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CORNERSTONES FOR A CONSERVATION ETHIC

An address by the Right Rev. Robert McConnell Hatch, Suffragan Bishop of Connecticut, prepared for the opening session of the Twenty-Second North American Wildlife Conference, in Washington, D.C., March 4, 1957, and read in Bishop Hatch's absence by Howard Zahniser, executive secretary and editor of The Wilderness Society.

In Dostoyevsky's novel, The Brothers Karamazov, there is an old monk whose life is motivated by a pervasive love for all creation. One day he gives this advise to his followers:- "Love all God's creation, the whole and every grain of sand in it. Love every leaf, every ray of God's light. Love the animals, love the plants, love everything. If you love everything, you will perceive the divine mystery in things. Once you perceive it, you will begin to comprehend it better every day. And you will come to love at last the whole world with an all-embracing love."

These words seem strange in an age of bulldozers, super-highways, jets and hydrogen bombs, and yet they contain a message that would enrich our life and save the beauty of our land if we took them to heart.

We Americans call ourselves a spiritual people. We profess love for our land. We take pride in our mountains and forests, our rivers, lakes and prairies. They have left their impact in the deep places of our national life. From earliest times we have been an outdoor-loving people but, paradoxically, the story of our country is shot through with a tale of waste, destruction and the reckless exploitation of our resources.

We remember the American pioneer and how he regarded nature as something to be conquered and plundered. We remember the forests that were slashed and burned. We remember the drained watersheds, the erosion and the floods, the streams befouled with factory chemicals, waste and sewage. We remember the slaughter of the buffalo, the fading trails of the grizzly and the wolf, the birds and animals that are close to extinction and those that have vanished forever. We remember scraps of wilderness and scenic beauty that we ourselves may have known in our childhood and that in the short space of our own lives have fallen before man's relentless advance. We remember all of this and we wonder where the process will stop and what will happen in the end to this land that we profess to love.

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The cause of conservation involves man's soul. It is a spiritual cause, grounded in ethics, and its roots are in the Bible. "The earth is the Lord's," says the Psalmist, "and all that therein is . . . . The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine . . . O Lord, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all. The earth is full of thy riches!" The earth was made by God, and it belongs to God. The trackless forests, the rivers that wind across our continent, the marsh lands, the prairies and the deserts -- all were made by Him. They belong to Him. Their riches come to us from Him.

"What is man, that thou are mindful of him, and the son of man, that thou visitest him?" asks the Psalmist. "Thou makest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands, and thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet." Man did not make the earth. He did not create the riches that are spread before him. All of these have been loaned him as a trust. None of it really belongs to him. His days are as grass, and when the span of his life is over he is the owner of nothing. He is called to be a steward of the riches of the earth, leaving them as a goodly inheritance to his children. He is given dominion over the works of his Creator, but such dominion is a frightening responsibility. One look at a dust bowl, or at a poisoned stream, or at a landscape blackened by fire shows how grave that responsibility can be.

Aldo Leopold in his book, Round River, has described three steps in man's ethical development. The first concerns the relation between individuals, the second the relation between the individual and society. These steps have been taken, although they are still far short of fulfillment. The third step has hardly been considered at all. It concerns man's relation to the land and to the animals and plants that share the land with him. Aldo Leopold writes:- "Individual thinkers since the days of Ezekiel and Isaiah have asserted that the despoliation of land is not only inexpedient but wrong. Society, however, has not yet affirmed their belief. I regard the present conservation movement as the embryo of such an affirmation."

Conservation teaches the principles of wise stewardship. It is profoundly ethical because it counsels foresight in place of selfishness, vision in place of greed, reverence in place of destructiveness. These are the cornerstones of a conservation ethic.

Foresight involves concern for other generations. It sees beyond the immediate and the temporary. It comes to grips with such stubborn human traits as greed and selfishness. It takes into consideration not only our own generation but future generations as well. It recognizes the rights of people who are not yet born, citizens who will inherit this land a thousand years from now. It reminds us that they too have the right to enjoy what we enjoy, to profit from the same things, to be inspired by them as we are inspired and to love them as we love them today.

We are not the only ones who have a right to the riches of our forests, the magnificence of what remains of our wilderness, the beauty of clear rivers, and the fertility of uneroded earth and unexhausted soil. Nor are we the sole beneficiaries of the game we hunt or the fish for which we cast. As Aldo Leopold so graphically declared, other generations have a right to "deer in the hills" and "quail in the coverts", to "snipe whistling in the meadow", to the "piping of widegons and chattering of teal as darkness covers the marshes", to the "whistling of swift wings when the morning star pales in the east".

Foresight involves the ethical relation between generations and reminds us that we have no moral right to live as though we were the sole recipients of these gifts and as though our own brief hour on earth were all that mattered. A conservation ethic is designed as much for our children as for ourselves and is committed to a long view of land, of people and of human rights.

Our concern for conservation should embrace a vision that sees beyond mere economics and gives expression to values that cannot be measured in terms of money. I am reminded of the long struggle to end the persecution of our hawks and eagles. So often the argument has rested on the economic value of these birds, showing how the stomach contents of certain species prove that many hawks and eagles are the allies of man in his war on the rodents that destroy his crops. This is true, but an even more telling argument is that they are beautiful to watch, that they add a touch of wildness to any landscape, and that the growing army of our outdoor-loving citizens has a right to the spectacle of these majestic birds.

Our forests, our national parks, our mountains, lakes and rivers embody values that help to undergird man's spiritual life. One is the element of beauty. Man needs the beauty of the natural world. He needs to have his heart stirred by forests that may be harvested but that are not slashed and pillaged into ugliness, by wild places untouched by roads and buildings, by lakes and rivers that are allowed to retain much of their primeval loveliness. He needs the thrill of listening to the tom-tom of a ruffed grouse and the blowing of a deer. He needs the exhilaration of standing on a mountain ledge and seeing great tracts of unspoiled wilderness outspread before him. All of these fulfill his life and answer an ancient hunger in his soul. Man's need for beauty is one of the strongest reasons for conservation.

Closely allied to this is his need for self-reliance. Camping in a lean-to of his own making, canoeing the length of a wilderness river, casting for native trout on a dawn-lit pond -- these sharpen a man's zest for life, help him to know himself, and take him down to the deeper levels of thought and feeling where a philosophy can be built. Most of us today live our lives in herds. We swarm to work, bumper to bumper. We spend weekends on packed highways. We confine our pleasures to canned

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entertainment and spectator sports. We are seldom alone, rarely beyond the reach of human voices or the din of man-made sounds. There is hardly a chance for a man to know himself or build a philosophy to live by.

The outdoors is an antidote to all this and to many of the complexes and neuroses that go with it. The conservation of our natural resources, especially of our forests, parks and wildlife, gives us a chance to regain values that our civilization has lost. Many outdoor activities, such as hunting, fishing, canoeing and mountain climbing, can teach us the blessings of solitude. Alone or in the company of a close friend or two, we can slough off tensions and learn to think. We are given time to separate the trivial from the significant and the false from the true. We discover that solitude is not an enemy to be avoided at all costs but, rather, a friend who helps us to reorient our lives at regular intervals and who invests them with a fresh scale of values.

The exhilaration of adventure is largely absent from modern life, but it can be recaptured in unspoiled country. It is the secret of the mountain climber's devotion to his sport and the veteran angler's addiction to remote places where he walks many miles for his fish and works a stream that has never been stocked. It can be found by listening to a loon in a solitary inlet or watching a ten-point buck at the edge of a clearing. It can be had by a man who seeks nothing more than a glimpse of a rare plant in a marsh or an unfamiliar warbler in a treetop. Those who have experienced it must recapture it again and again. For them it is as necessary to life as drawing breath.

People who know the outdoors know that it can build great friendships. Camping together, climbing the same mountains, fishing the same streams, watching the same birds and animals, sharing the same love for the same wild places -- these create a bond between friends that can be one of the most cherished possessions in a person's life. Such a friendship is unlike the fly-by-night acquaintanceships that most of us form in our high-pressure existence. A wealth of time is required to achieve it, for its roots go deep and it matures slowly. Countless memories are built into it. So, too, are understanding, sacrifice and loyalty. It is unique because it depends on the wilderness and on the rigors of wilderness life for its creation, and if no wilderness remained such friendships would cease to exist. A conservation ethic should emphasize men's need of this and should seek to show the close connection between his spiritual welfare and the land on which he lives.

At the heart of a conservation ethic should be reverence for the land and for the creatures that share it with us. It grows out of a view of life that recognizes that the earth is the Lord's and that we are stewards of the works of His hands. It is supremely expressed in the story of St. Francis, who had so deep a sense of kinship with the earth and all its creatures. It is seen today in the life of Albert Schweitzer and in his philosophy of "reverence for life". It is what the old monk in The Brothers Karamazov had in mind when he urged men to love all of God's creation.

Reverence does not appraise our land, our wildlife or any of our natural resources solely in terms of their economic value. In fact, it does not assess their worth merely in terms of man at all. It appreciates them for their own sake and enjoys them for what they are.

I suppose that there is no more "worthless" tree, from man's point of view, than the lowly scrub oak that grows on our mountain-tops in northwestern Connecticut. It cannot be harvested, has no commercial value, and is about as tough a challenge to the bushwhacker as anything in our woods. Yet when one lives with scrub oak and observes its stubborn hold on life in spite of wind storms, sleet and snow one grows to admire it as an embodiment of the sheer will to live that governs nature's processes. After a while one can see beauty in scrub oak as it rattles its dead leaves in defiance above the drifted snow. It is of no value to man, and yet it has a right to live and has a claim on man's respect.

The same is true of predators. In our Connecticut hills we have our share of bobcats that range over snow-swept summits and poke through tangled laurel in quest of snowshoe hares. Most men believe that bobcats should be shot on sight. Unlike hawks and owls, they are without economic value to man, and no "practical" arguments can be advanced to justify their existence. However, they are part of the wind-swept places, part of the land of laurel, scrub oak and jack pine, and none of this would be the same without them. When man has reverence for a country he appreciates all the parts and sees value in ancient patterns of life.

Reverence is being at one with nature, not fighting it or trying to wrest something from it but loving it for what it is. One sees this attitude in the fisherman who delights in unspoiled country whether or not he brings home any fish. One sees it in the grouse hunter who has a deep admiration for his prey, based on years of study in the field, and who is content to roam the hills he loves even though the grouse at times outwit him. One sees it in an explorer like Bob Marshall, who failed to achieve his ambition to climb Mt. Doonerak but who could gladly accept the second best, climb lesser peaks, and relish the glory of interior Alaska for its own sake.

Love is the motivation of reverence, and such love should be the heartbeat of the conservation movement. Foresight that protects the interests of future Americans is important. So, too, is a vision that perceives the spiritual benefits man can derive from our remaining wilderness. But most important is reverence. If we who call ourselves a spiritual people have this in our hearts we can restore much beauty to our land and can save at least some remnant of a natural heritage that has never been surpassed.

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