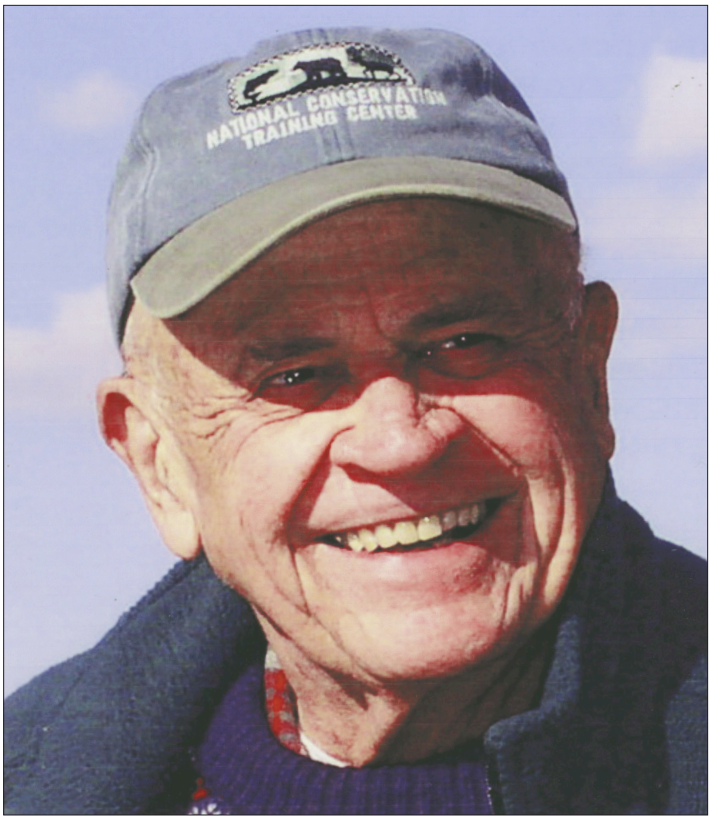
HOW I GOT TO WHERE I AM TODAY
REFLECTIONS ON THE EVOLUTION OF CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND WILDLIFE PROGRAMS SINCE 1953

Phil Pister

I started with the Department as a seasonal aide in March, 1953, following a three-year research position with the US Fish and Wildlife Service at nearby Convict Creek Experiment Station. As one would expect of a brand new and grateful-to-have-a-job employee, I jumped right into the established DFG management programs (built around massive trout plants from a series of excellent trout hatcheries) designed to supply good angling for ever-increasing numbers of southern California anglers following World War II, especially at renowned Crowley Lake. This was an admirable objective and, at first glance, one that no one could really disagree with. A few years later I was promoted to the position of Associate Fishery Biologist here in Bishop.



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My job in Bishop involved aquatic management and research on the "East Side," a very diverse and huge area comprising more than a thousand waters extending from west of the Sierra crest across the desert through Death Valley to the Nevada state line and beyond. For awhile I did this all by myself. It was my impression that although our conventional programs kept my bosses happy clear up to the Director and into the legislature, something was missing from the status quo. What the Department was doing was in direct conflict with the principles I had learned and studied as a graduate student.

I had recently emerged from spending nearly seven years at UC Berkeley studying under A. Starker Leopold and the excellent field biologists associated with the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. It soon became clear to me that the Department's programs were very short-sighted and were doing nothing to support the California biota: fish, wildlife, and plants. I was bothered by the fact that we had strayed so far from our legislative mandates. I read Fish and Game Code section 1700, which mandated the Department to encourage the conservation, maintenance, and utilization of the state's aquatic resources for the benefit of all the citizens of the state, including the maintenance of sufficient populations of all species of aquatic organisms to insure their continued existence. Similar direction is provided for wildlife under Fish and Game Code section 1801, and plants are provided protection under Fish and Game Code section 1900-1913. Speaking of the desert fishes, I am often asked by my CDFW colleagues: "What good are they?" My usual and favorite response is: "What good are YOU?"

In July of 1964 I received a call from Dr. Robert Rush Miller from Ann Arbor (Miller did his dissertation research on the pupfishes of this area), asking me if I would accompany him and Professor Carl Hubbs to Fish Slough north of Bishop. The Owens Pupfish (*Cyprinodon radiosus*) was thought to be extinct when Bob described it, and he wanted to find out if, somehow, there might still be a remnant population.

I called my boss in L.A. to get his permission (it was policy back then to get approval for long-distance calls). He agreed if I would assure him that I wouldn't just "drop everything" to accommodate perhaps the two preeminent ichthyologists in the nation. Hubbs and Miller came to Bishop, we found a population of pupfish, they returned to Ann Arbor and La Jolla. I dropped everything and never picked it up again. I was in the process of forming an entirely new set of values, often in opposition to the Department's existing programs. The Department has since provided staff to manage and protect heretofore seemingly insignificant creatures and plants. Helpful here was passage of the Endangered Species Act, signed by President Nixon in December of 1973. The Act provided funding for the programs I had been concerned with. Working with other western state biologists, we formed the Desert Fishes Council, a group of about 300 southwestern academic and agency biologists dedicated to the conservation of North America's arid land ecosystems.

(Photo by Desert Fishes Council)

Why did it take so long for us to implement conservation programs for all of our species, both economic and otherwise? I've given this a lot of thought and attribute much of it to "the thinking of the times." Our top administrators had been trained (if at all) during an era in which the terms "ecology" and ecosystem" were virtually unknown. When I mentioned work on ecosystems and endangered fishes to a former fisheries chief he looked at me with a totally blank stare. He was not understanding what I was trying to tell him. These words were not yet household terms. As a Berkeley student in the late 1940s I took a course in ecology, but this was the first time it had been offered.

Gradually CDFW moved into the 20th century, but it took a long time to drag us there. All this made it easier to live with an incident wherein I was called in to be strongly reprimanded by our top leadership (Director, Deputy Director, and Chief of Operations) 40 years ago for working on things like habitat preservation and endangered fishes, I couldn't really get too angry (although I had been doing most of this work entirely on my own, using my own vehicle and on my own time), because they were not playing with a full deck. In this respect they were dinosaurs yet unable to understand environmental biology, philosophy, or ethics, and they were not alone. Things are much better now, and for this I am most grateful. Such things make catch per unit of effort much less significant.

We now have strong public support for a new agenda through groups such as the California Native Plant Society, Trout Unlimited, Audubon Society, and National Wildlife Federation. Our new and evolving direction pleases both them and us, as anthropocentrism gives way to biocentrism, and we ask what we can do for our fish, wildlife, and plant resources rather than what they can do for us. Interests of the consumptive user are not overlooked. Department programs still include an active fish hatchery system, and programs are in place to allow for good deer and game bird management and for other harvestable species.

Max Planck put it this way: "A new scientific truth does not triumph by convincing its opponents and making them see the light, but rather because its opponents eventually die, and a new generation grows up that is familiar with it." I detect this syndrome now within the Department of Fish and Wildlife as the old guard leaves us and is replaced by a new generation of biologists with degrees from an increasing number of excellent schools that teach ecology and not just how to provide more deer to eat and fish to catch. Renowned conservation philosopher Aldo Leopold reminded us that "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise," We now recognize the wisdom of Leopold's words, and we are coming closer to them every day.

Changing thinking in such a traditional area as fish and wildlife management is never easy nor quick. Martin Luther King, Jr. observed: "We aren't where we want to be. And we're not where we're going to be. But thank God Almighty, we aren't where we used to be." Leopold sums it up: "In such matters we should not worry too much about anything except the direction in which we travel. The direction is clear…"