



The Tangled Strands of Conservation

By ALEXANDER F. SKUTCH

THE movement for the conservation of Nature, which during the last few decades has been so greatly accelerated, is supported by people with the most diverse motives. At one extreme are those who from pure compassion refrain from the destruction of living things. At the other extreme are those sportsmen with no sympathy for the animals themselves but who take an interest in their preservation merely in order to have a continuing supply of game to shoot. Between these two extremes lie the great majority of modern conservationists, including Nature enthusiasts who delight in woodland, meadow and stream with all their varied life; scientists whose concern is for the preservation of species rather than of individual animals or plants; agriculturists, economists and patriotic citizens who are convinced that the survival of their country is dependent upon the preservation of its soil, forests, watersheds, and other natural resources; and hunters who combine an interest in the ways of free animals with a propensity for taking their lives.

These are the multicolored strands of which the fabric of conservation is woven. There is a growing tendency for those of like interests to separate themselves from the general mass of conservationists—

In the April issue of *Nature Magazine*, Dr. Skutch discussed attitudes towards animal life in a meaningful article entitled "Our Difficult Choice." In this second article he provides further provocative thoughts on man's relationships to animals from the ethical, economic and recreational points of view, as well as varying aspects of conservation.

Nature lovers with Nature lovers, sportsmen with sportsmen, soil conservationists with soil conservationists, agriculturists with agriculturists—for each of these groups to form its own society, with its own publications and modes of propaganda. But this segregation of interests is by no means complete, and many of the more inclusive organizations or agencies of conservation enlist the support of men inspired by the most diverse motives. This

imperfect segregation of interests is a symptom of the youth of the conservation movement, which in its modern form goes back scarcely two generations. In a more mature growth we should expect, in accordance with the general laws of evolution, a more complete segregation of the component strands.

As conservation matures and its several objectives become more sharply defined and contrasted, those who are led by one motive to support it will become increasingly aware of the question of how far they should cooperate with those who support it with some different end in view. How far are the principles of these several classes of conservationists compatible with each other, and how far can they consistently and profitably work together? How long can the Nature enthusiasts continue to go hand in hand with the soil

conservationists, with the foresters, with the sportsmen? Again, how far can those whose prime interest is agriculture go with those who look chiefly to the welfare of the woodlands and the waterways? How far, in turn, can those who insist above all upon having a continuing supply of shootable game cooperate with the agriculturists, the foresters, and the Nature lovers?

Some of the conflicts inherent in this diversity of ultimate objectives have already come to the front; as when the draining of swamps and sloughs to increase the area of arable land threatens to lower water tables and contract the breeding sites of certain birds and other creatures; or when protected animals injure the crops or kill the livestock of farmers. In the ordinary course of events, we should expect these divergent interests and principles, now often settled by compromise and temporary expedients, to become more sharply defined and perhaps more difficult to bring into harmony.

When we look merely at the objects to be conserved, the problem we are asked to solve appears hopelessly complex, for these objects are multitudinous. Each part or component of the natural world—soil, water, woodlands, grasslands, wildflowers, mammals, song birds, "game" birds, birds of prey, reptiles, fishes—, each of these categories, and each division of each major class, has its own staunch supporters. To each of these the word "Conservation" connotes chiefly the preservation of that which he personally loves, admires, or values. But if we turn our attention from the objects to be conserved to the motives for conserving them, the situation becomes far less confusing.

Now, as in past ages, men have been led to protect and conserve the natural world by three dominant interests, which we may briefly classify as (1) religious or ethical, (2) economic, and (3) amusement or recreation. With few exceptions, it is easy to distribute present day conservationists among these groups. In the main, those chiefly concerned with the preservation of the soil, the forests, or the waters, look to the foundations of the economic health of their nation; of any nation. The sportsman-conservationist is motivated by the desire for amusement, and is intelligent enough to take a farseeing view of his interests. The heterogeneous group of people called "Nature lovers" is more difficult to distribute among our three classes. Most of them avowedly go to Nature for amusement or recreation, now mostly without a gun. But, in addition to relaxation and refreshment of both mind and body, many of them find there certain intangible values—beauty, peace, exaltation of spirit—which are at least not foreign to religion. The scientist or naturalist who insists upon the preservation for purposes of study of unspoiled samples of the several types of natural

vegetation, and of all species of animals and plants threatened with extinction, is also somewhat difficult to place in the foregoing classification. If his investigations are for the purpose of acquiring information to guide our economic activities, obviously he falls into the second group. If his science is of that sort called "pure," if he wishes to know about Nature just for the satisfaction of understanding it, he would seem to fall

into the third group, although he is perhaps not untouched by motives of the first class.

Between the several varieties of conservationists of the second class—those whose interest is primarily economic—there can be no radical opposition. With them no conflict is likely to remain unresolved in the face of growing knowledge and a fuller understanding of the implications of their

position. Only short-sighted selfishness could push the claims of agriculture, or forestry, or water-power to the exclusion of the other objects in this group; and short-sighted selfishness is not a failing likely to be pronounced in a conservationist, who looks to the welfare of future generations no less than of his own. Opinions may vary as to how much land should be left with its covering of forest, or what rotation of crops is best for the soil, or how many reservoirs should be created to hold water. However, there can be no doubt that soil, woodlands and water are essential elements of a healthy and enduring national economy. And, with growing experience, it should become easier to strike a fair balance between these at times antagonistic

claims. From the economic point of view there can be only one conservation, although it has many facets.

Likewise there would seem to be no irreconcilable opposition between the conservationists of the first and third classes (ethical and recreational) and those whose motives are primarily economic.

There may arise at certain points differences of criteria and preferences for variant procedures; but it is hard to understand how a conservationist of any sort can take exception to the economic motive in conservation so long as this remains within reasonable limits. To appreciate the beauty and calm of Nature, to penetrate its hidden meanings, no less than merely to amuse ourselves at its expense, we must live. We shall not continue to live if we disregard the economic foundations of our life, which in turn are rooted in the soil and waters of our country. Or to put the matter differently, fertile soil, abundant water, the proper balance between natural vegetation and arable land, are simultaneously the foundation not only of the agriculture upon which our civilization and its economic structure rest, but also of the possibility of our experience of all those esthetic and spiritual values that we find in Nature, no less than of the life of those wild crea-



tures to which the sportsman looks for amusement.

Those who love living creatures and the beauties of Nature for their own sakes may rightly think that some of the measures taken in the name of conservation by the agriculturist or the hydraulic engineer are needlessly cruel, or show a pathetic lack of appreciation of splendid scenery. But to the fundamental proposition that we must conserve soil and water, make the land productive, and turn the wheels of essential industries, they can scarcely demur. Likewise the sportsman may like to see more marshland where wild-fowl breed and less arable land, more shallow sloughs and fewer great reservoirs, but he will hardly fail to understand the importance of producing enough food for the community.

There remains, then, to be considered the opposition between the first and third groups. Since the composition of these groups is somewhat mixed, let us define the clearest representative of each. On the one hand we shall take those who believe, as a fundamental religious or ethical principle, that it is wrong to destroy any living creature except when absolutely necessary to preserve one's own life. On the other hand there are those who kill merely for amusement, never alleging that the sacrifice of other lives is necessary for the preservation or sustenance of their own. Men of both sorts call themselves conservationists; they may belong to the same societies and often support the same measures. Is it well for them to do so?

That it is wrong to kill, or even to injure any living things, of whatever kind, is a very old belief of men. In the East it has been for thousands of years a fundamental religious tenet of the Taoists, the Jains, the Buddhists, and of many of the sects of Hinduism. In the West it was taught by Pythagoras, and later reaffirmed in modified form by Plutarch and the Neo-Platonists, notably by Porphyry. Doubtless the majority of the people who hold this tenet as a fundamental article of their religion never cultivate that intimate sympathy with Nature, or with living things, which might have led them to develop sentiments of this sort from personal experience. They accept the command not to take life as men in general accept the teachings of the religion in which they have been raised, perfunctorily and with little understanding. But in the modern West, where no major religion teaches the sanctity of life other than human, thoughtful and ethically sensitive men are verging toward this position as an outgrowth of their personal contacts with other forms of life. Hence in this part of the world it is among those who love the woods and fields and all their varied creatures, rather than among the staunchest adherents of the established creeds, that we find the deepest respect for living things as such—the fullest “reverence for life,” to use Schweitzer’s significant phrase.

These voyagers and discoverers in the realm of spirit

are often reticent about their sentiments in this matter, which as outgrowths of individual experience lack the weight of prestige and authority that invests them when taught by a venerable religion, as in the East. But all religion is the outgrowth of someone’s experience; and men today are retracing the steps in spiritual development that led to the formulation of the doctrine of the sacredness of all life by ancient thinkers in India, China and Hellas. I say nothing of the theory of the transmigration of souls, a view by no means so



absurd as it apparently seemed to Shakespeare. But such dogmas are usually invented to give an intellectual dress to a prior intuition; they are the rationalization of a belief rather than the reason for it. If you do not hold the doctrine of transmigration it might be more difficult for you to argue against one who scoffs at your belief that it is wrong to kill a bird or an

insect. But the force of your personal conviction will not be greatly altered by your attitude toward this unproved but by no means improbable theory.

It requires no great imagination to see the profound effect that belief in the sacredness of all life will have on the conservation of Nature. One who holds this view can not avoid being a conservationist, although he may possess no theory of conservation nor understand the profound implications of this mode of thought. But the converse of this proposition is not necessarily true. It does not follow that every conservationist respects living creatures. He may wish to promote their increase for personal gain, or in order later to kill them. The great tracts of forest set aside by royalty for the chase, the deer parks of the nobility, the hunting preserves of the country squire, have from ancient times been important factors in the preservation no less than the exploitation of wild creatures of many kinds. And more recently we have great projects, supported by the state or by private corporations, for the propagation and “management” of all sorts of animals looked upon as shootable.

Up to a certain point, the objectives of the two extreme sorts of conservationists, those who love creatures for their own sakes, and those who value them as something to be killed, are essentially the same. The most zealous adherent of the view that it is wrong to kill can find no fault with the practice of the sportsmen and those whom they employ, by their taxes or otherwise, in setting aside areas where free creatures of all sorts can lead their natural lives and propagate under favorable conditions. Hence there is a great temptation for those who love and respect living creatures as such, and who may have relatively little wealth, influence and power, to travel in company with the sportsmen, who are many and possess great wealth and power. For a considerable distance they can jog along quite amicably together. It is only at the journey’s end, when the payoff comes, that (Continued on page 276)

and short of temper. Hence it may become necessary to destroy some of the animals that devour our crops, lest we starve. Although deplorable, this is wholly different from killing animals for the pleasure of killing them, after we have deliberately encouraged their multiplication for this very purpose.

But between those who love living things as such and the sportsman who kills them as a form of amusement, there is a radical and irreconcilable conflict of values that allows no compromise. The two attitudes are mutually exclusive; they can as little co-exist in the same person as noon and midnight at the same hour. The sooner the life-loving conservationist recognizes this, the better it will be for the cause dear to him. He will keep himself free from embarrassing entanglements, which can not fail to become more acute with the passage of time. He will avoid giving his support to measures designed to increase the number of animals the sportsman can shoot, because at least the idea of increasing them appeals to him. He will abstain from membership in organizations controlled by sportsmen for their own interests, or in those which support the sportsmen's interests. He will not encourage the membership of sportsmen in his own societies, unless with the hope that he may thereby "convert" them. By setting themselves sharply apart from a more powerful element, the life-loving conservationists will at first lose influence and support. It might become more difficult for them to accomplish some of their cherished aims. But they will remain true to their own maxims and show others exactly where they stand.

Cooperation between those who wish to conserve life for its own sake and those who find amusement in destroying it is like the alliance between the Western democracies and Soviet Russia when confronted by a common menace in Germany during the Second World War. There was never true community of interests or confidence between the governments of these countries; and when the peril they shared had passed, the former allies found in each other their most dreaded enemies. Little is to be gained, and much to be lost, by joining forces with those whose guiding lights are incompatible with one's own. The battle may be longer and harder if we accept as our allies only those who fight for the same standard as ourselves; but only so can we be sure that if we win, our victory will benefit the cause for which we struggle.

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the true lover of living things discovers how little he has in common with those who kill for sport. Then he suffers pain and disillusion. If thoughtful, he will ask himself whether he was well-advised to go hand in hand with the hunting interests so long as their proximate goals were similar, whether he did not compromise his cherished principles by proceeding at all in such company.

Between the Nature lover with an ethical regard for life and the economic conservationist there may be conflicts in practice but there need be none in fundamental principles. Conflicts in practice will inevitably arise from the tendency of living things of all sorts to multiply indefinitely and the limited area of the earth's surface available for their support. Indeed, competition between man and other animals for the means of subsistence poses problems of the same sort as the competition of man with man, with the added difficulty that with animals with whom we can not exchange thoughts it is impossible to discuss the matter and reach a mutually satisfactory arrangement, as we could with each other were we not so blinded by ancient prejudices