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Ideas, Landscapes, and Conservation's New Frontier

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As the new century stretches before us, we in the conservation profession are challenged by an unforgiving array of problems, the most prodigious of which is the explosion of human populations. This entirely natural phenomenon, buried within the genomic engines of our kind and harnessed to our rapacious greed for land, threatens all other living creatures and indeed the ecological fabric our tiny, limited planet. As the human hoard launches itself against the finite dynamics of nature, changes of profound complexity flirt with our juvenile wisdoms to create milieus of tension and crisis. While conservation efforts of great integrity and scope marshal the best we in this profession have to offer, the reality is that far too seldom do we attain the conceptual summits where ultimate understandings are sequestered. There are many reasons for this, not the least of which is the ever-quickening diminishment of natural diversity. Like laborers emptying deserts with spoons, we appear preordained to starting afresh as earlier progress is destroyed or new crises created.

To forestall a sense of disempowerment and to ensure the efforts we make result in maximal benefit to conservation are, I think, concerns for us all. We need to understand that we are making a difference and that our efforts to sustain nature simultaneously assist in sustaining traditions and activities we see as valuable. For many of us (and this may seem anti-thetical to the popular mythology of biologists as misfits) our deep concern for wild creatures is coupled with a profound appreciation of human societies that have traditionally relied on them, and a desire to preserve the lifestyles and appropriate natural conditions that will enable continuance of these cultures. In this sense at least, we encompass the human species within the natural community in an ecological way, identifying as for any other population its specific ecological requirements, while simultaneously struggling with the impact it (we), like all species, are having on the lands we use.

In this context historical reflections are profoundly important. They provide the perspective of both the direction and pace of change. Furthermore they map the journeys of ideas, providing our only true understanding of how social, intellectual, and environmental landscapes coalesce to influence the progress and maturation of thought as well as the effectiveness of conservation programs. Historical perspectives rescue us from the hypnosis of myopia as well as from the crippling effects of feeling overwhelmed. They are our transcendental selves in fact, allowing us to live though a time before birth, giving us experience that time would otherwise have denied us, and providing us with a wisdom beyond our years. All current efforts in conservation were effected in a time previous and are affected yet by their formative years. Thus an understanding of how ecological and societal situations have changed, and why, is crucial to evaluating our current problems and designing our current solutions.

Furthermore, our best efforts in any one field of endeavor, whether research, stewardship, or any other, can only be successful if they are integrated within a conservation framework that has all components working. Deciding on what this framework is and understanding its integrated functioning can only be achieved through conceptual thinking. This requires a determined retreat from the hurly-burly of our collective muledom and a journey to reflective thought. While this was throughout intellectual history considered the essential ingredient for advancement of ideas, the womb of creativity and cradle of civilization both, it has most unfortunately become what I term the ''last great extravagance of our times.'' It cannot be purchased, only afforded; thus its rarity in our culture. It is seldom considered a valuable enough entity to even enter our job descriptions, let alone our work roster. The isolated plateaus of peace required for such incubations are considered holiday resorts it appears, and thus unaffordable at any price. As a consequence we run the risk of working as ants gathering leaves but hoping to build a forest.

Today, in addition to the perusal of ideas and the historicity of their progress and clash, we are, more than any time before, challenged to identify the conservation model we believe can deliver nature and its surrounding and supporting human traditions into the next generations and beyond. The challenge has surmounted that of preceding times because we have arrived at an interlude in the earth's natural history which lays before us the prospect of an extinction cataclysm of staggering proportions and unprecedented pace. This is a time demanding the best and most dextrous of our abilities, the greatest vision and scope, and the most coordinated societal approach to conservation we can engender. We urgently require an unobstructed view of the new frontier, and a strategy cleared of confusion and inefficiencies. We must coordinate the conservation corps as never before. But to do so we must decide what the crucial linkages and components are.

I suggest 2 arresting questions in this regard:

1. What societal groups and processes must be integrated to effect the conservation of nature?
2. What world view most appropriately determines man's role within and for nature?

The first question is a pragmatic one whose answer will determine our conservation *tactics*; the second is a philosophical one, and its answer delves at the heart of society's current debate over hunting and fishing, and other extractive or utilitarian life style models. This second is a philosophical query whose answer will decide our *strategy*. Clearly if man is seen as rightfully integrating with nature as a moral utilitarian, a sustainable user and personally motivated conservationist, then one approach to natural populations and landscapes will be endorsed. If man's role is a voyeuristic one where interactions with other species must disallow lethal interactions of any kind then a very different approach, with different priorities and agendas, will be appropriate. Currently we have groups working with commitment and talent towards both strategies. I ask us all: how long can we afford this?

In North America we are the inheritors of a landscape abounding in wildlife and with still, by world standards, large expanses of clean and productive natural land. While not exclusively so, this legacy is primarily the result of a small group of dedicated leaders from the political and social elite of the late 1800s and a legion of hunter-conservationists who collectively inspired and enacted a social movement for conservation that had as its basis a utilitarian philosophy that predated the modern notions of sustainable use by a century! In what can only be termed a revolution, men like President Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, and Gifford Pinchot in the United States, and somewhat later, Prime Minister Sir Wilfred Laurier and Gordon Hewitt, in Canada, founded a program of conservation that destroyed the myth of limitlessness in nature, and stood firm against the centuries-old slaughter of wildlife for any price.

While this first great tremor for conservation launched wildlife refuges and reserves, National Parks, National Forests, and effective legislation and enforcement, it was clear by the 1930s that this was not sufficient. Continuing declines in some wildlife populations, as well as over abundances and habitat deterioration for others pointed to a deficit of knowledge and the requirements for training of a highly specialized force to mange wildlife populations, not just protect them. Again hunter-naturalists figured prominently and a new knowledge tide was set in motion. Men like Aldo Leopold and ''Ding'' Darling helped guide the rise of the wildlife management profession, and imaginative funding mechanisms based on the willingness of hunters to pay directly for conservation helped unite this second great revolution in the 1930s with the first of some fifty years earlier. The tactics of law, money and knowledge were clearly linked in these first revolutions to a utilitarian based philosophy, the demarcated strategy of which was to provide wildlife and land in sufficient abundance to maintain not only populations, but also the hunting and fishing traditions which required these. This North American model of wildlife conservation and management is arguably the most successful and mature in the world.

It is not without its problems however and some 50 years (again) after the second revolution we find ourselves groping once more. In strange ironies we see the disproportionate successes of the model, once rare species such as deer and turkey reaching overabundance status on landscapes where simultaneously others teeter on the abyss of extinction. Traditions once taken for granted, such as hunting, trapping and fishing, are ever more sequestered, constrained by shifting societal attitudes, land use practices, and urbanite emigrations to rural landscapes without rural cultures. Declining financial resources from hunting and fishing licenses, coupled with gradually emergent new sources of less directed funds have shifted the balance of influence within wildlife agencies and programs to some extent, and both the agencies and their headwater universities have begun to spawn new breeds of professionals whose identity and focus no longer reflect the traditional rural cultures of yesterday. Political elites are forever showing their broad range of adaptability as well, and reflect like sundials the times in which we live.

Humming within this model we see the crucial components of conservation as we have defined it, components that furnish the chassis upon which our vast array of programs depend. The principal members of this group are the public (amongst which hunters still figure prominently as supporters), academia, the body politic, professional agencies and organizations, and conservation groups. As the supporting infrastructure, all these components must work in a coordinated way if we are to realize the continued success in wildlife and freshwater fish conservation and management that we have achieved, and redress the failures and shortcomings we must acknowledge. One of our increasing problems I believe has been our specialized focus on separate components and the absence of a coordinated conceptual approach which targets several components at once and tracks simultaneously the response of others.

This is where the third revolution resides, in articulating new multifaceted approaches to influencing the conservation corps in a systemic attack. Our suggested anti-biotic administrations may no longer be effective, if what is at stake is a personality that believes there is no illness to be confronted, or one that sees the problem as entirely different from our diagnosis. To give one example of what I mean, many agencies are focusing on questions of hunter retention and recruitment, but when I ask the simple question of how many hunters do we want, I get vague answers or a clear silence. This suggests that asking how the political and academic communities, and the non-hunting and anti-hunting publics are to are to be approached on this issue is a useless exercise. Who, I ask, sees this as a problem, and why? Indeed where are we going to put these additional hunters? Wouldn't their presence necessitate an affiliated strategy for land acquisition or access? Is this possible?

I realize that the situations will differ depending

upon where in North America you are referencing, but certainly the answers to such questions are crucial in defining our conservation strategy and determining what issue we are to focus upon and how. Imagine if society doesn't think we have a problem in this regard at all. Why should academia respond? Why should politicians deal with it? Why indeed should agencies care? Well, the reality is they should all care and respond if hunting is relevant and valuable to society in a conservation sense or otherwise. Ah! But is hunting valuable and relevant? That is the basic question, and yet how much effort have we spent on trying to resolve this highly philosophical problem? Probably very little, because such pursuits are not deemed essential to our jobs. Well in fact they are critical, because depending upon the answer, we ought to make completely different decisions as to how much effort to expend in preserving hunting. That, in turn, will depend on how we tackle the components of the conservation corps.

Our goal, it seems to me, ought to be clear enough. We desire a sustaining and sustainable natural world. Leaving definitions aside, we must acknowledge that this cannot be achieved if the general public and our political leadership are not in general agreement with each other, and with the conclusions of our best teachers and experts as to the nature and scope of the problems we face. All of us know that multiple components are involved at every level of the conservation equation. Let us take research as an example. Detailed knowledge of one component of a species' ecology is obviously insufficient for its management and protection. The intriguing association of quail productivity, rainfall, ''sub-clover,'' and phytoestrogens is certainly an elaborate hypothesis, but of course even its definitive extraction could not effectively reverse the declines that have occurred. It is but one piece of an elaborate puzzle.

Landscape level changes associated with industrial forestry and agriculture and the suppression of the ''great regenerator,'' fire, have presented a different America to quail, seemingly not one to their liking. Thus any recovery across their former range of abundance must involve political, social, and economic reevaluations. Furthermore, as quail have declined and turkeys and deer exploded, new constituencies have arisen. For the recalcitrant quail, money has become a formidable elixir, money to be invested in burnings and plantings, and money to secure your personal access to them. Quail have moved along the spectrum towards European style hunting and management, once abundant and available to every man, now rarer and harder to obtain. Support for quail conservation has undoubtedly undergone a personality shift.

In the quail scenario we see an exemplar of the maelstrom that now evinces the third revolution in American conservation. Once the great hope, knowledge is clearly not sufficient to protect wildlife resources. It is essential; but our great realization must be that it is insufficient. Understanding must be coupled with opportunity if it is to play its role, and opportunity is determined by the conservation corps I have earlier referred to. Politics, agencies, public opinion, academia, and conservation organizations must all bring their best capacities to bear if the challenges facing quail, and all of the continent's resources, are to be met and overcome.

But our challenge doesn't end there. We must decide which world view we are to espouse, the ''wise use'' model of the founders of our conservation system, or the protectionist ideal where man foregoes all lethal interactions with the rest of animate creation. What is our fundamental motivation for quail preservation, and why do supportive constituencies exist at all? And which of these constituencies will fight for these little birds long enough to sustain their presence in our natural communities. We must face this debate head on, and recognize that it is *the* fundamental decision for conservation, not only for quail, but for all wildlife the world over. The human population roars and its echo will decide the fate of this planet. Some guiding philosophy must unite us in the fight to preserve the wondrous world of nature. Its diminishment is the loss of beauty and truth and the one mirror by which humanity may understand and honestly judge itself.

In North America we have had great achievements in conservation. We have restored species on the brink of extinction, safeguarded large predators, and launched a complex and versatile superstructure to work for wildlife that is the envy of the world. But no system reigns forever and we are witnessing major challenges that must be addressed. Our system of ''wise use'' and free and democratic access to wildlife is under assault, from without and within. At the same time that traditional activities such as hunting and fishing are coming under attack from groups opposed, changes within these cultures are worrying even the proponents who see a drift towards elitism and exclusivity and a return to the practice of viewing wild creatures as commodities. While the philosophical collisions between those genuinely opposed to lethal interactions with nature and those in favor is a healthful sign of the relevance of these activities, the slide towards commercializing wildlife is a direct and grievous assault on all who have worked for and benefited from the great North American model. It will deliver us, if unchecked, bereft of supportive constituencies, and nature will lose.

And so it is our fate, those of us who work for the conservation of nature, to be embroiled in debates that run the full range of human discussion, from the most pragmatic to the most philosophical. Running through the challenges of quail conservation and recovery are the haunting shadows of passenger pigeons flying in their multitudes and slaughtered in their billions. So too the nearly lost but wonderfully rescued flash of wood ducks in the morning light. Never easy, never certain, the road we travel is arduous and unending, marvelous and honorable. We must choose our philosophical ground and recognize that only by connecting the elements of conservation in a coordinated parade can we achieve our goals. Our ideas have traveled a long and complex landscape, but they have truly arrived at a new frontier.