Commentary

"I Don't See A Mallard, Let's Put One There"
Government Involvement in Consulting Can Be a Double-edged Sword

by
Keith Reynolds and John Reynolds

May we expand on Graham Forbes's commentary on ecological consulting ("I Don't See a Chat, Let's Bulldoze") in the April 1991 issue? We agree that ecological consultants can face ethical and professional conflicts but would like to take a more positive stance towards prospects for fair ecological assessments and offer a cautionary note about government involvement.

Ecological consulting should start by establishing goals. Those being considered by the Ontario Chapter of the Canadian Society of Environmental Biologists (CSEB) offer a place to begin:

"To promote conservation and integrated assessment of natural resources within the context of sound ecological principles to ensure their sustainability, and

"To strive for the highest possible standards of professionalism in both practice and conduct on the part of all members".

Established goals make it easier for prospective consultants to decide whether they possess adequate expertise to carry out specific assignments. In Graham's example, a local naturalist, offered a contract to investigate a woodlot slated for development, might recall seeing Red-shouldered Hawks there. Lacking adequate knowledge to meet goals such as those above, advice should be sought from people with broader perspectives or the contract should be refused.

Would more government involvement improve ecological assessment? Graham recommends that local governments form standing committees to take "an active role in monitoring and surveying areas to be developed" (p. 5) and "removing the pressure of developers hiring consultants through greater government involvement" (p. 6).

Although government bodies play significant roles in natural resource matters, too often they are more part of the problem than of the solution. Their agendas, vacillations, and funding commitments are too unpredictable to encompass the complex, long-term nature of most ecological issues.

Consultants hired by governments can face conflicts similar to their counterparts in the private sector. Both public and private purchasers of advice have the right to reject recommendations inconsistent with their priorities. In the case of governments, consultants often encounter bureaucrats more

skilled in politics than in weighing sound biological advice. Not surprisingly, many biologists and naturalists are irritated by pervasive, even if declining, game and management biases in government, particularly among senior biologists of the "shotgun/chainsaw" school of conservation. So, while a developer might want to hear "I don't see a chat, let's bulldoze"; a wildlife manager might prefer "I don't see a Mallard, let's put one there." Either way, prospective consultants should be wary of employers whose priorities differ from their own.

Which levels of government can best make decisions about protection and development? Conservationists may prefer to deal with local governments, as Graham suggests. Perhaps they are more sympathetic towards habitats and locally rare species, but developers may also have more clout at the local level. The battle over Toronto's Leslie Street Spit, where some "carnival scenarios" found favour with city planning officials, comes to mind.

The question becomes even more complex when diverging mandates of governments are considered. The Long Point experience is an example. The Long Point Company, when it owned almost all of the peninsula east of the Provincial Park, proposed to give most of it to the province. Who could resist the gift of a long, uninhabited peninsula in various stages of succession? But would it be safe in provincial hands or its fragile ecosystem put at risk by "management" pressures, such as roads, picnic grounds, and camping sites? Every Ontario birder knows of well-intentioned plans gone awry. Weighing such concerns, the donor was advised to consider giving the property to the federal government. Ottawa's statutes and serenely impersonal isolation seemed more likely to protect this unique ecological entity. The gambit seems to have succeeded and today the area is well protected.

Given the complexities, confidentiality, and long-term nature of acquiring lands prior to development, it is not usually realistic to require developers to undertake detailed ecological assessment before land purchase contracts are closed. But if something along this line could be devised, pressures on both developer and ecological consultants would be greatly eased. Once lands deals are sealed, pressures to approve development plans are difficult to resist. Developers are often more skilled, more politically astute, and have deeper pockets than environmentalists. However, the power of public relations is increasingly important in environmental matters. Reputable developers often seek high standards of assessment and pay attention to the results, if only to ward off confrontations with environmentalists. Less reputable firms, which seek short-term gains, appeal less to consultants as employers.

Several recent trends are encouraging. First, consulting firms are drawing on an increasing diversity of expertise to match the complexities of ecological problems. Second, governments are becoming more interested in non-game species and their habitats. Third, consultants

have access to comprehensive data bases yielding masses of information. In the realm of birds, the options include the Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas and its descendant, the Ontario Rare Breeding Bird Program, the Nature Conservancy of Canada's Conservation Data Centre, the Long Point Bird Observatory's studies, and the Canadian Wildlife Service's newsletters tying together various population monitoring schemes. These and other sources of reliable information contribute to better, more defensible decisions about the significance of chats, Red-shouldered Hawks, and ... even Mallards!

We commend Graham Forbes for his thoughtful article. Development proposals demand knowledge and realism from consultants. Advice may sometimes conflict with personal beliefs but it should be objective, whether tendered to developers or governments. As biology and data improve, so should the processes and standards.

Keith Reynolds, 5 Castledene Crescent, Scarborough, Ontario M1T 1R9
John Reynolds, Flat 33, Castle Mill House, Joxon Street,
Oxford 0X2 6DR, England

Articles

Ontario Bird Records Committee Report for 1991

by
Margaret Bain

This is the tenth annual report of the Ontario Bird Records Committee (OBRC) of the Ontario Field Ornithologists. A total of 125 records were received and reviewed by the Committee in 1991. Of these, 94 were accepted; two were not accepted on the grounds of debatable origin, and 24 were not accepted because of uncertainties regarding identification. Allowing for some duplications (for example, the White-winged Tern reports from Port Lambton and Long Point were originally submitted as two separate occurrences, but later judged to pertain to the same bird), and a beautiful Harlequin Duck on the Spanish River, which on close inspection was just a few km south of the 47th parallel, this gives an acceptance rate of 78.5%. No historical records were reviewed in 1991.

Four new species were added to the Ontario list: White-winged Tern, Green Violet-ear, Black-capped Vireo and Painted Bunting, bringing the provincial total to 449. No new breeding species were added in 1991. No changes were made to the Review