this planet was preparing for him

earth and man

By
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FOR millions of years before man appeared upon the earth in something like his present form, this planet was preparing for him. Not only was it attaining the capacity to supply his complex physical needs; it was also becoming a place to stimulate his developing mind. Through beauty in a myriad forms it was fostering the growth of his esthetic capacities, making him a creature that could respond warmly to the subtle influences about him, wonder at the significance of the constantly changing scene in which he found himself, and worship the unseen forces which he surmised must underlie what he saw. This twofold preparation of the earth as a fit environment for human life, as we know it, is all too often overlooked. It need not necessarily have been so. A vat full of juice of the sugarcane forms an excellent medium for the multiplication of yeast plants while providing nothing for their possible esthetic development. The true conservationist can never afford to forget the earth's twofold fitness for the life of man.

A short while ago, as the geologist counts time, man began to alter his environment. Possibly he started this process while still in the hunting or pastoral stage, burning the bush and the grasslands to drive out the animals on which he preyed, or to improve the pasturage for his herds. But alterations on a large scale could hardly have begun until man became an agriculturist and set about to destroy the forest and clear land for his crops. At first this activity was beneficial to himself in numerous ways, and not altogether harmful to other creatures. In regions which

had been covered by a scarcely broken mantle of forest he diversified the landscape. He created pleasant meadows and broad open fields that revealed the swelling contours of the earth, providing a wider and more varied outlook than the forest-dweller enjoys, and incidentally giving rise to conditions that attracted many plants and animals of open country which could get no foothold in the woodland. At the same time, plenty of forest remained—it seemed there would never be an end of it.

This diversification of environment had results of the utmost importance to our ancestors. When agriculture gave them a dependable supply of food from year to year they could dwell permanently in one spot, erect more commodious dwellings, accumulate wealth, and enjoy leisure with which to study and develop the creative arts. The more varied landscape stimulated the esthetic faculties and enriched the experience of individual men. Pastoral poetry, our first appreciative nature literature, began to flourish. But men still feared the rugged mountains and the great unbroken forests where many formidable large animals continued to roam. The sea, which they could cross only in frail vessels at the mercy of the winds and waves, filled with dread all but the stoutest hearts.

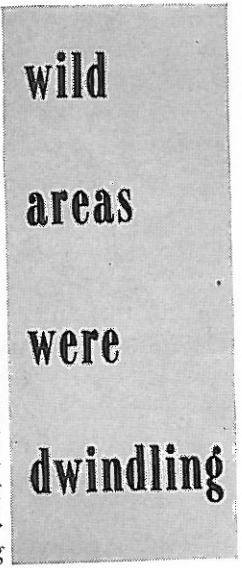
Year after year men continued to destroy the forest and subjugate the wilderness to their own uses. Long ago this process had gone so far in certain limited areas, such as Mesopotamia and the Mayan area of northern Central America, that no more readily accessible wild land remained to be brought under cultivation. Through long-continued overwork the croplands deteriorated in productive capacity until they no longer repaid the farmer's toil; then the district was abandoned by those who had ruined it. Their proud cities fell into decay, were covered by drifted sand, or where the rainfall was higher, were overgrown by forest. But it was only after the development of the steam-engine, hardly a hundred and fifty years ago, that the destruction of the wilderness speeded up over the entire world. It was scarcely more than fifty years ago that even thoughful men awakened to what was happening.

a new attitude toward wild nature

Meanwhile there had grown up, largely during the late Eighteenth and the Nineteenth Centuries, a new attitude toward wild nature, unlike anything that had existed in Ancient or Medieval times. Men discovered first that the unsubdued places of the earth—mountains and great forests and deserts and the high seas—were by no means so inimical to human life as their ancestors had imagined them to be. Some of the dangers which had been ascribed to them proved to be wholly mythical and illusory; others, although real, had been exaggerated; still others, such as hostile savages and fierce carnivorous animals, were becoming rarer; those threats to life which remained, lost their terrors with increasing skill in woodcraft and mountaineering, improved equipment, and the advances of preventive medicine. After men began to feel at ease in the wilderness, they discovered there many things that their ancestors, who had entered the wild places either

timidly or else greedily in search of material wealth, had largely overlooked. They found ineffable beauty, strange and unsuspected peace, a myriad circumstances to awaken the intellect, exalt the spirit, and bring man's soul into closer communion with the unknown power that had brought so much grandeur and loveliness into being.

When men began to analyze their impressions, to ask themselves in what this strange spell that wild places held over them consisted, they found the situation exceedingly complex. It depended in the first place upon the multitude and diversity of the living creatures that surrounded them. The centuries-old tree with its towering trunk and massive boughs was no more essential than the delicate herb with its frail ephemeral flowers and the green moss that carpeted the rocks. The deer and the bear added much to the mysterious delight of the woodland, but no more than the shy bird with its gay plumage and ringing song and the saucy squirrel that scolded from the bough overhead. The butterfly with its brightly painted satiny wings contributed its mite to the total impression, but so did the spider with its tediously spun unsubstantial web and the millipeds that lurked in the decaying fallen log. Thoughtful people discovered that much as any one of these diverse organisms offered for study and contemplation, it gained immeasurably in interest when considered in relation to all the other organisms, both animal and vegetable that surrounded and interacted with it. A wilderness was more than a combination of a botanical garden and a zoological garden, or than a museum containing the same variety of specimens carefully preserved and labeled. And its value was immeasurably enhanced by the tumbling stream of sparkling water that diffused its loud murmur through the woodland glades, the rugged peak glimpsed here and there through an opening in the high leafy canopy, the pervading fragrance of flower and leaf, the serene silence which formed the background for all the woodland sounds.



About the same time that a handful of appreciative men became convinced of the inestimable worth of these things, they discovered with a start that what men had so recently learned to value was in a fair way to be taken from them. Already in North America the wild areas were dwindling at an alarming rate. In some of the Eastern States it was difficult to find a trace of the forest which had originally covered them—in three centuries men had destroyed the most extensive and magnificent deciduous temperate-zone forest in the world, without thinking it worth their while to leave here and there a few remnants in their pristine state for contemplation and admiration by their posterity. And of the living creatures that had contributed so much to the interest and animation of the wild places of our continent, the passenger pigeon, the great auk and the Carolina paroquet were gone beyond recall; the bison, the ivory-billed woodpecker and the whooping crane seemed on the verge of extinction.

Now, after half a century of devoted labors by conservationists, we have come a long way and accomplished much. Yet, it is sad to reflect how far we have failed to make our aims and values current with the larger public, with which the success or failure of all our efforts to conserve must ultimately rest. Men continue now as ever—perhaps, be it said to our shame, now *more* than ever—to be absorbed with

themselves and the little gods created in their own image, forgetful of the larger things around them, the manifestations of that greater power which also created them. When during the first World War the Germans seriously damaged Reims cathedral by gunfire, indignation was general throughout the civilized world, and by no means restricted to that sect to whose rites the edifice was dedicated. This indignation was right and proper, for a medieval cathedral is an edifice so nobly conceived and so grandly proportioned that no sensitive man of whatever creed or philosophy, can stand long in contemplation of it without experiencing reverential feelings and an exalted sense of the nobility of the human soul.

But when the public hears that lumbermen and others are clamoring to take from it and convert into boards one of the noblest forests on the face of the earth, it is left strangely unmoved. Instead of one general cry of indignation that resounds from the nation to which the forest belongs as public property—a cry so loud and unequivocal that the would-be exploiters slink away in silence and in shame—we hear only here and there a courageous voice lifted in defense of the forest. But the forest was not, like a cathedral, raised by the hands of men in a few centuries. It is a far vaster and nobler edifice, created slowly through many thousands of years by the same forces that "spread out the heavens and established the earth." With modern methods it is probably not impossible to make a very fair replica of a medieval cathedral in a few decades. But a thousand patient years would not suffice to nurse back so noble a forest, once devastated, to its pristine splendor. In any man whose soul is not atrophied, who preserves a trace of "natural piety," the forest inspires the same sentiments of reverence, of wonder, of ecstacy and devotion, as the cathedral—to some of us it inspires them in a far higher degree. Because it is dedicated to no particular cult, it is a temple where all men, of whatever philsophy or creed, can join in equal worship of the unknown forces of which it is a manifestation. To the alert intelligence it poses a hundred questions, of greater depth and wider scope than those suggested by the more transient edifice raised by the hand of man. As a work of art, its patterns are more diversified, its tracery more delicate; its multitudinous choir sings in more varied tones.

patient years would not suffice

It is my faith that when we respond appreciatively to the grandeur and beauty of nature, we enter into closest communion with the unknown power of which it is an expression. We understand, spiritually, only things which have attributes in common with ourselves; and I believe that if men are at all capable of apprehending that which lies behind phenomena, it is in their own most godlike aspect, that of the creative artist. The artist worthy of the name, be he painter or sculptor, musician or poet, does not seek personal adulation or fulsome praise; his greatest reward is the certitude that those who see or hear his work are inspired and uplifted by it, that through it they are led to feel more deeply, think more truly and profoundly. May it not be the same with the Artist who set the planets in their courses and created life? But if men do not soon halt their work of destruction, they will leave undefiled none of that Artist's masterpieces this side of the moon.

If then, we are to conserve our resources and thus prolong our lives upon this earth, we must base our conservation philosophy upon our planet's twofold fitness for human life. We must maintain its ability to supply our complex physical needs and, at the same time, keep earth's beauty for the growth of our esthetic capacities.