



## Michigan COMMENTARY

A PROFILE:

DAVID HALES,  
DIRECTOR OF THE DEPARTMENT OF NATURAL RESOURCES

by Linda Headley

Those who remember June 5, 1968, the day on which Robert F. Kennedy was assassinated, probably also remember the horror and astonishment Americans felt knowing that the life of another of its talented, young leaders had been violently and senselessly wasted. For many, the experience symbolized the futility of one person trying to change the course of events through a life of public service, but it had an opposite effect on David Hales, the new director of the Department of Natural Resources (DNR). According to Hales, Kennedy's assassination forced him to grow up and recognize that if he was concerned about the state of the world, he would have to take an active part in changing it. "You can't be passive," Hales says. "Being passive is just as much a determinant of your future as being active, except that it is an acquiescence rather than an act of will. I am much happier trying to control, interact with, and willfully engage in the future."

Hales, a 43-year-old Texan with an easy smile and the affability one might expect from a southerner, will have many opportunities in his new position to take actions that will shape Michigan's future. Initially, however, he and the department must weather the heated controversy surrounding his appointment. Several Michigan outdoor writers, along with Tom Washington, head of the Michigan United Conservation Clubs, have charged that Governor Blanchard made his support for Hales too well known and thus inappropriately influenced the seven-member Natural Resources Commission in its selection of Gordon Guyer's successor. Hales, who admits he has no idea how much of a role the governor actually played in his appointment, hopes the commission made its decision based solely on the professional qualifications of the applicants and their ability to carry out the tasks assigned to the director. "Once you get down to four or five finalists," Hales explains, "it's no longer an interpersonal competition. It's really a decision that one individual more than the others is capable of addressing the particular organizational needs [of the department] at that particular time." Hales allows that if the organizational needs had been different, the commission might well have turned to a different individual.

An adept politician, Hales is thus far unscathed by the simmering conflict surrounding his appointment, and when he becomes director of one of the state's largest and most complex departments on May 15, he does not anticipate any real difficulties to arise from the strife. "My guess is that there's a healthy curiosity on the part of the folks within the DNR about what I'm like, and I've got a healthy curiosity about them. We'll just get on with business."

Those who do not know him well might expect Hales to harbor resentment toward those who have vehemently spoken out against his appointment. However, Hales seems to have taken their actions in stride. "All groups to one degree or another are advocacy groups. They're playing politics with the process, staking out their turf, and using tactics that have been successful for them in the past in influencing decisions. It's all a normal part of the process and ultimately fair."

The new DNR director also is confident that his working relationship with the legislature will remain intact. Hales has some "excellent friends" at the capitol, and his work as commissioner of the Michigan Radioactive Waste Management Authority has convinced him that "the leadership, committees, and the legislature in general are all predisposed to having a good environmental/natural resource/conservation program and, in that respect, will be very easy to work with."

Hales will need continuing optimism and unwavering confidence, since the top DNR job is one of the toughest in state government. Michigan's DNR director manages about 3,300 employees; supervises the management of nearly 200 environmental protection, natural resource, and recreation programs; and oversees a \$300 million annual budget, which is not likely to increase appreciably over the next several years. It will take considerable stamina and wit to withstand the long hours, extensive travel, and complex as well as often controversial issues that continually confront the director of a state department. Furthermore, even the most diplomatic, intelligent, and qualified person, would have a difficult time filling the shoes of Gordon Guyer.

With respect to his qualifications, Hales prefers to let his record speak for itself, and indeed it does. His six-page resume is filled with numerous awards, accomplishments, and special appointments that clearly illustrate his intellectual versatility. He graduated magna cum laude from Hardin-Simmons University in 1966 with a bachelor's degree in political science, and in 1969 he earned a master's degree in political science from the University of Oklahoma. In the political arena, he worked for two years as the field coordinator and Midwest regional director for the Carter-Mondale campaign. For eight years of his life, Hales filled the role of professor, at Stephen F. Austin State University he taught international relations and American government, and then at the University of Michigan he taught natural resource policy and management for six years. His experience as a natural resource manager is extensive: He served three years as executive assistant to the director of the Oklahoma State Park System; spent four years with the U.S. Department of the Interior in the post of deputy assistant secretary for fish and wildlife and parks; and in 1987 came to Lansing to head the Michigan Radioactive Waste Management Authority.

By his own admission, this professional background did not make Hales a more qualified candidate for the directorship, but it certainly gave him a unique perspective on the position. His work in the nation's capital sensitized him to "the frustrations of trying to solve local problems from a Washington perspective"; taught him how to operate effectively and efficiently within a large, bureaucratic system; and reconfirmed his belief that the most appropriate place to make sound resource decisions is at the state level. His teaching, which helped Hales hone his management skills and increase his scientific knowledge about the environment, provided him with a rare opportunity to reexamine his personal beliefs and professional code of ethics before reentering a more political arena. And his work in Lansing helped him

establish a credible reputation as an intelligent, thoughtful individual capable of handling such delicate issues as the disposal of radioactive waste.

With regard to his commitment to Michigan's resources, Hales concedes that he has not lived in Michigan very long but maintains this might prove to be an advantage rather than a disadvantage. "I come in with the absolute open admission that I have got a lot of homework and learning to do," Hales says. "Whether that is a strength or a weakness, it's up to others to determine." But, he cautions, "often people who think they know Michigan . . . know a Michigan that may not exist anymore, and thinking you know something is often the biggest barrier to knowledge." Besides, Hales asserts, his new job is not to be an expert on the subject of Michigan's natural resources. "The job of the DNR director is to make sure that the best information is gathered about a problem, the best expert judgment possible is brought to bear on the problem, and once solutions are found, they are implemented."

Although he is reluctant to talk about future plans for the DNR (Hales has not yet had a chance to consult extensively with departmental employees or major constituency groups), his intense eyes--which seldom betray his calm, professional exterior--begin to sparkle as he reveals the basic components of his vision for the DNR. "First, we have to pay attention to the resource base. It doesn't matter much whether people within the department do their best if in fact we are not cleaning up the water and preventing its further pollution, addressing air quality problems, dealing with solid waste, and making sure that we have quality hunting, fishing, and overall recreation resources. Just coming in and putting in your hours . . . is irrelevant to whether or not you're getting the job done."

Second, Hales says he wants to make sure that everyone in the DNR knows his or her mission. "Government should never act unless it knows why it's acting, and employees shouldn't be doing things unless they know why they're doing them." Hales believes such knowledge is the key to having an energetic, dedicated, and effective department.

Third, Hales wants a department that "tells the truth all the time, across the board, up and down, inside and outside, so that the public knows that however the DNR sees it is exactly the way we'll call it, regardless of the issue."

Finally, the new director does not want the department to surprise people. Hales says it is impossible for the DNR to have a good relationship with the business community if each springs surprises on the other. According to Hales, it is absolutely critical "to have a coherent, predictable relationship both inside the DNR and between the department and its major constituencies."

When Hales leaves the DNR, which he insists is a long time off, he wants only one thing--to know he has left Michigan's natural resources in better shape than when he came to this state. "The secret to many of our environmental problems," says Hales, "is educated consumers using their power in the marketplace and exercising responsible judgment. If we can get people voluntarily to choose a rational relationship with the environment, then we'll have good conservation. Until then, what we'll have is an increasing regulatory demand on state agencies, which is not going to be good for individuals or the economy, and in the long run will not be sufficient to protect our environment."

Hales is deeply concerned that people do not understand what is necessary to accomplish such a goal. According to him, the battle for a healthy environment "is going to be won in tiny, tiny, tiny battles, not big ones." He firmly believes that it will be far too late "if people wait for one big cosmic moment in their lives to deal with conservation issues--whether that is being the director of the DNR or making a smaller individual contribution." Therefore, he has placed educating Michigan citizens first on his list of priorities.

To describe Hales as a private person is somewhat of an understatement. His openness and honesty about his profession does not spill over into his personal life. Hales attributes this to two facts: (1) he is shy, and (2) he cannot understand why personal information would be of interest to anyone. But in listening to Hales talk about his goals and dreams, one cannot escape the feeling that his experiences have given him considerable strength, confidence, and a rare understanding of who he is and who he wants to be.

Hales attributes his character largely to the people whom he has loved in his life. Not surprisingly, he also credits his sense of inner peace to the times he has spent alone. "Whether its drinking ice cold water from a stream, swimming in the Great Lakes, or seeing a vista untouched by human hands," David Hales knows the value of taking time off to let nature touch his busy, sometimes complicated life.

Will the DNR continue to progress under David Hales? The real test will come when, with his critics watching closely, he is required to make a tough decision at the risk of upsetting his friends in the executive office. But Hales is determined to remain in Michigan and stay out of partisan politics for the long haul. Ever since he gave up his dream of being a professional basketball player--he stopped growing at 6 foot, 4 inches--Hales resolved to do everything in his power to make the world a better place in which to live. As the director of the DNR, he will have many opportunities to test his resolution.

*Linda Headley is a consultant for education and environmental policy at Public Sector Consultants. She also is editor of Public Sector Media Reports and a member of the firm's market development team. Prior to joining the firm, Headley worked as production coordinator for CBS daytime television in New York City. She received her B.A. in speech communication and theater from Albion College.*