

THE HUNT OF A LIFETIME:

Nine Mandatory Steps to a Fulfilling Career



LIFE LESSONS FROM THE ENVIRONMENTAL EDGE: VOL. I

Carlton N. Owen

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Prologue

N*o, this isn't a series of excerpts from my greatest sport hunting adventures. It is about the hunt where most of us spend the majority of our waking hours — work. And, if we are lucky, a career. Some believe that work is punishment. I think otherwise. Genesis states that God provided work so that we could be fulfilled. (Gen. 2:15)*

Yes, some take it to extremes. I'm probably one of those who fall into the category of "workaholic" or too darn close for comfort. That said, the natural resources profession has given me great joy, a sense of fulfillment and a belief that I'm working on something important to posterity. Choosing a job — and even more difficult, a career — is no easy decision.

In the following pages, you will find just some of the lessons I've learned thus far.

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Basic Ingredients

START WITH LITTLE STUFF

Many things go into the making of a forest ecologist or wildlife biologist. Early experiences with nature no doubt played a big part for many of us. In my own case, several experiences stand out.

There was the crudely designed crawdad capturing device that Paul Dillard (a forester now with NRCS) and I used to extract miniature crayfish from a tiny spring-fed pond. I don't recall that we did much with the creatures when we caught them. But it was fun anyway.

Then there were the mudpuppies that my cousin Bill Rutledge and I gathered from a spring below his grandmother's house. Bill was a daredevil. He'd reach his arm well back into the dark cavern and pull out mud, water, mudpuppies and everything else. I half expected him to one day insert his arm only to have something pull him in.

Several of those mudpuppies made their way into a terrarium at home. The screen cover over the top wasn't properly in place one evening and we awoke the next morning to find that more than a dozen mudpuppies had made an escape. It's not a pretty sight to have your mother dusting behind the TV to find the now dried and near petrified remains of a mudpuppy staring up at her. I don't recall if it was that experience or my brother's snake getting loose in the house that led to the new rule — "No live animals in the house." Anyway, by that time we'd graduated to keeping snakes and lizards in a 55-gallon drum that we had buried in the back yard.

As I grew older the outdoor experiences were

the one constant. There was a several acre lake just a half-mile from the house. There we extracted many catfish and not a few turtles from the waters using set-hooks tied to buttonbush limbs. Squirrel hunting with my Uncle Felix added to the equation.

"For me, there wasn't a single experience that gave me a longing for a career in natural resources. There were hundreds of small experiences — each grounded in a passion for learning about, enjoying and protecting the out-of-doors — that laid the foundation."

My grandmother's dairy farm and the associated woods and farm ponds were just five miles away. It was being at the farm and taking long hikes through the woods or spending lazy afternoons fishing for mud cats that established my longing for forestry and wildlife even though I didn't have an

inkling of a potential career.

For me, there wasn't a single experience that gave me a longing for a career in natural resources. There were hundreds of small experiences — each grounded in a passion for learning about, enjoying and protecting the out-of-doors — that laid the foundation.

Life Lesson: *Start with basic ingredients — add passion.*

"We may affirm that absolutely nothing great in the world has been accomplished without passion."

— Hegel

Find a Mentor

OF MENTORS AND FRIENDS

For some the decision to pursue a natural resources career seems almost hereditary. We follow in the footsteps of our father or another relative. Some are inspired by the conservation writings of Rachel Carson, John Muir, or Aldo Leopold. For others the process is more of an evolutionary experience that builds from many different encounters and experiences — those “basic ingredients.”

For me, the decision came relatively easy. Yes, it built upon my natural attraction and love for the great out-of-doors. But, one person more than any other, helped me crystallize the direction that would link my interests and a profession.

I can trace my decision to enter forestry and wildlife to my 9th grade biology class in Corinth, Mississippi. While I was a good student — far from straight A's — it was that year and the influence of a short, ruddy-complected, sometimes loud-mouthed biology teacher that set me on my present course.

Lou Sanders was a minor legend at Corinth. She was feisty, atypical, and, at least in my eyes, a real motivator. But, it was the time outside of the classroom, when I'd stop by for visits after school, that Lou would work her magic in my life. Now, I can't say truthfully that I recognized it at the time, but looking back, I can see the impact she had.

Lou was hard, but fair. Even more, she really loved what she was doing. That love for her job and profession came through in a way that I didn't see in many other teachers. She also began to help me see that my love for the out-of-doors could be directed into a course of action that could tie

interest and a future career.

Over the years, many people — authors, teachers, preachers, friends, and family members — have had an impact on and in my life. But only one stands out as the person that I can say gave me the gentle nudge that directed me down a path that has given me great pleasure.

Lou left teaching for a number of years. The need to provide for her daughters and the changes in the public school system in the early 70's took her into other areas. But, true to the thing that she loves best — and I think does best — Lou is once again teaching in the public schools just outside of Jackson, Mississippi.

Lou is the best. I'm glad that another generation is getting the benefit of her talents, love, and dedication. I'm glad too that over the years and with too few contacts, I can still call her a friend.

Life Lesson: Find a mentor. If you are very lucky you'll have more than one to help with various passages in life.

“We are all of us flawed, but we all have brilliant gifts.”

— Peggy Noonan

“People ask you for criticism but they only want praise.”

— Somerset Maugham

Spend Time With Professionals

MY DAUGHTER WANTS TO MARRY A GAME WARDEN!!!

We often gain an understanding about what someone does in their work by drawing inferences from our knowledge of someone else in that field or at least something related. It's the "related" part that got me into trouble with my in-laws.

Brenda and I were dating in our senior high-school year. Both of us had already chosen a course of study — the first in either family who planned to go on to college. She would be a teacher — a noble and well-known profession — and I would be a forester or wildlife biologist.

My mother-in-law-to-be had very little experience or understanding about the natural resources professions. In fact, no matter what I did to try to explain, she would always come to the same conclusion. Her daughter was planning to marry someone who aspired to be a "game warden." While

conservation officers are honorable and important players in the wildlife field, my mother-in-law's implications weren't so positive.

Of course, you'd have to put "game warden" in context. We were living in Mississippi at the time, and, sad-to-say, the era of the professional conservation officer had not yet fully dawned. Most of Mississippi's game wardens of the early 1970's had gained their jobs not by what they knew, but by whom they knew. Mississippi's Game & Fish Commission was at that time overflowing with political appointees.

"I slowly began to understand that what I found most repulsive and threatening in others were qualities I had refused to see in myself."

— Robert G. Lee

"Sixty years ago I knew everything; now I know nothing; education is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance."

— Will Durant

That said, I've had the privilege of working closely with "conservation officers" in Mississippi and Arkansas. Even there, and even in those days, you'd find some talented highly-committed individuals. I've ridden with many during hunting season as they went about their duty — at some of the most gosh-awful hours of the day. With those experiences, I'm convinced that every wildlife biologist or forester could gain a great deal from spending significant time walking in the shoes, or at least riding at the side of, those men and women.

Their work is thankless and extremely dangerous. Those of us who enter the science side of the natural resources field miss many of the learnings that are core to a conservation officer's everyday job — a deeper understanding of people — both the good and the bad.

Life Lesson: *Spend time with professionals. Get a feel for the range of options and aspects of the field.*

"The truth is that our friends – and our enemies – always know us better than we know ourselves."

— W. H. Auden

Know What You Don't Want to Do

ON MAKING SOUND CAREER CHOICES

On my one bear trapping expedition to Canada, I had the privilege of meeting some outstanding students working under Dr. Bruce McLellan at the University of British Columbia.

One of those students, a young man working on his Master of Science degree at the University of Montana, made an unforgettable impression on me. One day we had a few extra moments to visit while waiting on the troop to get ready for the day's activities. As conversations usually do, we came around to a discussion about work in the wildlife profession.

"What do you want to do when you graduate?" I asked.

To which he gave the not-too-uncommon, "I'm not sure."

As we talked further, I inquired about his interest in staying in

research — perhaps even with grizzlies. I finally had hit his hot button.

"No way man! I'm not working with grizzlies after this project is done."

Now, we finally had a discussion with energy — even if it was about what he didn't want to do.

"Why so adamant about not working with bears?" I asked.

He gave a rather graphic, but effective response.

"After we catch a griz, my bowels stay locked-up for three days! I just can't take the stress."

Now that's a young man who knows when he's found something that doesn't suit his personal demeanor! While I never heard what happened to

him, I have no doubt he stayed true to his word.

Life Lesson: *Know what you don't want to do. It's just as important as knowing what you do want to do.*

GOAL SETTING

A boat docked in a tiny Mexican village. An American tourist complimented the Mexican fisherman on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.

"Not very long," answered the Mexican.

"But then, why didn't you stay out longer and catch more?" asked the American.

The Mexican explained that his small catch was sufficient to meet his needs and those of his family.

The American asked, "But what do you do with the rest of your time?"

"I sleep late, fish a little, play with my children, and take a siesta with my wife. In the evenings I go into the village to see my friends, have a few drinks, play the guitar, and sing a few songs. I have a full life."

The American interrupted, "I have a MBA from Harvard and I can help you. Start by fishing longer every day and selling the extra fish you catch. With the extra revenue you can buy a bigger boat. With the extra money the larger boat will bring, you can buy a second one and a third one and so on until you have an entire fleet."

"How long would that take?" asked the Mexican.

"Perhaps twenty-five years," replied the American.

"And after that?"

"That's when it gets really interesting," answered the American, laughing. "Instead of selling your fish to a middle man, you can negotiate directly with the processing plants and maybe even open your own plant. You can then leave this little village and move to Mexico City, Los Angeles, or even New York City! From there you can direct your huge enterprise."

"Really? And after that?"

"After that you'll be able to retire, live in a tiny village near the coast, sleep late, play with your children, catch a few fish, take a siesta with your wife, and spend your evenings drinking and playing the guitar with your friends!"

"If there is any difference between you and me, it may simply be that I get up every day and have a chance to do what I love to do, every day."

— Warren Buffett

Be Comfortable With Yourself

BE HONEST

My experience with Potlatch Corporation in Arkansas led to new opportunities within the forest products industry. In fact, one of my friends with Weyerhaeuser Company recommended me for a position that his company had open in Oklahoma.

One thing I learned about a b-i-g Fortune 500 company is that their interview process is “very” different. After agreeing to go through the process, I was told that the interview would be conducted in Little Rock, about 90 miles from my place of residence. Two people the company would fly in from its corporate headquarters in Federal Way, Washington, would conduct the meeting. Their purpose was to narrow down the candidates to the final one or two who would then visit with local managers.

To get to the interview on time, I had to leave my home well before daylight. Not being a great morning person — I know biologists are suppose to love getting up with the birds, but I’ve always had trouble with that — I fumbled in the dark getting dressed and headed out still under the cover of darkness.

About two miles from home I had the odd feeling that something was very wrong. Had I forgotten something? I drove on for a couple of more miles. The feeling grew worse. Finally, I pulled over under a streetlight, parked my vehicle and stepped into the light. “OK, what is it? What’s the problem?” I asked myself audibly.

There on the side of the highway, some five miles closer to my destination, the reason for my feeling was now evident. I had on black shoes! Not

just any black shoes, a right and a left from two different pairs! A quick u-turn and back to the house. A change of “shoe” and back on the road. Now, it was getting light!

“The measure of a man’s real character is what he would do if he knew he never would be found out.”

— Thomas Babington Macauley

I made the interview on time and gained all kinds of new insights into Weyerhaeuser’s process. While some of the interview might be considered “standard,” most of the nearly three hours had more to do with psychological testing and scenario playing. I found myself having fun with the process — such fun that I felt

at liberty to tell them about my shoe experience.

“You shouldn’t tell us that!” said one of the interviewers.

“But it’s true,” I responded.

Now at this point I’m sure you’re thinking, “He blew it!” We’ll maybe I did, but I did get the job offer! While I didn’t take the job for a number of other reasons, I’ve always remembered the experience fondly and chuckle even now thinking about how close I came to walking into a job interview with shoes that didn’t match.

Life Lesson: *Be very comfortable with yourself — especially in job interviews.*

“I cannot give you the formula for success, but I can give you the formula for failure — which is: try to please everybody.”

— Herbert Bayard Swope

Choose Your References Carefully

CARLTON IS THE BEST GUY FOR THE JOB!

As has been my custom at times of career decisions, I sought out one of my mentors for a discussion. Thus, on a trip through Starkville, Mississippi, I dropped in to see Dr.

Rodney Foil, Vice President for Agriculture, Forestry, and Veterinary Medicine at Mississippi State University.

While in Dr. Foil's office, I mentioned that I had been contacted by the National Forest Products Association about a new wildlife job that would be based in D.C.

"NFPA," said Foil. "I know the top guy there. Sit still while I give him a call."

The next few minutes did a great deal for my ego. Foil spoke with conviction to his phone listener about my skills and the value that I would bring to the prospective position. "Oh, that's great!" Foil said as he finally ended the call.

"You're in. They think you are great." Only two weeks later did I learn what Paul Harvey would say is "the rest of the story."

Ever been in one of those conversations about something when you find that the other party was on a totally different topic? Well, in this case, while Dr. Foil extolled my great worth, his listener was looking at the paper work on the

"other" finalist for the job — one Robert Carlton.

Bob, who later became a friend, ended up with the job. I always told him that he got the

nod because of Dr. Foil's great recommendations — for me! As fortune would have it, I did end up working in D.C. in a similar job, but some seven years later. The timing was better then.

Life Lesson: Choose your references carefully.

"If all our misfortunes were laid in one common heap whence everyone must take an equal portion, most people would be contented to take their own and depart."

— Socrates

"Each of us is unique, sometimes wonderfully so, sometimes infuriatingly so, but always unique."

— Marcus Buckingham & Donald Clifton
Now, Discover Your Strengths

"In 1960, a researcher interviewed 1,500 business school students and classified them in two categories: those who were in it for the money (1,245) and those who were going to use their degree to do something they cared deeply about (255). Twenty years later, the research found that 101 were millionaires — and all but one came from the 255 who pursued what they loved to do!"

— Robert K. Cooper

Get Involved

I HAVE TOO MANY OTHER THINGS TO DO

In a small organization, just as in small towns, there are few secrets.

“Did I hear right that you’ve had another job offer?” asked Sam (not his real name), one of my fellow foresters at Potlatch Corporation.

“Well, yes, it is true, but it wasn’t something I was looking for; nor is it something I wanted widely shared,” I responded.

Thus began the conversation that quickly led to his root concern.

“I’ve been interested in moving on to something new for several years. But, try as I might, I can’t seem to get anyone to respond or make me an offer.”

“Sam, I don’t recall seeing you at the SAF Chapter meeting in Monticello last week.”

“No, I don’t have time to take part in SAF.”

Not one to leave things alone, “I didn’t see you at the Arkansas Board of Foresters Annual meeting either, did I?”

“No, you know, that fell on a day when I had something else going.”

One last push. “You know we’ve been trying to get more of our foresters involved in Project Learning Tree and other ways to promote conservation education. You haven’t been involved there either have you?”

“No, you know those things are often scheduled at night and on Saturdays. What’s your point anyway? All I wanted to know was why you were getting job offers?”

Bingo!

“Sam, that’s my whole point. Not a single job offer, including my job with Potlatch and the one

we were just discussing, came solely because of my degrees and my current work. I can trace every job offer I’ve had to my network of

professional friends and contacts. And, I’ve met almost all of those folks doing ‘extra curricular’ things, like SAF meetings and helping with PLT.”

At that point it became clear that I wasn’t getting through when Sam responded, “I have too many other things to do with my evenings and

weekends to get involved in all of that.”

Life Lesson: *Get involved in professional and other extra curricular activities.*

“Identify your most powerful talents, hone them with skills and knowledge, and you will be well on your way to living the strong life.”

— Marcus Buckingham & Donald Clifton
Now, Discover Your Strengths

“Empowerment is not granted by the organization. People must empower themselves.”

— Robert E. Quinn

Work With Folks You Like

THE RARE GOLDEN TROUT

Of the places I've been privileged to visit over the years, few rank higher for natural beauty and sheer tranquility than the former Champion International's Lake Logan Lodge. An eighty-eight acre lake nestled at 3000' elevation in the Smokey Mountains, encircled by even higher peaks thickly stocked with diverse hardwoods and white pines.

For almost a century, the Lake and original chestnut log cabins had been a mainstay for Champion executives and customers. In my decade with Champion, I had the pleasure of spending many nights in one of the cabins and of catching several of the stocked rainbow trout.

As customer interest waned and the cost of operation climbed ever higher, the company had begun holding a number of internal training conferences at the Lake. One such event was a convocation for the company's Public Affairs staff. As the Forest Resources staff lead for such issues, I had been invited to participate. After one of the many training sessions, most of the attendees made their way to the lake to try their hand at fishing.

Jim Carraway, a co-worker from the Environmental Affairs Department and long-time friend from Mississippi, and I decided that we'd use the afternoon to explore a plan to jump-start the comeback of the Pigeon River. The Pigeon is a tiny river that flows from Lake Logan, past the company's Canton pulp and paper mill and on into Tennessee. It also was the subject of an infamous chapter in Champion's 100-year history and the center of company efforts to reduce unintended pollution and put the river back on a track to restoration. It was just such a mission that occupied us for the afternoon. We were exploring the potential to stock rainbows in the

river to establish a catch-and-release fishery.

It was at a meeting with a hatchery operator near Brevard, North Carolina, that Jim and I both noticed the large number of albino fish in one pond. "What do you do with these?" Jim asked. "Oh, most of these get filleted as few people want the colorless fish included in their stocking."

Jim asked me if I recalled the mounted albino on the wall at the Lake Logan boathouse. Under the fish was a brass plate, "Rare Golden Trout."

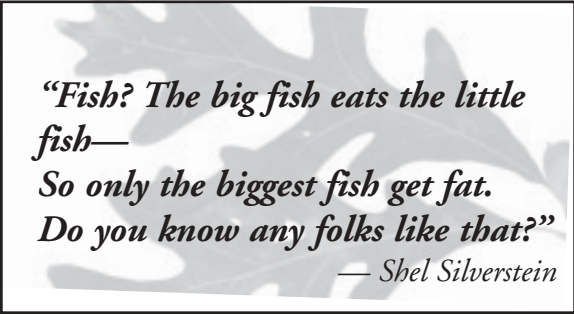
In the next minutes, Carraway hatched the idea of buying a couple of the fish and

planting them with some of our fishing colleagues. We negotiated a quick purchase of two two-pound beauties, but our hatchery friend looked confused when we told him we wanted them alive.

As we arrived back at the lake, it was easy to decide who we would recruit to join us in our plan. Jeannie Connelly, Champion Vice President of Government Affairs and her fellow Washingtonian Donna Harmon were sitting not far offshore in the middle of the lake while most of the other fishermen were stationed near the mouth of the Pigeon River. Super! We quietly urged the ladies to row their boat near shore. We "planted" the two Golden Trout on their otherwise empty stinger and told them to just "play along."

We then enlisted the staff at the boathouse in our scheme. When the ladies made their way to shore, there was a great commotion about not just the success of catching one "golden trout," but these ladies had done the impossible — catching two, and big ones at that! We let the story build for several hours before some began to suspect that something indeed was "fishy."

Life Lesson: *Work with folks you like. If you don't enjoy the people you work with, why are you there?*



***"Fish? The big fish eats the little fish—
So only the biggest fish get fat.
Do you know any folks like that?"***
— Shel Silverstein

Expect Things to Change

WHO MOVED MY TREES?

Shortly after International Paper completed its successful take-over of Champion International, the popular book *Who Moved My Cheese?* was a common sight on many desks around Champion. Some conversations began, “Are you Hem or Haw?” referring to two of the feature characters that had to adjust to their “cheese” suddenly disappearing. Hem denied the situation and feared that it would lead to something worse. Haw finally learned that change could lead to something better.

Yep, I too got a copy. I also read *What Color is Your Parachute?* Of the two, *Cheese* is more entertaining, but *Parachute* has hands-on value and deeper meaning.

The unexpected passing of Champion was troubling. Champion was my fourth professional employer, but the first where I’d stayed for such a long time — more than a decade. And, I have to admit that I had begun to think about staying the course until retirement. My thoughts were not motivated by the fact that Champion had become a comfortable place — one where the cheese was regularly placed in front of me; rather, the appeal came from the fact that Champion was an exciting place to work with lots of professional challenge and opportunity.

Champion was making a difference — not just for competitive reasons — in sustainable forestry issues in the U.S. and around the world. Our approach to endangered species issues in the U.S. was distinctly different from most others in the forest products industry and indeed most in the private business sector. We were seeking solutions that yielded wins for Champion and other landowners, but that also protected species.

We were in the midst of taking those commitments to a bigger playing field with our planned merger with Finland’s UPM Kymmene. I was

excited about the UPM merger and the “new” Champion that was to emerge. So, the week after the IP announcement, I was blue. It wasn’t the merger that I wanted. Not because IP was a bad company. Nor, was it because they weren’t doing some neat things as well. It was just that Champion had been a near perfect fit for me. But in a matter of days it was gone. I did feel that someone had “moved my trees.”

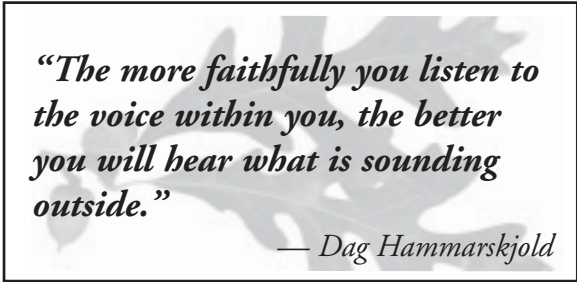
I told the IP folks that I assumed they would not have a place for me and that was okay. My concern was for the folks in my organization who wished to stay with the new parent. My focus was on getting as many of them placed as was possible and in seeing IP adopt many of the great things we had been doing.

To my surprise, IP did offer me a position as well, but for a number of reasons it just wasn’t the right thing for me. Unlike Hem and Haw, it wasn’t that I was reluctant to get on with my life. The fact was that I

needed time to decide what I wanted to do with the remaining third of my career.

The emotions that came after such a traumatic change were many — anger, fear, pain, discouragement and uncertainty. For me, the greatest burden was the loss of a sense of passion. But, with time came the excitement of new opportunities and new ways to give back to society and promote conservation. While it was not the experience I had wished for, it was one of those important passages in life that allowed deep reflection and significant learning. I can say that I am thankful for my years with Champion, for the great friends and colleagues, and even for the learning that came from my trees being moved, even if I’m just beginning to get refocused.

Life Lesson: *Expect things to change. Use the opportunities when they occur to step back, reassess and start the next chapter in your career.*



“The more faithfully you listen to the voice within you, the better you will hear what is sounding outside.”

— Dag Hammarskjöld

About the Author

Carlton N. Owen founded *The Environmental Edge, LLC*, as a consultancy designed to “bring business and the environment together.” He has spent more than 25 years as a professional conservationist working both for industry and the environmental movement. He spent 11 years with Champion International Corporation where he rose to the position of Vice President-Forest Policy for the company’s 5+ million acres of U.S. forests. He has run two not-for-profit organizations — the American Forest Foundation and the Mississippi Wildlife Federation — in addition to spending seven years with Potlatch Corporation. Owen holds a M.S. degree in wildlife ecology and a B.S. degree in forestry, both from Mississippi State University.



Carlton N. Owen

Owen has written dozens of professional papers and given literally hundreds of formal presentations on integrating conservation into economically viable businesses. He brings an effective writing style and a keen sense of humor honed over a quarter-century of life experiences to this latest challenge — a series of “life lessons” to help others in the conservation and business communities.

*“To have found work that one enjoys
and that is fulfilling is to have had a
very successful hunt.”*

— Carlton N. Owen