

Excerpts from 1967 lectures delivered by Sigurd F. Olson at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the University of Illinois, and the Wilderness Conference of the Sierra Club. Mr. Olson is President of the Wilderness Society and for many years was consultant to the Secretary of the Interior and to the Director of the National Park Service.

THE ECOLOGIC CRISIS IN ENVIRONMENT

by

Sigurd F. Olson

To explain why anyone is a conservationist and what motivates him to the point where absorption in the preservation of his environment becomes a way of life, means going back to the very beginning of his involvement with the natural scene. I believe one of the basic tenets in the life of anyone really concerned is the development of love for the land, and that this comes only through long and intimate association with natural beauty and living things, an association that not only breeds genuine affection, but has inherent in it a sense of awe, wonder, and reverence for the infinite and varied ecology of the country.

Love is nourished by constant appreciation of what is aesthetically rewarding and spiritually enriching, and inevitably matures into a recognition of what is significant from the standpoint of evolutionary development. Only if there is understanding can there be reverence, and only where there is deep emotional feeling is anyone willing to do battle for the land. A Spaniard said long ago, "There is only one cause a man must fight for and that is his home." Conservationists fight not only for their individual homes, but for the home of the whole human race, the total surroundings of man, the soil, air, water, and all life with which he shares the earth.

After 400 years on this continent, we are faced with a crisis which threatens our survival and happiness. Our waters have become sewers, our air poisoned with noxious wastes, our soil impregnated with harmful chemicals, the surface of the terrain befouled with garbage and the enormous effluent of civilization. Our garish cities are full of ugliness and noise. The demands of our affluent society are depleting our resources to the point where we see their end. With huge earth-moving machines we change at will the features of the land, dam and reroute rivers, lower water tables, level hills and build highways across impassable territory. Life moves at an ever faster tempo and the long, slow rhythms of the past are forgotten in the frenzy of our pace. There is nothing we cannot do, and our inventive genius seems able to cope with all problems, but we ignore basic human needs for beauty, space, and naturalness, believing the age of gadgetry and artificial diversions can still our unrest.

Man has emerged in the last two generations as a geological force capable of destroying the earth, and though he is aghast, he continues his desecration, confident that somehow he will escape the inevitable penalty. The fact he has created a crisis seems to bother him not at all. He reads the predictions of the year 2000 and laughs. To most, conservationists are fanatical in their zeal, prophets in the wilderness who cry as Isaiah once did, "Woe unto them who build house to house and lay field to field lest there be no place where man can stand alone."

Still there have been many who look at conservation as a movement having more to do with people and their culture than with any particular phase of environmental disruption. Beginning with Henry Clay who said, "The greatest patriot is the man who stops the most gullies," to Paul Sears of Yale who stated, "Conservation is a point of view involved with the concept of freedom, human dignity, and the American spirit," the stress has been the ultimate question of what kind of a world we want.

Also Leopold said that conservation is the development of an ecological conscience and that the practice of land management must spring from the conviction that what is right must preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the community of which man is a part.

If conservation is a point of view and the development of an ecological conscience, then what is involved is man's way of looking at the earth, his whole relationship, what he does to it and how he feels about what he has done. An ecological conscience implies a sense of guilt when he does something that destroys or befouls his living place, a feeling that because he has sinned against man and his right of enjoyment of the earth, it is ethically and morally wrong. Conservation then, is more than a point of view, it becomes part of our mores and way of life.

Most Americans have a blind spot when it comes to knowing what conservation means. They think it has only to do with parks and forests, with hunting and fishing, roadside beautification, planting trees or game birds, saving places for picnics and camping, and while these are part of it, actually it is involved with man's overall attitude toward the earth in an age where the ideal seems to be material progress and unlimited exploitation. They ignore the fact that the preservation of environment is the greatest challenge of our time, and that if we fail to meet it in our obsession with luxury and materialism, we will lose our cherished freedoms and the richness and beauty our homeland once had. Without a proper point of view and a realization of the crisis we face, the years ahead are bleak indeed.

Walter Orr Roberts, in speaking to the American Association for the Advancement of Science said:

"To me the true significance of the space age, this accelerating age of science and technology in which we now live, is that it is beginning to

lead us to wonder once again about the nature and the purpose of man, about what constitutes the good life and the good society. It is bringing philosophy once more to the center of the scene, making it as important as it ever was in the Golden Age of Greece."

Philosophers, historians, sociologists, and scientists are pondering the ecologic crisis with which we are faced, realizing that man no longer lives with nature as other creatures do, and he once did, but that he has become an exploitive power that now threatens his continuance as a species. In probing the reasons for western man's point of view toward the land, Lynn White, Jr., says:

"The victory of Christianity over paganism was the greatest psychic revolution in the history of our culture because then our daily habits of action became dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress through unlimited exploitation of the earth and its resources, an ideal unknown either to Greco-Roman antiquity or to the Orient.

"Man," he says, in speaking of the mandates in the Book of Genesis, "named all the animals, thus establishing his dominance over them. God planned all of this explicitly for man's benefit and rule; no item in physical creation had any purpose but to serve man's purposes. It was God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.

"In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its guardian spirit. Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge and to keep it placated. By destroying pagan animism, Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects. Man's effective monopoly on spirit in this world was confirmed and the old inhibitions crumpled.

"The whole concept of the sacred grove is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the west. For nearly two millenia Christian missionaries have been chopping down sacred groves which are idolatrous because they assume spirit in nature.

"What we do about ecology," he concludes, "depends on our idea of the man-nature relationship. *** We are not going to get out of our present ecologic crisis until we find a new religion or rethink our old one."

Such statements by those who are deeply concerned indicate a growing understanding of what is responsible for our attitude toward the environment. Increasingly, not only historians and philosophers, but scientists and leaders of industry are agreeing that science does not have all the answers, but that the final decisions lie in the realm of the humanities.

Dr. Julius A. Stratton, former President of M.I.T., said to a recent graduating class: "We are dedicated to science but if we expect technology to solve the ills of civilization, we are doomed to disillusionment. The solution lies in the field of the imponderables, the great unexplained truths and emotions that mean the good life and the happiness of a people."

And so it seems we have come full circle, and now after centuries of mistreating the earth, we are faced with an ultimatum we can no longer ignore or evade. Unless we stop the spreading blight over our country, purify our air, water, and soil, save the last remnants of natural beauty and wilderness, our future is uncertain. There is a slowly emerging realization that the application of technology is not the answer unless man's spiritual welfare is the major concern and that an ever burgeoning economy should achieve a balance with values that are more important to our welfare.

But even with such encouraging trends in thinking, the vast majority still hedge and evade the many problems, feeling as Americans always have that they can move if they wish, and somehow escape the penalty of abuse. The struggles still go on with the same old cliches and worn out headlines, industrial payrolls and dividends versus scenery, pure air and water -- food production versus wildlife -- highways and airports versus beauty and quiet.

Stewart Udall, former Secretary of Interior, wrote:

"Gross National Product is our Holy Grail: the economists and statisticians its keepers. Statistics concerning auto output, steel production, heavy construction, housing starts, freight car loadings, have become the indices of the American advance.

"We have no environmental index, no census statistics to measure whether the country is more or less livable from year to year.

"A tranquility index, a cleanliness index, a privacy index might have told us something about the condition of man, but a fast growing country bent on piling up material things has been indifferent to the little things that add joy to every day life.

"We have perfected the concept of the land's carrying capacity for animals, the principles of sustained yield in the management of trees and plants. Yet we abandon the idea of natural balance when we come to our own species. *** The time has come to evolve an ecology of man in harmony with the constantly unfolding ecologies of other living things. We need a science which will enhance the condition of man."

We know what we have done to our surroundings and are concerned, but we still refuse to listen, believing that through some legerdemain and our infinite capacity to build, manipulate, and improvise, we will be extricated from the morass we have created. At the same time there is a nebulous stirring in people's minds, a broad uneasiness that persists and hounds us even as we continue our pollution, tearing up the earth, and surging forward toward the millenium when our gross national product will be a thousand billion dollars. Man is becoming aware of his dilemma, but has no answer for it.

A hundred years ago, Henry David Thoreau said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world," and in this one prophetic statement gave the answer, for he saw portents of the future, and what he saw disturbed him.

The space age of today is a far cry from the elemental world he knew for we have opened up a veritable Pandora's Box of treasures and powers which have changed the pattern of human life. Scientific advance has brought nuclear energy, space exploration, satellites in orbit. Computers solve problems so complex, their meanings are beyond us. Medical science is controlling disease. We are exploring the secrets of life and chlorophyll, will soon be synthesizing food. We are probing ocean depths and the interior of the earth, moving so fast we are stunned and bemused.

From the standpoint of sociological development, the pace is equally swift; the springing into being almost overnight of new governments marking the end of colonialism. We have the United Nations, Common Market, World Health, Alliances for Progress, a multiplicity of international complexities unheard of a generation or two ago with the growth of a communications and transport system which is wiping out isolation. There is communism and neutralism, new ideologies and religious nostrums to take the place of ancient beliefs.

As if this were not enough to compound and confuse, there is the population explosion at an astronomical rate. The United States is no exception, and by the year 2000 it is estimated we may well have 350 to 400 million, double our present population, and the world at large, six billion people. While painfully aware of the implications, there is no end to the pyramiding of numbers and the resultant shrinkage of living space for human use. Soon there will be no more ground for expansion and humanity grows as fearful and distraught as other creatures when there is no longer any room.

A strange and violent world is ours, the great silences replaced by the roar of jet engines, our cities vibrating with noise and foul with gases and pollution. The smells of woods and fields and forests are replaced by those of combustion and industry, our senses bombarded with impressions man has never known before. Were it not for a racial consciousness steeped in a background that knew nothing of technology, we might make the adjustment more easily, but unfortunately, physiological and psychological adaptations take

aeons of time. Still too close to our beginnings to ignore them, and in spite of comforts and luxuries never known before, we are conscious of tensions and a sense of instability.

To think that only a hundred thousand years have elapsed since our emergence from the primitive, with vague beginnings running back a million years or more, it is not surprising we feel as we do. When we remember during all this time man's life was regulated by the seasons, the fears and challenges of the wilderness and total dependance on natural things, that only during the last ten thousand years did he leave evidence of any culture beyond the stone age, we realize how close we are to the past and how powerful our ancient ties to the earth.

In the past few decades, though we have almost succeeded in weaning ourselves physically from nature, we still have not severed our spiritual roots, and there I believe is the cause of our discontent. With growing urbanization, the change is coming more and more swiftly and we are now embarking on the greatest adventure and tragedy of all, exploring the universe while holding in our hands forces which threaten our survival.

Catapulted into such a dynamic and unfamiliar world, we are questioning our objectives and the meaning of our lives. We may seem urbane and sophisticated, but we are beset by longings we cannot satisfy, and search for quick panaceas to fill the growing void within us. In the light of the conditioning that has made us what we are is an almost universal urge to somehow align ourselves with those influences dominant for ages. We are still largely unaware that the solution may lie in a return to our ancient attitudes toward the earth.

Julian Huxley, in commenting on the needs of modern man, said:

"One function of the earth whose importance we have just begun to recognize is that of wilderness, the function of allowing men and women to get away from the complications of industrial civilization and make contact with scenery and unspoiled nature."

Here, perhaps, is a clue to our dilemma. The world has changed too swiftly for modern man, who, in spite of everything, still moves to ancient rhythms. When he steps out at night and looks at the moon, even though dimmed by smog and the lights of a city, he is doing what man has done since the dawn of the race. Man of the atomic age still listens to the song of the wilderness.

Last year a hundred million of us traveled to the national parks, and uncounted more millions took to the road over weekends and holidays until it must have seemed as though the whole population were on wheels. Going to the mountains, lakes, or seashores is evidence of the need to escape the

crowding megalopolis for the open countryside. It is an American phenomenon, this moving out, and it is based on a need only the out of doors and naturalness can satisfy.

Stanley Diamond, in commenting on modern man's need for escape from the cities, says:

"The longing for a primitive mode of existence is no mere fantasy or sentimental whim; it is consonant with fundamental human needs. *** The search for the utopia of the past projected into the future is paradise lost and paradise regained."

We know there is a crisis in the ecology of the land, know from personal experience that people must get away from cities in order to keep their sanity and perspective, that unless cities become more habitable, each will destroy itself and be abandoned. We know that environment means the total habitat of man, and that the solution to our problems lies in a new attitude toward the earth, a sense of stewardship rather than exploitation. We are beginning to see that ours is not only an ecologic crisis, but a moral one.

"Why," asks Harold Means, "is man's relation to nature a moral crisis? It is a moral crisis because it is a historical one involving man's history and culture, expressed at its roots by our religious and ethical views of nature.

"Perhaps," he suggests, "the persistence of this as a moral problem is illustrated in the protest of the contemporary generation of beats and hippies. Perhaps those who have turned to Zen Buddhism represent an overdue perception of the fact that we need to appreciate more fully the religious and moral dimensions of the relation between nature and the human spirit.

"It seems to me much more fruitful to think of nature as a system of human organization - as a variable, a changing condition which interacts with man and culture. If nature is so perceived, then a love, a sense of awe, and a feeling of empathy with nature need not degenerate into a subjective emotional bid for romantic individualism. In this sense, justification of technological arrogance toward nature on the basis of dividends or profits is not just bad economics - it is basically an immoral act. Our contemporary moral crisis then goes much deeper than questions of political power and law, of urban riots and slums. It may at least in part reflect American society's almost utter disregard for the value of nature."

Over the centuries a host of perceptive minds have believed that if man could only recognize his relationship to the earth and to the universe itself, he could become part of the order and reason that governs his existence, the movement of galaxies as well as the minutest divisions of matter.

Lewis Mumford reaffirmed this thought when he said:

"Man's biological survival is actually involved in cosmic processes and he prospers best when some sense of cosmic purpose attends his daily activities."

Life, as it is lived today, is a fragmentary sort of thing, and man often feels as impermanent and transitory as the things he has built. If he can grasp even an intimation of cosmic consciousness, he will know what the sages have been trying to tell mankind for ages. If we can believe the wise, then there is still hope for beauty in our native land, and if it is a spiritual resource, then there should be no question of its preservation.

But the fact remains there is an ecologic crisis, and that by the end of the century if it continues and we do nothing to reverse its impact, we may well destroy ourselves or have a world that is without happiness or richness. Even though we are beginning to understand that what is happening is the real reason for our unrest and dissatisfaction, there still looms the monumental task of doing something about it.

We **must** build so broad a base of understanding regarding conservation that the protection of our surroundings will be accepted by all. Only when people know that it is closely involved with our culture and spiritual welfare and its real dividends humanitarian, will they embrace its tenets and do what is necessary to restore what has been despoiled, and protect what is left. The most vital task for modern man is to bridge the enormous gap between the old way of life and its basic values and the new concepts of the age of technology.

Technology and the population increase is a two-pronged threat we must deal with before it is too late. None of us is naive enough to want to abandon what technology has wrought. We must make the adjustment between the old and the new, span the past and the present, and look at our habitat through the eyes of enlightened man. If we can begin to live in this modern world with the ancient dreams which have always stirred us, there is hope.

To change the thinking of a people is difficult. To take from them their Holy Grail of an expanding gross national product, and their blind devotion and faith in science and technology as a cure-all for their ills, will take wisdom and dedication. A people do not easily give up their acceptance of a way of life that is more comfortable and exciting than ever before in history. To make this change may be as difficult as asking man to tear from his psychosis his inheritance from the primitive.

Americans have a history of never moving unless confronted with disaster or a major crisis. We are now faced with one of greater proportions than we have ever known, and for the first time are concerned with what is taking place. There are hopeful signs in the general alarm over air and water pollution and the willingness to face the expenditure of billions of dollars to bring back beauty, cleanness and order to our country. But these are only indications; the population at large has other things to think about.

There are those who believe we can have our high technology, continue at the same pace of ruthless resource exploitation, and still preserve our world as habitable and pleasant for man. I doubt very much that this will be possible. The only alternative is to reverse our dominant attitude toward the earth, and in our use of it recognize that man is part of nature and all life, and that his happiness depends as it always has and always will on living in harmony with nature. If we can restore love and understanding of our environment, then we can look forward to the future with hope and confidence. If we can look out at our land with reverence, our great knowledge could mean an age of happiness and peace. This is the greatest task of man today, for unless we meet our ecologic crisis and solve its problems as thinking men, there will be nothing to plan for, no utopia, no paradise regained.

