

Book's lessons relevant for all enthusiasts

Whenever someone suggests solving a hunting or fishing issue by educating the public, I recall the "Feed the Deer" can a fundraiser gave me in February 1996 in hopes of collecting money to help Northwoods whitetails survive a brutal winter.

That tin can symbolizes about eight decades of educational failure in deer management. In the early 1940s, conservation legend Aldo Leopold took carloads of reporters and photographers into northern Wisconsin's deeryards to educate the public about balancing deer with habitat.

Leopold explained that artificial feeding only worsens the deer's plight by keeping more hungry mouths on the landscape, and requiring even more feed in subsequent years as the herd grows and further degrades its habitat. Although this "fix" is doomed to expensive failure, people still stubbornly feed hungry deer.

Such futility isn't unique to deer management. A new book by Professor Tom Heberlein of the University of Wisconsin explains why agencies and institutions

also fail to educate people about saving energy, reducing litter, avoiding floods, reducing traffic congestion, controlling lake algae and other disasters and irritations.

In "Navigating Environmental Attitudes" (Oxford University Press), Heberlein explains why information alone seldom changes attitudes and behaviors, no matter how credible the data or messenger. Once beliefs, emotions and direct experience glue attitudes into place, budging them is as difficult as coaxing river boulders to move aside for rafters and kayakers.

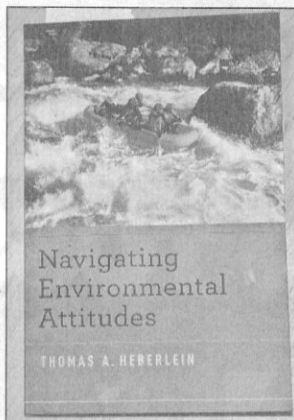
To solve environmental problems, Heberlein suggests working with public attitudes instead of trying to change them. How? Take a lesson from



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Commentary



Heberlein



rivers and river-runners. Go with their flow. If you learn to read an attitude's currents and eddies to avoid snags and submerged obstacles, you'll safely run the most hazardous rapids.

Heberlein's humor and storytelling skills turn local and international events and behavioral studies into fascinating lessons in solving environmental challenges. He explains several successes and frequent failures — some personal — to explain why we're more likely to navigate "rivers" than educate them.

Although "Navigating Environmental Attitudes" is an academic book, it doesn't read like one. It's fun, fast-paced

and informative, and as relevant to government policy-makers as it is to academicians, environmentalists, corporate planners and traditional conservationists.

I must note I'm not objective about Heberlein or his book. I've known him since 1991, hunted with him since 2001, and long admired his determination in writing this book, his life's work. In fact, I edited the manuscript last winter.

But as a result, I know this: It would be a shame if the book's primary audience is college students complying with a "required text" checklist. If I were DNR Secretary Cathy Stepp, for example, I'd put Heberlein's book atop my "must-read" list, and buy copies for everyone in the executive office, each bureau director, and the seven-member Natural Resources Board.

The book's lessons are especially relevant as we navigate how to implement the 80-plus deer-management recommendations made in July by trustees James Kroll, Gary Alt and David Guynn. The trustees urged the DNR to make

better use of "social science" and public participation to craft a new deer program.

The trouble is, Leopold made similar suggestions before World War II and little changed. Today's wildlife biologists are no more prepared to practice sociological science on deer hunters than social psychologists like Heberlein are prepared to practice wildlife biology on deer.

Social science isn't just compiling lists of conservation organizations and "stakeholders," and "empowering" them to set deer-harvest quotas and regulations. Heck, that's not even public relations, another profession that wildlife managers forever imitate but never duplicate.

Understanding the attitudes entwined in this and other complex environmental problems requires scientific analysis. But as Heberlein illustrates, we often lack "the social science resources to fully illuminate the human dimensions of fishing, farming" and other issues.

He writes that the "balance of science is out of whack" because we usually "relegate the

human dimension to 'an education problem' rather than an interesting scientific question."

Therefore, we still joust with these challenges nearly 80 years after Leopold noted two groups of researchers who barely know each other:

"One studies the human community ... and calls its findings sociology, economics and history. The other studies the plant and animal community, (and) comfortably relegates the hodgepodge of politics to 'the liberal arts.'"

Ever the optimist, Leopold foresaw an "inevitable fusion" of those two groups, and said the blend could be the "outstanding advance of the (20th) century."

Unfortunately, it hasn't happened. With "Navigating Environmental Attitudes," Heberlein offers hope that Leopold's "inevitable fusion" can occur this century.

Who says sociologists aren't dreamers?

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