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The True Conservationist

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

WITHIN the short space of two generations, conservation has become popular. It receives growing publicity, is much in the public eye, is beginning to claim the allegiance of wealth and power. Accordingly, it faces the dangers peculiar to a successful cause. Half a century ago, when conservationists were few and fought a seemingly hopeless battle against powerful financial interests, greed, and popular apathy, they could at least be sure of the sincerity of those who fought under their banner. No one was likely to become an active conservationist for the material advantages it would bring him. Today, when conservation is supported by strong organizations and can offer lucrative posts, its ranks are in danger of being weakened by . . .

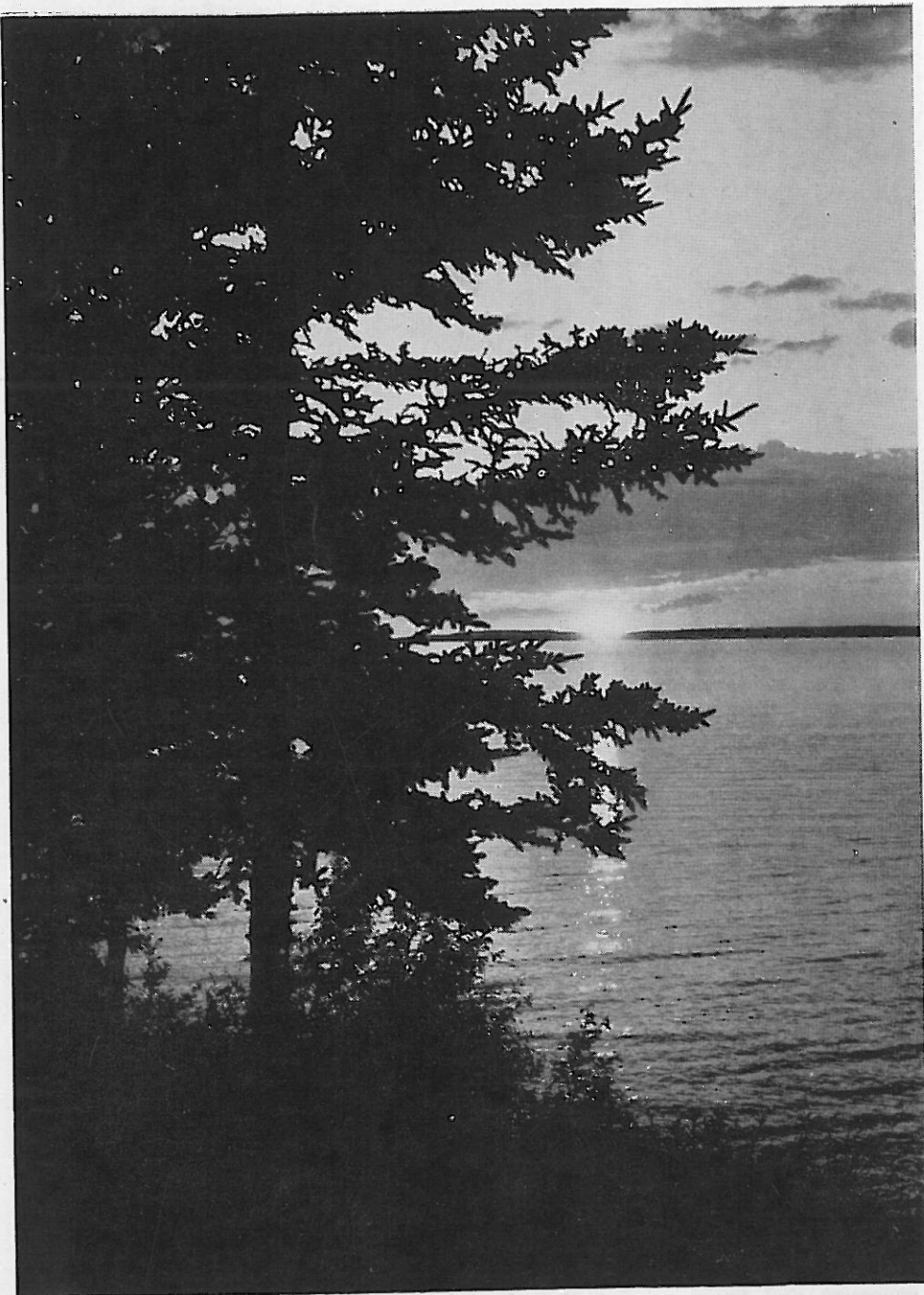
" . . . such as for their bellies sake

Creep and intrude, and climb into the fold."

As the first enthusiasm hardens into organization, spiritual dedication tends to cool into mere intellectual assent, while method takes the place of zeal. Such has been the history of every religion. In our own case, there is a perilous tendency to regard conservation as a matter of technology, of hiring specialists to discover

facts about Nature, and others to carry out their recommendations, rather than a peculiar attitude toward the natural world and a way of living. That is, it is infected with that blindness so widespread in our age, which believes that external arrangements can become an adequate substitute for internal soundness, governmental regulations for personal competence. It is led astray by the tragic fallacy that we can create a Utopia by remaking the physical world without first transforming ourselves; that we can improve society without regenerating men individually.

True conservation is above all an attitude of mind, and a way of life. It is living in intense awareness that the world is a vast community of living things, whose potentialities are not exhausted by our individual enjoyments, or even by those of the whole of mankind. The true conservationist regards science and technology as at best a useful instrument, which like any tool may be worthless, or even dangerous, except in the hands of one who knows how to apply it to worthy ends. And these ends are determined by the character and aims of the user. The correct application of our understanding of natural processes, of our ability to influence



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them, depends upon our qualities of mind and heart. What, then, are the attributes of the true conservationist, which make him the safe repository of power to control events in the natural world? We can distinguish at least nine such attributes.

Gratitude — The true conservationist is grateful to the natural world as the foundation of life, health, prosperity, and of all that makes life pleasant to him. He is thankful not only for the means of bodily existence, but for endless beauty, inexhaustible occupation for the intellect, and a setting wherein he can find tranquillity of spirit.

Love — Out of gratitude grows love. The true conservationist loves the natural world for its endless bountifulness to himself and those dear to him. But mere usefulness to ourselves is not an adequate ground for love. A tool or a piece of machinery, as an automobile, may be useful to us, but we do not truly love it, because all the qualities for which we value it can be exhausted through its service to us, then we throw it away. That is truly lovable which, however much it may serve or gratify us, can not thereby exhaust those qualities which endear it to us; as a mother, however much affection she may bestow upon a child, does not thereby destroy her capacity for devotion. Love is bestowed upon an object which serves or delights us, yet transcends our grasp. This is preeminently a characteristic of the natural world. The true conservationist loves not only Nature as an aggregate, but each living thing individually, because of its essential likeness to himself.

Compassion — From love springs compassion. The true conservationist is compassionate to all living beings, refraining from wantonly injuring them, and helping them to live by preserving conditions favorable to them.

Generosity — Because he is aware that he is only one living being among countless others, because he loves other beings

and feels compassion for them, the true conservationist is generous. He wishes others to enjoy the blessings that Nature provides, not only the material means of subsistence, but all those other treasures of beauty and knowledge which the natural world offers to those capable of appreciating them. He wishes to share these goods not only with all beings now living, but with all future generations.

Frugality — In a world such as ours, a truly generous man will be frugal, because he is fully aware that under no possible economy can Nature provide enough of the means of subsistence to satisfy the needs of all those

creatures that are born into it. He will not waste food, nor consume carelessly any of the products of the earth, for when he does this some other creature goes hungry. Remembering that all that he eats, all except plain water that he drinks, practically everything he wears, and indeed every organic product that he procures, represents so much of the limited productive capacity of the earth diverted from other claimants to himself, he will use no more of them than is necessary to maintain health. This economy extends only to material things and need not touch the life of the mind or spirit, for it is the peculiarity of spiritual goods that they are never exhausted by use. Whereas the food I eat can nourish only myself, I do not by enjoying the beauty of a natural object diminish its capacity for yielding like enjoyment to countless others.

Foresight — In his dealings with the natural world, the true conservationist is foresighted. He looks not merely to the immediate results of his activities, but how they will affect his own welfare in future years, and that of generations yet unborn.

Fortitude — The true conservationist is courageous. Because the maxims that guide his conduct are derived from sound understanding of natural processes and basic ethical principles, he will not be driven from his course by the threats or the ridicule of the ignorant, the selfish, and the greedy.

Humility — The true conservationist realizes that Nature is too vast and manifold ever to be completely understood by him, and makes no absurd claim to exhaustive knowledge of natural processes. Accordingly he hesitates to meddle with them, for the outcome of his shortsighted interference may be far other than he expects. On another side, his humility is such that he makes no arrogant claims of the absolute superiority of his own kind over all other kinds of life. He does not in blind boastfulness assert that mankind is the one end of creation, or the single branch of the animal kingdom through which evolution can continue indefinitely toward a glorious future. His humility leads him to sus-



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pect that the universe enfolds numberless potentialities of which he is ignorant, and that there may be whole realms of value of which he is unaware.

Reverence — The natural world is the visible expression of a creative force that far surpasses our understanding. Although it contains much of the pain, discord and frustration which we call evil, it holds also a vast amount of the joy, love, beauty and harmony that we intuitively recognize as good. This good seems to be the manifestation of a beneficent Power, which we can not contemplate without a feeling of reverence. From the Source, this sentiment is reflected back upon all its creatures, which the true conservationist regards with reverence. He has “reverence for life.”

Finally, it may be noted that the attributes we have ascribed to the true conservationist are in general moral and religious virtues, or that these several attributes

closely approximate them. Gratitude is by nearly all men considered an essential component of a noble character, while ingratitude is looked upon as base and mean. Christianity emphasizes love, Buddhism compassion, while generosity is another word for the charity, which every great modern religion enjoins. Frugality is almost synonymous with temperance, a cardinal virtue in every important system of religion or ethics, including even that of Epicurus. It suggests that freedom from sensual excesses, that moderation in eating, drinking and dressing, which is the indispensable accompaniment of an exalted spiritual life. Foresight is an extension of prudence, which has been defined as that equal regard for all parts of our expected existence which prevents the sacrifice of the future to immediate advantages. But it goes beyond prudence in suggesting regard for a future that stretches far beyond one's own earthly span, and in safeguarding the rights of this future with scientific knowledge no less than moral restraint. Humility and reverence are primary religious attributes; to be haughty and irreverent is incompatible with piety.

It is because of this close correspondence between the qualities that make a true conservationist and the virtues inculcated by religion, that religion has through

the ages exerted a powerful and on-the whole beneficent influence upon man's treatment of the natural world — a fact which we are apt to forget. The earlier primitive religions were everywhere largely concerned with preserving the natural foundations of tribal prosperity, hence deprecated wanton destruction of animal and vegetable life. Not only did they predict dire supernatural retribution for the wanton slaughter of creatures used as food, in some instances they prescribed severe penalties to be inflicted upon those who needlessly destroyed trees or animals. Oriental religions, by insisting upon the sanctity of all life, have played a part in the conservation of Nature which we in the West can scarcely conceive. Our Western religions have not been so favorable to the cause of conservation, yet if we lived in stricter accordance with the principles of their greatest prophets, all of us would be better conservationists, and better practitioners of our religious beliefs.

Neither these attributes of a true conservationist alone, nor knowledge of Nature alone, will make us good and effective conservationists. But when we unite the correct mental attitude with true understanding of natural processes, we become conservationists in the best sense of the word.