The Muries

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An Introduction to the Essay "Ethics in Wildlife Management."

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In his landmark 1954 article "Ethics in Wildlife Management," Olaus Murie delivered a simple but pithy message. His colleagues in wildlife management had a choice to make. They could content themselves with becoming competent technicians, a "basic and important" goal of the still-new field. Or they could accept the fact that theirs was "a complex field of interests and functions" that, to fulfill its goals, had to demonstrate a capacity for ethical development as well as technical expertise.

Murie's message arrived at a unique juncture in the history of wildlife management. The Wildlife Society, in whose journal Murie published his article, was then just seventeen years old. When Murie and his fellow founders established the organization in 1937, they were riding a wave of creative enthusiasm in a new profession. Wildlife management had carved out its professional niche in the 1930s, drawing motivated young people to the mission of conserving wildlife populations and habitats. World War II diverted that wave. With the war's end, however, the wave returned to the home shores, its momentum even stronger, but its character changed. Hundreds of young men — and they were almost all men — returned to civilian life, enrolled in college on the G.I. Bill, and chose wildlife management as the path back to normalcy. By 1954, that cohort had left campus and begun settling into careers. In a sense, wildlife management itself had settled into its young adulthood.

For many, the war had provided mission enough. What they wanted was a job, and those who had made this their chosen field preferred jobs that allowed them to spend a lot of time outside, avoiding deep questions about the human condition. For at least some, however, the war experience made Murie's point: wildlife conservation does not, and cannot, exist in a social and political vacuum. The human dimensions and cultural context of conservation, and hence the struggle to define a guiding ethical code, were simply inescapable. The wildlife manager not only had a need, but a responsibility, to participate in that struggle. For Olaus Murie, there really was no choice after all. Either you seek to understand conservation's context and "contribute to the highest thinking in the field," or you are not doing your job.

Depending on one's orientation, that message was easy to ignore, or hard to swallow, or an awakening to one's full professional obligations. In any case, Olaus Murie was one of the few who could broadcast the message. Aldo Leopold, Murie's close colleague, had shaped wildlife management's philosophical foundations, but by 1954 he was six years dead. Among the surviving elders, Murie was unique in his professional credentials, his field experience, his own technical competence, the breadth of his understanding, and the tone of his voice. When Olaus Murie spoke, wildlife managers listened.

What they heard was Murie's own contribution to "the highest thinking in the field." Murie's argument for "a big-hearted code of ethics" draws not only on Leopold, but on Ralph Waldo Emerson and Aldous Huxley... and sage grouse researcher Robert Patterson. Murie uses terms usually banished from the professional journals: generosity and sensitivity, neighborliness and charity, morals and esthetics, wisdom and democracy. He condemns the debasement of hunting and fishing and the mere "worship of numbers" to which wildlife management was becoming increasingly vulnerable. In a remarkable, maybe unprecedented, statement, Murie links conservation's expanding ethical sphere to "our heavy-footed progress in toleration of 'other' races of men" and our "tolerance for the views and desires of many people." Although not so widely read as Leopold's essay "The Land Ethic," Murie's "Ethics in Wildlife Management" was also pushing the boundaries of the ethical sphere outward. He was asking his colleagues to connect concern for human dignity and worth with "appreciation and regard" for the threatened biota. And in the end he gave professional conservation literature one of its great sentences: "Evolution is our employer."

Olaus Murie was a wise soul. He knew that many of his colleagues would just as soon stick to numbers and surveys, keep the live traps working and the field vehicles running, and "let someone else fuss with social trends." But he understood that social trends and the fate of wild nature could not be separated. He believed, and showed in his work and words, that wildlife conservation had a critical role to play in "man's struggle to find himself." That did not mean that every wildlifer had to immerse himself or herself in philosophy and ethics. It did mean that every wildlifer had an obligation to see one's work in larger contexts and to make attention to ethics part of the very definition of professional competence. Only in that way could wildlife management mature in a manner that kept it relevant, and earned for itself "the dignity and importance it deserves."

Ethics in Wildlife Management

OLAUS J. MURIE

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When the Wildlife Society was first conceived, it was provisionally spoken of as the "Society of Wildlife Specialist." I remember the discussion later on at the formal organization meeting, when the permanent title "The Wildlife Society" was adopted as more appropriate for the complex field of interests and functions with which we might be concerned. Since then members have now and then questioned: "What are we for? Where are we going?" Such questioning in itself denotes progress of our professional organization. Further proof of our progress is the current attempt, by a series of appointed committees, to establish professional standards.

There are several aspects to any set of standards. One of these should be high purpose in our work.

Naturally we all have the practical objective of finding work to do—a job. We have taken our training because we wanted to "get into wildlife work," to get out in the woods, to get into conservation, or to get into research. Some of us "get into" administration. In this process some of us learn to know much about animal populations, waterfowl ecology, fisheries, wildlife diseases, or some other specialties. We become expert, more or less, in some field of knowledge of wildlife, broad or limited. This is basic and important, and for the sake of the future of wildlife we earnestly pray that such proficiency in wildlife management will become accepted by sportsmen and political bodies more generally than is now the case.

But from here on we have a choice, every one of us. We may be content to tinker with the machine, gather facts, do the repair jobs, do the routine management in the hope of merely maintaining certain game populations. When a train pulls into a junction you may see a flock of mechanics begin tapping wheels, washing windows, supplying ice. A worthy and necessary operation.

With wildlife it is not so simple. We are not only dealing with animals and plants and soil and water. We are dealing with people as well. Whether we like it or not, we find ourselves in the midst of a struggle. Thoughtful people are trying to understand our place in Nature, trying to build a proper social fabric, groping for a code of ethics toward each other and toward nature. The current controversies in the diverse field of conservation are an expression of this ethical struggle. We, as wildlife technicians, cannot escape it. As members of our profession we have a responsibility to contribute to the highest thinking in this field.

You may say: "Be specific. What do you have in mind?"

Let us consider hunting as it is practiced today. Most of us are more or less closely associated with this pastime. Our work is generally directed toward the maintenance of this sport. Buy are we satisfied with the general attitude of a large proportion of those who buy hunting licenses? Are we satisfied with the low standards, or lack of standards, that we encounter among those who carry the guns?

There is a long background of trophy hunting, a tradition that, at its best, developed a set of standards into a sportsman's code that had some admirable elements profoundly affecting people everywhere. There are still those who reflect the gentlemanly behavior engendered by such a code. There are those who hunt, who are also sensitive to beauty and to the warmth of an outdoor experience. No doubt we all know such people. But what are we to think of the hordes of gun carriers, licensed to shoot something, who go afield with an indefinite lust that they themselves would not be able to define or understand, who shoot anything that comes in the line of vision, including each other, impatient of any obstacle or personal exertion, who want the game convenient to the car or airplane in the shortest possible time?

I remember that, many years ago, certain game wardens in Alaska used to size up and classify big game hunters as "sportsmen" and "killers." That is a nice distinction, considering that all of those hunters carried guns, buy it is a valid one.

A few years ago an article appeared in a sportsmen's magazine, written by an attractive woman whose picture was prominently displayed with the African game she had killed. The title of her article was: "I like to kill things."

One time at a refuge some surplus buffalo were being killed for official disposal. The animals were driven into a chute, where they were dispatched humanely. An Army officer happened to be present , and as a courtesy to him he was invited to shoot one of the buffalo in the chute. He did, with the preferred pistol, at a distance of some three feet. So, he had killed a buffalo.

One reads advertisements to the effect that at certain ranches one may have the privilege (for a specified sum) to go out in the pasture to shoot a buffalo.

Also, certain "public spirited" commercial interests sponsor special fish derbies and sundry game shooting contests. Thus the dollar hungry predators infiltrate to further debase the recreation we know as hunting and fishing.

Some months ago I attended a local meeting to consider certain revisions of the game laws. It soon became evident that some of the proposals were designed primarily to benefit certain people financially. One person frankly stated: "Let's support local industry." (In this instance, guides and outfitters.) As a friend of mine remarked about a similar meeting: "The dollar sign shone in their eyes." At the same time there were seething references to the "meat hunter."

All right, what of the so-called meat hunter? Aren't we nearly all meat hunters today? Is not hunting for meat, combined with whatever else we are capable of absorbing in the process, from what remains of wilderness habitat, perhaps the most worthy purpose in hunting and fishing? Those who have traveled in real wilderness, prudently taking from the fauna and flora what is needful, primarily motivated by love of wild country, have truly experienced the highest purpose of hunting. Doesn't it, after all, depend on what attitude we have toward Nature?

Let us look at the brighter side. On one occasion the Jackson Hole Chapter of the Izaak Walton League in Wyoming passed a resolution denouncing the principle of the hunting contests for commercial gain as unsportsmanlike. Some members of the Outdoor Writers Association urged their fellow members to play down the importance of getting the bag limit; to stress quality of experience rather than quantity of game.

It is significant too that many hunters today are taking to the bow and arrow as a weapon, in an effort to regain some of the skill that used to be required to secure game.

But these are not the only things that concern us. There is also the non-hunting use of wildlife. Aldo Leopold loved to hunt and fish, but he was also a staunch defender of those raptors and carnivores which are too often condemned by a certain class of "sportsmen," and he sensed the value of song birds and wildflowers and trees, for their own sakes. We are struggling with new concepts, or perhaps better, giving new attention to ideas that have long been struggling for recognition. At the Third General Assemble of the International Union for the Protection of Nature in Venezuela, a committee of members from Switzerland, England, Venezuela and the United States endeavored to formulate a statement of our convictions on man's proper relation with Nature. Perhaps every race or nation throughout its existence has dealt with this, as revealed in religious, folklore, and cultural patterns. Today we are still trying to understand.

I believe that a code of ethics arises from the quality of our experience and our thinking. Since the time when we emerged from the irresponsible pre-human era we have had to tamper with our progress, consciously and purposely, with whatever wisdom we have been able to command. But evolution still operates. It is fortunate that we can't escape it. Esthetics in its many forms has evolved with us, affecting our judgments, shaping our way of life and our philosophy—and esthetics had its roots in organisms long before man developed it so highly. We have also nurtured an inherent concept of morals, and of responsibility. We are toying with the qualities of generosity and tolerance, a sense of neighborliness in the Nature of which we are a part. Note the thousands of bird-feeding trays, the bird walks, the wildflower preservation societies. We have become interested in game species for their own sakes, as interesting animals. It seems paradoxical, but true, that certain sportsmen of sensitive minds love the things they shoot. Appreciation of our competitors, the carnivores and birds of prey and certain rodents, comes much harder. But we are progressing there too. We have Hawk Mountain Sanctuary in Pennsylvania. Certain western cattlemen like to have coyotes around. This is linked with our heavy-footed progress in toleration of "other" races of men. From the vantage point of history, in spite of recent murderous political madness, we see that charity may be slowly emerging.

It is always profitable to leave our own technical boundaries and explore what men have thought in other spheres of living. Emerson, as philosopher and literary genius of his time, was much concerned with Nature. His essay on "The Sovereignty of Ethics" is up to date worth our attention:..."that can never be good for the bee that is bad for the hive. See how these things look in the page of history."

"The idea of right exists in the human mind, and lays itself out in the equilibrium of Nature, in the equalities and

periods of our system, in the level of seas, in the action and reaction of forces."

Recently, in "Animal Kingdom", I read a letter from Aldous Huxley in which he speaks of "an ethical system comprehensive enough to include Nature as well as man."

In dedicating the monument to the passenger pigeon in Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold remarked: "But we, who have lost our pigeons, mourn the loss. Had the funeral been ours, the pigeons would hardly have mourned us. In this fact, rather than in Mr. DuPont's nylons or Mr. Vannevar Bush's bombs, lies objective evidence of our superiority over the beasts."

The more sensitive sportsmen long ago developed in their code a sense of fair play, and strove to give the hunted thing what they termed a "sporting chance."

Is this the road of man's spiritual travel? Are these the sign posts along the way: "the sporting chance," Emerson, Thoreau, Seton, Stewart Edward White, and Audubon Society, Izaak Walton and the League that uses his name, the many nature societies and associations, the Sand County Almanac, The American Nature Association, The Wilderness Society, the International Union for the Protection of Nature, The Wildlife Society? These are only random selections.

The Natural Resources Council is an attempt to give a common direction to diverse conservation impulses. We find the National Wildlife Federation helping to defend a national park, together with many other kinds of organizations. The Wildlife Management Institute does the same, and by the medium of its annual North American Wildlife Conference, has made much headway in bringing into closer understanding and concerted thinking the aspirations of many different groups of people.

I am not sure that we have agreed upon even a broad goal, but it is worth trying. Two viewpoints come to mind.

A number of years ago a group of us were standing on an elk-feeding ground in Wyoming, where hay was being doled out to the animals. Many of the elk looked unthrifty. A particularly old and decrepit cow elk came by.

"There is a poor specimen of an elk," someone remarked.

A game warden who was present said: "Oh well, she'll throw another calf for us this spring."

Worship of numbers. Counting, not weighing.

Then consider this. A field biologist, Robert L. Patterson, in the book *"The Sage Grouse in Wyoming,"* given the publication award by our Society for 1952, expresses this belief:

"By now it should be an old and well-established principle that the primary consideration in game management should always be the welfare of the game species, with the sportsmen receiving an important but secondary consideration. Issues of palatability, law enforcement, damage control, etc., as related to time of game harvest, must necessarily be resolved without sacrificing the primary objective of management."

Here is one approach to a philosophy about our relation with Nature, which grants that Nature has a right to exist, and reveals generosity toward wildlife, and tolerance for the views and desires of many people. Here is a spacious philosophy which finds room for the scientist, the hunter and fisherman, the nature lover; room for wild alert creatures in the home of their own choosing, the "good oak", the pine, the sage, a bit of original prairie, a mountain landscape with its original content.

Granted such a big-hearted code of ethics to include ourselves and Nature, could we find a place in it for extensive replacement of native species of game by exotic ones, for the satisfaction of a special interest group, without the concurrence of other users of Nature's domain? Our code as here suggested conceives of democracy as a way of life, a sportsman's consideration of the rights and sensitivity of fellow beings, as well as appreciation and regard for the native scene.

Does all this appear too complicated and unnecessary? Perhaps it seems more important to be a good technician, to know the biological answers and let someone else fuss with social trends. But some of us become administrators and are up against making decisions in policy. I have seen young technicians falling into the pitfalls of slanting their information, innocently enough, to suit politically minded superiors. We have the choice as a profession: We may be content to expertly tinker with the wildlife machine to keep it alive somehow; or we can give our profession the dignity and importance it deserves and help the public interpret the fact so as to contribute in man's struggle to find himself.

Perhaps many have already made this decision. To refer again to the most recent research report at hand, "The Sage Grouse in Wyoming", I find this statement:

"It is anticipated that some criticism will be directed against the elements of this study which depart from purely natural history and ecological phases. The most exacting

knowledge of an animal's life processes by itself is valueless in an evaluation of its chances for survival in the atomic age. The various land-use policies and political expediencies ultimately set the tolerance limits for the survival of any wildlife species. The sage grouse provides no exception to this principle. This monograph would have been erroneously conceived and derelict in its presentation if the effects of an expanding civilization upon sage grouse populations had not been fully explored and appraised."

Our training in the universities should be such that we do not come out pretty good technicians but philosophical illiterates. We need to look up from our technical study at times and look at the horizon. Evolution is our employer.