my staff every year as they will allow. I'm seeing these high-level staff coming back and performing to an even higher level. NCLI is truly a remarkable program in leadership development. It really merits the support of the full conservation community."

Graduates return to work with more courage and self-confidence to step up to vacancies in leadership. This is creating excitement and renewing the vigor of professional wildlife staffs with the knowledge that behind every leader are highly-trained protégés.

*NCLI is a 501(c)3 tax exempt organization sponsored by the generous support of some of America's leading conservation organizations. Support from sponsors and individual gift giving keeps tuition to a minimum. Visit [www.conservationleadership.org](http://www.conservationleadership.org) for more information.*

