



By J. T. Fleegle

People, people & more people

"I DON'T LIKE people, so, I'm going into wildlife biology." To any wildlife biologist, this is the punch line of a bad joke. In every wildlife management class, students are told wildlife management is ten percent animal management and ninety percent people management. As a student, I heard these words and I understood them, but I'm not sure I truly believed them. Even through graduate school, students are relatively insulated from the social side of wildlife management. I'm not sure anything could have prepared me for the public tsunami that, at times, seems to drown out anything that has to do with wildlife.

Many on the outside think biologists live in the wilds, keeping the company of animals, worlds away from humanity. Being part of a state deer management program is more like living in a fish bowl. And everyone is tapping on the glass, watching us swim around.

In February, our fish bowl gets really sloshed around. After hunting season is over, 'tis the season of sports shows and open houses. This is when I question if I have the right degree on the wall. It says wildlife biology. But after a day at the Eastern Sports & Outdoors Show, a degree in sociology, psychology or communications might seem more useful. Our job is not only to gather and analyze data and make management recommendations, but also to help people understand why the recommendations are made. Most people don't see the hundreds of hours of data collection, analysis and deliberation that go into forming recommendations. Deer management is a complicated business and people have questions.

When you flip the light switch at your house and the light goes on, do you think about the coal that is being burned, the complex inner workings of the power plant that changes that heat into electricity, the power lines and transformers that transport that energy to your electric meter, the wiring from your meter through your walls, finally connecting to your light switch? Imagine having to explain that process to someone in a few minutes . . . imagine explaining it to every person you speak with . . . all day.

Welcome to the fish bowl!