

Watchable Wildlife Conference Shows Strength in Diversity

By Napier Shelton

The most exciting thing about the Watchable Wildlife program—its pulling together of people from many sectors of American life—was once again evident at the program's second national conference, held at Corpus Christi in November 1993. Besides managers and interpreters from numerous public agencies and conservation organizations, there were representatives from municipal offices, chambers of commerce, ecotourism, the military, universities, corporations, and the media—as participants. All were interested in how wildlife watching can lead to understanding, conservation, and ultimately the maintenance of biodiversity.

Some also were interested in the economic benefits. For instance, several staff members from Texas ranches, where cattle and abundant wildlife coexist, came to explain or find out how to make money from wildlife watching. (Bird tours regularly visit the King Ranch, where 434 species of birds have been seen as many or more than in most states.) Participants also learned how corporations increasingly are contributing to wildlife habitat enhancement, thereby achieving better community relations, often a better bottom line, and heightened employee involvement.

The ethics of wildlife viewing received a lot of attention this year. How close should you get to wildlife? When is it OK to play

tapes to attract birds? Where should we draw the line between the benefits of wildlife viewing and stress on animals? These questions need more research and continuous awareness.

Three NPS presenters (including one "defector" to the NBS) shared Park Service experience. Judd Howell from Golden Gate described the benefits to both park and people as volunteers assisted with raptor banding and vertebrate surveys. Ray Skiles explained how Big Bend attempts to prevent too-close encounters of people with mountain lions and black bears, under the NPS land management ethic. John Miller talked about birds and sea turtles on Padre Island.

The Park Service had nine attendees at the conference—up from six last year but still a disappointingly small number. The NPS has a lot to contribute to the Watchable Wildlife program, especially its interpretive/educational experience, and a lot to gain from working with the many groups involved.

Gary Graham, John Herron, and numerous colleagues from the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and elsewhere are to be congratulated for a well-run, highly informative, friendly conference that made good strides toward bringing the public and private sectors together for wildlife conservation. Next year's conference will be held in Burlington, VT, in October. Y'all come!