

OLD DOGS AND NEW TRICKS

A VIEWPOINT FROM THE SOIL AND WATER CONSERVATION SOCIETY'S EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR



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Elk Hair Caddis dry fly.

The Elk Hair Caddis is the dry fly I go to first. It imitates an insect—the caddis fly—that lives in almost all trout streams. Even better, caddis flies seem to hatch all year long. The trout get used to seeing them every day and so are willing, at least sometimes, to check out a good imitation that floats over their heads.

It has been a long time since I have been in the field as a practicing conservationist. But I remember I always carried a soil probe with me, especially if I was headed to a site I hadn't worked on before. The probe was the basic tool I used to figure out what was going on and what I was up against. The Elk Hair Caddis is a lot like that soil probe. I use it to figure out what is going on if the trout aren't rising and there aren't any other clues to what might interest a willing trout. Sometimes I stick with the Elk Hair Caddis all day. Sometimes I switch to something more specialized as I figure out what is happening that day.

The Elk Hair Caddis is the first fly I learned how to tie myself. I've been tying it for thirty years now. In fact, I'm so used to tying it I think I could tie it in my sleep. I know from experience I can tie it in the dark, in the wind, and while riding in a car. So when I bought a new and beautifully illustrated fly tier's reference book a couple months ago, it wasn't because I thought there was any thing new to learn about tying the Elk Hair Caddis. Instead, I bought it to tie the highly specialized and hard to find fly patterns that I use maybe two or three times a year.

It was just out of curiosity, then, that I looked up the Elk Hair Caddis in the reference as I sat down to tie up a bunch of flies for a trip to Wyoming. And it was just out of curiosity that I tried the slight variation in technique the reference suggested—a trick I was sure wouldn't make

much difference based on 30 years of tying the fly my way. And it was a big surprise when that little trick produced a fly so much better than what I normally produce. So much better, in fact, that I couldn't tell my fly from the professionally tied flies I had bought over the internet.

Being part of SWCS should be like that. When you read the Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, attend our annual conference, scan the Conservogram, talk to colleagues at a chapter meeting, or participate in a workshop, I hope you are surprised sometimes. I hope you discover something you didn't know, something that challenges your point of view, something that leads you to try something you have never done before. Or more important, I hope SWCS leads you to change the way you've been doing things—even if you've been doing it that way for thirty years and it seems to work just fine.

Pleasant surprises are great. A new trick that allows us to solve a new problem or makes our work more effective, faster, easier, or better is a gift. But unpleasant surprises are just as important. When new knowledge reveals that what we have been doing is wrong—when conventional wisdom turns out to be traditional folly—it is harder to accept the surprise as a gift. But the willingness to be surprised is what allows us to grow as professionals.

Curiosity and an open mind, in fact, seem to be the hallmarks of an effective professional conservationist. They should also be the hallmarks of a professional society.

SWCS is almost sixty years old. Many of us are close to that milestone ourselves. Some of us are past it. For some of us sixty still seems a long way away. But young or old, we all need new tricks. I hope SWCS delivers that new trick for you from time to time.