



The Conservation Attitude

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Part C

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By Luna B. Leopold

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PART C

The Conservation Attitude

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Forsaking his inheritance and its assurance of a comfortable existence, Guatama Buddha adopted the life of a pauper to seek the intellectual joys of pure contemplation. Under a mulberry tree, it is said, he propounded a 12-point program of ethical conduct stressing the development of a disinterested outlook in each individual. Temples, ritual, and idols he considered distractions from the basic need. He felt that there was a basic need for the development of an attitude.

The Brahmins as well as the lower castes recognized the merits of the system suggested by Buddha, but they molded his teachings into an accessory to existing rituals and dogma. They soon forgot that Guatama wanted no idols and no temples. They forgot his admonition that an attitude was the thing that really counted. Despite his expressed wish, today Buddha in stone, in bronze, and in gold ponders these things in thousands of temples and hears the prayers of millions who still seek the truths of an ethical life.

Today, conservation has its temples. The temples of conservation include hundreds of irrigation reservoirs; it has prayer-sticks in miles of contour plow furrows, and the Buddha of a drop-inlet structure looks down on a conservation pool in myriad detention dams.

Conservation is well established today in the

minds of the American public. It seems appropriate to analyze at this time just what it is that is established in the public mind. In what ways have we, too, substituted the temples, the ritual, and the idols for an attitude?

What concept of conservation is established in the minds of Americans? Conservation involves the idea of sustained yield of renewable resources, and prevention of extravagant waste in nonrenewable ones. In a less specific sense, conservation implies the preservation of values, and the use of a resource for the public good through an indefinite future. In a third, and still more subjective sense, conservation connotes natural or wild things, the country and landscape beyond the confines of our own back fence.

A moment's contemplation of these concepts makes it immediately apparent that the concepts in the first definition, sustained yield and extravagant waste, are relatively objective things which can be measured and studied. Five loaves and two fishes can be weighed, tagged, and price-marked. They can be rung up on a cash register. The prevention of waste can be measured, in a way, in twelve baskets gathered full.

In the second concept of conservation, a preservation of values implies that worth must be evaluated. Use for the public good means that there should be some way of determining what is in the public interest, and what is not.

This is where the conservationist begins to have trouble. There is an immediate tendency to express value in the ordinary daily-life measure, dollars. Therefore there is pressure to express one mallard as equivalent to \$2.00 or to say that one goose equals \$6.00. This leads to an even more spurious equation—that the value of a park is measured by the dollars spent by park visitors in the local stores. Surely a park has a far greater value than that, but expression of this greater value is not simple. In any event, the matter becomes confused when the public good is measured strictly by the number of people using a resource.

An important element in the present-day conservation movement is the idea of the wilderness reserve. The reserve system means setting aside specific areas as wilderness and keeping these areas free from the encroachment of roads, as well as other types of development. Following an initial suggestion that wilderness reserves be designated in areas of Federal forest land, a system of such tracts was delineated by the Forest Service beginning with the Gila reserve in New Mexico and Arizona. Later the wilderness reserve concept was extended to particularize different kinds of tracts, differentiating wilderness, primitive areas, and other classes of reserves.

The wilderness concept is closely allied to the concept of national parks. The park system involves two kinds of uses: so-called recreational development and, separately, areas preserved as wilderness both within the confines of a single national park. The park system is characterized by complete protection from hunting and from the cutting or transplanting of vegetation. At the same time, the park system implies the development of roads, access trails and, in the most accessible areas, concessions, as well as camp grounds and picnic areas. Road development and concession areas are for the express purpose of drawing the public, opening up

such areas to recreational use. This contrasts sharply with the idea of wilderness protection, where access is limited to those traveling by foot, by pack train, or by canoe. This paradox in the administration of parks exemplifies the conflict between alternative uses of a resource, each competing use being justified by its classification as conservation. Can conservation mean all these things?

This line of thought leads directly into the third and most subjective concept involved in conservation. The idea of natural, wild things is, no matter how thin you slice it, an essential element in what people think of when they speak of conservation. Sports in the woods or wilds require a least a semblance of naturalness in the setting. A natural setting contributes materially to the esthetic pleasure. Furthermore, the aspect of sportsmanship under wild conditions connotes an ethical exercise in which conscience and self-discipline play a part. When hunting and fishing are separated from these esthetic and ethical connotations, they may be recreation but they are rather far removed from the usual concept of conservation. A baited duck-blind or an illegal bag may be recreation, but gone is that restraint which is an essential element in a conservation attitude.

As one deals with those concepts which are far enough down the scale of objectivity to defy simple monetary evaluation, he is increasingly pressed to substitute visible symbols which in themselves may not be any direct measure of conservation value, but which by a round-about reasoning are felt to be indicative of such value. These are the idols and the prayer sticks, the temples and the trappings. If we who consider ourselves conservationists are worthy of that name, it is not too early to analyze our own attitudes critically, to ask ourselves whether the idols and the prayer sticks, to which we point with pride, have become substituted in our minds for conservation.

I think all human beings are easily taken in by labels. It is because people believe they can understand something better when it can be pigeonholed, tagged, or named. Labels make things black or white. Soon we forget what was behind the label, or how the original differentiation was made. Therefore, when one label is more popular than another, anything anyone wants to sell or promote is tagged with the popular label, and immediately becomes better or different.

At this moment, conservation is a popular label. As a result there are plenty of programs, practices, special interests, and misrepresentations riding the coattail of a popular movement.

There is not only great attention to what something is called, but there is also a preoccupation with visible signs—idols you might say. Things which can be seen and counted become synonymous with basic accomplishment. The number of miles of farm terracing can be counted and may be sold as a measure of how much conservation is being applied to the land. A careful scrutiny may reveal that the only land management measures which are in widespread use are those that are financially beneficial to the operator. Yet these measures may be advertised as conservation in the broad sense, and in fact they may become the only things being done on a program which is called a conservation program.

One of the pointed—and I might add—heartening indications that at least a few land managers have seen through the popular labels was a statement made by a Wisconsin farmer testifying before a recent hearing of the Water Resources Committee.

“Practices such as contour strip-cropping and terracing are very important, but I maintain that they do not get at the source of the trouble, which is soil compaction and a very low organic-matter content in our soils.

“It should be the goal of every farmer to

restore and maintain his soils in a spongy, organically rich condition.

“I do not feel that the State or Federal agricultural agencies have given this phase of conservation work the emphasis it deserves.”

This land manager indicated, in effect, that government agencies have become principally concerned with keeping soil in place. He said our concern ought to be on the quality of the soil. If we did that, the other would follow. The visible signs of so-called conservation—terraces and the like—can be measured and advertised. The basic accomplishment is more subtle. Payments or incentives, Federal or State aid, may go to the man who has the nicest temples and idols to the conservation gods.

In some instances, visible signs of accomplishment of conservation, signs of having done something, may be less important than visible signs of having done nothing. When you find a piece of really fine canoe water or a little remnant of prairie flowers, you may thank your lucky stars for this visible sign that man has done nothing here.

In analyzing the field of conservation I come to the conclusion that there is need for recognition of an attitude, a way of looking at resource problems which allows the existence of values which are noneconomic, but nevertheless real. A conservation attitude would recognize esthetic and ethical values as distinct and immiscible with economic ones. It would admit that maintenance of esthetic values of a resource may be incompatible with development of economic values but would not make esthetic and ethical values compete with economic ones in monetary terms.

By such an admission, competing uses may be viewed in a framework which allows choices to be made on reasonably objective grounds rather than behind a screen of distortion and of differing definitions.

Stream pollution involves the loss of three kinds of values. First, in more extreme form, pollution may be a direct threat to public health, and health is a commodity which civilized communities do not evaluate in dollars, though for some purposes dollar valuations are placed on certain aspects. Second, pollution can be viewed in terms of the dollar cost of purification necessary for use of the water. Third, pollution as a stench and an unpretty condition can be viewed as an esthetic degradation.

On the other hand, streams are polluted because economic pressures prevent municipalities and industries from adequate treatment of wastes which must perforce be disposed of in bodies of water.

Let it be recognized at the outset that in an industrial world waste disposal is a mandatory as well as a logical use of rivers and lakes. The problem is not whether streams are to be used for transport of wastes, but what it is worth to the community to keep waste disposal within limits of esthetic and salubrious acceptability.

In the case of Brandywine Creek, Pennsylvania, the citizenry of the area decided that they wanted the stream cleaned up. They did not decide this because it was economical or because it would attract tourists to the local stores. Public health was not the issue. The decision was based on a desire for more pleasant surroundings in which to live, in other words on an esthetic premise. The local industries participated in this venture. Local and temporary pollution by industrial waste should not be interpreted as lack of willingness to cooperate but should be accepted as a result of circumstances. The pollution abatement of the Brandywine can, I believe, be attributed to a conservation attitude.

We Americans must decide what we want for ourselves as well as for our children. We want the advantages of a mechanized civilization, but we also appear to want a culture having certain

intellectual, esthetic, and ethical values. Resource development and use brings these into competition, and decisions must be made. Many of the conflicts in the use of natural resources stem for a confusion of these different kinds of values. If all resource development and use is judged by economic yardstick alone, resources having principally esthetic and ethical values will continue to disappear as rapidly as they have in the past half century. With regard to areas of real wilderness, we are already on the flattening portion of a die-out curve which is approaching zero.

Like Buddha's followers, we seem to have forgotten that it was the attitude which was the important thing. We have substituted the idols and the temples for the attitude, and we have moulded conservation into a trademark to help sell preconceived ideas. Let us take a new look at resource development and resource use. Development or use which is economic rather than esthetic should be compared strictly and objectively with alternative lines of action using uniform criteria for judging economic value.

For resources which are principally noneconomic in value, let us decide whether we want them, but not by assigning a dollar sign to scenery and not by making the sale of hot dogs a measure of the worth of a park. Thomas B. Nolan, director of the U. S. Geological Survey, recently made a significant addition to the definition of conservation which, in my opinion, provides a framework within which a conservation attitude may function. He said that conservation must have the positive objective of "better utilization of our resources and our environment in order to make possible better and fuller lives for all the people." In this context conservation can mean development of a resource such as water or minerals, and it can also mean preservation of a resource in its natural state such as a scenic landscape or a piece of wilderness. Development or preser-

vation would depend on which is more conducive to a better and fuller life for the people of the country.

To achieve a better and fuller life it seems to me necessary that we look beyond the temple idol of monetary evaluation. We must think beyond the prayer sticks of the voluminous reports which ostensibly determine whether a given project is justifiable.

It would seem to me less esoteric and far more honest to decide that certain elements are necessary for better and fuller lives without dreaming up ways to put meaningless dollar values on them; then to weigh the other elements having monetary value by uniform and objective procedures, so that alternative uses of the resource can be compared, and choices among the

alternatives made on sound monetary grounds.

We who call ourselves conservationists must be the first to identify land-use and resource-development measures which are financially sound investments, quite justified without a conservation label. We would then fortify our position and consolidate our ranks when there was need to maintain or protect some esthetic value, some piece of scenery, some wood lot full of ladyslippers, some stretch of white water or of wilderness, which could never be justified on strictly economic grounds. It will require a self-restraint which can come only with the development of a conservation attitude for us to fly the conservation banner only on those things whose value lies not in our pocketbook but only in our heart.

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