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EDITED BY

Igor Khorozyan,
Consultant in Mammal Research and
Biodiversity Conservation, Germany

REVIEWED BY

Alex Brackowski,
The University of Queensland,
Australia
Ronald R. Swaisgood,
San Diego Zoo Wildlife Alliance,
United States

*CORRESPONDENCE

Emily F. Pomeranz
pomeranze@michigan.gov

SPECIALTY SECTION

This article was submitted to
Human-Wildlife Interactions,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Conservation Science

RECEIVED 19 July 2022

ACCEPTED 31 October 2022

PUBLISHED 17 November 2022

CITATION

Decker DJ, Pomeranz EF,
Forstchen AB, Riley SJ, Lederle PE,
Schivavone MV, Baumer MS, Smith CA,
Frohlich RK, Benedict RJ Jr.
and King R (2022) Taking time
to think: The tyranny of being
“too busy” and the practice
of wildlife management.
Front. Conserv. Sci. 3:998033.
doi: 10.3389/fcosc.2022.998033

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Taking time to think: The tyranny of being “too busy” and the practice of wildlife management

Daniel J. Decker¹, Emily F. Pomeranz^{2*}, Ann B. Forstchen³,
Shawn J. Riley⁴, Patrick E. Lederle⁴, Michael V. Schivavone⁵,
Meghan S. Baumer¹, Christian A. Smith³, R. Kipp Frohlich⁶,
R. Joseph Benedict Jr.⁷ and Richard King⁸

¹Center for Conservation Social Science, Department of Natural Resources and the Environment, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY, United States, ²Wildlife Division, Michigan Department of Natural Resources, Lansing, MI, United States, ³Wildlife Management Institute, Gardners, PA, United States, ⁴Department of Fisheries and Wildlife, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI, United States, ⁵Bureau of Wildlife, New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, Albany, NY, United States, ⁶Division of Habitat and Species Conservation, Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission, Tallahassee, FL, United States, ⁷Wildlife and Forestry Division, Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency, Nashville, TN, United States, ⁸Wildlife Division, Wyoming Game and Fish Department, Cheyenne, WY, United States

KEYWORDS

effectiveness, job satisfaction, planning, productivity, time management, professionalism, professional practice

Introduction

Does it seem that most people you interact with professionally say they are too busy? Hearing this comment so often, it is possible to become numb to it, consider it the norm, and not think much about what the comment or condition really means. But have you ever wondered about the ramifications of constantly being “too busy” for you, your colleagues and the agency you work for?

In addition to our daily observations of colleagues, recent interactions with wildlife professionals¹ in workshops and training events elevated our concern about the deleterious effects of what we call “the tyranny of being too busy” on the practice and practitioners of wildlife management. For more than 15 years, several of us have engaged with wildlife professionals across the US in “Thinking Like a Manager” trainings and workshops (Organ et al., 2006). We also have held workshops on wildlife governance (Decker et al., 2016), ethical considerations in wildlife management (Decker et al., 2019),

1 In this article we use the term wildlife professional(s) to include both fish and wildlife professionals.

structured decision-making, and more recently habits and practices of effective wildlife professionals (Decker et al., 2020). Additionally, various members of our team have served in agency, academic or professional society leadership roles where we have confronted the condition of colleagues and employees being “too busy” to get critical work accomplished. Our referent for this article is state conservation agencies but we believe this condition exists throughout the conservation institution.

The negative effects of being too busy as a profession-wide phenomenon were brought in focus by our recent efforts to identify habits and practices of consistently high-performing wildlife professionals (Decker et al., 2020; Siemer et al., 2022). In brief, high-performing professionals continuously build the cognitive skills and habits of mind for critical thinking and apply those skills and habits to professional reasoning and judgment processes. The work of wildlife conservation professionals is accomplished through management within a framework of decision-making that requires those skills and habits (Decker et al., 2021). Professionals are expected to be reflective and analytical about what to believe (reasoning) and what to do (judgment) in a particular management situation. They also evaluate and learn from their experiences. Such purposeful reflection and critical analysis are essential to successful professional reasoning, judgment, evaluation, and decision-making. This entire process requires taking time to think.

Our recent study (Siemer et al., 2022) emphasized the importance of prioritizing time for reflective practice, yet most people in our study felt they were too busy. This observation led us to postulate the tyranny of being too busy is a substantial impediment to being a more effective wildlife practitioner. Basically, professionals engaged in management of public trust wildlife resources today live in a paradox. This is often stated by wildlife biologists, managers and administrators along the lines of: “My responsibilities make it impossible to find time to be as thoughtful as I would like or to engage in professional development that could make me more effective and consistently successful.” The implications of such a paradoxical situation should be alarming for any profession. Both adaptive leadership and adoption of innovations across geographies and layers of the wildlife management and conservation institution in the US are being impeded, with yet unmeasured but undoubted consequences on effectiveness. The phenomenon of being too busy is not unique to the conservation institution (Charlton, 2006; Hsee et al., 2010; Bellezza et al., 2017; Yang and Hsee, 2019); other professions, such as health care and education, that attract professionals who share “a calling” also are subject to the impacts of being too busy. These professions share some characteristics such as caring for the well-being of another entity (e.g., doctor/patient, teacher/student, wildlife manager/wildlife and human stakeholders of management), but wildlife professionals may be different in that they typically are entrusted to manage all wildlife for all people.

Wildlife administrative trustees (elected and appointed officials) often do not have deep ecological or wildlife management backgrounds and sometimes have unrealistic expectations of the time and cost of information gathering and analysis needed for informed decision-making (Smith, 2011). Increasing expectations of rapid response to public and stakeholder concerns frequently results in the urgent taking precedence over the important.

We do not possess and are unaware of extensive, scientifically-obtained data precisely documenting the prevalence of being too busy in the wildlife profession, but to the extent our collective experiences and observations provide *prima facie* evidence that this is a widespread condition in wildlife management, we believe there is a cause for concern. That is, the deleterious effects associated with being too busy and having no time to think (i.e., inadequate time for planning one’s work or thoughtfully reflecting about one’s actions) jeopardize our ability to accomplish the aims of conservation to meet societal needs (Classens et al., 2007). For example, we have observed that “doing just good enough” rather than as good as possible seems to be increasingly accepted as the threshold for success. As a recent workshop participant noted, being too busy creates the “80% is good enough” effect. This may suffice for some objectives or in cases where dwelling on an issue limits progress, but if applied to all efforts, this threshold for performance may lead to mediocrity in wildlife conservation with objectives not being achieved or success being short-lived. The wildlife profession may improve its effectiveness and increase job satisfaction by addressing this problem openly and identifying and mitigating the detrimental consequences it has on individuals and the profession overall. Being “too busy” is fundamentally problematic in a profession that values continual learning, such as adaptive management and continuing education for certification.

This article focuses on describing the tyranny of being too busy—primarily its symptoms, causes and effects—and presents ways to address the problem offered by wildlife professionals and the organizational behavior literature. We focus on three questions: (a) what is preventing wildlife professionals from setting a higher priority on taking time to reflect critically about their work? (b) what are the consequences of the current condition? and (c) what can be done to combat the problem? We draw on qualitative input received from 38 participants (a nonprobabilistic sample) in workshops focused on identifying habits and practices of consistently high-performing wildlife professionals as well as pre-workshop interviews with 10 wildlife professionals across Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies regions. Workshops were held in New York, Michigan, Florida, and Montana in early 2020. The answers are manifold, indicating efforts aimed at improving the situation will be a large undertaking, likely requiring interventions at multiple levels simultaneously, implemented over a considerable period and renewed continually.

Dissecting the problem: Too little time for critical thinking and reflective practice

Consistently effective wildlife management requires competence in several skills contributing to professional reasoning and judgment, including (a) critical, analytical thinking and (b) reflective, evaluation of actions (Decker et al., 2020). The reported alternatives to these two traits are relying solely on intuition (or “gut feelings”), acting without adequate analysis of a problem or repeating a previous management action unreflectively (i.e., continuing to carry out a management action uncritically, without evaluating its effects). Arguably, these alternatives do not represent an acceptable standard of practice for professionals responsible for intergenerational public trust wildlife resources. Yet, wildlife professionals report that these approaches regularly occur because reasoning and judgment are the processes that require time that people who are “too busy” may not believe they have (Decker et al., 2020; Siemer et al., 2022). Sometimes the timeline given by a commission or department leadership for regulatory decisions or other policies does not allow enough time to do things optimally, even when those tasked with the effort know what needs to be done. These abbreviated decision-making timelines also limit the ability for agencies to conduct, contract, or consult needed research, resulting in decisions informed by incomplete biological or social science data (McDonald-Madden et al., 2010; Merkle et al., 2019). This issue may be compounded by the fact that there is variation on the number of state agencies with research staff; some state programs are more robust than others (Merkle et al., 2019). Consequently, critical, analytical thinking and reflective, evaluative practice needed to support reasoning and judgment are frequently short-changed or even side-stepped entirely for expedience when people are not allotted enough time to think.

Before delving into the thrust of this paper, we recognize there is a side to the “too busy” phenomenon that we are not intending to address. That is when the claim of being too busy is made for less than honorable purposes. There are at least four variations to this:

1. Claiming to be “too busy” is used as a form of status; I am “too busy” therefore I am important.
2. Some people believe if they had more resources (i.e., people, money), they would have time for self-reflection, strategic thinking/planning, and evaluation, but no matter the resources, they will create a situation to make themselves “too busy.” Fundamentally, people are not convinced that setting aside time specifically for “deep thinking” is crucial to wildlife management success.
3. In some cases, the claim of being “too busy” is a code for “I do not think what you want me to work on is important so I am going to tell you I am ‘too busy’

rather than voice my concerns.” If we think something is important, even something new, we “find time” to make it happen. The problem is we do not agree with the others on what our priorities are or should be. “Too busy” is a prioritization problem.

4. In various ways, the “I’m too busy” refrain can feel somewhat unifying; we are all so busy. But as a response to your peer, colleague or co-worker, it can also be dismissive of what is being asked of you, as if your work is important but others’ work is not. This can have equity ramifications as well; you are too busy compared to whom?

What is preventing wildlife professionals from taking time to reflect critically about their work?

The obvious answer to the question posed above is conservation agencies are being asked to do more and different things than was expected 20-30 years ago, and with no more staff – usually less – in place to accomplish the work. Though not empirically documented, this is a common perception among professionals who have been in public sector wildlife conservation for their careers. Whether or not workload has increased markedly, our observations and inquiries indicate many factors are conspiring to prevent wildlife professionals from taking time to think more analytically, critically, and reflectively. Four factors are particularly problematic: fallacy of equating activity with productivity, normalizing the problem, action bias, and rigidity of the conservation institution (Figure 1).

Fallacy of equating activity with productivity

It seems that rewarding activity (doing things) may be displacing valuing productivity (accomplishing things) in wildlife management, or at least this shift is perceived to be occurring by our workshop participants (Decker et al., 2019). Certainly, activity is easier to measure and takes less time to quantify than substantive outcomes. But this trend toward activity being the coin of the realm also can quickly lead people to becoming too busy. As one workshop participant cautioned, expectations to be a “product-oriented public servant” can lead to menial tasks that consume large portions of work time. Being active is not necessarily being productive or successful; it can even signify the opposite. To have time to do the most important tasks you generally need to do fewer things, though, some people can engage in many activities *and* be productive.

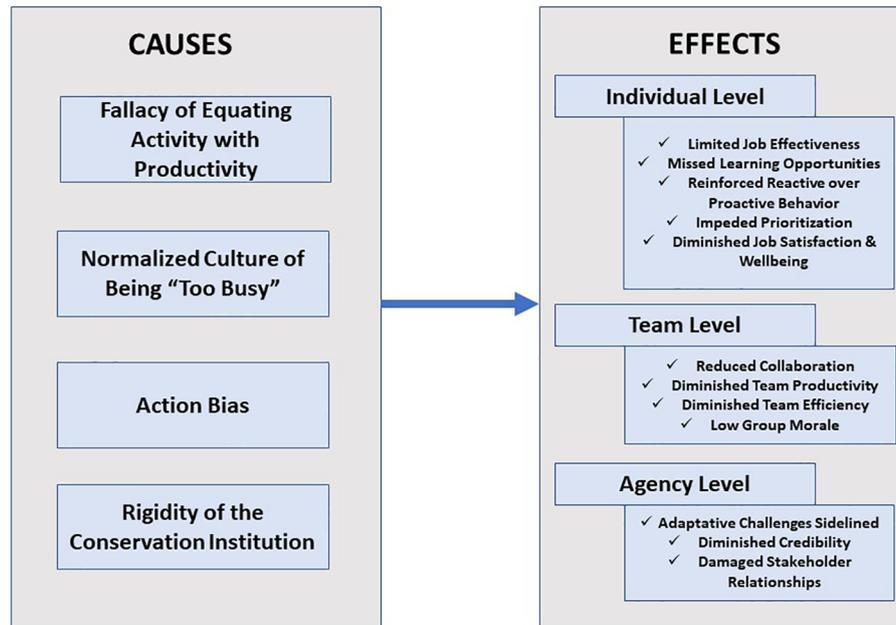


FIGURE 1

The Tyranny of Being Too Busy: Causes and Effects. Four broad causes of the "too busy" phenomenon in wildlife conservation and the associated impacts on individuals, work units or teams, and conservation agencies.

What is the difference between activity and productivity? Being very active usually means doing many things, with multi-tasking (participating in many activities simultaneously) regarded as the master level of this class of behavior. Productivity focuses on doing the right things, the things that contribute significantly to goal achievement. Concentrating on impacts in wildlife management—outcomes rather than outputs—helps align activity with productivity (Riley et al., 2002). Being busy with lots of activities that are not focused on important objectives can be deceiving, giving the illusion of being productive. Sometimes the need to feel busy is a way to justify not doing other, more important tasks that may be challenging or make us uncomfortable. Sometimes thinking about how to undertake novel tasks is simply more difficult than being busy with easy, familiar activities.

Being busy is often associated with "being important," so an agency's culture may perpetuate people exhibiting this trait to demonstrate their importance or worth to the agency. Relatedly, "being busy" may be perceived as a status symbol, tied to self-worth and is a signal to others that a person is valued. This statement may seem trite but is important. It is the foundation from which other facets of busyness arise, some undesirable. As one workshop participant critically observed, "individuals can be as busy as they let themselves be, and busyness is generally an excuse for procrastination or inability to prioritize work." It also has been observed that agencies with a heavy meeting culture tend to fuel staff feelings of being too busy, and some staff

declaring they are too busy often use the number of meetings (activity measure) on their schedules as evidence of their state (and status).

Being too busy generating outputs (which are not always outcomes) also may be equated with commitment to one's work. Showing dedication to work is commendable, if you have a sound definition of what constitutes meaningful work in the first place. Outputs can be wonderful, if they are meaningful (i.e., creating the impacts desired). Thinking, reflecting on experiences, evaluating, and anticipating the future all are important for a professional, even though these activities may have no tangible, immediately measurable products to show for the time spent engaged in them.

Normalizing the problem

Part of normalizing being too busy is readily accepting or being directed to absorb increasing workloads (e.g., doing more with less). As one workshop participant reported, "I do not have enough resources to do my job well. I am understaffed and spend a lot of my time in the field covering for lower-level positions instead of spending time reflecting, planning, and evaluating." Several workshop participants noted that agencies easily add more work to their portfolio but find it difficult to shed tasks or add staff to compensate. Becoming too busy is the inevitable result.

Perhaps as a rationalization of excessive workloads, being too busy has taken on a peculiar status in modern professional circles (and arguably in people's lives more generally), as if it were a badge of honor (Andrade, 2013). Any reinforcement co-workers or supervisors give to this elevated idea about the state of being too busy is counterproductive to learning why the condition exists, why it is so pervasive and how to overcome it. Perhaps the more precise question is why do we accept being too busy as a normal condition? Maybe the answer to that question lies in individual and social psychology. If we are unable to control something or find it too difficult to do so, we sometimes normalize it—accept it and adjust. If enough people follow this pattern, the behavior switches from a few individuals' isolated behavior to a socially accepted norm (i.e., herd behavior). When this occurs, a system of additional reinforcing behaviors develops that impedes analysis of the behavior in question and resists change. This is one reason why changing the status quo is usually so difficult.

Our observations indicate that being too busy, with no time to think, is becoming the status quo for the wildlife profession. Worryingly, being too busy may already have become institutionalized to the point that, as one workshop participant put it, “taking time for reflection feels unproductive and results in feeling guilty” for using time unwisely.

Contributing to normalization of being too busy is the inflexibility of existing rules and protocols. One workshop participant expressed this as “I spend the majority of my time making sure that we are following policy, procedures and protocols and not thinking about creative ways to get the job done.”

Action bias

A common phenomenon among wildlife professionals we observed long ago is what we call action bias. That is, wildlife managers tend to be action-oriented with an innate tendency and preference for “doing something,” rather than taking time for planning to do the right thing (Fuller et al., 2020). At the same time, state wildlife agencies, like many organizations, may be prone to path dependence, essentially “locked in” to a repetitious cycle of limited actions which can be difficult to change (Sydow et al., 2009:704). To a point, being action-oriented is a good trait, but often we found wildlife managers are prone to moving straight to action without first framing the problem, defining clear objectives and identifying benefits and costs of alternative courses of action, as would be identified in a reputable planning process, even a simple one. Action bias commonly surfaces when manipulating or regulating habitat, wildlife populations, or human interactions with these components of the management system. Many wildlife managers are prone to jump to action quickly in management thinking, perhaps after only cursory attention to other aspects of

the management system. Adoption of a structured decision process encourages spending time on objective setting, which ensures that action is based on desired outcomes (Gregory et al., 2012; Hammond et al., 2015).

The nature of public wildlife management – management of complex, common-pool resources – by agencies embedded in bureaucracies governed by a democracy lends itself to incrementalism (Lindblom, 1979) and to demonstrating that things are getting done on short time frames. This political feature of wildlife management contributes to action bias. It often seems that every request from agency leadership or wildlife trustees is an emergency or at least urgent (high priority, short timeframe to respond). Sometimes this is true (there is political pressure for immediate action in the public interest) and sometimes it is perceived (the boss asked so it must be important). This is an old story of the tension between being reactive or responsive rather than proactive, but no matter how thoughtful and process-oriented one may try to be, the immediate need for information and quick decisions is going to be a part of wildlife management. Not overdoing this reactive/responsive tendency necessitates adaptability, part of which is taking time to plan in the first place, developing decision processes, and then responding appropriately instead of reactively.

In addition to leaping impulsively to action, some managers tend to rely on favored actions that they have used effectively in the past and are comfortable prescribing because of their familiarity and prior usefulness (Patt and Zeckhauser, 2000). This seems more rewarding to action-oriented people than spending time investigating the complexity of an evolving issue and then identifying goals, objectives, and actions accordingly. In our experience, the tendency to jump too quickly to action (prescribing solutions to problems that have not been adequately analyzed) is minimized by encouraging professional reasoning prior to considering actions. In other words, taking time to analyze a situation adequately and to consider alternatives intentionally rather than doing business as usual.

How pervasive and powerful the action bias is in wildlife management is not quantitatively documented, but workshop participants reported a strong current in agency culture that does not value reflection, planning and evaluation: a culture where “responding to” is far more important than “planning for.” Reinforcing action over planning and evaluation is not just an internal phenomenon, as a perception exists among agency staff we interviewed that public stakeholders do not see value in planning and evaluation, contributing to arguments against allocating time to those functions. Workshop participants describe symptoms of this situation to include:

1. Not enough support from leadership to spend time (a) planning and (b) holding analytic after-action discussions.

2. Expectations to be swiftly responsive (reactive) in addressing brush fires (pulled into “the vortex”); the urgent is prioritized over the important (tyranny of the urgent).
3. Lack of thoughtful prioritization to ensure effort is directed to the most important goals and tasks.
4. The constant interruption of creative thought because priority is placed on responsiveness to the public as opposed to doing what is needed for broader public resource management goals (benefits) to be achieved.

Rigidity of the wildlife conservation institution

Workshop participants observed that during the last few decades, expectations about the work of wildlife conservation (including potential technology to improve that work) has evolved but the conservation institution (especially state conservation agencies) for the most part has not adequately adapted to these expectations or adopted improved methods. Conservation challenges such as invasive/exotic species detection, eradication, and management; climate change; overabundant species; and managing impacts of habitat loss are complex and require greater attention and specialized skill sets. In addition, the time it takes for managers to observe meaningful management impacts relative to many of these conservation challenges may span many years. This not only adds complexity to managers’ work but may compound feelings of there always being more to do, as observable payoff may be delayed for much of the work. Stakeholder expectations have changed and are more varied, too, resulting in new priorities in many areas (such as addressing human-wildlife conflict and delivering new programs such as birding trails, shooting ranges, youth programs, and wildlife disease detection and management programs).

Agencies are simultaneously attempting to: (a) adjust to new expectations and greater accountability and transparency in decision-making and financial processes; (b) engage in effective collaboration across jurisdictions and disciplines; (c) address the need for staff specialization despite legislative or administrative caps on the number of employees; and (d) accommodate the acceleration of issue development from initial public awareness to expectation of resolution. Restrictive funding models constrain institutional adaptability to respond to societal demands for conservation benefits. Lack of prioritization to determine what is essential and lack of a clearly articulated definition of agency responsibility and jurisdiction results in a culture where everything is important, “no” is rarely heard, legacy programs persist, and staff increasingly do more with less resources, particularly time (Ford et al., 2022). And, rapidly changing agency policy and directives, undoing and redoing

decisions and programs, and developing, communicating and learning new protocols is time-consuming.

Not clearly falling into any of the categories mentioned above, but nevertheless likely of considerable importance, is the observation made by one workshop participant: “not being able to articulate the need to reflect and plan in a way that gains support from leadership.” Two aspects of this statement merit underscoring. First is the assessment that wanting and having time to reflect is a condition that a wildlife professional has difficulty explaining. Second is the implicit belief that they must explain the need in some especially convincing way to gain their supervisor’s approval to spend time for this purpose. These two observations speak volumes about the challenges to overcoming the tyranny of being too busy.

The consequences of being too busy

Being too busy and not having time to think carefully, whether for planning work or evaluating performance of oneself, a project team or broad program area in an agency, has potential to give rise to many undesirable effects. We asked workshop participants how being too busy influences the effectiveness of individual wildlife professionals, work groups, or wildlife agencies. Feedback from workshop participants and our own observations resulted in many effects.

Effects on individuals

As noted above, being too busy has a peculiar status in modern professional circles, as if it signifies the importance of a busy individual’s work (if not the individual himself/herself). This generally positive (and not critically examined) assumption about being busy prevents the assessment of the harm this condition brings to individuals, work groups, and organizations. The deleterious effects associated with the tyranny of being too busy are serious. The effects manifest in reduced productivity (Mullainathan and Shafir, 2013), threats to mental health (Van Wijhe et al., 2013), and tensions in interpersonal relationships at work and elsewhere (Schaufeli and Bakker, 2004).

Being too busy can lead to wildlife professionals becoming narrowly task-oriented and production-focused, which in the extreme can result in loss of creativity and innovation at a time when rapid change in many parts of the social-ecological system make creativity and innovation critical for conservation. Being too busy makes it difficult to stay current on issues outside those perceived as most immediately pressing, which leads to suboptimal decision-making. As one workshop participant observed, “perspective is lost.” Furthermore, as another workshop participant remarked, “when supervisors and agency

leaders are too busy, they are less likely to encourage innovation and support staff who have new ideas.”

Being too busy can have two seemingly opposite outcomes on individuals. One is a false sense of achievement—“I’m busy therefore I am doing something useful.” The other is the lack of a sense of achievement—“I work harder and harder, spend more time and energy, yet I can’t get on top of my workload.” The former can be deceiving and the latter discouraging.

Being busy also has the likelihood of shifting the balance in an individual’s commitment of time to work versus personal, non-work responsibilities (e.g., home, family, friends, community). When this balance leans too heavily toward the excessive time committed to work at the expense of time devoted to other pursuits, one is likely to experience stress, waning professional effectiveness and diminishing personal wellbeing (Van Wijhe et al., 2013; Pace et al., 2019). The term “quiet quitting” has recently made its way into the popular literature to describe the way some workers are pushing back on this stress, no longer going “above and beyond” in an attempt to re-set boundaries and alleviate burnout (Krueger, 2022).

Workshop participants shared many threats to professional performance associated with being too busy. They can be divided in various ways, but here we use five categories for organizational and presentation convenience. The listed statements are a mix of direct and paraphrased quotes.

1) Deleterious effects:

- Limiting job effectiveness, especially if time and attention are directed to other than primary position responsibilities
- Creating an “80% is good enough” effect
- Hurried decision-making without adequate time for proper diagnosis of the issue or problem
- Prioritizing work with the organized sporting groups or groups/individuals with higher political capital rather than the broader public
- Impacting quality of work may cause some individuals to pass up opportunities that could be beneficial and/or enjoyable to them
- Diminishing ability to be a fully present leader for coworkers and staff

2) Missed learning opportunities:

- Making the same decisions rather than taking the time to develop new ideas using the knowledge gained from experience, as it is easier and faster to just do the same thing
- Quick decision-making without fully exploring implications, which often have to be revisited when additional information, that was always there, comes to the surface

3) Reinforced reactive and discouraged proactive effort:

- Lacking time to think about what and how something can be improved and to plan how to make the improvement results in reactive behavior
- Limiting room for innovation and creating new ways of doing things or creating new programs/studies necessitated by new management challenges
- Limiting relevancy, as our work would be broader and deeper if we were able to plan and prioritize our work
- Limiting strategic thinking, planning, or “extracurricular” (not routine) work

4) Impeded prioritization and consistency:

- Adding more to the plate, sometimes without a clear indication of its benefit
- Seldom slowing down enough to filter things through our vision and guidance documents or determine what is most important
- Prioritizing projects with political importance often at the expense of projects that are of much greater conservation importance
- Cutting strategic work in favor of the urgent, which significantly impacts and slows our ability to address rapidly evolving issues like relevancy, morale, diversity, etc.

5) Diminished job satisfaction:

- Affecting performance and an individual’s job satisfaction; tasks build up, there is an increase in frustration and resentment for the position
- Burning out staff from heavy workloads which further diminishes their effectiveness
- Demoralizing staff, as we are spread so thin we do a mediocre job on most things to try to get as many of them done as possible, rather than produce the high-quality work we are capable of; this stifles professional growth, which all contributes toward a discouraging agency culture

Effects on work units and teams

Being too busy has consequences on team efforts. Direct effects usually manifest as inadequate preparation by team members, thereby making teams less productive. Indirectly, being too busy can lead a team member to regard

collaborative teamwork as being too time-consuming and favor “getting things done” relatively quickly to be able to check tasks off one’s individual, long to-do list. This in turn leads to giving less attention to the norms of collaborative behavior or avoiding team participation altogether, contributing to other issues (e.g., team inefficiency because of lack of expertise or quorum for decision-making).

Workshop participants reported concerns about details being neglected because thoughtful engagement on a process or project does not occur, and sometimes tasks are missed or not completed when staff are overwhelmed. Instead of doing one or a few projects well, many projects may experience sub-par execution. Staff morale can also suffer significantly when the team or supervisors are too busy, e.g., being too busy often leads to inadequate evaluation and planning which can make a team feel confused, pulled in multiple conflicting directions, and overwhelmed. Furthermore, being too busy for evaluation and planning diminishes opportunity for program and service improvement.

Effects on the agency

Multiple forces are at work simultaneously that affect time consumption within an agency: time required for routine activities and special projects; too many time-sensitive issues coming in too quickly; inadequate staff to deal with or spread out the workload. These can lead to organizational underachievement with respect to highest priority goals, damaging a wildlife agency’s credibility. Spending time, treasure, and talent on many tasks that do not yield desired outcomes will be noticed and criticized. Public perception that agency staff are wasting time and money can be expected if wildlife management and conservation objectives valued by stakeholders are not being met, or not being met efficiently.

One workshop participant explained the organizational impact of being too busy as follows:

What is lost is our ability to engage deeply in adaptive challenges. We can continue to crank out technical work (e.g., field work, population monitoring data collection, regulatory review, harvest analyses), as those are the core tasks that are institutionally expected and supported. Technical work is also satisfying because the work can be accomplished in short bursts amidst other distractions and the products are immediately evident. But our collective ability to make progress on complex issues that require deep and creative thought and inclusive public processes require extended, focused time, generally with a group of people working together. Ironically, it is progress on the complex adaptive challenges that many people find to be the most professionally rewarding.

Overcoming the problem: Practical advice

Volumes have been written on actions that can be taken at the individual, work group or organizational level to increase productivity and how to transition from being too busy to being more productive (Helms, 2021). For example, a Google Scholar search on “productivity in the workplace” yielded more than 2,000,000 citations, more than 37,000 since 2021 alone. Two ideas consistently rise to the top of the list of actions for reducing unproductive use of time (and being too busy): (a) plan and prioritize tasks vis-à-vis goals and (b) eliminate time-wasting behaviors.

Plan and prioritize

The “too busy” problem is, perhaps mostly, a time prioritization issue. It stands to reason that time spent on activities of lower importance can mean less time spent on high priority topics. In wildlife conservation, it is often a high-stakes tradeoff that is inadequately assessed. Processes exist to aid work teams in collectively determining what is important, collaboratively creating a shared vision [e.g., developing fundamental objectives for manager’s models (Decker et al., 2014)], and prioritizing and working toward those objectives.

Using time effectively starts by being clear about priorities. This applies to individuals, work groups and agencies. Clarity about what is important (or better yet, what is most important or essential) to accomplish is a necessity for effective resource management. Furthermore, adhering to agreed-upon high-priority topics should not be optional; staff and supervisors should be held accountable for maintaining focus on high priority topics and avoiding the diversion of inordinate energy toward what may be perceived as immediate crises (which workshop participants clearly regarded as highly erosive to focused effort on important work). In addition, staff and supervisors should have clarity about their roles and responsibilities, and what is within their sphere of control (Ford et al., 2020). Understanding roles and responsibilities of wildlife professionals within a public trust framework also may help divert attention away from activities that are not within the scope of responsibility for trust managers (Smith, 2011).

Staff and supervisors should plan and prioritize to avoid the action bias described earlier. This requires spending the time it takes to think through and agree on what is important, what one or the organization values, what one wants to accomplish and why, then take on the more linear tasks related to work planning and successfully implementing those plans. Procedures can be put in place to foster this approach (such as prioritization

processes), and agency leadership can help isolate time and secure specialized assistance for the highest priority activities.

Ironically, one of the most common sources of stress associated with being too busy and having no time to think is caused by not thinking enough about how much time a task will take (Buehler et al., 1994). This is also known as the planning fallacy, a form of optimism bias, which can be summed up in Hofstadter (1979) law: “It always takes longer than you expect, even when you take into account Hofstadter’s law.”

Avoid time-wasting behavior and schedule “thinking time”

Our workshop participants disclosed some of their efforts to mitigate being too busy to think. In addition to avoiding potentially inefficient habits (e.g., inefficient email management, excessive social network/blog monitoring), workshop participants pointed out that agencies more broadly may have some time-consuming protocols and procedures that are of low value but are required by policy or historical practice (agency culture). Though outside the control of most individual wildlife professionals, these need to be identified and corrected or replaced with processes that streamline internal procedures and processes. Also needing scrutiny are activities under one’s control that take an inordinate amount of time yet produce little in terms of positive conservation outcomes. On the positive side, one can also identify which activities produce results and bring you closer to individual, work group, and agency goals.

Several workshop participants reported that scheduling time to concentrate undisturbed on an important work item allowed them to be more focused and thoughtful. Here are ways some workshop participants deal with their situations:

- Setting aside some time each day or week to reflect and plan or just read through the scientific literature
- Blocking off time in the calendar for reflection, planning, and evaluation; build in time for unstructured thinking and consider things from a broader perspective
- Looking for micro-opportunities during the course of the workday to mentally stop what they are doing and purposely check their purpose and the larger context for whatever they are doing
- Reflecting, planning, and evaluating when they are at home laying in their bed at night. They take midnight notes on their phone so they will not forget and review them in the morning
- Calling a meeting to specifically discuss planning, evaluating, and reflecting about a specific topic with others involved makes time for it and would bring other viewpoints that one could not get by reflecting alone

Perhaps a positive outcome associated with physical distancing precautions during the Covid-19 pandemic, one workshop participant reported his unanticipated discovery of time to think:

Working from home the last few months has been great for this ... I think having flexibility to work more from home in the future will help this aspect. I feel like I can be way more productive at home for a day without the constant interruption of phone calls, co-workers, walk-ins, etc.

Phone calls and emails seem to be frequent antagonists to concentrated, productive effort, so it is not surprising that several workshop participants told us they try not answering the telephone every time it rings. Similarly, some workshop participants turn off email receipt notification alerts and then respond to emails a couple times a day rather than continuously as they come in. These tactics help people feel like they are in control of their time.

Related to control of one’s time, a supervisor reported, “As a supervisor, I encourage employees to take time for reflection and we try to do some of that at our staff meetings (more thoughtful discussion versus routine reports).”

It is encouraging to learn how imaginatively some wildlife professionals are being in their personal efforts to combat having too little time for reflective thinking. Here is how one of our workshop participants described her/his efforts:

I find it very helpful to intentionally schedule time to meet with other trusted professionals who encourage/challenge/feed the reflection, planning, and evaluation for a couple reasons: (1) I’m much less likely to cancel or reschedule when someone else is involved, (2) having others participate adds dimension and perspective that I cannot achieve on my own, and (3) it ends up being mutually beneficial and encourages other participants to reflect, plan and evaluate as well. I am also experimenting with technical tools like My Analytics (Microsoft) which has features to support and promote this area in particular.

Reflective and evaluative thinking relegated to extracurricular activity

Some workshop participants were taking time for reflection, despite the difficulties associated with doing so. Here is how one describes their experience:

I have developed habits to take the time to reflect on what has been done over the past week and month. Without disciplined reflection I may completely forget about a project milestone that took several months (or years) to reach. Forcing time to reflect and evaluate makes me recognize what worked and what didn’t and how I can do better next time.

It seems that for many wildlife professionals, any reflective thinking they engage in is not done at their place of employment during normal working hours where distractions are part of the office environment, “A lot of it happens outside of work when I

can think.” Another lamented, “It is not ideal, nor is it my preference, but the only time I have for reflection is outside of work hours when I can really think something over.”

Wildlife professionals reported this reflective thinking occurs during their commute to and from work, or when “performing mindless tasks like mowing the lawn.” Some have routinized their commitment to uninterrupted quiet time away from the formal work environment, but they may be creating impacts in other areas of their lives.

Practical advice abounds

In addition to the practices our workshop participants reported, a sample of which are provided above, material exist in both the scientific literature across various disciplines (e.g., Van Eerde, 2003; Gupta et al., 2012; Andrade, 2013; Manchester and Barbezat, 2013; Prinz et al., 2020; Wessel et al., 2020) and the popular press (e.g., Koch, 1998; Gawande, 2009; McKeown, 2014; Tracy, 2017; Covey, 2020) offering advice on how to have more of your time available to do high-priority tasks and be more productive. Being too busy is so prevalent and worrisome that an industry exists to teach “time management” for individuals, work teams and organizations. The distinction between being busy and being productive is echoed throughout the body of advice available for professionals across all fields. Experts in the subject of time management nearly universally remind us that many of our daily activities do not translate into productivity. To that end they advise, do not work harder, work smarter. And, if you are not working on the right thing, the better you do what you are doing, the more wrong you become.

Andrade (2013):37-38) suggests ways professionals can reserve time to attend to truly important and meaningful tasks—he refers to these antidotes (and others) for bad habits as “time savers.” Here are a few:

Be decisive. Collect the necessary information (i.e., avoid extraneous information), analyze it (avoid analysis paralysis), and decide. Then move on. Do not spend unproductive time second-guessing decision ad nauseam, to the point of stalling progress. Following a structured decision process helps ensure efficient decision-making (Hammond et al., 2015). For some wildlife conservation professionals, this might be misinterpreted as the antithesis of adaptive management and learning from experience. The point for wildlife professionals practicing adaptive management is to stay focused on the data pertaining to their management experiments that yield the greatest amount of learning (Organ et al., 2020), though it is possible that data on unanticipated effects of the decision may be useful or even enlightening. In addition, we suspect that wildlife professionals, with a background in natural science and modeling, have a tendency to optimize. Optimizing might be appropriate in modeling, but in the workplace, “satisficing” or focusing on only a few options to make decisions that are sufficient to meet aspiration levels, is found to be most efficient and effective

(Weber 2013). Bottom line: use good judgment in distinguishing between developing focus versus creating blinders.

Prioritize goals and, accordingly, your work. Professionals today regularly engage in multi-tasking. This means dealing with multiple tasks but does not mean one must do them all at the same time. Effective multi-tasking is the art of organizing multiple tasks in a way that facilitates achieving an individual’s, work team’s or agency’s goals. Those who believe that multi-tasking means “doing everything at the same time” may end up doing nothing well. This recommendation is similar to Covey (2020) popular Urgent-Important Matrix to help individuals identify distractions, interruptions, planning tasks, and crisis tasks and subsequently prioritize more appropriately

Set aside time for high-priority tasks. Progress on important projects is usually incremental, occurring over time, not typically a result of frantic, last-minute activity. Have the discipline to allocate adequate time for important work. Based on our recent study of wildlife professionals, we strongly suggest that this includes a commitment to achieving professional development goals, as well as creating “space” for reflective practice. For wildlife conservation professionals, this may include spending time to engage with research, as work grounded in the best social and biological considerations is central to sound wildlife decision-making (Riley et al., 2002; Merkle et al., 2019). This should also include setting aside time to pursue adaptive challenges—modern wildlife conservation challenges are complex, and an adaptive, strategic approach will be required for successful 21st century wildlife governance (Decker et al., 2011; Decker et al., 2016).

Many authors offer advice on controlling how busy one is (e.g., Koch, 1998; Gawande, 2009; McKeown, 2014; Tracy, 2017; Covey, 2020). Unfortunately, although many wildlife professionals have been exposed to such advice, they find it difficult to put the advice into practice, ironically because they are too busy to even think about the tips suggested. Cognitively accepting the value of new ideas and then meaningfully changing behavior in one’s work environment can be a large chasm to cross. It will take commitment and ingenuity, which is why digging out from under the heavy boot of having no time to think and overcoming the tyranny of being too busy has proved so difficult.

Conclusion

Being unproductively busy is antithetical to development of professional reasoning and judgment because it steals time that should be used for everyday critical thinking, analysis, and reflection. As Hilton and Slotnick (2005) assert: 61), professional judgments are based on experience and reflection, which takes “a prolonged period of learning, instruction, and reflective experience.” Put simply, developing habits and practices that enhance the effectiveness of professional reasoning and judgment takes time.

We urge individuals, supervisors, agencies, and professional societies to address the tyranny of being too busy by acknowledging

the pitfalls it presents to professional effectiveness and taking actions that will reduce the condition and its negative consequences. Necessary changes at multiple levels (individual, work group, and agency) will not occur without purposeful intent. From the evidence we have seen, leaders in agencies have essential roles in fixing the problem embedded in the tyranny of being too busy. As one workshop participant concluded: “There needs to be clear encouragement from supervisors to prioritize time for this important part of our jobs, reduce and/or prioritize workloads overall to find time, and create an atmosphere that recognizes the importance of these activities.” Leadership is required to align agency expectations in support of a new norm where wildlife professionals take the time to critically analyze, reflect on, and continually improve conservation decisions and actions.

Together, all parts of the wildlife profession must push back against the tyranny of being too busy such that this sentiment expressed by a workshop participant is no longer valid: “While reflecting, planning and evaluating would improve my job performance and the overall performance of my team, it is a luxury that I cannot currently afford.” The belief that reflecting, planning, and evaluating wildlife management work is a luxury should be sobering, if not intolerable to a profession entrusted with public trust resource administration. The risks associated with not addressing the problem of being too busy are significant and the benefits of overcoming the problem—for individuals, groups, and agencies—may be substantial. We applaud those who are attempting in whatever way they can to push back on this threat to professional excellence.

Author contributions

Conceptualization: DD, EP, AF, SR, PL, MS, MB, CS, RF, RK, and RB. Writing initial manuscript draft: DD, EP, and AF. Revision and Feedback: DD, EP, AF, SR, PL, MS, MB, CS, RF,

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RK, and RB. All authors contributed to the article and approved the submitted version.

Funding

Our work was funded by a Multi-State Conservation Grant from the Association of Fish and Wildlife agencies and administered by the Wildlife Management Institute.

Acknowledgments

We extend our thanks to the fish and wildlife professionals who found time to share the challenges and solutions they face in taking time to think.

Conflict of interest

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