My friend Marcia is married to a fifth-generation Wisconsin farmer. They run a modest-sized dairy operation in south-central Wisconsin, of the type that once gave the state its identity as "America's Dairyland," but that in the last quarter century have been disappearing from the landscape by the thousands.

LEAVE NO ACRE BEHIND:

Renewing the Conservation CONSENSUS

By Curt Meine

Marcia has been working on a local land use issue involving a nearby closing military facility. As part of this work, local conservationists organized an ad hoc workshop of local farmers, scientists, educators, and government officials to share ideas about collaboration. "Before I start," Marcia said, "I'd just like to say one thing about these environmentalists… People call them 'tree huggers' and dismiss them, but they are *so* interested in your farm and in your work, and they're so eager to talk! We need to keep working together!" Eyebrows lifted, jaws dropped.

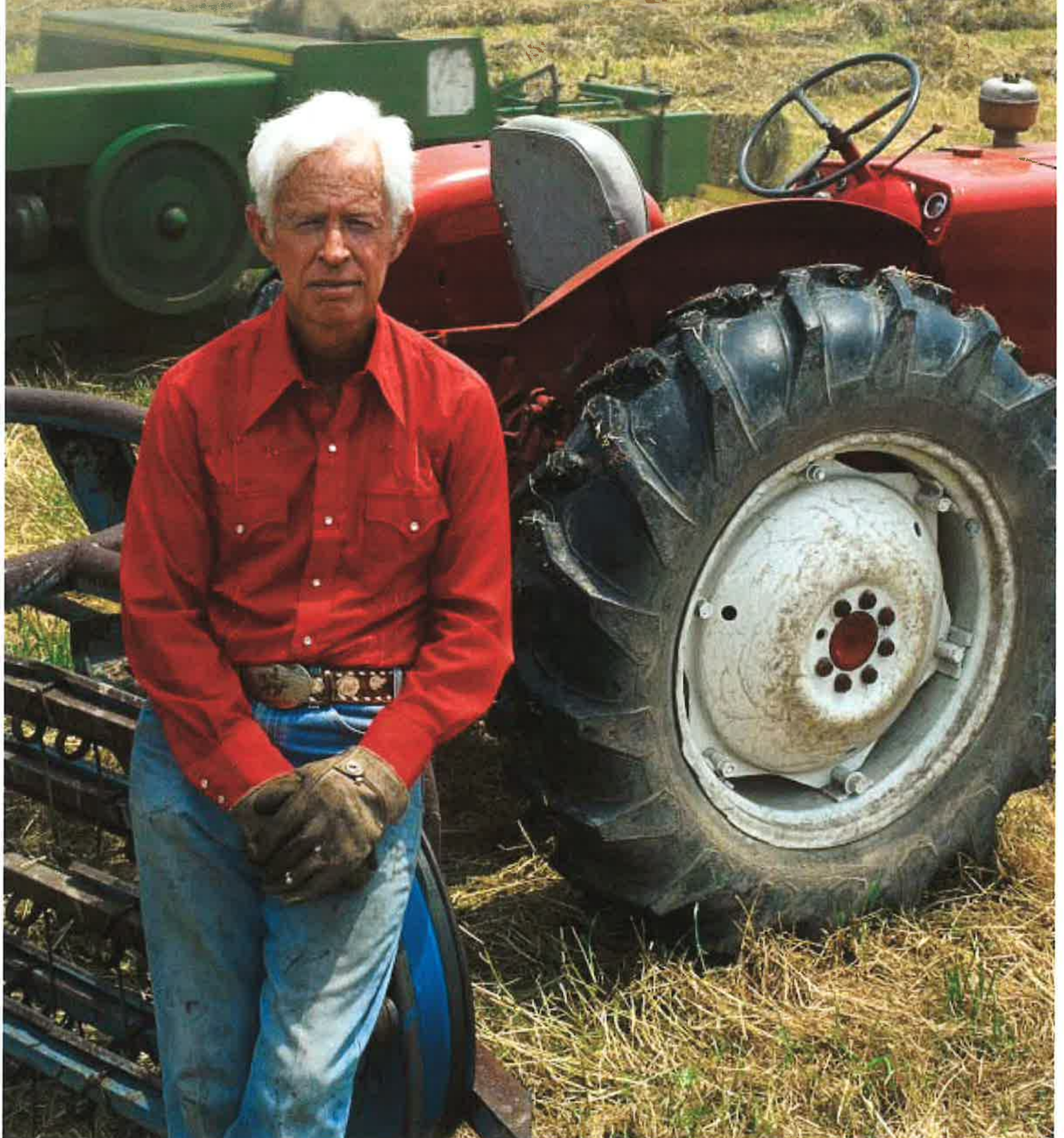
That such statements should meet with astonishment is one indicator of the immense challenge facing all who care about land and its conservation. For decades, wedges have been driven deep between environmentalists and farmers, ranchers, and other rural landowners. Some, like splinters, have slowly and quietly worked their way into the body politic as social, economic, political, and environmental conditions have gradually changed. Some indicate real tensions between public and private interests, with the momentum behind confrontation overwhelming the need for consensus. Some of the wedges reflect a failure to understand the history of environmental ideas, policies, and practices. Still others have been driven in purposely and cynically by those with political points to score. The demons of political discourse – simplification, exploitation, stereotype, scare tactics, polarization – have had a field day. As always, the American landscape bears the brunt, and the scars, of the struggle.

"Conservation... is an expression of commitment to democracy, justice, and stewardship, to future generations, and to the land itself."

- Curt Meine

"The most tragic conflict in the history of conservation," Wendell Berry wrote, "is that between the conservationists and the farmers and ranchers. It is tragic because it is unnecessary. There is no irresolvable conflict here, but the conflict that exists can be resolved only on the basis of a common understanding of good practices." And, I would add, on the basis of a renewed conception of the public interest that includes conservation as a shared value and good. The "tragic conflict" that Berry notes is just one symptom of the precarious state in which conservation finds itself in a century after it first found currency during the Progressive movement one hundred years ago. To grasp the full magnitude of the situation, we need to step back and frame it more broadly.

Since World War II, the increasingly globalized economy, rapid technological change, shifting demographics, and narrowly conceived models of development have been driving land use decisions at every level, with conservation values a



Modest-sized dairy operations once gave Wisconsin the identity "America's Dairyland," but in the last quarter century they have been disappearing from the landscape by the thousands.

secondary factor, at best, in the calculus. In retrospect, we can see the 1990s as a sweet moment when, in the wake of the Cold War, leaders in every sector of society might have stepped forward and built, across ideological boundaries, a new global, national, and local vision of resource stewardship and restoration, economic sustainability, and community health. Instead, the decade will be remembered for its economic and technological fever, its globalization mania, its orgy of speculation and hucksterism, its rank partisan politics, and its complacency.

Now, in a post-9/11 world, land and its conservation hardly register on the political radar screen. The phrase "homeland security" verges on the propagandistic: who speaks with heartfelt conviction for the health, security, and sustainability of the American land itself – the soils, waters, plants, animals, and people together? In the wake of another national crisis, World War II, Aldo Leopold refused to indulge in symbolic or sentimental paeans to the American land. Instead, he asked hard questions:

"Do we not already sing our love for and obligation to the land of the free and the home of the brave? Yes, but just what and whom do we love? Certainly not the soil, which we are sending helter-skelter downriver. Certainly not the waters, which we assume have no function except to turn turbines, float barges, and carry off sewage. Certainly not the plants, of which we exterminate whole communities without batting an eye. Certainly not the animals, of which we have already extirpated many of the largest and most beautiful species."

"We are not building this country of ours for a day. It is to last through the ages."

- Theodore Roosevelt

In the political arena, conservation has too few champions making such points. Now, a national political leader can with impunity deride energy conservation (to cite just one example) as a mere "sign of personal virtue, but... not a sufficient basis for a sound, comprehensive energy policy." For those with such a view, the American land is an inert commodity, not connected to any notion of responsible citizenship.

In the face of these dilemmas, the media largely ignores stories about the land and the way it is changing – which is to say that it ignores stories about who, in the end, we are as a people. The modern environmental movement has, until recently, paid scant attention to private land and "working" landscapes, having forgotten – or perhaps never learned about – the rural roots of environmental concern in the older conservation movement. And, it must be said, an indifferent public finds it hard to care about something that it has increasingly tenuous connections to, or knowledge of. Far from being appreciated as the fundamental source of life, health, wealth, stories, poetry, identity, belief, and, yes, patriotism, land is just a raw resource and backdrop for busy modern lives. Such an attitude can in the long run only impoverish us – economically, ecologically, culturally, aesthetically, spiritually.

Todd Ambs, administrator, Division of Water, Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources; and Steve Born, professor of urban and regional planning, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Waters of Wisconsin Strategy Meeting

If progress in conservation requires an ever-deepening understanding and awareness of land, an engaged citizenry able to think critically about land and our connections to it, elected officials who make conservation a priority, and public policies that promote the commonwealth, then conservation as a movement has reached a crossroads. It finds itself marginalized as other priorities take precedence. It exists in a quickened world of ever-shrinking attention spans, election cycles, and investor patience. It requires interdisciplinary knowledge and an integrated concept of the public interest, at a time when specialization and fragmented policies are the norm.

Conservation, we have come to believe over the last century, can be achieved using standard tools: scientific information, expert administration, efficient regulation, effective enforcement, the discipline of the free market. It is a simple matter of economic and policy choices. Leopold understood the efficacy and even the necessity

Robert Lange, former executive director, Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

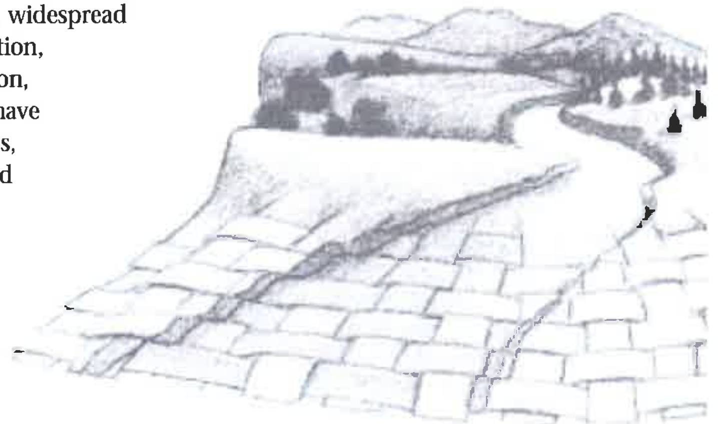
Waters of Wisconsin Strategy Meeting

of such tools, but he understood their limits as well. This is what led him to write in his famed essay "The Land Ethic": "No important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it. In our attempt to make conservation easy, we have made it trivial."

Leopold penned those words in 1947. They serve as a reminder that the conservation ethic, in the United States and around the world, has deep roots, and has weathered other extended droughts and disruptions. In the 1860s George Perkins Marsh writing from Italy urged his contemporaries to "renovate a nature drained by human improvidence of [the] fountains which a wise economy would have made plenteous and perennial sources of beauty, health, and wealth." In 1903, Theodore Roosevelt in California challenged his fellow citizens to recognize that "We are not building this country of ours for a day. It is to last through the ages." In 1932, Black Elk on Dakota's Pine Ridge Reservation told the story "of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one spirit." For these and other voices, known and unknown, who have contributed to the evolving American land ethic, conservation is no mere "sign of personal virtue"; it is an expression of commitment to democracy, justice, and stewardship, to future generations, and to the land itself.

In a time of international turmoil and insecurity, we badly need a renewed conservation consensus that reflects continued commitment to the broad public interest. It must seek first to remove the political wedges. The conservation problem, Leopold once wrote, "is co-extensive with the map of the United States." His point was that conservation that focuses only on protecting wildlands, or public parklands, or private woodlands, or hunting grounds, or scenic spots, or erodible soils, would always remain inadequate. Rather, a more enlightened conservation philosophy had to take hold, one that recognized the conservation values inherent in *every* acre and *all* land, and the responsibility of all landowners and land-users to protect those values. To that end, Leopold in his day devoted much of his energy to building bridges between farmers and conservationists, bird-watchers and foresters, hunters and wilderness protectors, consumers and producers. All had to contribute in the effort to ensure land health, which he defined as "the capacity for self-renewal in the soils, waters, plants, and animals that collectively comprise the land." Only in this way could private interests and the public interest be better harmonized for both people and the land.

The challenge today is greater than ever. Two generations of population growth, easy mobility, intensified resource management, widespread development and land fragmentation, increasing wealth and consumption, and hard environmental politics have undermined the former consensus, which was always fragile. We need a coherent, across-the-landscape, conservation vision that reaches from the innermost city to the outermost wilds, and that recognizes



the dynamic connections within the entire landscape. For too long the feedback loops have been all wrong: people have fled faltering cities for the next ring of suburbs or the semi-wild ex-urbs, which have consumed untold acres of farmland, ranchland, and forestland, which has fragmented landscapes, which has turned expanses of open space and wildland into increasingly isolated and threatened islands.

We must turn those dynamics around. Reinvigorated urban neighborhoods, retrofitted suburbs, restored brownfields, vibrant small towns and cities, sustainably managed farms, ranches, and woodlands, and wildlands whose wildness is honored and vigorously guarded: these are the parts of the landscape that conservationists of all backgrounds and commitments must weave together.

The good news is that, despite the missed opportunities, sobering trends, and new global realities of the last decade, there are yet many examples of what a new consensus might look like on the ground. To note just a few:

- In the vast "sky island" country where southern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and northern Chihuahua meet, a number of organizations – the Malpais Borderlands Group, the Quivira Coalition, the Diablo Trust, the Altar Valley Conservation Alliance, the Santa Maria Mountains Group, the Arizona Common Ground Round Table – have formed to bring together ranchers, agency land managers, conservation biologists, and local communities to steward their shared range landscapes.
- In the greater Chicago region, more than 160 cultural and educational institutions, environmental and conservation groups, local governments, and other organizations have banded together under the banner of Chicago Wilderness, and work together on land education, planning, and stewardship projects.
- In Aldo Leopold's own "sand county" landscape of Wisconsin, the "Farming and Conservation Together" (FACT) project, works to combine agriculture and ecological restoration through a self-organized group of local farmers, landowners, and local conservationists. It joins other collaborative projects that seek to protect agricultural productivity and other land conservation values in the Midwest.

Peter Forbes, vice president and director, Center for Land and People, The Trust for Public Land.

Rethinking the Promise of Land Conservation

Such community-based approaches have taken hold in watersheds, riverways, lake basins, valleys, forests, rangelands, farmlands, coastlines, and neighborhoods throughout the country. Among professional resource managers, ecosystem management has provided a broader rubric under which to pursue social and ecological goals in a more integrated way. In these and other places voices from the "radical center," where traditional ideological divisions are challenged, are beginning to be heard. I believe that all these signs, and many others besides, indicate an unspoken yearning. People want to acknowledge that we can be more than mere consumers of land and its products, more than passive recipients of handed-down policy, and more than idle observers of inexorable economic change. People want to know that we can still rise to the challenge of democracy and accept our responsibilities as citizens, as community members, and as caretakers of the land. If conservationists can capture, articulate, communicate, and activate this yearning, they will have begun to forge a new conservation consensus for a new century.

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