A THOUGHT ON MOLLIE

Trish Aspland*

Mollie Beattie. In one word, effervescent.

Sometimes in life, one is lucky enough to meet a person who has made a lasting impression on you. For me, it was Mollie Beattie. Our paths crossed when, following graduation from Vermont Law School, I found myself employed at the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

No less than my first week on the job, I began hearing about "this woman who was going to head our agency." The hallways were filled with anticipation as well as some skepticism. Women have been entering the conservation field in large numbers over the past 15 years, but to hold such a powerful office in a traditional conservation agency was truly historic.

The first time that I saw Mollie was the day before her office reception following her Senate confirmation. I was walking down the hallway towards the Director's office and along came Mollie. She was by herself, carrying a briefing book of some kind. As she passed me, she stopped, smiled, and said "hello." She asked if I was an employee of the Service and I said yes, "brand new." She laughed and said, "so am I." She welcomed me to the agency and hurried down the hall.

I remember smiling on the way back to my office. There was something very real about this woman, much different than the usual political sound bites that I had become so accustomed to in my fourteen years in Washington, D.C. The next day at her office reception, she again shook my hand and smiled. I knew I wanted to be a part of Mollie's team at the Service.

At a time when national debates over the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act and refuge operations were at an all-time high, Mollie embraced her new position with integrity, energy, and a sense of purpose. Things began to happen very fast during her tenure at the Service. One of Mollie's first areas of change was to guide the Fish and Wildlife Service toward an ecosystem approach to conservation. She saw that conservation included multi-disciplinary areas and that conservation planning must take into consideration entire ecosystems.

Mollie had the foresight to see that the 21st century would be one of scarce resources, more people, and reduced habitat for wildlife. Her ecosystem idea would help to harmonize nature with the developed world.

---

* Legislative Counsel, United States Fish and Wildlife Service. J.D. Vermont Law School (1991). The author is currently on detail with the Office of Senator Patrick Leahy in Washington, D.C.

She also loved working in the field and released a rehabilitated bald eagle to the wild in her capacity as Director. She visited the field offices and took the time to talk to staff about her visions for the agency. She made us all reflect upon how important our work was and what an honor it was to protect the fish and wildlife resources of this country.

As a woman professional in the resource conservation field, Mollie was the epitome of a role model. Just watching her conduct meetings, asking questions, playing the devil's advocate and pressing Service employees to reach for their very best was fascinating.

Under Mollie's direction, the first women Regional Directors for the Fish and Wildlife Service were appointed. Mollie recognized good talent and never hesitated if her personnel decisions "broke the norm."

In my capacity as counsel to the Office of Congressional Affairs, I would brief Mollie on various conservation and legislative issues. She was tough on the issues, but, when you delivered a good product, Mollie would remember that and would take the time to send a note of thanks. That human touch made all the difference in the world.

The thing that will keep Mollie in my memory forever was her kindness. She really cared about others. When you spoke with Mollie, you knew that she was engaged in the conversation. Her mind was not a million miles away. Her beautiful eyes looked back at yours constantly.

During my second year at the Service, my mother died very suddenly. My world was torn apart. Mollie heard about my mother's death and, upon my return to work, she came to visit me personally. She asked how I was coping. She also asked how my father was dealing with the loss.

I remember Mollie remarking on how unpredictable life can be and how short life is. I found out later that when Mollie showed her concern for me and my family, she had already been diagnosed with her first tumor.

I will never forget her kindness and how, when she was struggling with her own mortality, she took the time to care about me. The lesson I have learned from Mollie Beattie is one of kindness to others, both people and nature. To tread softly on this earth, for it is ours for only a short while. To tread softly on others, for we all should want to treat others as we would like to be treated.

My world is emptier without my mother and without Mollie, but in many ways much more full for having known them. Mollie has taught me that it is not what happens to you in life, but rather, how you react and deal with what life brings your way, no matter how difficult. Both my mother and Mollie lived by that philosophy.

I feel blessed to have been working at the United States Fish and Wildlife Service while Mollie Beattie was the Director. I feel blessed to

have seen her in action and how she fought for sound conservation ideals. Her spirit is with me every day as I take on new challenges in my own life.

Mollie, as your spirit lives on in the wild areas of this world, I am grateful to have known you and I thank you.