

Conservation and Continuity

By CURT MEINE

This essay has been adapted from a plenary address delivered on March 24, 2010, at the 75th North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The first North American Wildlife Conference (as it was then called) was held in Washington, DC, in February 1936. President Franklin Roosevelt, who had issued the call for the conference, described it as “the most important conference of its kind ever assembled.” It has since served as the primary annual gathering of professional wildlife managers, administrators, and policy-makers from across North America. The full text of this address will be published in 2010 in the Transactions of the conference. For more information, visit the Web site of the Wildlife Management Institute at <http://www.wildlifemanagementinstitute.org>. —ed.

How can we make meaningful connections among a seemingly distant past, a troubled present, and an uncertain future? That question was on my mind earlier this week when I found myself in the library at the Department of Forest and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At the top of one bookshelf was a box labeled “North American Wildlife Conference Transactions, 1937–1972.” I did not have time to review all the volumes, and their contents are not yet available via the Internet. (They should be.) But by chance I did pull out the *Transactions* of the 1963 conference. Toward the end of that volume is a paper entitled, “The Importance of History to Natural Resource

Managers,” by Charles Callison, who at the time was executive vice president of the National Audubon Society. The article begins with a lament that, in 1963, only fifteen years after Aldo Leopold died, students didn’t know who he was any more. This was only a few years before Leopold’s *A Sand County Almanac* was reissued in a paperback edition. That edition would itself change history.

A good portion of my own work over the years has been devoted to exploring “the importance of history to natural resource managers.” Invariably, when I focus on the theme of conservation, history, and the land ethic, I return to the events of the mid-1930s. Think of the stories we have all heard and the images we have seen of the Dust Bowl. Several of the images that especially come to mind are from “Black Sunday”—April 14, 1935, almost exactly seventy-five years ago—a day remembered for one of the most terrifying dust storms of the “Dirty Thirties.”

Mark the occasion. April 27, 2010 was the seventy-fifth anniversary of the legislation that created the USDA Soil Conservation Service. I hope each year we will remember and celebrate it, perhaps by giving thanks for the soil that is beneath our feet and in our bones. I regard it as one of the most important events not only in conservation history, but in all of American and human history. It was one of many critical conservation developments of those years. Others included the founding of the National Wildlife Federation, the Wilderness Society, and The Wildlife Society; the work of the Civilian Conservation Corps; and the expansion of the national wildlife refuge system. It was, in fact,

the time when the one-word term *wildlife*, as we now use it, first became widely adopted.

These innovations came in response to the devastation of the American land and the economic turmoil that was both cause and consequence of that devastation. The plowing up of the prairies and the recurring dust storms were only one expression of the crisis in conservation. It also entailed the near complete deforestation of the northern Great Lakes forest; the pollution of waterways and the disruption of watersheds across the continent; the widespread draining and ditching of wetlands; the depletion of game populations and an increasing incidence of species endangerment and even extinction; the environmental degradation in the nation's burgeoning cities; and of course, the pall of economic depression over it all. These coningled dilemmas of the 1930s brought forth what we can now recognize as dramatic change in conservation science, policy, and practice. That change is reflected in the early transactions of this conference, in a wave of new laws and policies, in the letters and articles of the times, and in the newspaper headlines of the day.

Conservationists of all stripes knew in the mid-1930s that they faced an unprecedented situation and that conservation must evolve to meet the call of the times. They simply had to find new ways to think and work together to meet the multiple problems before them. There was no choice.

This response, of course, played out in many ways in many places. But to make a direct historical connection, I want to concentrate on one particular episode. Out on what we in Wisconsin fondly call our west coast, along the Mississippi River, a lovely, burbling trout stream flows amid the beautiful wooded hillsides, contoured crop fields, and rolling pastures of the Coon Valley watershed. It was not always so pleasant a picture. In the early 1930s it was a wasted watershed, vulnerable to gully-washing storms that had stripped much of the loess topsoil off its hills, deposited it thickly in the valleys, and finally lost it to the Mississippi. Leopold described Coon Valley at the time as "one of the thousand farm communities which, through the abuse of its originally rich soil, has not only filled the national dinner pail, but has created



the Mississippi flood problem, the navigation problem, the overproduction problem, and the problem of *its own future continuity*” (emphasis added).

That last phrase, I think, is simply a more poetic way of expressing the modern concept of *sustainability*. And it was in the Coon Creek watershed that a radical new approach to living sustainably on the land unfolded. Hundreds of farmers came together with the assistance of what was then called the Soil Erosion Service (predecessor to the Soil Conservation Service and today’s Natural Resources Conservation Service) to establish the nation’s first watershed rehabilitation demonstration project. Leopold and other experts from the University of Wisconsin and the newly mustered city boys in the Civilian Conservation Corps joined in the effort.

Shortly thereafter, in May 1935 (again, almost exactly seventy-five years ago), Leopold published an article about the project in *American Forests* called “Coon Valley: An Adventure in Cooperative Conservation.” In it Leopold sought to communicate an essential message: that to solve the problem of Coon Valley’s “future continuity,” the landowners and conservationists had to deal not only with the proximate symptoms of land degradation, but with ultimate causes. And to do that, they had to invent a whole new approach to conservation, one that encouraged all those involved to look beyond their own boundary lines and professional categories, to reconsider their special interest in this or that part of the land. They had to deal not only with the soils, or the water, or the pastures and crop fields, or the forests, or the wildlife, or the scenery, or the economic status and productivity of the land; they had to deal with all of them, together and simultaneously, within the entire Coon Creek watershed.

“There are two ways to apply conservation of land,” Leopold wrote in his article. “One is to superimpose a particular practice upon the preexisting system of land use without regard

to how it fits or what it does to or for other interests involved. The other is to reorganize, gear up the farming, forestry, game cropping, erosion control, scenery, whatever other values may be involved so they collectively comprise a harmonious balanced system of land use. The crux of the problem is to show that integrated use is possible on private farms, that such *integration* is mutually advantageous to both the owner and the public.” Leopold used that word *integration* several times in the article. He also used the words *community* and *cooperation*. In so using them, Leopold was not criticizing the highly individualistic Norwegian farmers of Coon Valley (whose adaptability he greatly admired). Nor was he overlooking the particular parts of the land community. Rather, he was conveying the need to make connections on the landscape so that all might flourish together, in a manner that did not undermine, but bolstered, the resilience of the land.

What do we learn from those events of seventy-five years ago? I ask because, if we are honest with ourselves, we must recognize and admit that we have been slow to learn and apply many of those lessons. Let me offer three core lessons that I, at least, have taken away from the history of “the worst hard times” (as Timothy Egan titled his recent award-winning book on the Dust Bowl).

First: the 1930s taught us in a profound way that the fate of human communities and natural communities is intimately interconnected. For those of us who work in conservation, that is basic knowledge and maybe even plain common sense. But it was not for the public then, and it is not now. It was a lesson that forever marked that generation of conservation scientists, policy-makers, educators, and practitioners. It was one, however, that would fade in and out over the decades that followed, depending on the length of time since the most recent environmental crisis pointed out its essential truth, and the speed with which that crisis faded from the headlines and into the past.

Second (and I say this with writer and farmer Wendell Berry in mind): we conservationists need to speak loudly and boldly some fundamental truths about our economic philosophy and the system of economic, educational, and policy institutions that embody that philosophy because, quite frankly, we cannot count on traditional economists to do it. Leopold, commenting on the problem of soil loss and watershed degradation early in his career, in the American southwest, wrote: “Erosion eats into our hills like

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a contagion, brings down floods and the loosened soil upon our valleys like a scourge—water, soil, animals and plants—the *very fabric of prosperity*, react to destroy each other and us” (emphasis added). Later, in his essay “Wildlife in American Culture,” he would distill his emerging economic wisdom into a deceptively simple sentence: “We fancy that industry supports us, forgetting what supports industry.”

On my dark days I fear that we have learned nothing from the last two years of tectonic economic change—that we are well on the way to having wasted this crisis. Worse yet, I fear that we in the conservation community have had no voice in this conversation, that we have failed to bring to the table our necessary perspective, using our generations of accumulated knowledge and wisdom. Up until the very brink of the recent economic near-meltdown, pronouncements came forth over the airwaves and from the highest offices in the land—and not just government or business offices—that “the fundamentals of the economy are strong.” Now that we have stepped back (at least for the time being) from the brink, we are anxiously awaiting the word from our economists and from the pundits’ pulpits that the fundamentals are strong again! But we conservation-minded citizens know in our bones that “the fundamentals of the economy” are not abstract numbers on the computer screens and spreadsheets of the world, not the sub-totals toted up at the end of economic formulae. These do not constitute the bottom line. The true “fundamentals of the economy”—of all human economic activity, everywhere, all the time—are in fact *the soils, the waters, the plants and animals, the atmosphere and oceans, and our fellow citizens of our communities, the nation, and planet*. It is up to us here—if we do not, *who will?*—to speak up and speak out, to point out these basic economic truths, and to challenge ourselves, our colleagues, our fellow citizens, our leaders, and especially our children to imagine and create an economy that does not exist merely to consume, but to sustain, the land; that does not deplete resources and move on, but that restores and renews healthy ecosystems and

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human communities; that rewards rather than penalizes stewardship and caring and conserving. That was the conservation challenge of the mid-1930s. It remains ours today, *in extremis*.

And this suggests the third lesson from the 1930s: that we cannot solve any one of our multiple conservation and

environmental problems in isolation. Solutions to any one of our dilemmas must also contribute to solving all the others. That is what the watershed approach showed. Coon Valley was a troubled place, not just in terms of its soils, or waterways, or woodlands, or wildlife, or farms. It was all of those and more. In the 1930s at Coon Valley, and in a thousand other places like it, the solution required that all the conservation needs be addressed together in the same place, within the same watershed, in a coordinated and integrated manner.

Now we find ourselves again in a time of national and global economic turmoil, even as we face what we might call the Litany of Woe—the many daunting problems we face: climate change, human population growth, dwindling fossil fuel supplies, biodiversity loss, emerging diseases, declining freshwater quality and quantity, food security . . . all those dark trends that keep us up worrying late at night. We have every good reason to shudder when we look straight at the Litany of Woe and at our human prospects a generation or two out (much less seven generations). Yet we still seek simplistic solutions (think, just to choose one example, of the recent corn ethanol mania). We fail to think like conservationists: to make connections among our concerns; to support and use our best science; to weigh long-term costs and benefits; to consider ultimate causes and durable solutions; to care about our neighbors, future generations, other species, and the land as a living community. We are re-learning what our grandparents had to learn in the 1930s: the absolute necessity of coordination and integration in service of our shared interests, of pulling together toward a common cause. Our predecessors might not understand the way we talk about it today—promoting positive synergies, changing our paradigms, achieving

win-win solutions, and so on. But we face the same need. We need to design conservation policies and programs and practices so that solutions to any one problem help to solve all the other problems simultaneously. When I'm feeling really severely academic, I say it this way: *systemic problems require systemic solutions*. Wendell Berry describes it more poetically as "solving for pattern": that is, addressing each problem not in isolation, but as related expressions of troubled relationships.

And so when the dust of the 1930s had literally settled, a new generation of conservationists had learned the hard way lessons that would be relevant to all future generations. That our human communities are fundamentally dependent on natural communities, even as both undergo constant change. That conservationists have a particular responsibility to speak this truth and to point out that our economic welfare reflects the health of the ecosphere in all of its dimensions. And that achieving sustainable relations with and within a healthy natural world requires integrated, caring responses at all levels of human society.

Looking back now across three generations and seventy-five years, why were some of these lessons remembered and others forgotten? Why and how did the emergence of modern environmentalism alter them? How have these notions fared in the never-ending whitewater churn of political change? Here I want to offer a challenge and a hope. I am often torn apart, as I suspect many of you are, by the Litany of Woe. But then I wake up another day and recognize that there is also a Litany of Hope. When we look back especially over the last twenty years, we can take some justifiable pride in how conservationists have begun to think in new, different, and utterly necessary ways, and how we have begun to act on that knowledge.

I have had occasion recently to review some of those positive developments. I have been writing a new introduction for a forthcoming new edition of my 1988 biography of Aldo Leopold. In so doing, I have been looking back over these last generation in con-

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conservation projects; the development of ecological economics and new ways of valuing of ecosystem services; the “greening” of religion and philosophy. We could add other trends to the list, this Litany of Hope. Whether these changes will come fast enough, and go far enough, is up to us. So let us keep in mind the words of David Orr, “Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up.”

As we turn to the future, let us ground ourselves. Let me take you to two places in Wisconsin where I find hope as a conservationist these days. One is right back there along the Mississippi River in western Wisconsin: Coon Valley and its neighboring watersheds. If not fully healed, the land has recovered dramatically since the 1930s. You can indeed find plenty of good hunting and fishing and birding and scenery in Coon Valley. But you will also find that the hills and valleys of Wisconsin's beautiful Driftless Area have become a hotbed (literally!) for local and organic agriculture. If you examine a map of the nation's certified organic producers, you will see quite a swath across the upper Midwest, with

conservation. I could honestly conclude that, however daunting our challenges have become, we have also seen essential changes in the way we think about and do conservation: the shift to landscape-scale approaches; the increased focus on working lands and private land conservation (which was sorely lacking twenty years ago); the emergence of ecological restoration and community-based

conservation projects; the development of ecological economics and new ways of valuing of ecosystem services; the “greening” of religion and philosophy. We could add other trends to the list, this Litany of Hope. Whether these changes will come fast enough, and go far enough, is up to us. So let us keep in mind the words of David Orr, “Hope is a verb with its sleeves rolled up.”

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Coon Valley right at the epicenter. Nearby La Crosse, Wisconsin, has hosted an annual gathering of the Midwest's organic growers every February since 1989. That first meeting drew a few dozen people. This year 3,000 people attended. In fact, it is no longer advertised as a Midwestern meeting; it has become the de facto national meeting of those exploring and inventing new ways to produce healthy food from healthy land.

What this signifies to me as a historian of conservation is that agriculture and conservation are coming back together in a way that we have allowed to wither over the last two generations. We can see this not only in Wisconsin and the upper Midwest, but across the country in the growth of the local food movement, in the popularity of farmers' markets and community-supported agriculture, in the increased commitment to childhood health and nutrition. Food is reconnecting people from cities, suburbs, and rural communities to each other and to the land. New and creative links are being forged in ways that support local farmers, economies, and communities, public health, education, and land stewardship. Through food, we are trying—and able—to solve multiple problems simultaneously.

The second spot is up on the north side of Milwaukee, on Silver Spring Road. There you will find what from all outward appearances is an unremarkable place: the non-profit organization Growing Power. There Will Allen and his team hold forth. Last year Will was recognized with a MacArthur "Genius Award" for his innovative work in urban agriculture, reconnecting his neighbors to food and soil and water, offering basic lessons in ecology and resource stewardship to communities that had been neglected, reviving food and cooking traditions, providing fresh food in neighborhoods where fresh food is often unavailable. Will Allen is an amazing fellow. I encourage you, if you are in Milwaukee, to visit Growing Power and see what goes on there. I guarantee that you will find hope there (and, I bet, a few samples of fresh greens).

And so, on Wisconsin's rural west coast in La Crosse and Coon Valley, on our urban east coast here

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in Milwaukee, and in many other places in between, our land ethic is growing and changing. It is being reinvented and extended by new generations in new places. And of course, these are only two examples from here in Wisconsin; in fact, we can find them everywhere when we look. Our imperative need is to hold these places up, to make connections and common cause across the landscape with others who care about the health of the land, all its inhabitants and functions, and the well-being of its people. We may have different immediate priorities. We may come from different backgrounds. We may care about the land in different ways. But we all care, enough to act on that concern in imaginative and meaningful ways.

In 1940 Aldo Leopold observed, “Conservation viewed in its entirety is the slow and laborious unfolding of a new relationship between people and land.” (I sometimes add, when I recite that sentence these days, “You know, Aldo . . . we’ve *got* to be a little more *fast* and laborious!”) From that difficult period in our history we can take this vital lesson: that generation faced multiple crises and emerged from them with the shared commitment to the greater conservation good, to land health, and to resilient human communities. The people who organized the first North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference seventy-five years ago did so under dire circumstances, with social, economic, and ecological disaster playing out across the land and war clouds on the horizon. They had to confront some basic, uncomfortable truths about history and economics and about our deficient record as keepers of the land and creators of wealth.

Not all their responses were right or effective or lasting; yet among the fruits of that time was a deeper vision of humanity's role and responsibilities within the natural world. Aldo Leopold's term for that vision was “the land ethic.” When in 1947 he composed the essay “The Land Ethic,” he included this key passage—the most important words he ever wrote, in my view: “I have purposefully presented the land ethic as a product of social evolution, because nothing so important as an ethic is ever ‘written.’ . . . It evolve[s] in the minds of a thinking community.” Consider exactly what Leopold was doing in that passage. Leopold, in writing “The Land Ethic,” points out that an ethic can in fact never be written; that this was only his best effort to define it at the moment. He was calling upon all of us as a community to “write” the land ethic—to draw upon our diverse experiences and knowledge and tra-

ditions and wisdom to build that ethic. In other words, all of us, in effect, write the land ethic every day.

Moreover, the development of the land ethic requires a critical venue for the “thinking community” of conservationists, such as the North American Wildlife and Natural Resources Conference provides. We cannot know what our grandchildren and great-grandchildren will say about what we do now and in the years ahead. I feel pretty confident that they will take a look back and will pass some kind of judgment. Let us hope that our grandchildren are generous and forgiving. Let us also, however, work to earn their respect and gratitude by demonstrating that we are contributing to a still-evolving conservation ethic; that we can rise above our differences and circumstances and look beyond our immediate self-interest; that we responded with hope and at least some wisdom to the profound

challenges and opportunities we face right now. For how we respond to those challenges will shape the way that they live and the world that they live in. Let us pause in this moment to remember the debt that we owe to our grandparents, and the effort that we owe to our grandchildren.

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