

HOW TO INTERVIEW A SCIENTIST

A Guide For Outdoor Journalists



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HOW TO INTERVIEW A SCIENTIST

As modern fish and wildlife management has become more technically complex, it has also become farther removed from the day-to-day world of fishing, hunting, and birdwatching. The resource manager's job is complicated by widespread and steadily increasing urban development, which encroaches on wildlife habitat and squeezes fish and wildlife into even smaller environments. Some wildlife populations remain stable, but others are rapidly declining. At the same time, growing human populations actively compete for the use of these natural resources. In such a situation, the role of the outdoor journalist in bridging the information gap between resource managers and the public has assumed greater importance. With good scientific information, the journalist can educate hunters, fishers, and others who enjoy the outdoor environment and positively influence their opinions regarding management issues, including allocation disputes.

WHY TALK TO SCIENTISTS?

Certainly, a great many excellent outdoor articles are written without contributions from scientists or natural resource managers, but many, if not most, could be strengthened by an interview with a scientist. Scientific information is a positive alternative or supplement to the writer's individual viewpoint or opinion. Additionally, quotations by scientists enhance the credibility of the writer and the story.

In the hands of a capable writer, a scientist's input can also help the reader build outdoor skills and better understand fish and wildlife behavior. For example, movement or feeding patterns can often be explained through research. Outdoor enthusiasts who can more accurately predict the daily and seasonal behavior of fish and wildlife will have more satisfying and rewarding outdoor experiences. They will probably catch more or larger fish and see more game or other wildlife.



If hunters and fishers understand the *why* behind restrictive harvest regulations, they will be more likely to cooperate. Wildlife enforcement officers cannot be everywhere, and effective laws depend to a large degree on voluntary compliance. Scientists can often provide the rationale for existing laws.

Both consumptive and nonconsumptive fish and wildlife users are playing an increasingly important role in public policy decisions concerning natural resources. Unfortunately, public perceptions are frequently at odds with scientific data. Without access to science, natural resource users may rely exclusively on their perceptions and can influence public policy counterproductively. Good science can produce good co-managers.

Finally, and probably the most important reason to include science in a story, is that outdoor enthusiasts are interested in scientists' views. A day spent listening in a boat or in the field will always yield numerous statements prefaced by "I believe that..." or "I wonder why..." All journalists want their material read. Give people answers, and they will read.

SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

If writers and scientists make such a good team, why don't they work together more effectively? The answer is simple: they don't understand each other. They receive different technical training for different objectives, work in different environments, and have different perceptions about each other's responsibilities, motives, and ethics. To work effectively with scientists, it is important to understand some of their perceptions of outdoor journalists. Let's look at some of the commonly held beliefs of many scientists.

The story is already written. When a scientist is interviewed by a writer, the line of questioning often leads the scientist to believe



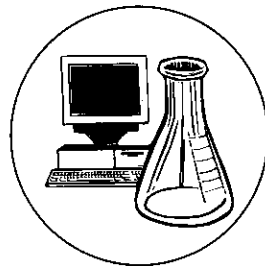
that the story is already written and that the writer is merely seeking credibility or quotes to strengthen a weak story.

Most writers aren't interested in facts. Scientists are interested in research results (facts) for their own merits. Writers must weave these facts into an interesting story. When facts don't fit and aren't used, scientists may perceive writers as not being interested in them.

I'll be misquoted. Scientists are subject to peer judgment as much as or more than in most professions. A scientist fears being embarrassed by a misquote in print more than almost anything else. Because scientists and natural resource managers are often held accountable for quotes attributed to them, they fear that changing one word in a statement will give the quote an entirely different meaning.

The results of the interview are always negative. Like any human, scientists dislike criticism, especially in print. While, in fact, very few articles are critical of scientists who have been interviewed for a story, the fear exists. Some scientists and managers are also concerned that their agencies won't get credit on positive stories but will be quickly identified on negative issues.

Outdoor writers don't report the news; they print opinion. Scientists, as well as much of the public, see outdoor journalists as news reporters who focus their writing on fish and wildlife issues. Outdoor writers often see their work as editorial rather than as news reporting. Outdoor writers' work does not usually appear on the editorial page of a publication, so scientists view journalists' work as news that should be devoid of opinion.





DEVELOPING A PRODUCTIVE RELATIONSHIP

An outdoor writer may need to interview the same scientist on more than one occasion, so building a long-term working relationship is important. Even on first or only interviews, a relationship of a sort can develop. Sales people in the business world do it every day.

Probably the most important thing to remember is that all relationships are personal. Personality intrudes, like it or not. It is always easier to work with and trust someone you like, and scientists are as human as anyone else. Proficient writers recognize this and, when appropriate, insert some "small talk" or personality into the interview, just as they would in a friendly social conversation.

Also, it is important to remember that your reputation precedes you. Active outdoor writers are widely read by fish and wildlife scientists, and both professions are small worlds. Scientists talk among themselves and a reputedly accurate and well-liked writer will find his or her work easier, even on a first interview with a scientist.

Once the decision has been made to seek information, the writer must decide whom to call. Some management issues require policy decisions made by agency administrators, who must sometimes deal with insufficient and conflicting biological data or factor social and economic considerations into the biological ones. Calling an agency scientist for comment on a policy issue will almost invariably result in vague answers or the terse comment that the decision was made at a higher level of administration. Scientists may disagree with a decision, but will almost never undermine their agencies by expressing their personal views to the press. If an issue involves the administrative responsibilities of the agency, call the administrator first.

University scientists, on the other hand, have research missions, because universities do not have fish and wildlife management



responsibilities. After speaking to an agency administrator, a call to a university scientist may often yield another perspective on an issue.

Finally, a writer making an effort to talk to the right person should remember that not all scientists are biologists. Besides the fish and wildlife involved in an issue, people and businesses are also involved. Economists and social scientists actively work on fish and wildlife issues at the university level, and increasingly within state and federal agencies. Always try to reach the right person!

You've decided whom to call. You dial the number, the telephone rings, you hear a voice, you've got your scientist. Now what do you say to be most effective? Many scientists say that writers who call usually only introduce themselves and mention their publications before launching into a series of questions. That is often not enough to prompt a scientist to make the leap of faith based upon trust to feel that he or she can comfortably, openly, and completely answer the writer's questions.

The time spent saying a little more will pay off. Immediately after the conversation opens, every scientist mentally questions a journalist's abilities and intents. More than likely, the scientist will be reluctant to ask these questions, but unanswered, they are a barrier to open communication. Answer these unspoken questions. Tell the scientist how long you have been writing, your previous experience on the subject, and what information you have compiled so far. Most importantly, tell the scientist what provoked your interest in the subject and what prompted you to call him or her instead of someone else. Don't be afraid to state a lack of knowledge about the subject.

It is also useful to explain the scope of the article and when you expect it to appear in print. Most scientists are interested in all views being expressed on a subject, particularly a difficult or controversial one. If that is your intent, by all means say so. If you are planning only



to express one view, be clear about it. Honesty is usually rewarded with candor. The writer should attempt to be truthful and open. If much of the story is already written or the writer has some preconceived views on the subject, it is helpful to share that with the scientist. Scientists avoid people who they feel have strong hidden agendas.

Scientists pride themselves on their objectivity, but in spite of their training, scientists do have opinions. Their views may be clouded by their experiences. They also may not have full faith in the tools and approaches used by other scientists, or even by themselves, to address an issue. Science is almost never black or white, but rather a mosaic of various shades of gray. This can frustrate communications between scientists and journalists. Scientists often load every statement with so many qualifiers and exceptions that the statement is nearly useless.

Extracting useful information without oversimplifying a complex subject is the objective. Using a statement with all the qualifiers and exceptions may be cumbersome, but dropping them is very dangerous. The scientist will invariably feel "burned" and may likely refuse to deal with you again. Remember your reputation.

Ask questions about the qualifiers and exceptions. Ask how often they occur and how important they are. Interestingly, some scientists will reply that the exceptions almost never occur, but that they felt obligated to mention them for the sake of being complete. If you need to use the statement without the exceptions and qualifiers, ask if you can do so.

In cases where the scientist doesn't feel comfortable allowing this or if his or her comments are heavily laden with technical jargon, explain that your audience needs a more understandable answer. Asking the scientist to rephrase the comments as if talking to a ninth-grade high school student usually works, but use the rephrased quote exactly! Don't oversimplify a complex issue and risk presenting unintentional



misinformation. If you need to paraphrase to simplify or shorten an answer, run the words past the scientist to make sure that they convey the intended meaning. If it is going to be a paraphrase, you can work together on the wording without violating journalistic ethics. Most scientists, especially those employed in management agencies, can cite incidences of unintentional misinformation in the press. Repercussions can be serious, damaging the fish and wildlife resource, users' access to the resource, the credibility of scientists, or the ability of an agency to manage the resource, not to mention the future relationship between the writer and the scientist.

Scientists often preface their answers to questions with extensive "off the record" preparatory explanations before giving an "on the record" quote. Nothing said to a journalist is ever really off the record, but a writer interested in building a working relationship with a scientist will not use the prefacing material or will ask permission to do so.

Most scientists are also extremely appreciative when a writer gives them some lead time to look up numbers. Pressing them to produce "ballpark" numbers on short notice will make them uncomfortable and the entire interview may be lost. Scientists don't deal with and may not understand the deadlines of press time, so advance planning by the writer is important. Call early!

Numbers and statistics should be handled with care, particularly when dealing with a sensitive issue. Numbers from different sources are often not comparable with each other, and different scientists may interpret numbers differently. It is wise to call one or even two more experts to see if their interpretations agree. Calling more than one scientist also allows a writer to report more than one scientific view when disagreement occurs.

In spite of good preparation, a scientist may evade or directly refuse to answer a question. There may be a number of reasons for this,



but it should never be forgotten that scientists have an employer or a source of research funds. Much publicly funded research is agenda-driven, and all agencies have mandated missions. If the scientist won't or can't provide a quote, don't ruin a budding relationship with pressure. Get your quote elsewhere. Frequently, the scientist will send the writer to someone who will answer the question, but only if the writer asks.

Speak the lingo. Unfortunately, resource management, especially fisheries management, is becoming increasingly complex and jargon-laden. A scientist will feel much more comfortable speaking to a journalist who has at least a working knowledge of technical language. While a writer should request clarification of new terms, an interview will also go more smoothly if the writer does not have to repeatedly interrupt the scientist to ask for an explanation of terms. A useful reference for fisheries management terms is *Defining Fisheries: A User's Glossary*, published by the Louisiana Sea Grant College Program.*

THE FOLLOW-UP

Typically, a journalist specializing in outdoor writing will need to turn to the same scientists repeatedly, especially since the number of fish and wildlife biologists is limited. Good follow-up can build a partnership for future consultations.

The most important and most overlooked courtesy is for the writer to send copies of the article to the scientists mentioned in the article or at least let them know when and where the article will appear. Journalists all too often go on to the next writing project and forget about the last one. A copy of the article or a tear sheet makes the scientist feel appreciated and more willing to cooperate the next time.

*Available from Louisiana Sea Grant College Program, Wetland Resources Bldg., LSU, Baton Rouge, LA 70803 or call 225/388-6448. Free.



Handling misquotes or corrections is a little trickier. What seems like a minor error to a writer could be viewed by the scientist as a threat to credibility. If your editor will approve it, correct a misquote publicly; it's worth the effort! The easiest way to correct a misquote is to develop a follow-up story on the subject in which the scientist is quoted correctly. Face is saved all the way around, and the writer has another story.

The possibility of a misquote can be minimized by checking quotes with the scientist the first few times before publishing. Time consuming yes; onerous yes; worth the effort absolutely yes! This is especially important if the writer is picking up quotes or numbers from other newspapers or magazines. Avoid spreading misquotes or typographical errors by getting information firsthand.

Developing effective relationships with scientists does not require the writer to change scientists' views of the media in general. The focus is on you, the individual writer. It demands openness, objectivity, tact, and learning to think a little bit like a scientist (empathy). Remember, all relationships are personal.

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