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Science's Next Wave

Editor: John Benditt

EDITORIAL

Dancing with Wolves

I'm a biologist. My fascination with wolves began when I was very young. Wolves are beautiful; wolves are smart; wolves tend to work together; wolves protect their young. Wolves also prey on the ill, the young, and the wounded of other species, and humans are afraid of them.

Today, two of the most powerful federal agencies supporting scientific research (Health and Human Services and the Department of Energy) are headed by women, one of whom is African American. The Office of Management and Budget has a prominent female economist as its director; the chair of the National Economic Council is another outstanding female economist; in most of the science agencies, distinguished female scientists preside at the deputy and director levels; and in at least several of those agencies there are prominent minority scientists. Many national scientific societies, notably the AAAS, the American Society for Cell Biology, the American Physical Society, the American Chemical Society, the American Association of Immunologists, the American Institute of Nutrition, and the American Society for Clinical Nutrition are or have recently been headed by women or minorities. In 1994, the female share of new U.S. doctorates rose to an all-time high of 46%; the number of women in science disciplines increased substantially; and although minorities are still woefully underrepresented in many areas of science, at least their overall participation has increased. Twenty-five years ago, these statistics and examples were unimaginable. Yes, more progress is needed, but why aren't we celebrating this remarkable testimony to the power of cultural and civil rights reform? Why do many women and minorities fear not only for their own careers but for the careers of those who will follow? Maybe it's because the wolves are circling.

This is a time of extraordinary paradox. Just as we begin to reap the benefits that diversification of the scientific leadership of the nation is bringing us, we are also faced with a new popular perception that the tools that helped to open our doors and our eyes were wrong, that they created "preferences," not equalizers. This is a bit hard for some of us to swallow. We remember the days when a "gentleman" with a C could get a job not available to a "lady" with an A. It may be true that it is harder for the "average" male to get a job at the same level as he could two or three decades ago, but this is not because unqualified women and minorities have taken over. Rather, it is because the hard work of concerned educators, enlightened male colleagues, and others has helped to ensure the success of more qualified women and minorities than ever before.

If affirmative action dies a victim of inflated rhetoric and media blitzes uninformed by data, then we need the next generation of diversity tools and we need them now. Drawing more women and minorities into science is no longer so much about righting the wrongs of the past as it is about developing talent for the next century. Recent estimates indicate that between the mid-1980s and the year 2000, the majority of growth in the labor force will come from the entry of women, people of color, and immigrants. In an international, stridently competitive "information age," we have to mobilize all of the latent talent in this new work force. Scientific leaders from diverse backgrounds, some of whom you will meet or remeet in this issue, are desperately needed because their presence will help inspire others to follow their lead.

As the pressure to downsize the scientific effort increases in response to fiscal conservatism, it will be tempting to not spend money on "frills" such as special needs science education and access programs for women and minority scientists. This is a temptation we must resist. As my grandmother said when trying to teach me proper "English" tea-time manners: "It's easy to learn and practice your manners when there is plenty of food, but when food is in short supply, people forget their manners." The mark of a civilized society is the ability to do what is right in the face of challenge. In our attempts to survive as individuals, we must not forget that we have an obligation to ensure that those who follow us can also be nourished.

The wolves may be circling, but scientists, whatever their gender or ethnicity, can outsmart them. Indeed, when one overcomes one's primitive fear, the wolves no longer look so threatening. Their dance is dangerous, but not lethal.

M. R. C. Greenwood

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