

# Our Shared Conservation Legacy: Past, Present, and Future—The First Legacy Organization Workshop

*Ryan L. Sharp*

FROM APRIL 11–13, 2014, AN AMBITIOUS GROUP OF 26 CONSERVATION ORGANIZATIONS GATHERED at the US Fish and Wildlife National Conservation Training Center (NCTC) in Shepherdstown, West Virginia. Specific legacy organizations were invited whose missions include interpreting and extending our national legacy of conservation. Organizations such as the Aldo Leopold Foundation, the Ding Darling Wildlife Society, the Murie Center, and the George Wright Society came together, for the first time, to examine the past, share current achievements and challenges, and discover pathways to the future.

A primary goal of the meeting was to engage youth representatives of invited legacy organizations to provide input about how to include this demographic in the future of conservation. The discussions carried out during this roundtable were enlightening, and provided a few key points to consider for organizations like the George Wright Society. Many of the youth representatives expressed a need to celebrate achievement, and emphasize hope when discussing conservation. It can be easy to take on a “gloom and doom” type of attitude with so many challenges present on the conservation front. Listening and inviting youth to the table was also stressed as an important avenue to engagement. Many young people may already be practicing conservation, but are not calling it that; understanding the younger generation’s perspective can help bring more into the fold. One suggestion to achieve this is to begin collecting stories from youth about their conservation-related activities, and by doing so, display that there are several avenues to the common goal of protecting our natural and cultural heritage. Also, in terms of legacy organizations, finding ways to make them more accessible by changing the narratives commonly told; specifically, make the story less dense, and more relatable to youth. It was suggested that more focus be placed on conservation values, or the significance of the place, and less on the story of the individual.

The youth roundtable also had a lengthy conversation about how to best utilize social media. The importance of a website or “landing page” was stressed, which can act not only as a source of information, but also as a place to connect with the organization’s Facebook, Twit-

---

*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 112–113 (2014).

© 2014 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permissions requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

ter, or Instagram (to name a few) accounts. It is not enough to just have these accounts, they must be maintained and updated to attract interest in the organization. Social media outlets can be used to show what youth are doing related to conservation. Stories and pictures can be shared that will connect a diverse collection of youth engaged in conservation activities (which as mentioned above, may have varying definitions). These stories and pictures will also give those considering involvement in conservation organizations a place to see how they would fit in, or provide them with someone to ask questions about the organization. The importance of social media cannot be denied, but the members of this youth discussion group also emphasized that face-to-face contact cannot be replaced and time needs to be set aside for this.

This first meeting of conservation legacy organizations led to many fruitful conversations and ideas for the future. Not only did we have a great exchange about how to include the next generation of conservationists, but we also shared how we can work together towards a common goal. We discussed the value of making this an annual meeting to ensure the momentum established during the short two days does not dissipate. On the first night of the meeting we watched a biography of J.N. “Ding” Darling, the famous cartoonist and conservationist. The movie provided our mantra for the remainder of the meeting. Ding Darling stated that “eleven million horses running wild couldn’t pull a rubber-tired baby buggy to town unless there was a harness to hook them to the load.” These words provide an important reminder that conservation organizations working together are more powerful and efficient in meeting our shared conservation goals than each working in isolation.

*Board member Ryan L. Sharp attended the meeting as the GWS representative.*

**Ryan L. Sharp**, Department of Recreation and Parks Administration, Eastern Kentucky University, 405 Begley Building, Richmond, KY 40475; ryan.sharp@eku.edu