


NBII Wildlife Disease Information Node – Wildlife Disease News Digest Wildlife Health Newsmaker Interview

Jonathan Sleeman

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Who are you?

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>>> [Full CV here](#)

What are you working on now?

I am working on a number of interesting projects.

- Writing a book chapter entitled, Wildlife Disease Surveillance Strategies, for a conservation medicine text book.
- Developing a 5-year strategic plan for the USGS National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) which will help establish future research directions for the Center and its scientists. One area of research which will take priority is the study of ecosystem health and how wildlife health is interconnected with human, domestic animal and environmental health.
- Reviewing new studies on the effects of contaminants on wildlife health. The Center has become increasingly more interested in further exploring this area of research.
- Developing the NWHC operational budget.

How does your work benefit wildlife disease research?

I believe many of the routine tasks I do in my current position help to further wildlife disease research. I try to provide leadership and strategic direction on the research that is conducted at the Center. I feel I offer a big picture view of the current landscape of science which can assist with developing projects.

Finding funding for wildlife disease research is always challenging which is why I am continually on the lookout for sources. I spend time educating our stakeholders (e.g. Congress and wildlife professionals) about NWHC research projects and other capabilities through meetings and presentations which help to promote the importance of wildlife disease. In the end, I work to facilitate the activities the Center does and try not to get in the way too much.

What do you see as the most significant challenge for wildlife health professionals today working in the field of wildlife disease?

As a profession, we may not have all the resources we need for wildlife disease surveillance, prediction and management, but what we can do is utilize what we have now for the maximum effect.

Also, we need to develop infrastructures for communication and information exchange that will support this goal. We are beginning to use these types of system structures and tools more, but we still have a ways to go.

At the technical level, we need to look for new approaches to doing integrated science. And, we need to look for new tools, such as those that could improve communications and surveillance methods.

What informational resources (e.g. book, journal, website, etc) should any wildlife health professional be familiar with?

- [Journal of Wildlife Diseases](#)
- [Field Manual of Wildlife Disease – General Field Procedures and Diseases of Birds](#)
- WDIN Wildlife Disease News Digest
- [USGS National Wildlife Health Center](#)

What is your most significant accomplishment?

My most challenging as well as one of my most significant accomplishments was the work I did through my position as the field director for the Mountain Gorilla Veterinary Project, in Rwanda, Africa. <http://gorilladoctors.org/>. After the civil war, I worked to rebuild the program back up from the ground level, which included renewing trust with partners, re-starting current work, and exploring new projects and research directions to take on. In particular, we helped to identify the potential risks for transmission of infectious disease from humans to the gorillas. Despite all the challenges, the time spent on this project holds some of my fondest memories.

What do you like most about your career?

What I like most is the diversity. You can be doing hands on work in the field, clinical work in the lab, or managing a project from the office.

What does being a wildlife health professional mean to you?

I enjoy working in an area of science that has so much potential for new discoveries. There is so little we know about wildlife disease. It is an exciting scientific frontier.

What would you like to see in the field of wildlife health in the next 5 years?

I strongly believe in the linkage between human and wildlife health, as well as ecosystem health. It will be important to take these connections into account beyond the use for wildlife conservation and apply this information to human health issues.

Scientifically, we need to better understand the drivers behind emerging diseases. Why do they happen in the first place? For example, why did the bat disease, white-nose syndrome, happen in the east coast areas of the United States? Until we answer this question, we are vulnerable to the next disease. We need to do more research in this area and we need to increase the involvement of young scientists to help do it.

In addition, wildlife health professionals need to have a seat at the decision table when concerns about conservation and ecosystem health are being discussed. Wildlife health professionals, in turn, will need to be prepared to work in multi-disciplinary teams in order to effectively begin to address these important global issues.

What advice would you give to someone interested in pursuing a career in your field?

Interested students should do summer externships to assess their interest in this area of science. They should also be prepared to pursue an advance degree (MS or PhD) or residency training. This is a highly specialized field, and hence the professional requirements are highly specialized.

What do you enjoy doing in your free time?

Like most wildlife professionals, I enjoy being outdoors doing activities like camping, hiking, fishing and so on.