

A common lament heard these days is that there are no more heroes. That in our hyper-partisan, hyper-connected and hyper-critical world, it's difficult, if not impossible, to find leaders who truly stand apart for their integrity and selflessness.

My friend and colleague, Hannibal Bolton puts the lie to that. For nearly 45 years, he has embodied what it means to be an exceptional public servant - leading by example and devoting himself to nurturing and developing others.

On January 3, for the first time since 1972, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service will head to work without Hannibal, who is retiring to pursue his great passions - fishing; mentoring young people; and growing grandchildren who love the outdoors. Selfishly, I'm glad I won't have to serve as Director for more than a few weeks without him by my side. I also know how great a loss it is for our agency to see him go. Still, because of his tireless efforts to recruit and develop diverse leaders at all levels of the Service, I'm confident that others will step up and fill his shoes. And also, that Hannibal will keep working to recruit and grow young, talented and diverse people into our profession.

For the few of you who don't know him personally or by reputation, it's worth understanding the remarkable journey Hannibal has taken over the past 45 years. He grew up on a small cotton and soybean farm in the Mississippi Delta near Crawfordsville, Arkansas, part of a family of 7 boys and 5 girls. After attending segregated schools, Hannibal was the first - and only - member of his family to graduate from college, in 1971, when he received a bachelors degree in agriculture from the University of Arkansas-Pine Bluff. Fortunately for conservation, Hannibal went on to earn a Master's Degree from UAPB in Fisheries Management, and joined the Fish and Wildlife Service a year later, gathering and assessing data on fisheries and water quality in Southern Indiana.

It's hard to imagine the challenges facing a young black man at that time, entering an organization and a profession that included few, if any, people of your race and ethnicity. Us lesser beings might cower in fear, but Hannibal endured, reflecting Nelson Mandela's view of courage:

"I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear."

He rose steadily through the ranks of the Service in various leadership positions within the Fisheries and Refuge Programs. After serving as Deputy Assistant Regional Director for the Fisheries Program in the Midwest Region, he came to Washington in 1995 to become Chief of the Division of Fish & Wildlife Management and Habitat Restoration. It was in that role that Hannibal led the transformation of our Fisheries Program, expanding its role and importance far beyond the Hatchery System to be a driving force in aquatic conservation. He played key roles in the creation of the Aquatic Invasive Species Program, the National Fish Passage Program, and in the establishment of the National Fish Habitat Action Plan and National Fish Habitat Partnerships that supported it. In recognition, he was inducted into the Fisheries Management Hall of Fame by the American Fisheries Society - just one of dozens of major awards bestowed on him for his exceptional leadership.

He joined the senior leadership of the Service, in 2008, as Assistant Director for Wildlife and Sport Fish Restoration, serving with distinction until he stepped aside, this year, to spearhead the agency's Diversity Retention and Recruitment efforts. It was the culmination of a lifetime spent mentoring and developing young people.

Through his leadership in the national ranks of his college fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi, as a member of the UAPB Board of Trustees, and through the American Fisheries Society, Hannibal has been a mentor to scores of young men and women. It's truly remarkable how much time he has devoted to helping them become leaders in fisheries management and in so many other professions.

Throughout his impressive career, Hannibal has also been a friend, colleague, and mentor to me and so many others across the Service. Most of all, he's an uncommonly skilled consensus builder, always working to find common ground with others in the pursuit of shared goals and solutions.

Hannibal, we've been privileged to work with you for so many years. Hang out the "Gone Fishing" sign on your door - you've earned it! But, we're hoping you're not done yet!

- Dan