



THE WAY I SEE IT

COMBAT BIOLOGY

We need to work together and start practicing conservation that works.

Words by Richard L. Knight, Ph.D. Photo by Heather Knight.

“You cannot save the land apart from the people or the people apart from the land. To save either, you must save both.”—Wendell Berry

For years I have heard ranch and logging families tell stories of how natural resource practitioners show indifference when dealing with them. Either through lack of empathy or by being carried away with their authority, there are too many conservation professionals who are ineffec-

cies took a top-down approach to resources and the families who used them. The time for top-down “we’re in charge” resource management has come and gone. Agencies, at best, can still be partners in managing the resources, but they *must* share this authority with the users of those resources. America’s respect for government has sadly plummeted and it may be decades before it comes back. The good news is that agencies are increasingly aware of this truth and are

shocked when I read that is an understatement. Clearly, the previous instructor was signaling to the students that they would learn how to defeat the users of the resources—whether they were outfitters, ranchers, loggers or irrigators. I changed that learning objective to capture what Wendell Berry once said: *“In the years to come we will need ranchers, loggers, farmers and irrigators as teachers, mentors, and critics.”*

Today’s educational system is increasingly aware that for conservation to work, it must harness three dimensions—the human one, the economic one, and the ecological one. Historically, we emphasized just the ecological dimension. This approach ensured that the three dimensions were in perpetual conflict. Only when they are pulling together in harness do we have conservation that works.

Today we see land-grant schools reconnecting with their historic responsibilities—for when land does well by people and people do well by land, we have conservation. Wendell Berry sank the stake when he penned the words that open this essay. The good news is that higher education has heard this message and is making the appropriate adjustments. In the years to come, we should expect to see more conservation practitioners who realize that the fates of people and our planet are entwined. For conservation to work it has to include people, but for people’s economies to prosper we have to steward the land. This is a shared responsibility that

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Rick Knight rides Dottie to check heifers on his place in the Livermore Valley of Colorado. The grasses are native cool-season perennials.

tive when dealing with families whose livelihoods are tied to the land.

Why? Having once worked for a natural resource agency and now teaching conservation at a land-grant university, I see two possible reasons. One is the culture of the agencies managing natural resources and the other is the educational emphasis in universities.

First, look at the culture of the agencies managing our resources. Historically, agen-

making adjustments—though it will take time.

Second, consider our educational system that produces natural resource practitioners—is that also mired in the past? Yes, but thank goodness it is changing as well. As an example, the capstone course in my department is titled “Protected Areas, Working Lands, and Livelihoods.” Only a few years back it would have been “Protected Areas.” An even more stark contrast to how times have changed is the capstone course in our college, which I taught for 12 years. When I inherited the course, one of the learning objectives was “combat biology.” To say I was

neither one—working families or resource agencies—can accomplish alone. Why we missed this obvious truth decades earlier, I’m not sure. At least today, we can perhaps forgive the omissions of our elders and begin again, honoring our most sacred connections between people and land. ■

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