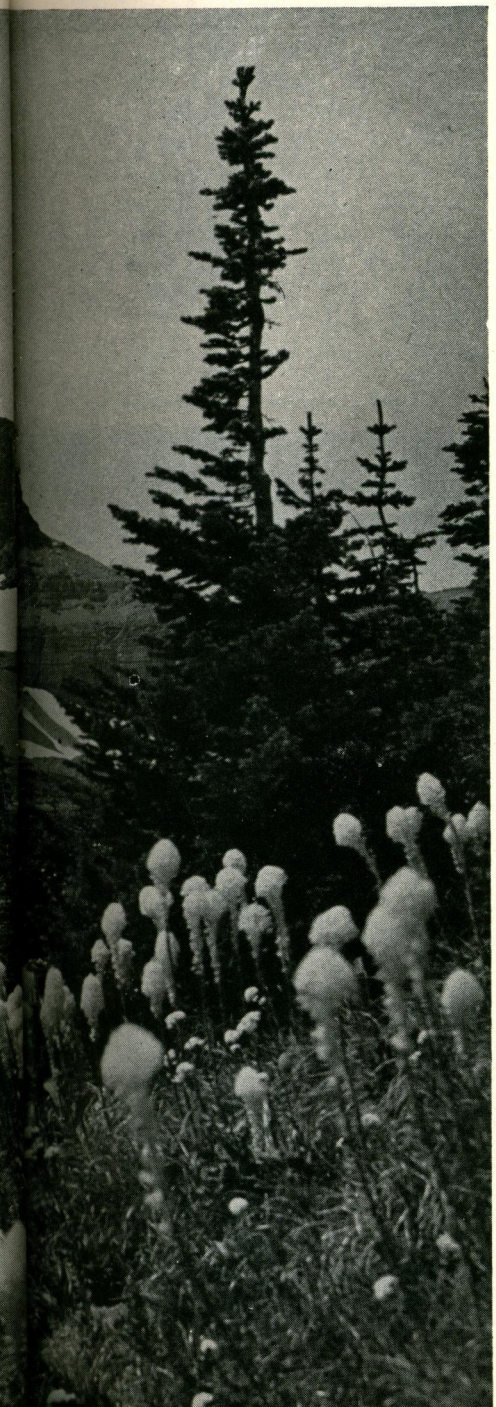
# A Conservationist's Philosophy



**For 50 years this philosophy has been in the making. But ACTION must go hand in hand with the search for timeless truths— for the value of a philosophy of conservation depends upon the existence of something worth conserving.**

**By Alexander F. Skutch**

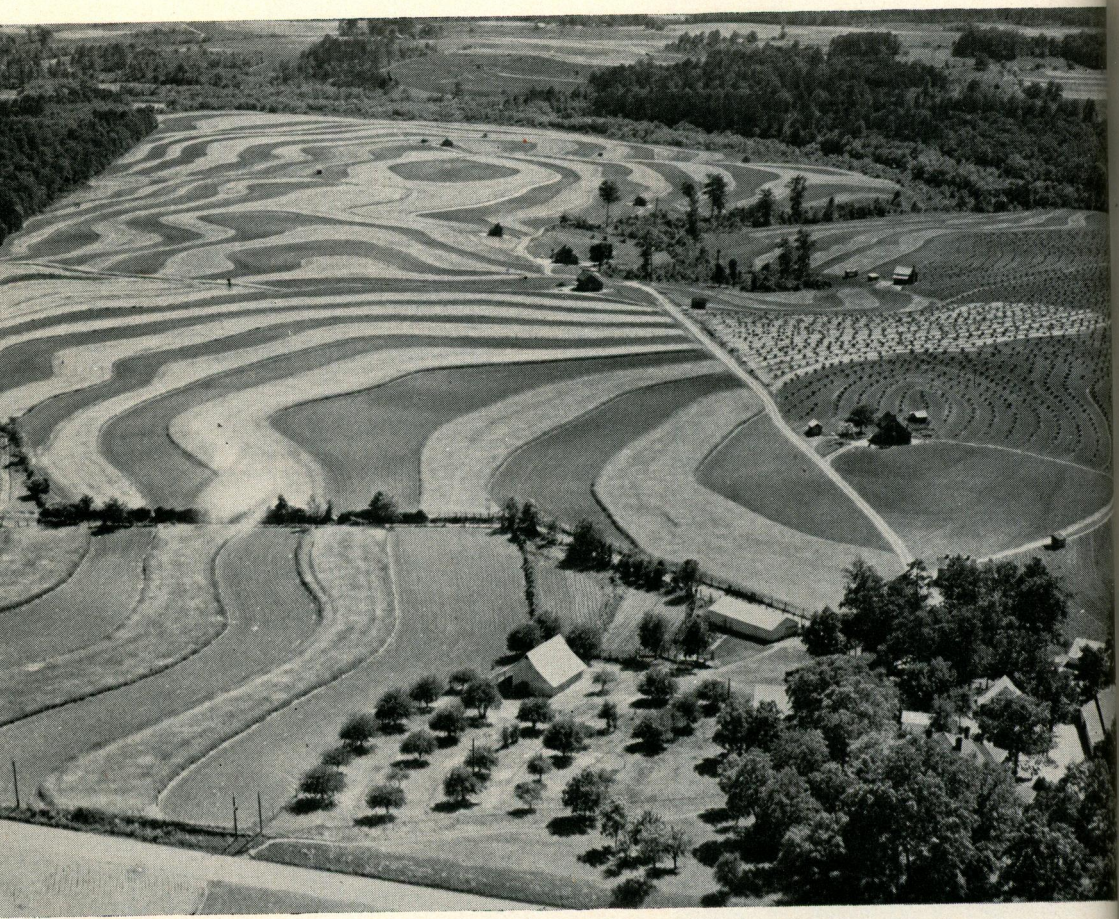
THE first point in the philosophy of the conservationist, especially if he is also a naturalist, is the desirability of preserving for ourselves and our posterity, in their original and unaltered state and amid their natural setting, unique natural objects including mountains, waterfalls, glaciers, caves and unusual geological formations; liberal samples of each type of vegetation, as deciduous and coniferous forests, grassland and alpine meadow, in its most highly developed form; and of every kind of animal and plant, save noxious parasites and dangerous pathogenes, a population sufficiently numerous and well situated

to be exempt from the threat of extermination. He believes that the spiritual and intellectual values to be derived from these things will amply repay the cost of preserving them. Historically, the attempt to preserve representative samples of the wilderness and its life marks the beginning of the conservation movement in America. It is also the most usual point of departure of the novice in conservation.

But the seasoned conservationist will not forget that the fitness of the earth for human life is twofold; it supplies the means of man's subsistence as well as the values that make his life worth living. Men have always tended to exploit the natural wealth at their disposal without giving much thought to the future. The conservationist is well aware that unless people are fairly well fed, clothed and housed they will have little time or inclination to consider the grandeur and beauty of nature. A hungry man is too preoccupied with thoughts of food, a cold man with the means of obtaining warm clothing and adequate shelter, to care whether a distant mountain peak is set apart as a national monument. If preserved forests are on land capable of producing a few grains of wheat or a couple of potatoes, a starving population will soon be clamoring to have them opened to agriculture; if the people lack materials for building dwellings, they will wish the trees to be turned into lumber.

Thus the second point in the con-

*Photograph by Soil Conservation Service.*



servationist's philosophy is the preservation of the means of subsistence. In addition to altruistic consideration of the needs of his neighbors and of future generations, he is fully aware that his success in preserving natural objects whose value is chiefly esthetic or intellectual will depend largely upon keeping the population of his country well supplied with their prime necessities. Accordingly he will interest himself in conserving the productivity of the land and the purity of the waters, in seeing that only renewable timber is cut and that mining is carried on by economical procedures. He will always prefer systems of exploitation which use only current increments to those that exhaust wealth, in whatever form, that has been slowly accumulated through the ages.

The third point in the conservationist's philosophy is the unity of conservation. There are not many kinds of conservation; there is only conservation and the lack of it. This is because nature is not a series of isolated systems, but a

**We must interest ourselves in conserving the productivity of the land and the purity of the waters and in seeing that only renewable timber is cut.**

single vastly complex community of many interacting organisms, including man himself and all the animals and plants that surround him. We either preserve this community and its environment in good health or we allow it to

*Photograph of white pine forest by U.S. Forest Service.*

become diseased and out of balance. One man may be interested in conserving the fertility of the farmlands, another in protecting birds, a third in saving trees; but unless they and others of many different primary interests unite in supporting a well-rounded program of conservation, it is likely that each in the long run will be unsuccessful in his partial aims. Similarly the unity of conservation transcends national boundaries. Rivers that flow, winds that carry rain, birds that migrate, all pass from country to country; and good practices under one government may be nullified by evil practices under another. And in our present economically interlocked world, shortages of primary materials in one continent often react unfavorably upon the conservation policies of another.

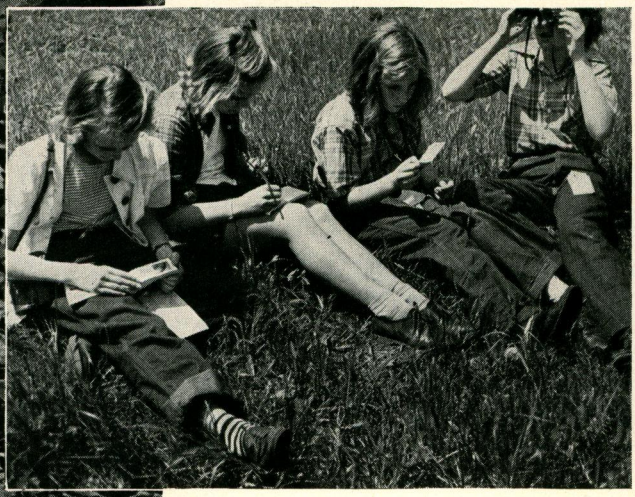
Hence the conservationist must have great breadth of vision, and some knowledge of the principal branches of plant and animal life. I heard it said of a well-known ornithologist—doubtless with some exaggeration—that he could not tell a daisy from a dandelion. In many fields of scientific investigation the narrow specialist may go far, achieve eminence and contribute knowledge of fundamental importance. But the situation is different with the conservationist, for he deals, not with some organism isolated in the laboratory or museum, but with living things under natural conditions, where animal is dependent upon plant and plant upon soil and soil upon weather, which in turn affects the animal directly—where in fact the welfare of everything is somehow bound up with everything else. Under such conditions no narrow specialization is permissible.

Similarly the conservationist must be as impartial as nature herself. He cannot play favorites. He may like the deer and wish to defend them from predatory carnivores, but if he meddles too much the deer may overpopulate their range and perish by starvation more lamentably than if suddenly struck down by the puma or jaguar. It is not unnatural for him to prefer the small birds—sprightly, bright in plumage, sweet in song, harmless to their neighbors—to the cruel-taloned and, by comparison, stolid and sullen birds of prey. But if he destroys the latter indiscriminately he may be confounded by grave unbalances in the natural community which react most unfavorably on the very creatures he wishes to protect. At most our intervention may tilt the balance slightly in favor of one organism or another; and we must be exceedingly cautious lest we overtilt it.

We cannot even favor man himself without considering him a part of a larger biotic community. This is a conclusion that men in their foolish pride will long and stubbornly resist, but there will be no fundamentally sound conservation until we accept it. Medical science in its modern form grew up largely in western Europe and North America. Almost immediately it increased man's length of life. But in these regions the same social and economic forces which favored the development of medicine resulted in a decline in birth-rate. This tended to compensate the decreased mortality and prevent an excessively rapid increase in population.

But take, for example, the impact of modern medicine upon countries where it was previously lacking. It was quite different when modern medicine and sanitation were introduced—in part by missionaries and visiting commissions as a sort of human conservation service, in part by native doctors who went to study abroad. The result has been a decline in the mortality-rate—not to the same low figures that prevail in the North, but still considerable—uncompensated by a falling birth-rate. This is kept high partly by religious teachings, partly by lack of the same social and economic pressure that resulted in its decline in the North. Hence overpopulation, deforestation, overcultivation of unsuitable lands in a hopeless attempt to wrest a living from them, erosion, failure of streams, malnutrition, social

*Photograph by Don Eckelberry.*



**The new generation understands the unity of conservation. There are not many kinds of conservation; there is only conservation and the lack of it. This is because nature is not a series of isolated systems, but a single complex community including man and all the animal and plants that surround him.**

*Photograph of baby raccoons by Karl H. Maslowski.*

*Photograph of yellow lady slippers and trillium*

unrest, decline in the value and dignity of human life, an increase in the quantity of men but certainly no advance in their quality—conditions which have been vividly portrayed by William Vogt in his book "Road to Survival." This makes us suspect that when we help comparatively primitive peoples to stay well and keep their babies alive, we may be following the dictates of our hearts rather than using our heads. It is cruel to keep people alive on half rations. Unless in addition to conserving men we help them conserve the lands and waters they need to live decently, we had better adopt a policy of "hands off."

The fourth point in the conservationist's philosophy is the need for research. Conservation, as we have seen, consists not only in preserving small areas of the earth's surface in their pristine loveliness, but in so managing the larger parts devoted to production of various sorts that they will reach their maximum productivity and maintain it from year to year. To attain this goal the conservationist must understand climates, soils, the life history of each of the varied organisms that make up the living communities with which he deals, the interactions of every one with every other and with soils, crops and man. This is an ideal impossible of attainment, even if as conservationists we are helped in our studies by a multitude of specialists whose knowledge in particular fields is more profound than ours, although their breadth of view may be permissibly more narrow.

But the nearer we come to the fulfilment of this ideal, the better conservationists we shall be. And since we must always fall short of perfect knowledge, we shall be humble and meddle with nature as little as possible. With more time, patience and ingenuity than we possess, she has been experimenting, during millions of years, with the relations of living things to their environment and to each other. It is likely that she

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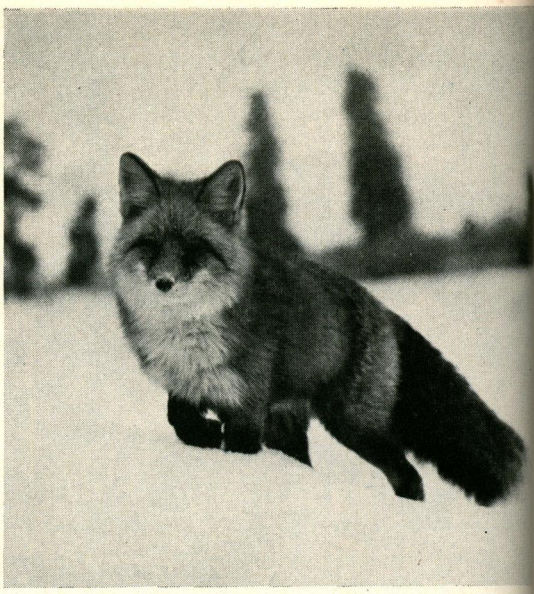
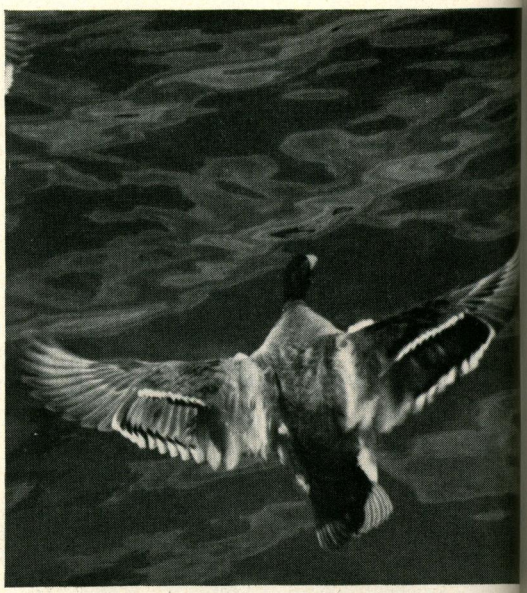
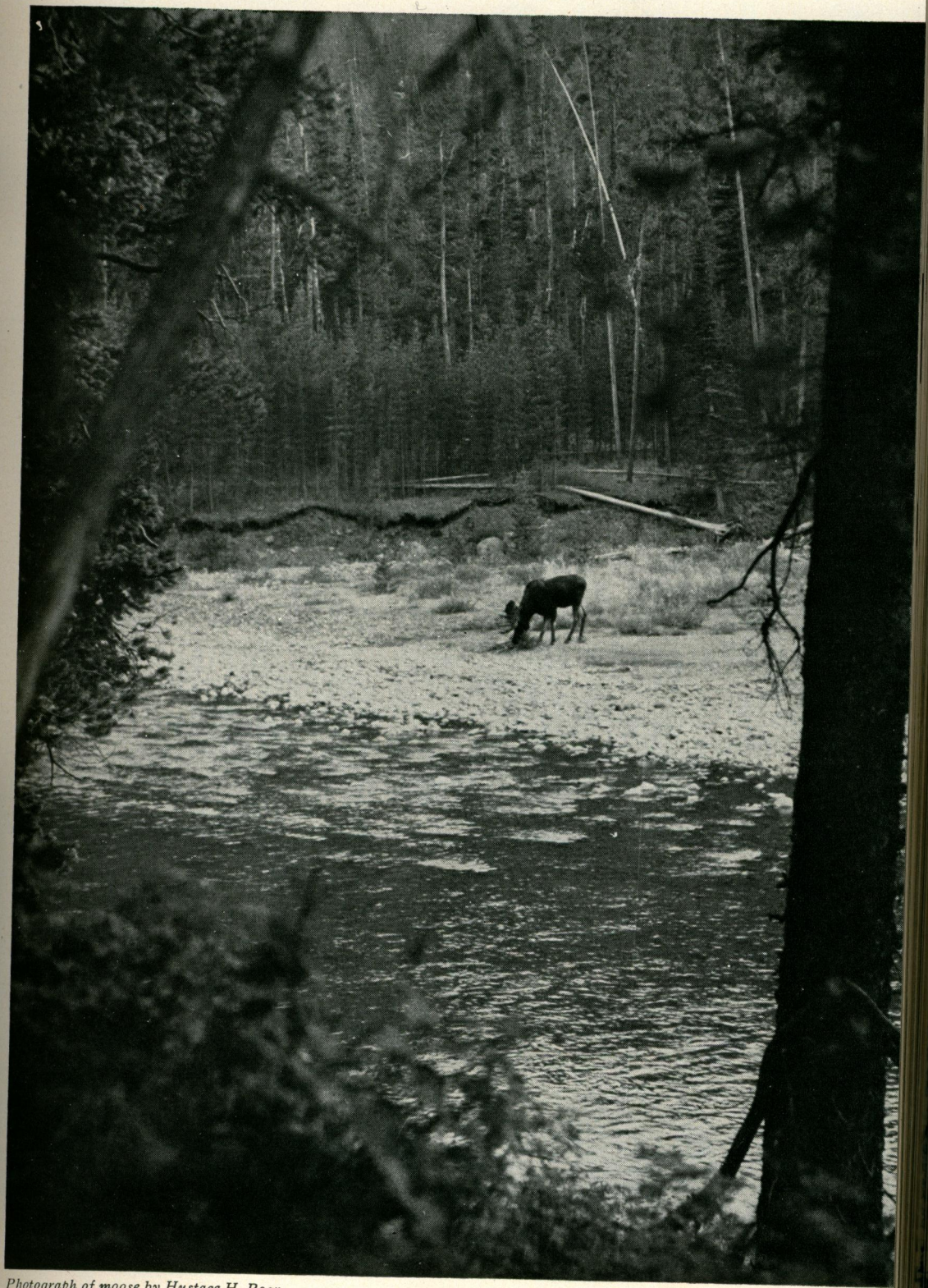


*Photograph of red fox by Adolph Murie.*

**We should make as a test of the highest culture the capacity to enjoy the earth and its creatures without destroying them.**



*Photograph of male mallard by Hugo H. Schroder.*



*Photograph of moose by Hustace H. Poor*

# A Conservationist's Philosophy

*(Continued from page 18)*

has generally worked out the most satisfactory combinations that her material allows. Even when we believe that we can improve upon her, we shall proceed with extreme caution. Above all we shall be wary in introducing wild animals and plants into strange environments where their behavior cannot be predicted. Whenever we are tempted to do so, we shall study the fantastic history of the introduction of animals and plants into Australia and New Zealand—if the examples of such introductions that have come under our own observation at home do not suffice to teach us wisdom.

The fifth point in the conservationist's philosophy is the necessity of teaching others. Without general support, conservation can accomplish little. Since most men take the short view, preferring immediate returns to an assured future, it requires long and patient education to bring them to understand and support the objectives of the conservationist. This education must begin in the primary schools, with young and flexible minds that have not yet hardened into the stubborn and often distorted opinions of later life. Above all, this education must combat the age-old flattering view, morally and materially pernicious, that man is something above and apart from nature. We must substitute the conviction that we are one among many members of a vast community of living things as worthy as ourselves of study and contemplation. And we should make as a test of the highest culture the capacity to enjoy the earth and its creatures without destroying them.

The sixth point in the conservationist's philosophy is reverence for living things. As a conservationist he must deal with populations and combinations of populations—with life in the mass. A great danger of dealing with things in large aggregates is that it often causes us to lose respect for the individual. The conservationist may at times find himself in the position of the philosopher so absorbed in his grandiose schemes for the betterment and happiness of humanity that he forgets his own wife and children are starving. He needs constantly and deliberately to remind himself that populations of animals are composed of individuals whose capacities for joy and suffering he can only surmise. In the absence of positive experience of the inner life of any non-human creature, he must always give that creature the benefit of the doubt.

A philosophy matures slowly. There are problems which philosophers have been pondering for thousands of years, and may well consider at their leisure for as many more, for they seek timeless truths. The conservationist can ill afford to proceed at so deliberate a pace to perfect his philosophy. The value of a philosophy of conservation depends upon the existence of something worth conserving. If destruction continues for a few centuries longer, accelerated at the same rate which has prevailed during the last two centuries, there will be no natural resources on earth worth preserving. Even if his philosophy fall short of perfection, the conservationist must use it immediately as a working tool. As I write, the forests are dwindling, the hillsides are eroding, the soil is losing its fertility, wild creatures are being killed faster than they reproduce. There is an urgency in conservation as in no other field of human endeavor. Our aims are noble, our purpose firm, our comrades trustworthy. But can we act swiftly enough to preserve the grandeur and beauty of nature, its fecundity upon which the existence of ourselves and all other creatures depends, while there are still enough of these things left to inspire the effort? Each true conservationist must ask himself how he can speed his cause *now,* before the sands run out.