

Organizational Identity Change in Conservation Law Enforcement

Lessons for Pennsylvania

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Conservation officer safety has become a growing concern across the United States. This is particularly true since the scope of conservation law enforcement has expanded to include duties often relegated to more traditional law enforcement agencies such as state and local police. As a result, several states have changed the titles of their conservation officers to reflect a more police-oriented stature (e.g., Conservation Police Officer). This study analyzes how a change in organizational identity, through a title change, impacts conservation officers, the general public, traditional law enforcement agencies, and governmental entities. The major findings suggest that those states that have changed the titles of their officers have experienced enhanced organizational legitimacy with natural resource users, other law enforcement agencies, and state legislatures. Given these findings, this article argues that it would be advantageous for Pennsylvania to at least consider making a title change for their conservation officers.

It has been widely held that conservation officers are at a higher risk of assaults than traditional police officers. The problem is further exacerbated by the expanding scope of the enforcement responsibilities of conservation law enforcement over the last several years. More specifically, conservation law enforcement evolved from specializing in conservation-specific

infractions (e.g., hunting and fishing infractions, user safety, and resource protection) to an increased focus on drug offenses and other laws that were outside the scope of their duties (Shelley, O'Connor, and Crow 2009). As a result of this shift in focus, research has suggested a correlation between increased assaults and use-of-force incidents with conservation officers who engage in general policing outside the scope of traditional conservation law enforcement (Carter 2004; Eliason 2006; Eliason 2011; McSkimming and Dunbar 2015; Patten 2012).

This unfortunate reality has prompted conservation law enforcement agencies to explore meaningful policy changes that would enhance the safety of their officers. For example, a number of conservation agencies in the United States eliminated their original title and adopted some form of police designation in their title (e.g., Conservation Police Officer) (McSkimming and Dunbar 2016; Patten, Crow, and Shelley 2015). However, very little if anything is known about the effectiveness of a title change on officer legitimacy and safety. This article enhances the literature on conservation officer safety by addressing the following questions: (a) Why have various states changed the titles of their officers? (b) What impact, if any, has the name change had? and (c) What issues, if any, do organizations experience in the change process?

Literature Review

Organizational Change

Conservation law enforcement is defined as a special type of policing that is mainly responsible for enforcing wildlife and fishing laws on public lands (national and state parks and forests) and waterways (lakes, rivers, and reservoirs) (Eliason 2011; Forsyth and Forsyth 2009; Palmer and Bryant 1985). Conservation Officers (COs) are historically responsible for enforcing wildlife regulations in order to protect wildlife and other natural resources in the United States (Falcone 2004; Eliason 2007). When we examine the historical development of conservation law enforcement as a profession, we find the first state-level conservation agents responsible for protecting state parks and natural resources in Michigan and Missouri at the beginning of the twentieth century (Falcone 2004). Wildlife hunting and fishing as leisure activities were privileged activities of elite classes in the Middle Ages in England and later in the United States (Nauright and Parrish 2012). Fundamental changes in American culture resulted in an increase in leisure time, which combined with the affordability of automobiles for the working class to create an increasing need for wildlife and fishing enforcement in the second half of the twentieth century in the United States (Falcone 2004).

In the United States, there are different titles such as “*wildlife management agents, fish and game wardens, park rangers, conservation agents, natural resource police, and conservation police officers*” (Falcone 2004, 56) for the enforcement of wildlife and other natural resources laws at the state and federal levels. Conservation Officers or COs were generally placed under the management of the conservation department at the state level and under the responsibility of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service at the federal level (Falcone 2004). However, due to recent changes in the occupational responsibilities of COs and to respond to the changing nature of wildlife and natural resources enforcement, most states established a Department of Natural Resources in the 1990s (Eliason 2007; Falcone 2004).

According to researchers (Chavez and Tynon 2000; Eliason 2007; Falcone 2004; Pendleton 2000; Sherblom, Keränen, and Withers 2002), occupational responsibilities of COs have recently changed due to several factors. First, the recruitment and retention of hunters and anglers are declining and other non-traditional users of outdoor recreational areas (e.g., birdwatchers, hikers, and ATV riders) are on the increase. These nontraditional users of state-controlled lands and waters are reshaping the enforcement duties of conservation officers and placing them at a greater risk for assault and use of force (Shelley, O’Connor, and Crow 2009). Second, crimes that are considered to be urban, such as drug possession and use, are now problems in rural areas, especially in national and state parks, forests, and waterways. Finally, some researchers (Carter 2006; Shelley, O’Connor, and Crow 2009) highlight the role of occupational identity and organizational subculture and the increased emphasis on traditional law enforcement over that of wildlife and fishing law enforcement as reasons for changes in occupational responsibility. While seasoned conservation officers prefer to specialize in traditional wildlife and fish law enforcement, a new generation of officers emphasizes traditional law enforcement duties (Shelley, O’Connor, and Crow 2009) rather than identifying as “game wardens,” “wildlife enforcement,” or “duck cops” (Oliver and Meier 2006).

Some scholars (Eliason 2010; Falcone 2004; Shelley, O’Connor, and Crow 2009) define this change as an organizational transition from a specific wildlife enforcement role to a general law enforcement role. This transition has broadened the organizational roles and responsibilities of COs and their occupational title from being a game warden to a traditional police officer (Eliason 2007; Falcone 2004; Forsyth 1994; Patten 2012; Shelley, O’Connor, and Crow 2009). Due to these changes, COs have to deal with more traditional policing roles than before and they need to shift their attention and resources to law enforcement duties and responsibilities as their counterparts do in city police departments. However, as discussed in the literature (Eliason 2014; Patten

2012; Patten, Crow, and Shelley 2015), this shift in organizational role responsibilities, from wildlife and fish law enforcement to general law enforcement, creates some confusion, tension, and frustration among COs. These are the main issues discussed in organizational behavior literature relating to identity change.

Organizational Identity

The term “identity” has been the subject of research for psychologists and was recently applied to groups and organizations (Brown 2001). Organization members’ answers to “Who are we as an organization?” and “Who do we want to be as an organization?” (Albert and Whetten 1985) form the meaning of organizational identity in their minds (Corley and Gioia 2004). Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organizational identity as members’ beliefs about their organization’s central, distinctive, and enduring characteristics. Ravasi and Schultz (2006) stated that, although Albert and Whetten’s organizational identity definition is widely accepted among researchers, two different perspectives on organizational identity have emerged: social actor perspective and social constructivist perspective.

According to the social actor perspective (Ravasi and Schultz 2006), which is theoretically based on institutional theory, organizational identity can be traced to official institutional claims because they define central, enduring, and distinctive features for organizations. As defined by Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), there are two main identity-related actions during change process in organizations: sensegiving and sensemaking actions. While sensemaking actions happen when organizational members reevaluate and reinterpret their collective identity under changing circumstances, sensegiving actions include managerial efforts to present the new organizational identity to internal and external audiences (Ravasi and Schultz 2006). Organizational leaders engage in sensegiving to influence their members’ perceptions of collective identity by providing them with consistent and legitimate narratives to construct their identity. On the other hand, social constructionists view organizational identity as a shared collective schema that is constructed through negotiation and sensemaking among organizational members. Elstak (2008) argued that organizational identity has mainly been approached from the social constructivist point of view, while studies from the social actor perspective are rare. However, in order to understand the relationship between the perceived organizational identity and institutionally claimed identity, there should be more research about how organizational members interpret and negotiate institutionally claimed organizational identities.

Organizational members continuously interpret events in their surroundings to make sense of what is going on in their environment (Apker 2004; Weick 1979). Sensemaking activities continually occur in organizations; however, when a surprise or change emerges, sensemaking becomes a more conscious and less automatic activity for organizational members to find the gap between their schema and existing reality (Balogun and Johnson 2005). Organizational change is a catalyst for organizational members to engage in sensemaking collectively (Apker 2004; Maitlis 2005). Balogun and Johnson (2005) stated that, when individuals encounter a change in their organizations, they try to make sense of what is happening around them in order to adapt their cognitive understanding to a new state in the organization and find appropriate responses to a change initiative.

According to Corley and Gioia (2004), change is challenging for organizational members because it disrupts organizational identity, which is the members' collective sense about their organization's distinctiveness and uniqueness. Due to ambiguities and uncertainties in the change process, organizational members try to make sense of how new initiatives will affect their organizational identity in order to see whether changes fit their collective understanding of organizational identity. Therefore, members' sensemaking process will play a critical role in revising organizational reality embedded in organizational identity. Moreover, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) state that to deal with environmental threats, organizations need to achieve a strategic change in organizational members' way of thinking. Gioia, Thomas, Clark, and Chittipeddi (1994) defined this change as a cognitive reorientation of organization directly related to changes in identity. To achieve cognitive reorientation, organizational members—including top management—need to engage in sensemaking and sensegiving processes. While the sensemaking process helps participants experiencing strategic change to construct and reconstruct their collective identity, sensegiving serves as a tool to influence others (both insiders and outsiders of an organization) in redefining the organizational reality during the change process (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991).

In earlier studies, organizational identity was viewed as stable and resistant to change (Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, and Hunt 1998). However, subsequent studies (Chreim 2005; Corley and Gioia 2004; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000) suggested that organizational identity can be viewed as a fluid and unstable concept in order to explain adaptation and change in organizations. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) referred to Gagliardi's explanation of "the firm must change in order to preserve its identity" (Gagliardi 1986, 125), defining this explanation as a paradoxical statement because they think that,

if organizational identity needs to adapt to changes in its environment, it cannot be stable and rigid. Moreover, Gustafson and Reger (1995) asserted that organizations need to engage in fundamental changes to be successful in the turbulent environment; however, at the same time, they have to maintain their organizational identity to provide stability and continuity for their members. Similarly, Fiol (2002) says that a paradoxical relationship exists between organizational identity and change. Although organizational success depends on having a sense of strong identity among members, organizational change requires loose ties with organizational identity in order not to anchor too deeply into the features of organizational identity to initiate change. To cope with this paradoxical issue, Corley and Gioia (2003) argued that organizations maintain consistent labels to explain their identity while the meanings of these labels are continuously reinterpreted according to changes in the environment. Thus, organizational members ensure a sense of continuity in their identity while being flexible by interpreting emergent issues differently.

Sensemaking is an important phenomenon for analyzing how individuals in an organization perceive organizational change (Balogun and Jenkins 2003; Ericson 2001; Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991; Isabella 1990). Weick (1979) argued that no one accurate way exists for perceiving organizational change; rather, several interpretations can exist according to an individual's sensemaking of change (Apker 2004; Grill and Carver 2008; Taylor 1999). Gioia and Thomas (1996) argued that members' views about their organizational identity and image can result in varying interpretations of envisioned image and identity. Due to their different roles and responsibilities, members can interpret change differently (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991). Top managers have more relationships with higher levels of the organizational environment, whereas rank-and-file employees interact with organizations' actual customers on the ground, meaning that their sensegivers will signal different issues in changes and will make sense of changes in a different manner (Taylor 1999). When a change occurs in an organization, members make more effort to make sense of what is going on because change challenges shared understanding, institutionalized practices, and organizational schemata (Balogun and Johnson 2005; George and Jones 2001).

In this study, we will analyze how a change in organizational identity, through a title change, impacts conservation officers, the general public, traditional law enforcement agencies, and governmental entities. More specifically, we will determine if such a title change provides more organizational legitimacy and safety for officers as they encounter a wider array of both resource and nonresource users.

Pennsylvania Conservation Officers

Pennsylvania is unique in that it is the only state where fish and game commissions are separated, run independently, and funded primarily through license and registration sales. The commissions are managed by commissioners appointed by the governor and confirmed by the Senate. Conservation officers of both agencies are empowered to enforce most state laws but are encouraged to concentrate on enforcing the laws within the title of their agency. Fish officers and game officers do maintain a professional working relationship with each other as well as with officers from parks and forestry, but they normally turn over violations outside of their title rather than prosecute them. Law enforcement of each agency consists of a bureau nested within what is primarily a non-law-enforcement agency.

Executive leadership consists principally of biologists and administrative personnel who have risen to the top of their bureaus. Executive leadership including law enforcement personnel is better represented in the Pennsylvania Game Commission than in the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission due to the greater number of officers within that agency; game officers outnumber fish officers by roughly four to one. Pennsylvania has 67 counties with an average of one fish officer and three game officers assigned to each county. The remaining officers are assigned to managerial and other duties. Both agencies are struggling with vacancies and lack of funding to hire and train new officers. Officers of both agencies belong to the Fraternal Order of Police in the Conservation Police Officers lodge and are issued reflective vests and other uniform items with the word “police” on them. Administrators of both agencies have been reluctant to effect a title change to include the word “police.”¹

Methods

Data

The data for this study were derived from 31 semistandardized interviews with personnel from conservation law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. These include agencies that have a police designation in their title ($n = 16$) and agencies that do not ($n = 15$). All agencies were identified through a simple search of “Conservation Law Enforcement Agencies by State.” Initial phone calls were made to the listed agencies to determine (1) if the appropriate agency was contacted, and (2) if there was an individual within that agency who could offer assistance with the research. If the wrong agency was contacted, the person who was contacted pointed the researchers

in the right direction. In many cases, multiple calls had to be made. This was particularly true when it was unclear who would be in the best position to assist the researchers. After about three weeks of phone calls, a final sample ($n = 50$) of potential respondents was complete. However, not all potential participants were interviewed for the study.

A first round of calls was made to all 50 designated officials. Some interviews were conducted immediately, some were scheduled for another time, and in other instances, messages were left to call the researchers back. After approximately two weeks, a second attempt was made to reach those who were not available at the time of the initial call or who did not return the researchers' initial calls. This round of calls yielded more interviews, and once again, messages were left for those who were not available. One final round of calls was made a week later. However, in this instance, no further messages were left to contact the researchers, and the researchers decided to use the sample size they were able to generate for final analysis. Each participant was informed of the nature of the study, invited to participate in the study, and assured confidentiality.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted by telephone over four months. In many instances, interviews were audiotaped with the respondent's permission and ranged from 20 minutes to one and one-half hours. Interviews were conducted in comfortable locations for the respondents (e.g., office, home, in the field). All interviews were transcribed verbatim and data were analyzed using a standard form of thematic content analysis (Berg 2007).

For the purposes of this study, two interview schedules were created, for those states with a title change and for states without a title change (see Appendices A and B). Each instrument was worded specifically for the type of information desired and reflected differences between the agencies. Researchers were careful to follow the scripted interview questions as closely as possible and asked follow-up questions when appropriate.

Results

States with a Police Title

A majority of states that have a police designation for their officers, such as Conservation Police Officer, Natural Resource Police Officer, Environmental Police Officer, Environmental Conservation Police Officer, Wildlife Conservation Law Enforcement Officer, and Conservation Law Enforcement Officer,

are along the east coast of the United States (nine states out of 16). Five states have had their title for more than two decades, the oldest being New York and Maryland, which adopted “police” designations in 1974. Delaware was the most recent state to adopt the “police” designation in 2014. Agencies with the police designation have indicated that the title, for the most part, has provided benefits that a nonpolice designation failed to produce.

Benefit One—Credibility in the Eyes of the Public

First, and perhaps most important, it was widely reported from those agencies interviewed that having the title of “police” gave them instant credibility in the eyes of the public. For many conservation agencies, gaining respect and understanding on the part of the public had been difficult at best. According to the majority of respondents, the general public “just didn’t get it” or “didn’t care” what the agencies did or what they were empowered to do. Often they would hear such things as, “You’re not a cop. I do not have to listen to you,” or “Get back in your truck and mind your own business.” This lack of understanding on the part of the public had an impact, as pointed out by the following:

It was like the people were looking at us and going “What the f**k?” I mean we were pulling people over for stuff [violations not relating to natural resource law], like we are empowered to do and they looked at us like we were from another planet. They would give our guys s**t and all that. It wasn’t worth it, so we stopped it for the most part.

However, once the title “police” was put into place, there seemed to be a shift in public perception. This was particularly true for states engaged in aggressive promotional campaigns (e.g., outdoor clubs and organizations, outdoor shows, television and radio broadcasts, etc.) highlighting what the officers were empowered to do. Initially there was a bit of “confusion” on the part of the public, but once the “word spread,” this confusion seemed to dissipate. Consider the following:

You have to understand, we operated a certain way for so long and now we changed overnight. But we really didn’t—just our title changed and that had to be explained. I can still see some of the eyes on the good ol’ boys faces when I said that I was now a cop and could arrest them for DUI. I swear one guy spit his soda all over the place. Yeah, it hit them hard but we went out to them and explained it all. That is what you have to do, make them understand. Once they did, things seem to be pretty good.

Unfortunately, these agencies could not provide convincing quantitative data to support their claims that the title change brought about a better rapport with the public. However, it was clear that something was indeed happening, and they were more than happy to embrace the title change. Many respondents clearly pointed out that their interactions with the public were “smoother,” they had fewer incidents of questioning their “authority,” and they had fewer verbal and physical assaults. Agencies reported having an increased number of calls from citizens about both resource violations and crimes code. As one respondent put it, “It is like we are legitimate now; we are the police!”

Benefit Two—Credibility with Other Law Enforcement Agencies

Second, other law enforcement agencies and the courts have reacted to these officers more favorably as a result of their donning the police title. Frequently, conservation law enforcement officers require the assistance of other agencies such as the local police, sheriffs, and state police. This could range from asking for help in an active incident or an ongoing investigation, requiring laboratory work, or requesting the use of equipment that the agency does not have handy (e.g., ATVs, night vision equipment, helicopters, etc.). One would assume that interagency cooperation and respect was a given, and that help would be available for the asking. However, according to some respondents, this was not necessarily the case when it came to conservation officers. It was made clear that not all law enforcement officers are created equal. However, once the name “police” was officially attached, perceptions changed rapidly. Consider the following from an agency located in the northeastern part of the United States:

It was as if we really did not exist in the law enforcement community. Then once we applied the title “police” to our name, we now can get search warrants and other law enforcement agencies call upon us for assistance: from public safety stuff to emergency management. It was like the door was suddenly opened and we were legit.

A conservation agency in a geographically different region gave a similar response. According to a respondent from that conservation agency, the name change has “increased the number of calls for assistance from other state and local law enforcement and from homeland security itself.” Many additional agencies have also claimed instant “credibility” with other law enforcement agencies. No other changes were made apart from adding “police” to their title.

Benefit Three—Credibility with Legislatures

In addition to experiencing enhanced credibility with the public and other law enforcement agencies, a significant number of those interviewed suggested that the name change has increased visibility and financial support from their legislatures. Law enforcement agencies rely heavily upon monies from their respective state governments. As needs increase and support decreases, conservation agencies have received barely enough to “survive on their own.” Having to compete with “more legitimate law enforcement agencies,” many have had to find creative ways to finance such things as deteriorating fish hatcheries, officer training programs, vehicle replacement, and equipment upgrades. Interestingly, financial concerns seemingly disappeared for many agencies once they became “recognized by the higher-ups” as being “real law enforcement.” As these conservation agencies began to enjoy a stronger relationship with traditional law enforcement agencies, they found it “easier to get sponsored bills passed in the legislature” and funding seemed to increase. Many credit this enhanced relationship with their state legislatures to the fact that their agencies were strongly tied with “recognizable” agencies such as Homeland Security, and in some cases, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service. As one respondent remarked, “It seems you only become legitimate once someone else finds you to be. Once that happens, you get what you want and need. We should have figured that out years ago.”

States without a Police Title

Entities without a police designation ($n = 15$) are clearly divided between those that have at least considered adopting a “police” designation for their officers and those that are emphatically against it. Seven out of the 11 agencies reported that there has never been “official” talk about changing their officers’ titles, but believe that a title change would benefit the officers in the field. According to one agency representative, “We are aware of the issues and know of the recent changes. We simply are not there yet, but I think we will be.” Another official made the claim that, “Our officers are being taken advantage of because they are not thought of as being real police.” Interestingly, while many agencies have not elected to go with an official title change, a few states (Arizona, Hawaii, and Wisconsin) have at least changed markings on their vehicles, patches, and vests, or introduce themselves as “police” when interacting with the public. When asked why those changes were made, each participant indicated that, “The term ‘police’ is understood by everyone, and having that term visible makes a difference when interacting with the public.”

Finally, one state (Arizona) considered a title change about five years ago but remains divided on the issue. During an interview an official from Arizona made the point clearly:

We have an issue with illegal immigrants coming into our state, and if you do not have the word “police” on your vehicle, they do not understand. We had agents in the field doing some wildlife census, and when they got back to the truck, it was full of illegals. They asked for a ride to the nearest city. One officer asked them why they thought they could get a ride and the reply was, “Cos it did not say police on your truck so we figured it was safe.” The officers told them that they needed to get the hell out of there and that they were indeed police officers. If we had that word on the vehicle, they would not have jumped in.

He went on to add:

Changing the title of the conservation officers in the northern part of the state really does not make sense, since the majority of the people up there know who we are and what we do. There is an acceptance. So given this division, we will continue to struggle with the idea of change.

The picture is quite different for states that have maintained their original titles. Some members of state agencies simply love the traditional title, and their officers are dead set against a title change ($n = 4$). As one interviewee put it, “We have a tradition here and our officers believe that a change would tarnish that tradition.” Another participant was more emphatic about the idea of a title change when he said, “Our officers love the name Game Warden and there is no need to change that for any reason. Period and end of story.” For the remaining states that have resisted a change, it was clear that they wanted to avoid the “stigma” of being called police. According to one official, “We are not police and we were told by the higher-ups to never hire former police officers. We are in the game of conservation, not policing.”

Discussion and Conclusion

The current study examines the merits of changing the title of conservation officers to a “police” designation. Conservation law enforcement officers suffer from a lack of legitimacy in the eyes of the community, other law enforcement agencies, and in some instances, their corresponding legislatures. However,

once a single word is added to their title, a different reality presents itself. A significant number of agencies now enjoy increased awareness and acceptance by the public of their enforcement authority, better relationships with traditional law enforcement agencies (local, state, and in many cases, federal), and increased funding from their state legislatures.

Furthermore, many participating state agencies have indicated that they have had easier reception and passage of their proposed legislation with their state lawmakers or legislatures. This has been important to them as they strive to promote laws that protect, conserve, and enhance their natural resources. For conservation agencies that had already completed their identity change process, it made sense to change their titles as well. They viewed it as a positive contribution to their organizational identity.

Data also revealed resistance to making the title change in a few states. For some agencies, changing their title flies in the face of a longstanding tradition. Their officers are proud to be called “wardens,” and changing that devalues their position. For others, the term “police” is not wanted because the perception is that they are conservation officers and not police officers. Their duty is resource protection, not traditional law enforcement activities. Similar to the earlier studies (Eliason 2014; Patten 2012; Patten, Crow, and Shelley 2015), we found that changing the title of “conservation officer” to “conservation police officer” created confusion, tension, and frustration among members of some state conservation law enforcement organizations. This is particularly true regarding conservation law enforcement organizations in states without a title change that are currently in the middle of organizational identity change. Conservation law enforcement officers working in these organizations try to make sense of organizational change happening in their organizational environment (Apker 2005; Balogun and Johnson 2005; Weick 1979). Due to changes in the occupational responsibilities of conservation officers and ongoing changes in conservation law enforcement, conservation law enforcement organizations in states without a title change experience tension between their current organizational identity and new demands coming from their organizational environments. While they want to keep the traditional features of their organizational identity, such as wildlife and fish enforcement, natural resource protection, and warden-oriented culture, they also feel pressure to adjust to the new working environment. These conflicting demands will reshape the new organizational identity as a result of power struggles, organizational culture clashes, and resistance to change in these organizations.

Conservation officer safety and legitimacy should be a priority for all concerned. Times have changed and as recent events have indicated, the respect for law enforcement authority is eroding. Changing the title of conservation

officers to more of a police designation should not be viewed as the “magic solution” that will yield greater legitimacy for these officers. However, it may be a significant step forward in increasing officer safety. Coupled with increased public education, media programming, and legislative support, significant strides can be made to enhance conservation officer safety. Conservation officers who are sworn to enforce state laws are police. It is a part of their training and duties. The public understands the authority of police officers. Therefore, the simplest step with the most immediate impact that conservation agencies can take to protect their officers is to include “police” in their title and in the markings of their uniforms, vehicles, and vessels. Administrators are concerned that conservation officers will focus more on policing than natural resource protection. States that have made the title change have shown this concern to be false.

A study such as this should be viewed as a starting point for further research into conservation officer safety and legitimacy. Essentially, it suggests three avenues for further inquiry. First, while respondents verbalized that their agencies experienced an enhanced sense of credibility in three areas (the public, other law enforcement agencies, and state legislatures), it would be interesting to collect quantitative data to validate those statements. For example, future research might examine the rate of officer assaults before and after a title change. Similarly, future research might examine the differences in calls for assistance from other law enforcement agencies before and after the title change. Finally, examining changes in funding or policies impacting the work of conservation agencies might reveal how a title change increases the perceived legitimacy of their requests with lawmakers.

Another study could focus on how conservation law enforcement officers develop coping mechanisms to deal with feelings of confusion, tension, and frustration during the process of organizational identity change. Thus, we can better understand how officers make sense of identity change and what types of responses they develop to manage problems they encounter during the change process. This research could be realized in one of the conservation law enforcement organizations that are still in the process of title change.

A final direction for research would be to garner information on those who have directly interacted or associated with the participating agencies and officers. This particular study addresses only those who work in the agencies that purposely availed themselves of the study. Some bias may exist because only those agencies who believe the title change was instrumental in their increased legitimacy participated. Including civilians who have come into contact with conservation officers, other law enforcement officers, and state legislators would greatly enhance the current data.

Policy Implications for Pennsylvania

There is ample evidence to suggest that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should consider a title change for its conservation officers. This holds true for both the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission and the Pennsylvania Game Commission. Both independent agencies work closely with other law enforcement agencies, and having the “police” designation would greatly enhance their legitimacy in the eyes of the public and the agencies they associate with in the field. Based upon the interviews and data collected for this study, we recommend the following policies to be developed as soon as possible.

First, the titles of “Waterways Conservation Officer” and “Wildlife Conservation Officer” should be replaced with “Waterways Police Officer” and “Wildlife Police Officer.” Pennsylvania is in the unique position of having two independent agencies: one focused on fish and boat enforcement, and the other covering the protection of mammals and birds. As a result of having these separate entities, it makes sense to have two titles at present. If for some reason the two agencies merge into one large entity that will oversee both fish and game enforcement, we would suggest that “Conservation Police Officer” be used.

Second, all conservation officer vehicles, boats, hats, officer jackets, hats, and uniforms should contain the word “police” in appropriate and remarkable lettering and color. As suggested by the data, states that have undergone a title change have found it to be in their favor to have the word “police” printed on as many official items as possible. Ironically, states retaining their original title have in some instances incorporated the word “police” on their vehicles and uniforms. Even these agencies have recognized the importance of the word “police,” and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania should follow suit.

Third, an extensive campaign to educate the public about the full powers of Pennsylvania conservation officers should be undertaken. It should begin with the creation of informational pamphlets distributed to radio and print media across the Commonwealth. Each state agency should be responsible for the information contained in the pamphlets (for the purposes of validity and accuracy), and the literature should be made readily available to the general public. Furthermore, conservation officers should be encouraged, if not mandated, to attend as many outdoor clubs and fishing-oriented organizations as possible. Some may view this as “preaching to the choir,” but it is our position that more public exposure will reinforce the new “police” designation. Ultimately, with greater awareness, the public will “get it.”

Finally, we suggest that criminal justice curricula across the Commonwealth begin to include discussions of the duties and powers of conservation officers in their classes. Introduction to criminal justice or law enforcement

classes might be the most appropriate to this end. It appears that the most popular criminal justice texts fail to mention or discuss conservation officers as “police officers,” so it is safe to assume that faculty who teach these classes are not exposing their students to this reality. The lacuna in the literature and the classroom certainly does not bode well for the legitimacy of conservation officers as police.

These policy recommendations for the Commonwealth may bring legitimacy to those officers who protect, conserve, and enhance the natural resources of Pennsylvania. Many of the northern states have been proactive in changing the titles of their officers to reflect the true scope and nature of their work. While it is admirable to hold true to traditions, the time might be right for Pennsylvania to join the growing number of states that have understood the need to bring legitimacy to their conservation officers. As Director John Arway of the Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission succinctly put it:

Our law enforcement staff is second to none and has evolved from Fish Wardens to Waterways Patrolmen to Waterways Conservation Officers. The evolution of their name is a result of society’s changes. Officers didn’t need body armor, semi-automatic weapons or even computers or smartphones when they were Fish Wardens, but they do today. (Gearhart 2016, 37)

We hope that Director Arway and the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania are willing to evolve even further.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR AGENCIES WITH POLICE DESIGNATION

1. Has the name of your law enforcement officers ever changed since its creation? If yes, go to question # 2. If no, go to [question #1 in Appendix B].
2. What was their official title prior to the change?
3. If the title has changed, what year was it changed?
4. How long had the agency used the prior title?
5. Why was the name of your agency changed?
6. What impact, if any, has the name change had on interactions between your officers and the public? [PROBE—Have there been any noticeable changes in the assault rates or use of force since the title change? Any supporting documentation? Has the agency received any feedback from its officers regarding their perceptions of the changes since the title’s inception? Do you have any anecdotal evidence to offer?]

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR AGENCIES WITHOUT POLICE DESIGNATION

1. Has your agency ever considered changing the title of its law enforcement officers to represent their status as a policing agency? If yes, go to #2. If no, stop here.
2. What factors have influenced the idea of changing your agency name? (e.g., other agencies changing their names, time for a change, public pressure, etc. . . .)
3. What obstacles, if any, may stand in the way of changing your agency name?

NOTES

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1. For more information, go to <http://www.fishandboat.com/AboutUs/AgencyOverview/Pages/default.aspx>, or <http://www.pgc.pa.gov/InformationResources/AboutUs/Pages/WhatWeDo.aspx>

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