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Busy to burnout: finding life balance in the human–wildlife interactions profession

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I HAVE A PROBLEM related to wildlife: anyone I am desperate to reach in the profession seems to have stepped out for 3 weeks—with very limited connection.

Even in my urgency for contact, I cannot help but admire the work ethic and dedication of exceptionally busy wildlife professionals. Their fieldwork, conferences, and travel for leadership or service often result in schedules that seem overbooked year-round, particularly for those who manage the sometimes “pesky” wildlife problems. Plus, factor in their teaching, advising, committees, funding proposals, research, publications, and infinite manuscript review requests, and it can be difficult to find the time for family, friends, and fun. The media also demands time from wildlife experts to share those interesting stories that sometimes go viral (or to observe the action; Arnold 2019).

In this fast-paced adventure of a career, is there a certain point when busy becomes burdensome? When overcommitment can compromise the quality of work? Is a balance possible to minimize stress, maximize personal time, and avoid professional burnout in the sciences (Powell 2017)?

Strategies for work–life or work–social balance in general seem to abound in other professions, but for the wildlife professional, it might take a more specific approach to achieve life-balance bliss. I spent years juggling my current job, another one in a different field, and educational and personal commitments, struggling almost daily with time, stress, and a nagging sense of inadequacy at not being able to give 100% in any area. I was at the point of burning out. However, I asked myself some questions that helped me to focus my career and achieve balance in my life. Here is what I did.

1. I prioritized my passions. I explored which of my current commitments were best for my *vitae*, for my organization, and for me. Was I passionate about everything on my plate, or was I dividing myself to help others achieve their goals? I asked what activities, personal and professional, gave me

the least satisfaction, and I did not continue them when the next opportunities for involvement came around—even when it was hard to walk away.

2. I acknowledged my limitations. It was a challenge to admit I could not do everything or take on more without letting go of something else. Everyone I know in the wildlife profession works simultaneously with more species and management issues than I can count. But I had personal goals too, so I set limits on my professional commitments.

3. I reminded myself why I chose my career track. It is easy to get distracted by deadlines and caught up in conference calls. I considered whether, at the core, the things that kept me busy by day and up at night still represented why I got into this profession. Knowing that what I do has a purpose that is still meaningful to me made it easier to stay motivated and push forward.

My goal in this article is not to suggest a career shift or the downsizing of wildlife professional commitments. I realize that new tasks are required within already full workloads. Rather, I hope in some way my experiences raise awareness of the tough but necessary questions and self-reflection that may lead to a healthier and more balanced life.

Literature cited

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