

Thoreau and the Conservation

Ethic

A trait that Thoreau shared with primitive peoples generally and the American Indian in particular was his reverence for a life-giving earth. To the Indian game and crops were gifts bestowed by a beneficent Earth Mother. His emotional ties to the land that nurtured him were deep and strong.

This is not the occasion to detail the grievous history of the relationships of the native Americans and the pioneering and conquering white man--much of it remains unwritten or was written alone by the white man.

From the beginning the confrontation was based on hopelessly differing and conflicting attitudes. Completely alien to the Indian was the concept of private ownership of land. The land was to live with and in, to be shared with his fellow tribesmen. To cultivate and use up the land was the baffling idiom of the white.

In Walden Thoreau observed, "By avarice and selfishness, and groveling habit, from which none of us is free, of regarding the soil as property, or the means of acquiring property chiefly, the landscape is deformed, husbandry is degraded with us, and the farmer leads the meanest of lives. He knows Nature but as a robber."

It was much earlier in life, at age twenty as a Harvard graduate in Aug. 1837 that these words were written, "This curious world which we inhabit is more wonderful than it is convenient; ~~more beautiful than it is convenient~~; more beautiful than it is useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used. The order of things should be somewhat reversed; the seventh should be a man's day of toil, wherein to earn his living by the sweat of his brow; and the other six his Sabbath of the affections and the soul,--in which to range this widespread garden, and drink in the soft influence and sublime revelations of Nature."

This statement foreshadowed the pattern of his life with amazing clarity. His admiration and enjoyment of the world never ceased and the ordering of his time and needs allowed him the freedom to observe, think and write.

One fairly shudders at the increasing scope and complexity of the problems and frustrations that face the harried world of today. To which of its multitudinous demands and to which set of priorities would Thoreau have addressed himself?

Arbitrarily, I have chosen to relate my comments to certain aspects of the environment and to see if some reasonable parallels or insights can be drawn. And here only a few bases can be touched.

Today more than an avid birder armed with spyglass or binoculars is required to spot a fish hawk pursuing its prey over Walden. (Had Thoreau a Peterson in his pocket he would have called them ospreys--he learned the "hard way"). There simply aren't that many around.

Last year in all of California only one brown pelican chick was known to have hatched--one bird from 500 nests on Anacapa Island. Among those that laid eggs the shells were so thin that they folded on slight pressure. Some had only a chalky membrane. Laboratory tests revealed 2,500 parts per million (ppm) of DDE, the principal metabolite of DDT. A high price to pay for being top carnivore in the food chain.

Last year thirteen new species of wildlife were added to the Endangered Species list, bringing the total of those facing extinction to 102. Even more recently six species of whale have been added. The bald eagle, our national symbol, is recognized as endangered in 48 states.

The lethal inroads of toxic pesticides from the Arctic to the Antarctic are too well known to warrant further comment. Man is not immune from its ravages and when wildlife is endangered by a poisoned environment, so is man. Loss of wildlife is the "miner's canary" that signals trouble.

When Rachel Carson launched her landmark volume Silent Spring on Sept. 17th, 1962 she expressed her ecological anxieties in strongly Thoreauvian overtones, "We have already gone far in our abuse of this planet . . . Knowing the facts as I did, I could not rest until I had brought them to public attention."

The diminishment of much of our wildlife in terms of pesticides and habitat loss or deterioration is reflected on our environment on the broadest of fronts. Since the first storm warnings were raised a few first steps have been taken but the road back is not yet even in sight. Our air continues dirty, waters polluted and living space problems mount ^{with} population pressures.

When Thoreau observed that in "Wildness is the preservation of the World" he manifested a kind of conservation consciousness, an ecological prescience that even in this post-Earth Day is only inadequately recognized or appreciated.

This concept of "Wildness" admits of no easy or precise definition but essentially it recognized the operational presence or principle that in the grand complex of living things also brought man into being. It is a life force that preceded man in his self-assumed role as conqueror and destroyer and which will continue to function long after his despoliation has taken its course. Whatever plans man may devise for his continued

occupancy or survival on this planet this "Wildness" will observe its transcendancy. It attributes to man no special margin of safety because of goods--materials or materiel.

Long before the acquisition of wild or parklands for public use or enjoyment Thoreau had written in his Journal, "Each town should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of 500 or a 1000 acres, where a stick should never be cut for fuel, a common possession forever, for instruction and recreation."

He further suggested, "As some give to Harvard College or another institution, why not another give a forest or huckleberry-field to Concord?"

Certainly some of the aims and achievements of the various land trusts and conservation commissions in this Commonwealth and elsewhere during recent decades are found in Thoreau's suggestion that "It would be worth the while if in each town there were a committee appointed to see that the beauty of the town received no detriment. If we have the largest boulder in the county, then it should not belong to an individual, nor made into door-steps."

All too frequently when an area of land, a forest, park or swamp, has become public domain it turns out to little more than a stay of execution before the "improvers" begin to move in and emasculate. Under the guise of multiple use, accessibility, pertinent facilities or "progress" the roads, dams or other rights to exploit make a mockery of the area's most unique and essential values.

We are provided with one of Thoreau's most revealing insights when he says in Walden, "At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild, unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, (oil-spills) the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud and the rain which lasts three weeks and produces freshets." He concludes, "We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander."

~~All too often when an open space or natural area~~
 how often has not a natural area originally set apart to permit some life to "pasture freely" had its greatest charm and value nullified under the ruse of accessibility. From personal experience there comes to my mind an area in New York State not far from Rochester--Bergen Swamp. Here lies an area uniquely rich in plant and animal life and what in

large part keeps it that way, open to the public as it is, is a kind of natural filter effect gratuitously provided by a combination of mosquitoes, poison sumac and Massasaugus rattlers. These natural elements serve most effectively to screen out any excessive numbers of bipeds that might otherwise place in jeopardy the lovely white lady's slipper, the Muhlenberg turtle and the little coal black skink. I would only hope that the mosquitoes continue to be friendly, that the leaves and berries still hang from the branches of the sumac and that the Massasaugus rattler basks on the sphagnum hummocks in Bergen Swamp.

Certainly the claims to diversity among all humans must be recognized and areas must be identified for their most appropriate use but far too often has the non-vocal wildlife or the things naturally beautiful been pushed back. Distinction between areas that are best adapted for recreational use and those which preserve something of nature herself must be sharply drawn and observed.

Any realistic appraisal of the deterioration of our environment and directions that must be taken rests most broadly on the interaction of population and technology. Disregarding some purely natural factors that are sometimes placed under the umbrella of pollution the basic point of departure is a sober recognition of the fact that people pollute--you and I--we who drove to get here, ate our breakfast, washed our hands and performed the amenities associated with our way of life.

The real crunch develops when the demands of our advancing technology collide with a surging population and a blind obeisance to the economics of a G.N.P. undergirds it all.

Let it be put in this fashion: every 8 seconds an American baby bawls his way into the world. Before that baby bows out at the expiration of his allotted three score and ten he will have consumed 14,000 qts. of milk, 10,000 lbs. of meat, burned up 21,000 gal. of gasoline and used 26 million gal. of water. As a kind of footnote it might be noted that according to a 1967 motor fuel consumption estimate the average American uses 250 times more than the average Indian.

The price tag for crawling out from under our mountain of garbage--100 million tires, 20 million tons of paper, 28 billion cans and 48 billion bottles--this breed of G.N.P.--gross national pollution--is a cool 2.8 B.

The preemption of natural resources on the part of a technologically-oriented society is stridently greater than that of an "under-developed" country. Although Americans constitute less than 6% of the total world

population we consume about 50% of the world's vital (non-renewable) minerals. Even less sedating is the estimate that this same transistorized, televised and air-conditioned 6% uses 40% of the world's overall resources and, concomitantly, accounts for 30% of its pollution. Our mania for comforts, conveniences and consumer goods is aptly identified in Thoreau's comment in the Week: "Only make something to take the place of something, and men will behave as if it was the very thing they wanted."

Perhaps at the risk of somewhat oversimplifying let me put the matter this way. Whatever the area in question--an acre of woodland, a fresh water pond, a piece of ocean--the forces that sustain it can accommodate just so many organisms within it and in necessary and successful competition with each other--interacting and interdependent. Any overly complete domination by one form at the expense of another is self-defeating. Imbalance is intolerable and although individual battles may be won or lost there can be no permanent victories. The pyramid can be no higher than it is broad.

There can be no reason for believing that man's presence on this planet and his relations with other life upon it is subject to a different set of rules. If we needed to make a detour of approximately a quarter of a million miles to discover that this earth is indeed our habitat with its fragile and finite resources that can be no small reward. Individual freedom and diversity certainly fall within the ~~pr~~view of our habitation but the unabated flaunting and ravaging of earth's resources invites the kind of "shock" and recriminatory reaction that follows upon the abuse or overloading of any habitat.

It must be noted that all too frequently there are times when our humanitarian ideals as they apply to people--and sometimes wildlife--are in conflict with the recognized carrying capacity of any given habitat. When hunger and disease press in upon people in the wake of a despoiled environment we are prone to apply the short term benefits of food and medical assistance--ignoring the limitations or lethal conditions of the land itself.

The luxury of time is no longer ours and the population question is one that must be decided now. It is one that the individual must resolve not in terms of how many children he can afford but whether an affluent America can afford it.

Any efforts to upgrade the living standards of the poor countries of the world to anything approaching U.S. standards, apart from any moral convictions, contravenes the most basic of ecological principles and

implants the seeds of accelerating environmental disaster.

The Green Revolutionists--those who would bring modern agricultural technology to the poor countries--are at best buying a few years of time. New cereal varieties, power tools, massive application of pesticides and fertilizers are the methods by which they would avert widespread famine. Even if the very complex problems of adjusting to this kind of an economy could be met the hazards of an agriculture premised on such controls are self-defeating. Any gains achieved in one facet of the economy, be it grains or rice, will be more than offset by pollution effects on a much broader ecosystem. The degradation of our fresh water lakes, rivers and streams from the chemicals and fertilizers of our own agricultural-industrial complex is adequately documented.

Perhaps there might be entertained the optimistic view that the genius of a modern technology might be able to correct the imbalance of a world one-third sated and two-thirds starved if the world's population were stabilized at its present level of 3.6 billion people. Even if this were possible it rests on the very insubstantial supposition that a developed society will stabilize its wants and desires for ~~ever~~ more of the world's goods. We are in a poor position to pontificate on this point. Our growth rate of one per cent, estimates show, is outstripped by a technological growth of 4-5 percent and in such pattern we increase our demand for electrical power, raise the noise levels and the height of our trash--and add pollutants to air and water.

When Thoreau walked the sands of Cape Cod in 1850, his second visit there, the world population after more than a million years, reached its first billion. Today the best estimate is 3.6 billion. The projections are for 7 billion by the year 2000. If that ~~time~~ span seems distant perhaps there are some charter members of this organization who may recall the first meeting of the Society in Oct. 1941, 29 years ago.

One of the most alarming of recent threats to the environment comes from the Four Corners area of Colorado, Utah, New Mexico and Arizona. Here the Southwest Power Development proposes to build a complex of 26 utilities generating 36 million kilowatts of electricity and serving (what a gratuitous way of putting it) the cities of Phoenix, Tucson, Las Vegas, San Diego and Los Angeles. First plant of the system, operating since 1964, is located on the Navajo Reservation near Mesa Verde. Its reported daily particulate emission (soot, if you will) is in excess of that coming from all sources in N.Y.C. and Los Angeles combined.

When all six plants are ready to "serve" the resulting tonnage of fly ash and sulfur and nitrogen oxides will hang a curtain of smog over Grand Canyon and 5 other national parks, 3 national recreation areas, 28 national monuments and some important Indian reservations. Since coal is the energy source huge areas of land will be strip mined. In a Gemini 12 photograph taken at an altitude of 170 miles smoke from the first of 6 plants was the only visible activity of man.

Desecration of this magnitude sounds more like a horror tale out of a science-fiction paperback and one gropes for a vestige of sanity in a world that only yesterday had vowed to make ecology and conservation and environment the shibboleth of the seventies.

Would it be inappropriate to ask why utilities are so wont to spend many millions for advertising and promotion and so disproportionately little for research and development--especially when so many customers are already waiting to be served? Or if the power outages and shortages are all that serious wouldn't it curb wastage of power if the rate structures were reversed, making big users pay more, not less?

Or would it be impolite to ask of ourselves--did we really need that last electrical appliance we bought, than can opener, tooth-brush or blender? And the last time the temperatures soared into the 90's did we rush to Lechmere's to purchase an air conditioner?

Or are we all so geared to "progress" that "to simplify" is ante-diluvian--or regressive?

Or finally, would it be too much of a shock to share ~~WIKI~~ this bit from the opening chapter of Walden?

"A lady once offered me a mat, but as I had no room to spare within the house, nor time to spare within or without to shake it, I declined it, preferring to wipe my feet on the sod before my door."

Indeed, our tenure on this planet is determined by the inflexible priorities that shaped it and ourselves and whose finite resources we are privileged to share. The shape of our tomorrow will be determined by the sacrifices we are prepared to make today.

"All things by immortal power,
Near or far,
Hiddenly to each other linked are,
Thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star."