




A Mascot for the Profession

A university planning professor asked students to suggest appropriate animal images to symbolize the field. What they came up with is instructive and amusing.

By Harvey M. Jacobs



Years ago, *Planning* reported that the Ann Arbor, Michigan, planning commission had adopted an official mascot for the planning department—the penguin. The resolution noted that the penguin was “a strange bird . . . aesthetically pleasing in design [although] it could never fly. . . . It has an elegant stance [but] faces all decisions with cold feet and huddles together in groups. . . . [Moreover] it has few friends except those of its own kind.” One commissioner expressed a tongue-in-cheek reservation about the choice. He wanted to know which of the four varieties of penguin it would be—king, emperor, Adelie, or jackass.

I was so taken by this story, which is retold by Anthony Catanese in his 1974 book, *Planners and Local Politics*, and how well it illustrates the ambivalence many planners feel about their profession that I decided to use it as an extra-credit question for the final examination in my introduction to planning course. I asked my students to come up with other appropriate mascots for the profession. My hope was to lighten what is always a trying experience for students and also to give them a chance to do some creative thinking about a subject that for many represents the beginning of a lifetime of professional activity.

Over the years, the responses have been instructive. They have helped me understand planning and planners, my own teaching, and how the profession is viewed by students. Not unimportantly, they have also given me some comic relief during the hectic exam and grading period. Here are some examples.

- “The rabbit would be a good mascot. It hops to every politician’s request. Unfortunately, while the rabbit has many enemies, it has no natural prey.”
- “The skunk. It sticks with its own kind.”
- “The eagle. It soars boldly and with style.”
- “The owl. It perches alone high up in the trees, all the while surveying the landscape and absorbing its surroundings.”
- “The hermit crab. It puts on the shells of other creatures.”
- “The chameleon. It changes colors at the drop of a hat. If it were a planner, we could say it turns green to represent incrementalism (let the economy roll full steam ahead); yellow for the caution of implementing comprehensive planning; and red for when budget cuts put a stop to income leveling.”
- “The catfish. It’s the classic scavenger, surviving only as long as the other fish in the tank survive. Likewise, the planner is answerable to the status quo.”
- “The ant. It has social consciousness but doesn’t know who its leaders are. It lives to build its hill higher, but a casual breeze or misplaced foot sends it tumbling down. Ants (planners too) work their asses off building up the pile again and get nothing for their efforts.”
- “The fly. It’s seen as a nuisance by many, and it has a short life.”
- “The spider. It’s not particularly aesthetically pleasing, but its purpose is to create something beautiful and practical. The spider represents the generalist planner—hairy, even ugly, but quick on its feet and an artist in its own way.”
- “The duckbilled platypus. A strange one. It seems as though it should be extinct, yet it continues to flourish.”

Can you do better? Send your suggestions to *Planning*. The editors have promised to print them in the letters column.

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