

# Mixing PR and danger confuses wildlife officers' image

To this lad in the 1960s, "game wardens" were intimidating figures.

Not that I ever had reason to be "pinched." But growing up as a hunter, I knew enough that you didn't want a "warden" coming down on you. Very authoritative.

## GAME WARDEN.

Even the words had a hard sound to them.

Fifty years later, we call them wildlife conservation officers. Not only do they sound more politically correct and public relations friendly, non-aggressive — the reputation has softened to the point where the public misunderstands them as being less than law enforcement.

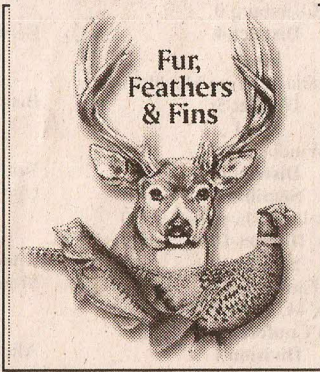
That would be far from the truth, as the death of WCO Dave Grove last November proved.

WCOs perform a variety of tasks with most visibility leaving a public relations impression, and therein lies a lot of the diffusion of credibility. The meter has swung far toward the "Officer Friendly" reputation.

"Many people see us as the guys who pick up roadkilled



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deer," says WCO Frank Dooley of Wayne County. Dooley is also president of Conservation Police Officers Lodge 114 of the Fraternal Order of Police. The union represents the state's game and fish officers.

"If the violator or criminal doesn't believe you are a true law enforcement officer the danger threat to the officer goes up considerably," Dooley says. "Questioning our authority and who we are many times confuses the situation, especially when the officer is alone."

A lot of what they do is seen as public relations for their Pa. Game Commission. Officers are popular attractions at community events and schools, for their displays of pelts, game heads and other specimens that are "cool" to kids (aka future license buyers).

So they are often not taken seriously when they have serious business.

Folks have refused to open their doors to WCOs trying to serve warrants, preferring to wait "until the police arrive."

"A chief of police and head of the (Delaware) county's radio committee refused to allow conservation officers to use the county radio network, because those channels were reserved for 'legitimate police purposes' (by the way, the dogcatcher was allowed on the network)," says Adams County WCO Darren David, a CPOL trustee. "Here in Adams County, the county courthouse security committee, consisting of the three county commissioners, three judges, and the district attorney, voted to allow only all county local and state police officers to carry firearms into the courthouse, 'except Game Commission officers' (and waterways officers)." The ordinance restricted wildlife and other officers from outside the area because courthouse security was not familiar with them. It's hard to fathom them not being familiar with the only two WCOs in the area. As a show of solidarity, state police officers wore empty holsters at a preliminary hearing for Grove's accused murderer.

After Grove's death, the policy was changed and WCOs were allowed their sidearms.

An overdue increase in fines and jail time for Game Law violations will elevate the work of WCOs through the court system. Court and district justice reports are printed in the newspaper.

Image is nearly everything.

Union president Dooley would like to see the word "police" inserted into the job title.

"We're in obscurity," Dooley says. "What we should be doing is projecting who we are and that we are the conservation police."

WCOs are often asked why they carry guns.

They carry guns so that, in the process of enforcing the Game Law, which includes catching poachers and stopping vehicles on dark, back roads as WCO Dave Grove did, should a "ferocious exchange of gunfire" break out, they can handle themselves. A tactical rifle, like those used by most other wildlife agencies across the country, could also come in handy. The Game Commission needs to give up its refusal of that request by its officers.

Union president Dooley says the culture behind WCOs needs to change and it starts at the top.

When Christopher Johnson, charged with killing Grove, was asked if he knew he'd shot a police officer, he said, "no, I thought it was a game warden."

Last weekend, the photo caption in another local newspaper referred to two WCOs, in ceremonial jackets at the memorial dedication for Grove, as "two park rangers."

Dooley tells a story when he and another officer, in full uniform, badges, vehicle and duty belts, approach two in a car. "As we approached we could see the two sharing what appeared to be a lit cigarette that turned out to be marijuana," Dooley says. "I immediately told the subjects to place their hands on the dashboard. The passenger still with the marijuana cigarette in his hand complied and said, 'You're not going to call the police, are you?' We found additional narcotics in the vehicle. Both individuals were arrested and charged with criminal and wildlife code violations."

Going forward, the commission and sportsmen may need to re-evaluate whether they want the wildlife-property-people resource to be protected to the fullest.

Get field officers out of the public relations (to sell licens-

es) business and have them focus on law enforcement.

If the answer means that WCOs or game wardens are to continue to step into the potential line of fire, they should not be expected to do so half-way. To enforce the Game Law without full support and respect. With half the strength of firepower and authority. Or with little communications that could bring backup.

Dave Grove proved there is human life on the line.

It will cost money and sportsmen or the public will have to buy in with taxes or license fees.

I won't guess the outcome of financial support. Not a single penny came from a sportsman's club here to buy a mechanical deer to catch poachers.

Reality is — We place lesser value on wildlife than we do human life.

People may take WCOs less seriously, thinking that unlike Dave Grove did, a wildlife cop can just as easily walk away from outlaws who put animals in peril, as to risk his own welfare.

That would be sad.

And wrong.

*B.J. Small is the Times editor and outdoors columnist.*