A Matter of Trust

AS STAKEHOLDER VALUES CHANGE, HOW DO WILDLIFE PROFESSIONALS STAY RELEVANT?

By Shawn J. Riley, Jenna A. Van Fossen, J. Kevin Ford and Taylor Lauricella

Credit: Ryan Hagerty/ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

In wildlife management, trust is a foundation of good governance, thoughtful management and sustained decision making. As concerns have grown about the erosion of trust in science and government (Twenge et al. 2014), those worries have spilled over into the practice of scientific wildlife management (Stern and Coleman 2015).

Trust typically is defined as a willingness to be vulnerable to the discretionary actions of another. In the case of public wildlife management, an agency — or trustee — is empowered to create benefits related to wildlife. Its actions, however, may have unintended consequences, or they may fail to meet some stakeholders' expectations while they benefit others.

Across North America, shifting demographics are likely to shape how various stakeholders view wildlife agencies. Migration from rural areas to cities and suburbs, accompanied by growing affluence, is leading to reduced participation in traditional uses of wildlife. Stakeholder values are moving from utilitarianism to protectionism (Manfredo et al. 2017).

Wildlife professionals stand at a crossroads on this constantly shifting social landscape in terms of how to best adapt, connect and remain relevant to their stakeholders.

In a study published recently in the *Journal of Wildlife Management* (Riley et al. 2018), we surveyed 2,708 licensed hunters throughout Michigan to see what factors affected this key stakeholder group's trust in the state wildlife agency. Technical competence was valued, we found, yet far more important in building trust — four times more influential — was the perception of procedural fairness. A sense of shared values was the most influential modifier of the relationship between trust, technical competence and procedural fairness.

If it's not about competence, what can wildlife professionals do to build trust?

▲ **Waterfowl hunters set out across Izembek National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. A survey showed that for hunters, perceived fairness played a stronger role than technical competence in forging trust in state wildlife managers.**

◀ A father and his son hunt at Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge in Montana. As traditional uses of wildlife, like hunting, decline, stakeholder values are shifting.

▼ A law enforcement officer speaks with a hunter at William L. Finely National Wildlife Refuge in Oregon. Researchers have found that even when people are not satisfied with decisions on wildlife resources, they are more likely to maintain trust in wildlife agencies if the process seems fair.

Credit: Brett Billings/U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Credit: George Gentry/ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Fair play

Think of organizational fairness (Greenberg 2011) as a molecule with three atoms. The first atom is procedural fairness. How do people perceive the processes used to make and carry out decisions?

Identified as a component of good governance of wildlife (Decker et al. 2016), procedural fairness encompasses perceptions of motives, processes and procedures used by a wildlife agency to make decisions — not the outcomes themselves.

We define procedural fairness as the stakeholders' views of how decisions are crafted, how transparent and understandable the decision-making processes are and how management outcomes are determined.

Transparency generally is considered a pattern of openness and clarity about decision processes, procedures and performance (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2013). Stakeholder and agency engagement that is perceived to be procedurally fair requires efforts that go beyond simple participation in decision making (Lauber et al. 2012). Typically, four elements of process and procedures contribute to stakeholder determination about their fairness: opportunities for participation, a neutral forum in which participation occurs, trustworthy authorities and benevolence by which stakeholders are treated.

Fair results

The second atom is distributive fairness — how stakeholders see the outcome of decisions, whether it's access to wildlife resources or harvest regulations or grant money allocation.

Distributing the benefits derived from wildlife populations is a key pubic trust function of wildlife agencies, commissions and legislatures. When making judgments about distributive fairness, people usually compare their evaluations of outcomes to those of others. Agencies that strive to demonstrate neutrality and objectivity in how resources are allocated are likely to build trust among stakeholders.

Highlighting the importance of procedural fairness, research on contentious wildlife issues such as baiting and feeding have demonstrated that agencies are more likely to sustain trust — even when people are not satisfied with the way resources are distributed — if the process is judged as fair (Rudolph and Riley 2014).

Fair treatment

The third atom is interactional fairness. Do people believe they were treated with dignity? Was information communicated to them in a clear, impartial, unbiased way?

Interactional fairness has a strong interpersonal component, which refers specifically to treating people with goodwill and benevolence and imparting a sense that their concerns matter (Schroeder and Fulton 2017). Interactional fairness also has an informational component, determined by whether people believe they are provided clear and thorough information on the agency's procedures.

Ultimately, though, people form perceptions of trust in individuals, not agencies. Agencies that establish opportunities for stakeholders to interact with personnel in positive, face-to-face interactions create perceptions of interactional justice.

Opportunities for more personalized interactions can come from events such as field trips, open houses, volunteer opportunities and even videos, newsletters and podcasts. Agency behaviors that signal the same information is available to everyone will more likely build trust. Selectively distributing information to limited, privileged stakeholders will erode trust — quickly.

Shared values

Stakeholder perception of whether an agency's values and goals align with their own is another key building block of trust. This is sometimes referred to as "value congruency." Research frequently suggests that stakeholders who believe their agency shares their values — be they for conservation or protectionism — are more likely to trust it (Cvetkovich and Winter 2003).

Values, however, differ widely among stakeholders and are shifting throughout North America from utilitarianism toward protectionism. This shift creates a need for agencies to stay aligned with stakeholders broadly by considering values in policies and personnel within the agency.

This shift also creates stakeholder-to-stakeholder issues. Recent research indicates that rifts between stakeholders, broadly expressed in terms of populism versus progressivism, will likely result in factions of stakeholders misaligned with each other (Manfredo et al. 2017). How agencies handle rifts in

ways perceived as fair will affect levels of trust and perceptions of agency relevance.
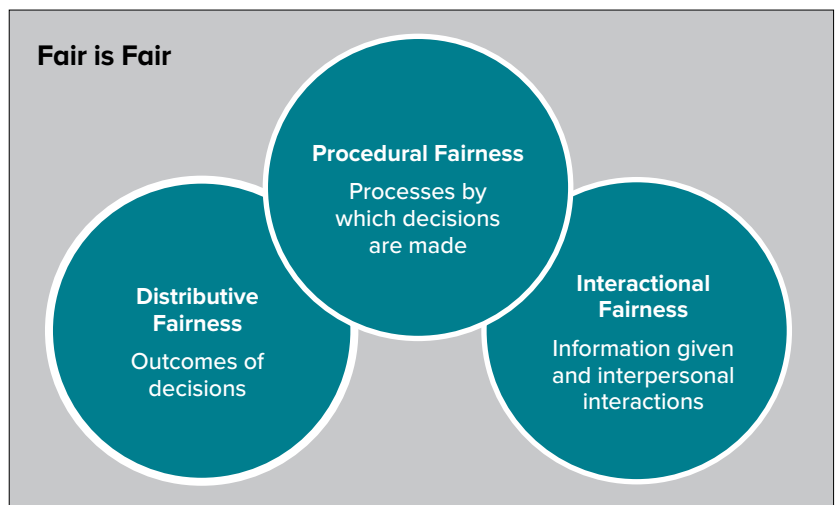
Building trust

Trust is asymmetrical. It is difficult to build and easy to lose. People tend to believe news that erodes trust more readily than they accept behaviors that build it (Rozin and Royzman 2001). The faster news travels, the quicker trust erodes. Once lost, it may be a long time before trust is restored.

Yet, while establishing trust is desirable, research suggests it does not always lead to greater levels of stakeholder participation (Smith et al. 2013). For wildlife professionals, it offers something of a paradox. The more trust individuals have in an organization, the less likely they feel a need to engage with it (Davenport et al. 2007). And even with high levels of trust, stakeholder participation can be challenging. People who trust the agency can be expected to be less active in conventional stakeholder participation. People who don't will continue to engage vigorously to achieve their goals.

When issues are morally charged or contentious — often the case in wildlife management — questions of fairness and competency may take a back seat to how aligned stakeholders see the agency's values

▲ Members of the public take part in a meeting at the National Conservation Training Center. Inviting stakeholders to share their opinions and using their input can encourage perceptions of voice. Face-to-face contact between agency personnel and the public can similarly allow for direct communication.

▼ Perceptions of fairness in wildlife management typically are comprised of components that wildlife agencies and wildlife conservation professionals can affect.

Fair is Fair

Procedural Fairness
Processes by which decisions are made

Distributive Fairness
Outcomes of decisions

Interactional Fairness
Information given and interpersonal interactions

Key Factors Known to Affect Stakeholder Trust in Organizations and Agency Personnel

Behaviors for building trust in wildlife conservation professionals are listed under actions that can be taken. Agencies that violate these likely will experience loss of trust and can expect difficulty implementing management actions.

Trust factor	Definition	Actionable recommendations
Fairness	Perception that an agency is just. Composed of distributive, procedural and interactional fairness.	• People are most sensitive to perceived *unfairness* when making judgments on fairness, so it is doubly important to be consistent in implementing the below practices for fairness. • Invest in hiring personnel with stakeholder engagement skills.
Distributive Fairness	Fairness in how outcomes are decided.	• Strive to be neutral and objective when allocating resources among stakeholders.
Procedural Fairness	Fairness in the process by which decisions are made and outcomes decided.	• Make decision processes transparent — known and visible to all. This includes information on decision-making criteria and policies. • Craft decision processes aimed at effective and inclusive stakeholder engagement. • Share how feedback from stakeholders was utilized in the decision-making processes.
Interactional Fairness	Fairness in how outcomes and procedures are explained or presented. This includes treating people with respect, providing clear information about procedures leading to outcomes and distributing it equitably.	• Establish opportunities for stakeholders to interact with wildlife department personnel in positive, face-to-face interactions. • Implement different methods of communication to target all stakeholder interests. This may include technological messaging via email and social media (e.g., blogs, podcasts). • Be forthright in conveying relevant information to stakeholders; give information on both risks and benefits. • Publish or otherwise publicly distribute lists of who has received information.
Shared Values	Perception that an agency has similar values, goals and opinions as oneself.	• Take steps to learn stakeholder values through surveys, focus groups or less formal techniques of engagement, such as conversations with constituents. • Emphasize similarities in values and goals that are shared with stakeholders and evaluate policies to be sure they reflect stakeholders' values.

Credit: Riley et al.

with their own (Manfredo et al. 2017). The disparity likely reflects changes in social values, beliefs and attitudes, leaving the agency able to do little more than anticipate and mitigate conflicts while avoiding trust-eroding behaviors.

In the table, we have listed actions that wildlife personnel can take to build trust. Agencies that fail to put them into play will likely see trust deteriorate. That may be disheartening to those working in contentious and constantly changing social situations, all the while believing they are doing the right thing. Just remember that progress in democratic processes — including public wildlife management — is by definition nearly always catalyzed by a certain level of distrust in government. This is especially true in the U.S., where the Constitution was framed upon a measure of skepticism in government. Some distrust is inherent to the management system.

A focus on engaging in trust-building behaviors — and not engaging trust-eroding behaviors —should make life as a wildlife professional more effective and satisfying. As trust administrators and managers, wildlife agencies are in a unique position of developing a culture of fair and equitable stakeholder engagement. The absence of such engagement practices invites a more purely political process. ■

Shawn J. Riley, PhD, TWS Fellow, Fulbright Fellow, CWB®, is the Parrish Storrs Lovejoy Professor of Wildlife Management in the Department of Fisheries and Wildlife at Michigan State University and is active in TWS' Investment Committee.

Jenna A. Van Fossen, is an MA/PhD student in Michigan State University's organizational psychology program.

J. Kevin Ford, PhD, is a professor of organizational psychology in the Department of Psychology at Michigan State University.

Taylor Lauricella, MA, is a PhD candidate in Michigan State University's organizational psychology program and a specialist at McKinsey & Company.