

Five Years Later, a Look into Perspective and Direction of the FWC: An Evolving Culture

John Burton

Abstract

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) was created in 1999. Since that time numerous changes have occurred in the structure and culture of the FWC Division of Law Enforcement. New guiding principles and approaches for problem solving have been established by the agency that affect the future role of the division. The type of work that is the day-to-day focus of FWC officers varies greatly across the state. This research examined the perspective and direction of field supervisors and officers. Results of the study indicate field personnel are maintaining core values while embracing the challenges of the future.

Introduction

On July 1, 1999, the Florida Game and Freshwater Fish Commission and the Florida Marine Patrol were combined to create the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC). The merger created the largest state conservation law enforcement entity in North America. Over 700 FWC officers are responsible to enforce all state laws and many federal laws. Numerous changes to the agency and the Division of Law Enforcement have occurred since the inception of the FWC. Work force changes due to attrition, retirements, new management, new employees, changing social demands and domestic security have all added to the evolving culture of the division. Diversity, flexibility, commitment and a broad based working knowledge are required attributes of the FWC officer.

The mission of the FWC Division of Law Enforcement is “to protect Florida’s natural resources and people through law enforcement.” To carry out its mission, the division is strategically divided into six geographic regions. Each region has unique enforcement needs and priorities. Examples would include the Special Enforcement Area (Monroe and Collier Counties), where officers primarily focus on marine resources, boating enforcement and public safety in a marine environment. However, they are also tasked with drug smuggling and illegal immigration along with domestic security missions. A second example would be the Northwest Region (16-county area from Escambia County to Jefferson County), where an officer would primarily focus on both inland and coastal resources as well as boating safety enforcement. Officers in this region are also tasked with conflict resolution between changing user groups, landowner vs. hunter disputes, trespass, domestic security, occasional Capital security details and public safety in numerous remote areas of public land and water.

FWC officer responsibilities are complex and diverse. Intensive training is required to prepare a new officer for their future role. Officers are required to complete the standard basic recruit academy in addition to specialized training in conservation law enforcement. After graduation from the 28 week academy, officers are required to successfully complete a field training officer (FTO) program and complete a one year

probationary period. Seasoned officers also continue training consisting of both mandatory subjects and advanced career enhancement courses.

Since the creation of the FWC, over 50% of the division's workforce has changed. Retirement and attrition account for the majority of the change. In some areas, a senior officer may only have three years of experience. Cultural conflicts resulting from the merging of two similar resource law enforcement agencies have subsided. The focus at all levels is now on the success of the FWC. Officers may still prefer specific types of enforcement, but they also recognize a responsibility and accountability to the needs of their work area.

Opportunity for advancement has also increased for employees with the changes in the workforce. Managers are often tasked with the difficult process of choosing selecting supervisors that have less experience than in previous years. Managers are also presented with new ideas and perspectives from the new employees and supervisors.

Management must choose the direction the agency should take in an ever changing society. Public safety, disaster response, homeland security, and resolving user conflicts have taken precedence over traditional resource and boating enforcement in many areas of the state on a day-to-day basis. The type of work that is the day-to-day focus of FWC officers varies widely across the state. Even in the few remaining rural areas of the state, traditional "hook and bullet" enforcement is only part of the service the public demands from the FWC officer.

Managers, supervisors, and employees are provided training statewide with an agency goal to become more effective and efficient. One recent training seminar was called "Good to Great." Employees from all of the divisions of the agency were brought together and placed in mixed groups. Sworn and non sworn employees were required to solve problems involving user group conflicts and resource management. Employees were exposed to the many jobs each division does on a daily basis. The emphasis was on working together as a team to be the best.

Additionally, upper level supervisors and division representatives meet routinely to discuss emerging issues and solutions. The Division of law Enforcement is also working toward a future goal of accreditation.

The number of traditional outdoor consumptive resource users has fallen year after year. Demands on the division have evolved to being more response/public safety oriented. In addition, some of our new employees "Generation X" are not as focused on resource protection as in years past due to the difficulties involved in making resource cases and the time, knowledge, and skill that is required. They also lack the life experiences that attracted people to this specialized type of law enforcement in the past. Often the new FWC responder/public safety officer feeds the agency with numerous traffic and boating infractions combined with general police type work activity. This was compounded after 9-11 to include port and domestic security. The positives associated with this are funding, recognition, working with other agencies and providing a service that the public demands. The negatives are that the resource may suffer, agency morale is affected in some areas, and our resource-oriented constituents are dissatisfied with agency priorities. Upper managers are often tasked with trying to satisfy constituents in these political arenas.

Resource laws have evolved to being very complex and difficult for not only the public, but also for officers to understand. Knowing specific laws and rules for each species of fresh and saltwater fish, wildlife, commercial resource regulations, management area regulations, boating, and federal migratory and fishery regulations in addition to traffic, trespass, narcotic, and other state statutes is difficult.

Having knowledge of when and where to work and target peak activity times is an acquired skill. Community Oriented Policing (COP's) philosophy and proactive patrols are directed and are required strategies for the success of the agency.

Background

Pridgen (2001) examined the traits and values that typify a role model officer. Pridgen observed that conservation agencies have historically assumed that they would hire employees from the ranks of hunters and fishermen. However, changes in public attitudes about wildlife and reduced opportunities for traditional outdoor recreation have reduced the percentage of hunters and fisherman in the general public. An increasing number of conservation officer candidates have limited or no hunting or fishing experience.

Pridgen's research also found that attributes of a good inland officer are the same as those of a good marine officer. There were not significant differences in traits and values of officers from two previous agencies (GFC and FMP). Role model officers were found to be self motivated, with a desire to acquire knowledge, help people, and enjoy freedom and variety with a passionate commitment to protect human well-being and natural resources.

Ouellette (2002) examined shift assignments and effective conservation law enforcement. Ouellette found that increased responsibilities, political influence and the public's demand for immediate response had caused conservation agencies to adopt new and different shift concepts. Each concept required the ability to change continually to meet the needs of both the agency and the citizens. As responsibilities of traditional resource agencies increased, their importance within the law enforcement community was more easily recognized by the public.

Ouellette's research also found that a flexible work schedule may provide a perception to the public that officers are available twenty-four hours a day/seven days a week. No specific shift schedule would work for every department. The research indicated changes in shifts caused strife and conflict among the employees.

Jourdan and Leavine (2001) found that when dealing with organizational change, it is important to prepare employees for the transition. Supervisors should prepare their employees for change by involving them in the process, promoting communication and overcome barriers that prevent cooperation. Supervision should focus on the advantages associated with the change and display a commitment to overcome obstacles.

Collins (2001) stated that enduring great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. This is a magical combination of "preserving the core and stimulate progress." Collins said the real question is not, "Why greatness?" but "what work makes you feel compelled to try to create greatness?" If you have to ask the question, "Why

should we try to make it great? Isn't success enough? Then you're probably engaged in the wrong line of work."

Cabbage (2004) wrote in an FWC news release dated June 30, 2004, that 5 years to the day after the former GFC and the former FMP faded into history; the agency that replaced them will take on a modernized internal structure. FWC consulted stakeholders, employees, and other interested parties to design a new internal structure to address complex conservation issues of the new century. FWC Executive Director Ken Haddad stated, "The 2004 Florida Legislature recognized that the old structure needed to be updated, and law makers approved the complete reorganization of the FWC." The agency will focus on making decisions with a greater variety of internal and external input. Haddad stated, "We are moving the decision-making process closer to the public, down from the upper management level where it occurred previously."

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement, General Orders Manual, Section 2 (July 1, 2004), states, "Sworn members shall exercise prudent judgment by evaluating the circumstances surrounding a suspected violation. Officers should consider the intent of the law as opposed to the letter of the law, the intent of the violator and the mitigating circumstances that surround the violation when deciding the appropriate action to address a violation. Employees are directed to use discretion, common sense and impartiality when determining whether a violation merits a warning or an arrest."

The purpose of this research was to determine the perspective and direction of the field supervisor and officer. Focus was placed on interests, stressors, decision making, and employee vision. The results of the research were intended to assist management with an enhanced understanding of the field perspective. The results may assist the agency with future endeavors and enhanced customer service.

Methods

The research was based on the assumption that stress and uncertainties are caused by a changing organization and society. It is also based on the assumption that employees embrace the challenges of the future when they are committed to the success of their organization.

During the time of the research, the agency had recently dealt with several hurricane disaster responses, was preparing for a Super Bowl security detail, providing homeland security in several water ports and was conducting normal operations related to resource and boating enforcement.

Information for this research was obtained by review of data and information primarily related to conservation law enforcement and the FWC.

On November 23, 2004, a brief letter and survey form (Appendix A) was mailed to a random selection of 8 officers and 2 lieutenants in all 6 regional areas of the state; a total of 48 officers and 12 lieutenants. The target group of ten employees per region included field operations only. No training or administrative staff were surveyed. A self addressed stamped return envelope was provided with each survey. Survey results were required to be returned by December 31, 2004.

Interests were observed by asking the employee what they liked best about their job, what was the most important thing they did while working and what was their favorite activity to work. Conversely, stressors were observed by asking the employee what they liked least about their job and what was the most stressful thing they did while working.

Decision making was observed by asking what criteria the employee used to determine the appropriate enforcement action when they found a violation and what the public saw as the most important function they provided. Vision was also observed by asking whether the employee considered their agency to be a police or resource agency, where the Division of Law Enforcement was headed in the future and what were the three most pressing issues that needed to be addressed by the division.

For demographical purposes, employees were asked to identify their region, whether their work area was rural, urban or both, time in service and job title. Employees were asked to make additional and confidential comments if they wanted.

Results

Results of each of the survey questions were sorted and grouped into similar responses/categories. Responses, when shown as percentages, are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Nineteen surveys (31%) were completed and returned. The Northwest Region, Southwest Region and the Special Enforcement Area each had a 40% return (four per region). The Northeast Region had a 30% return (three from the region). The North Central Region and the South Region had a 20% return (two per region).

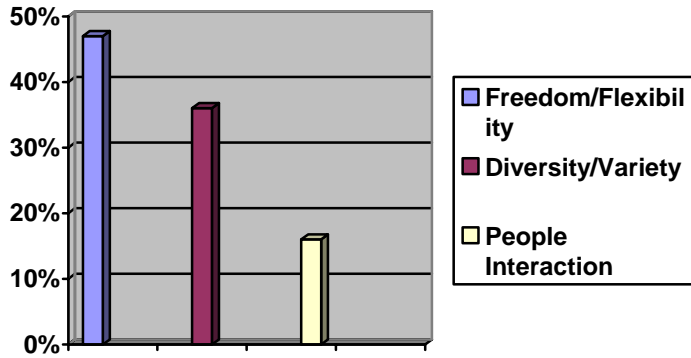
Fourteen of the respondents (74%) identified that they worked in both rural and urban areas. Four respondents (21%) identified that they worked in rural area. Only one respondent (5%) indicated they worked in an urban area.

Thirteen respondents (68%) were officers and six (32%) were lieutenants. This fact constitutes that from the target group 27% of the possible officers responded and 50% of the possible lieutenants responded.

Seven respondents (37%) had five years or less experience. Seven respondents (37%) had sixteen or more years of experience. Four respondents (21%) had between eleven and fifteen years experience. One respondent (5%) had between six and ten years experience.

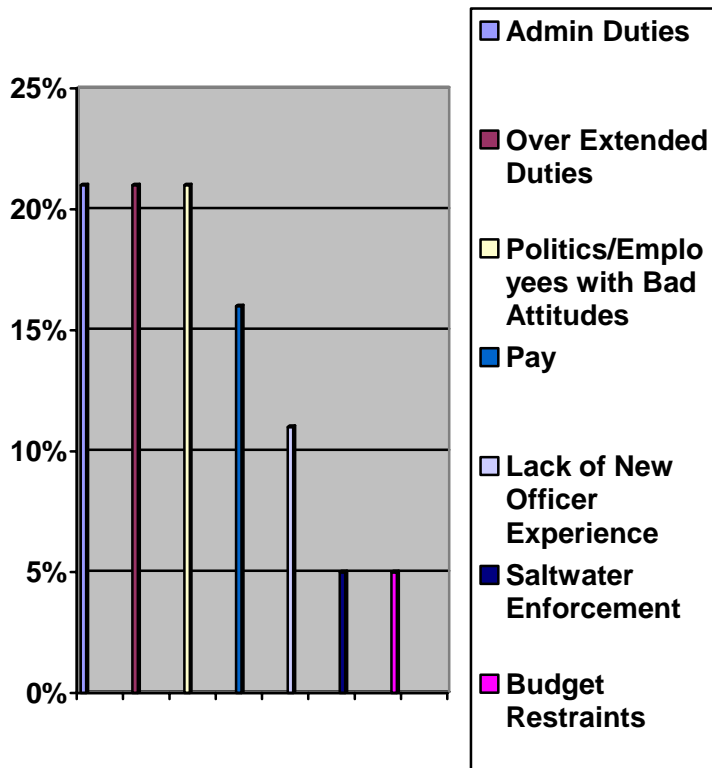
Individual responses are summarized in the following few tables:

What do respondents like best about their job?



Of the nineteen respondents, nine (47%) liked freedom and flexibility, seven (36%) liked the variety and diversity the job offers and three (16%) liked the interaction they have with the people they work with and the public.

What do respondents like least about their job?

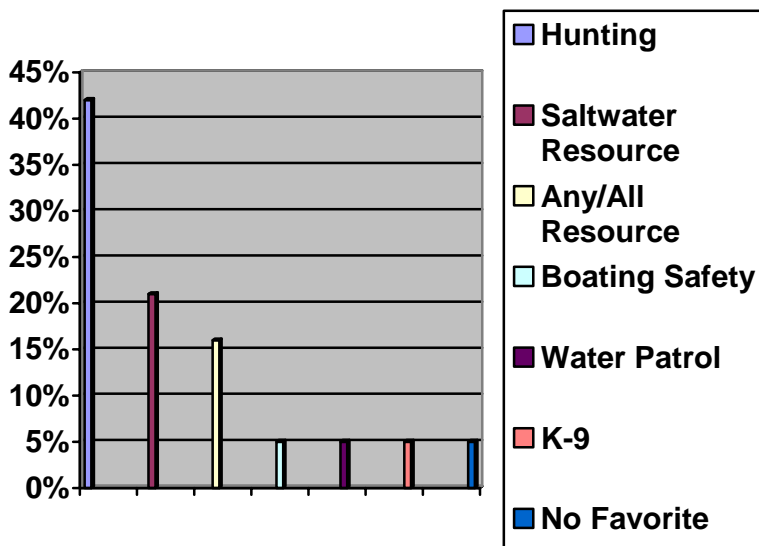


Of the nineteen respondents, four (21%) disliked administrative duties, four (21%) disliked over extended duties and having to do too many jobs, four (21%) disliked internal politics interfering with their jobs and employees with bad attitudes towards the agency, three (16%) disliked their pay, two (11%) disliked the lack of new officer experience, one (5%) disliked saltwater resource enforcement and one (5%) disliked budget restraints.

The most important thing respondents did while working resulted in a wide variety of responses. Eighteen of the 19 respondents answered the question. Five (26%) indicated community/public support, landowner issues and responding to complaints were most important. Four (22%) indicated resource protection was the most important. Four (22%) indicated educating the public was the most important. Two (11%) indicated public safety and high visibility patrol was the most important. Two (11%) indicated assisting officers and completing assignments was the most important. One (6%) indicated their own safety was the most important.

What criteria were used to determine the appropriate enforcement action when a violation was found (listing at least three each) resulted in the following data. Seventeen (89%) indicated the intent of the law. Sixteen (84%) used the intent of the violator. Twelve (63%) indicated the circumstances of the violation. Six (32%) indicated the attitude of the defendant. Three (16%) indicated residency of the defendant. Two (11%) indicated personal safety.

What is the favorite activity to work?

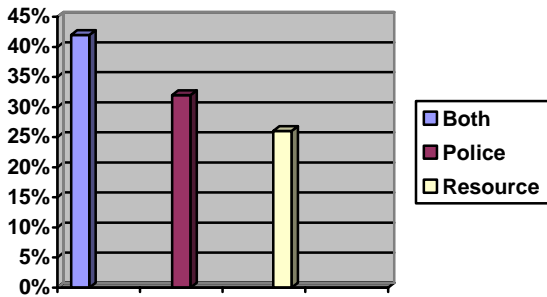


Of the nineteen respondents, eight (42%) indicated hunting activity, four (21%) indicated saltwater resource activity, three (16%) indicated any and all resource activity, one (5%) indicated boating safety, one (5%) indicated water patrol, one (5%) indicated K-9 use and one (5%) indicated they had no favorite activity.

Seventeen of the 19 respondents answered the survey regarding the most stressful thing they do while working. Results showed that six (35%) stated administrative duties with an emphasis on "People First" time entry and required reports

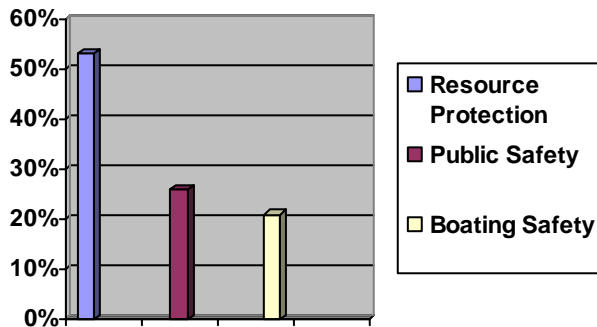
were the most stressful part of their job. Two (12%) stated vehicle stops, two (12%) stated dealing with their supervisor and two (12%) stated always being available and doing everything right. Each of the following results were listed one time (6%), balancing patrol activities, use of inadequate equipment, homeland security, user conflicts and dealing with incompetence.

Do respondents consider the FWC to be a police agency or a resource agency?



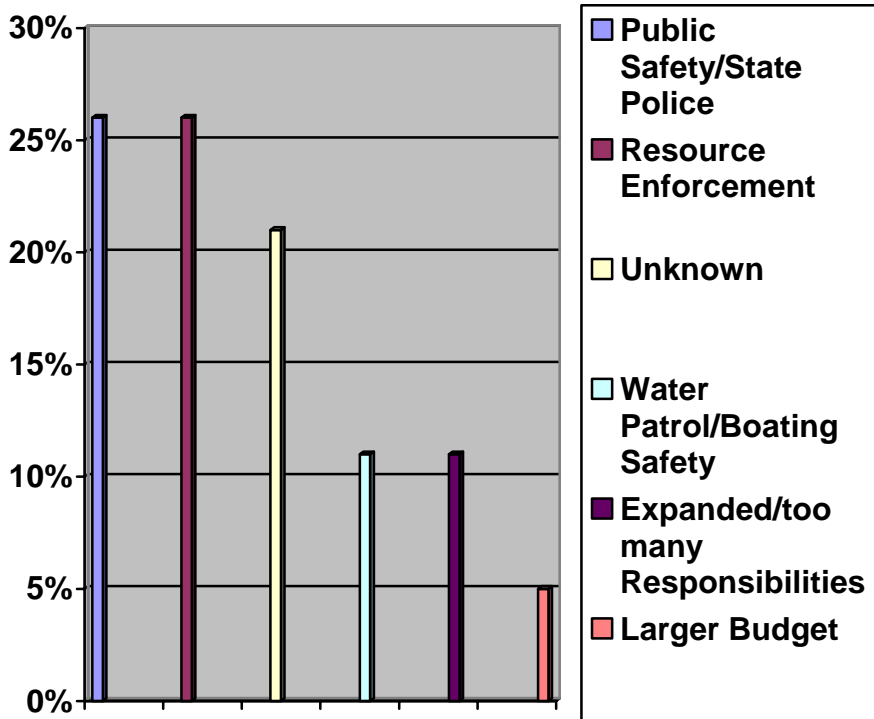
From the nineteen respondents, eight (42%) stated both, six (32%) stated police agency and five (26%) stated resource agency.

What does the public see as the most important function officers provide in their patrol area?



Of the nineteen respondents, ten (53%) stated resource protection and enforcement, five (26%) stated public safety and law enforcement presence and four (21%) stated boating safety.

Where is the FWC Division of Law Enforcement headed in the future?



Of the nineteen respondents, five (26%) stated public safety and/or a state police agency, five (26%) stated resource and conservation law enforcement, four (21%) stated they didn't know, two (11%) stated water patrol or boating safety, two (11%) stated expanded with too many responsibilities and one (5%) stated with a larger budget.

What are the three most pressing issues that need to be addressed by the division?

Eighteen of the nineteen respondents answered the question with a total of fifty-four responses.

Employee needs, including job knowledge, training, equipment, information exchange, employee turnover and retention, promotions, work schedules and pay were stated in twenty-two (41%) of the fifty-four responses.

Clarity in FWC rules, extended seasons, more opportunities for recreational consumptive users, resource enforcement, commercial fishing rules and enforcement, added inland enforcement, equal penalties for salt and freshwater violations, reducing user conflicts (landowner vs. hunter, airboat noise, ATV use) and public relations were stated in twenty-one (39%) of the fifty-four responses.

Water patrol, including boating safety was stated in four (7%) of the fifty-four responses. Public Safety, including domestic security, immigration and alien smuggling were stated in four (7%) of the fifty-four responses. Endangered Species protection was stated in two (4%) of the fifty-four responses. Stolen boats were stated in one (2%) of the fifty-four responses.

Discussions

Survey responses were not categorized by region due to the low return/response rate. Responses from the six supervisors were also not categorized separately. The survey results indicated the majority of responders (74%) had five or less years of experience or sixteen or more years of experience.

The responses (83%) to what employees like best about their job, included freedom, flexibility, diversity, and variety. These are known qualities that attract and retain employees in the field of conservation law enforcement. The research suggests these qualities will continue be the guiding factors for the future role of the agency.

The prevalent dislikes documented during the research included administrative duties, over-extended duties, negative employees and internal politics. These same dislikes are similarly found in the majority of other law enforcement agencies and organizations. These issues are significant and are a constant reminder for positive management and leadership.

This research indicated that the variety of responses regarding the most important thing done while working primarily related to community and public support, resource protection, and public safety. These results are directly related to the agency's Community Oriented Policing program and patrol philosophy.

The research found that the majority of respondents are in compliance with agency philosophy and policy when deciding the appropriate enforcement action to take when addressing a violation. The issue of residency being a factor created a question that was not addressed during the research. The presumption could be interpreted as residency being part of the circumstances surrounding the violation, and/or the knowledge or intent of the violator. It does not necessarily infer that non residents would be targeted or be dealt with in an unfair manner. It also does not infer that residents would be targeted or be dealt with in an unfair manner.

It was discovered that the favorite activity to work was hunting activity. The responses varied from different types of hunting activity (deer, turkey, migratory birds, night hunting, etc.). This was not expected from a statewide survey response, since hunting activity is limited in many areas of the state. The argument could be made that the other responses of saltwater resource, any and all resource and water patrol would almost equal the response of hunting activity. A more important finding was all but two of the respondents listed a type of activity related to resource enforcement as their favorite.

The research found a correlation between the most stressful thing officers do and what they like least about their job. This placed administrative duties as a number one concern among respondents. Responses included vehicle stops, balancing patrol activities, homeland security, handling user conflicts, always being available, and doing the right thing can in fact be stressful and are sometimes part of the job.

The majority of respondents (74%) felt the public saw resource protection and boating safety as the most important functions provided in their patrol area. The influence of changes in society and day-to-day work activity were shown with the other respondents (26%) indicating public safety. Public safety is a service that the division provides on the waters and public lands of the state. The research found that the

division's core missions are the same as the respondents' perception of the public's needs.

The majority of respondents (63%) felt public safety and resource protection were the primary direction the division was headed in the future. The responses (32%) which included an unknown direction and expanded with too many responsibilities indicate that field personnel are experiencing the changing demands of their jobs.

Respondents indicated that employee needs, including job knowledge, training, equipment, information exchange, employee turnover and retention, promotions, work schedules, and pay were the most pressing issues that needed to be addressed by the division. The research also found that respondents are very concerned with internal issues primarily related to enforcement, public needs, rule and statute clarity. These are also priority issues for the agency.

The research indicated that field personnel are changing and adapting with the role of the division in an ever changing society. The research found perspective and direction of field personnel is positive and appears to be maintaining core agency values while embracing the challenges of the future.

Captain John Burton began his career with the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission in 1986 as an officer in Volusia County. He promoted through the ranks to his current position of Area Supervisor of a five county area in North Central Florida where he is responsible for administration of field operations. He is a Florida native with a strong commitment to the protection of the state's natural resources.

References

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- Ouellette, P. R. (2002). *Shift assignments and effective conservation law enforcement*. Proceedings of the Fifty-Sixth Annual Conference, Southeastern Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies, October 26-30, 2002, Baltimore, Maryland, 389-395.
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- Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Division of Law Enforcement, General Orders Manual, Section 2, p.1 (July 1, 2004).

Appendix A

MEMORANDUM

November 23, 2004

TO: Surveyed Personnel
FROM: Captain John Burton
North Central Region
Area III Supervisor
SUBJECT: Law Enforcement Survey

The purpose of the attached survey is to assist the Division of Law Enforcement with our shared vision to be the best. The survey is intended to identify issues that are important to you and to identify a statewide field perspective of our personnel.

You were selected by a random drawing to complete this important project. You may remain anonymous or attach your name to your survey. Your survey results will be kept confidential. Upon completion, please return the survey in the stamped self addressed envelope **no later than December 31, 2004.**

If you have any questions or need any assistance with this request please contact me at (352) 447-1633 Ext. 102.

Thank you for your time, thoughts and assistance in this matter.

LAW ENFORCEMENT SURVEY
FLORIDA FISH AND WILDLIFE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

1. What do you like best about your job?

2. What do you like least about your job?

3. What is the most important thing you do while working?

4. What criteria do you use to determine the appropriate enforcement action when you find a violation (list at least three)?

5. What is your favorite activity to work?

6. What is the most stressful thing you do while working?

7. Do you consider your agency to be a police agency or resource agency?

8. In your patrol area, what does the public see as the most important function you provide?

9. Where do you see the FWC Division of Law Enforcement headed in the future?

10. What are the three most pressing enforcement issues you feel need addressed by the Division?

Please circle the appropriate answer(s)

Region: NW NC NE SW S SEA

Your primary work area is mostly: Rural Urban Both

Time of Service: 5 years or fewer 6 to 10 years 11 to 15 years 16 years or more

Rank or job title: _____

Thank you for your assistance with this survey. You may make additional comments on the back or with additional pages. Please return the survey by mail before December 31, 2004 to:

LE Survey
Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission
10247 Suncoast Blvd.
Crystal River, FL 34428