

## **Editorial-**

### **A LOVE/HATE RELATIONSHIP**

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Having been with the Dept. of Fish and Wildlife for over 28 years, I have had the opportunity to learn a lot about the job of Game Warden, as well as the public's perception of us. One thing that has always amazed me is how we, as Game Wardens, are portrayed in the media as well as in the community grapevine. There are certainly more rumors and misconceptions about Game Wardens, and our work, than there are with any other Law Enforcement entity.

For the majority of my career I have been stationed in small communities. In a small town, everyone knows everybody, but still the local Game Warden is a constant subject of attention and rumors. People who like us will embellish our accomplishments, and make "their" Game Warden out to be local legend. Our supporters will go out of their way to talk to us every time they see us (just try to have an undisturbed meal in a restaurant in a small town). To most people, our job is fascinating, adventurous, and somewhat mysterious. But, Game Wardens are also the recipients of quite a bit of discontent.

While I have always understood why poachers hate Game Wardens, I have also been amazed at how many others share contempt for our work. To many, we are only one step away from an IRS Agent on the "pain-in-the-butt scale". People are passionate about their hunting and fishing, and many feel they should not be "disturbed" while conducting those activities. If we check a person, while they are hunting or fishing twice or more in a month, then we are harassing them. If we don't check them at all, then we are lazy and aren't out enough. Ironically, those same people get satisfaction out of hearing that we busted another poacher, since that poacher is taking opportunity away from them.

Many of our job tasks end up so that we are wrong either way we go. If we dart and relocate a problem cougar, then we should have killed it before it killed a small child. If we kill the same problem cougar, then we are trigger happy murderers who don't seem to care about the wildlife we are tasked to protect. I have come to realize that how we do our jobs will frequently result in a good deal of "armchair quarterbacking" and we truly can't make everyone happy. That's just the way it is, and Game Wardens all have to deal with it.

However, what truly amazes and puzzles me is how the media treats us and our "stories". Most of the time the media accurately (or fairly accurately) reports the stories of our activities. However at other times, the media clearly works by the "never let the truth get in the way of a good story" rule. I used to think that journalists worked to provide balance and accuracy in a story, that they would try to present both sides of every issue. But over the years I found that simply isn't the way things always work in the media world. One glaring such example was a story/commentary reported by Seattle KOMO 4 TV's Ken Schram.

I like, many of you, have watched KOMO 4 news, and have heard Ken Schram commentaries and watched as he bestowed his famous "Schrammie" award (given to the worst bureaucrats for

their foolish decisions). I used to think that Schram had good common sense and was doing a service by pointing out the worst wastes of money, and greatest blunders conducted by public officials in our state. That was until Schram gave out a “Schrammie” award to WDFW Sgt. Russ Mullins.

In his report, Mr. Schram told a story about how a citizen had been out crabbing when that citizen watched several canoes full of kids capsized in the choppy 56-degree waters of Puget Sound. The story went that the citizen jumped to the rescue, pulling the kids out of the water, and rushing them to the safety of shore (all true). The citizen then returned to pick up his remaining crab pots, only to find that Fish and Wildlife Agents had been sitting back watching most of the rescue through their binoculars. Those same Fish and Wildlife Agents (who were apparently more concerned with writing a ticket, than saving kids lives) then “rewarded” the citizen with an \$80 citation for failing to have his catch record card properly filled out. At the end of Schram’s report he awarded “The Schrammie” to WDFW Sgt. Russ Mullins, after naming Sgt. Mullins the “Grand Poobah of Fish and Wildlife Agents”.

As a veteran Fish and Wildlife Officer, I was outraged! The fact that one or more of our officers would simply sit back and watch as young kids helplessly bobbed around in the frigid cold waters of Puget Sound without offering any assistance, in order to be able to write a small infraction citation, was repulsive! If our officers could see the whole event unfold (through binoculars), why would they not immediately rush to the scene for a rescue, and why would they issue a citation for a relatively minor offense to the one person who actually did the right thing?

Normally, I would have immediately called the involved officer and given him an earful, but in this case I didn’t see any real need to do so, as at the time Sgt. Mullins was my direct supervisor. Still, supervisor or not, shouldn’t I at least see what he was thinking, and ask why he endangered the lives of kids, simply to boost his stats? I still didn’t feel that I had to call Sgt. Mullins, as I had a little insider information; I knew that Sgt. Mullins had nothing to do with the incident, and that he in-fact had been on land over 30 miles away. I knew that, because I was the one on the patrol boat, with one of our new-hires (in training).

As you can now guess, Ken Schram took several liberties with the “facts”. There was, in fact, an incident of several canoes capsizing into Puget Sound. A citizen, who had been crabbing, did rescue several kids from the waters and transport them to shore, but that is where Schram’s “facts” end. Rather than sitting back and watching the rescue through binoculars, we were about 20 miles away, when the rescue took place. We did contact the rescuer while he was engaged in crabbing, but it was hours after the rescue. We did issue a citation for failure to record his crab, but only as an alternative to citing him for the more serious violation of possession of undersized Dungeness crab (which he was warned for). It was/is my opinion, that in the hours since the rescue had occurred (and before returning to crabbing) the citizen had all the time in the world to sort and record the crab he already had on-board. I take nothing away from the citizen for rescuing the kids; however one good deed does not give a person a free pass to violate the laws for the remainder of the day.

After the incident, both Sgt. Mullins and WGA President Dan Chadwick tried to set the record straight with letters explaining the facts. Obviously, Schram was not only disinterested in

presenting the true facts, but resented the intrusion into his story so much, that he decided to fry the very person who was only trying to set the record straight.

I wish I could say that Ken Schram was the only irresponsible journalist out there, but unfortunately he is not. Just like with any group, there are good and bad, responsible and irresponsible.....the only difference is that journalists have a large audience to influence.

While I have no respect for Mr. Schram, what-so-ever, I do like the idea of bestowing an award to the biggest idiot of the year. Therefore, this year's "Hot Toddie Award" goes to Ken Schram. Ken, take a bow, for embellishing a story beyond recognition, to boost your TV ratings.