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my turn

Starving Fish and Game will harm our state

By James J. DiStefano
For the Monitor

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The financial crisis facing the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department results from nationwide trends. Although there is evidence of some renewed interest, especially among women, people have just stopped hunting and fishing.

In fact, there seems to be a decline in any type of outdoor activity - to the extent that one popular author on the national scene has invented the term "Nature Deficit Disorder" to describe the problem among youngsters. The disconnection with the land has happened in one generation and doesn't bode well for conservation efforts or for human survival in general.

Yet I am cautiously optimistic that the problem is temporary and that people will return to the natural world. The fix, however, will take at least several years.

Right now, most state and federal fish and wildlife departments and their peers in conservation-oriented non-government organizations are combating the problem with intensive educational programs, including in-school efforts. New Hampshire Fish & Game's public affairs division is among those agencies.

I am a retired wildlife biologist with experience in three state fish and wildlife agencies - eight years in Maryland, 13 in Vermont and the last four years in New Hampshire. I also lived in Nashua for 12 years during the '60s and commuted to a management job in defense and aerospace work in Bedford, Mass.

The private sector was good to me, but I eventually resigned to enroll as a full-time married student at UNH, where I received my degree in wildlife management late in life. I continue to be an active hunter and angler.

There is no question New Hampshire's fish and wildlife resources attract lots of economic activity for the state, including hotels, motels and restaurants.

At the moment, offsetting Fish & Game's dramatic losses in hunting and fishing license

revenue after its years of financial solvency, essentially free of state budget money, should be top priority among our leaders. House Bill 376 is a natural step in that process. It would direct a portion of state rooms and meals tax revenue to Fish & Game.

There are other ways to reorganize, consolidate and finance a critical state environmental and ecological mission, but those decisions can wait. Fish & Game is in fiscal crisis, its dramatic decline in revenue brought on by a wholesale change in human behavior across our national culture. The agency needs to be rescued now.

This is no time even to think of reducing the efforts of state agencies that have biological competence.

Negative consequences that people in the biological sciences forecast years ago are now with us. They have come on surprisingly fast. Reduced air quality, global climate changes, resource depletion and other problems of which we are all well aware are, to the best of our knowledge, human-caused. They threaten to overshadow the successes we have had in natural resource management.

We must make up for lost time and past negligence by using our biological knowledge and competence and intensifying natural resource management. Now more than ever, we need the dedicated staff within Fish & Game, the Department of Environmental Services, the plant heritage and forestry arm of DRED, health department epidemiologists and biological academicians and researchers at UNH. The work of habitat experts deserves new emphasis, not reduction.

Our children and grandchildren deserve a better chance at life on our precious and endangered planet. Please encourage your legislators to support state programs that protect nature in New Hampshire, including the current House bill to bail out Fish & Game.

(James. J. DiStefano of Canterbury is a former director of the New Hampshire Fish and Game Department.)

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