CONSERVATION COMPASS

Doom, Gloom and Failure, or Optimism, Vision and Progress—The Human Choice

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IN MID-APRIL I WAS IN CORPUS Christi to give a talk to a prestigious organization dedicated to conservation. I had a prepared speech in my pocket. While I was reading the Corpus Christi *Caller-Times* over breakfast, I came across a short article that caught my attention, and caused me to toss my prepared text and spend the morning preparing another talk.

The news story contained the statements of actor Martin Sheen (he plays the President on the TV series "The West Wing") that were made when he received an award from the Sierra Club for services to the environment. Mr. Sheen was quoted as saying:

"I don't know if we can repair what's been done already. I really don't know. And I don't know if anyone does. With global warming and the gases that are already trapped, and no real awareness in sight, with nuclear proliferation, and the cutting down of forests in the third world just to burn fuel to cook food and keep warm. I mean it is just terrible. We are at a stopgap now. If we started now, just to try and conserve what's left, that would be an achievement. But I don't know if that is even possible."

Now, there is a way to start your morning! But, you know, Mr. Sheen could be right—but only if we choose to learn nothing, do nothing, and change nothing as we face the challenge of environmental exploitation. He, obviously, is an intelligent man and one who cares enough to speak up and act on his beliefs.

He is correct when he points out that we have, and have always had, big problems related to how we deal with living in and within our environment given the circumstances of time and place. Such has always been true—and always will be. It is an ongoing challenge that each generation faces anew and under differing circumstances.

But, respectfully, I think he is wrong when he views the situation as essentially hopeless, and then influences others to embrace that view. What can that do but engender cynicism and despair—particularly in the young—or the disregarding of his legitimate concerns? I do not think, down deep, he is as hopeless as he sounds, or he would not work so hard to change things and to influence others.

In my 66-plus years of living and 45 years as a natural resources professional dealing with wildlife, forestry, and range issues, I have seen and been involved with much conflict over natural resources and environment. Some, such as spotted owls and old-growth forests, were highly controversial. I have seen too many dramatic turnarounds in how we relate to environmental challenges in North America and elsewhere in the world for me to become a resolute pessimist. On the contrary, I have seen much that leads me to an *almost* (I do have my dark moments) sustained optimism.

In fact, if I had been told at the beginning of my career in the mid-1950s of the positive changes that would come over the next 50 years, I would have been highly skeptical. I have lived to see, and even helped make, significant changes in how we husband the land and wildlife in our care.

In North America alone, there have been enough truly dramatic changes to provide hope for the future. And those changes are ongoing—and even accelerating. Think back with me over what has taken place over the past century. In general, both the amount of forested acres and their condition are dramatically improved. In general, most wildlife is better off, with many species (deer, elk, turkeys, antelope, moose, wild sheep, waterfowl, and others) brought back from the edge of extinction within the last century. We are making huge investments—both in direct expenditures and in terms of opportunity costs in the name of threatened and endangered species. In general, air quality is improving after worsening steadily for most of the 20th century. In general, water quality is getting better. In general, soil protection is steadily improving.

We are the world's best-fed nations with relatively cheap food to feed more people being produced on fewer and fewer acres. The technology that has produced this miracle is being enhanced and exported.

In the United States, we as a people have—considering local, state, and federal levels—placed over one-third of our land in public ownership for purposes of preservation and conservation. Debates—free, open debates—rage over how and for what these lands should be managed over time: a luxury not extant in most of the world.

We, now, speak with serious intent of implementing such emerging concepts as "sustainable land management" and "ecosystem management." They roll over the tongue with such ease. In reality, these "new" concepts are but reincarnations of ancient truths—old wine in new wineskins. In the concept of sustainable management lies the long-term consideration of what economic theorists call "intergenerational equity," and what ethicists consider as fairness for generations yet unborn.

That simply means that each generation can only take from the land that which does not impair the ability of future generations to do the same. Ecosystem management embodies the recognition that land treatments do not occur in isolation. One ecologist/philosopher put it in very simple terms: "Everything is connected to everything else, and there is no such thing as a free lunch." So land management will increasingly take place with consideration of cross-boundary effects and more complete and simultaneous consideration of ecological, legal, social, and economic concerns.

I contend that we, along with the peoples of numerous other nations, have begun to come to grips with the reality of the closure of

frontiers related to territorial expansion. Now we must live, and, perhaps, prosper on the land that we have.

If that were the end of human striving, I too might tend toward pessimism. But as land frontiers have closed, new frontiers loom on the horizon—three in number. The first encompasses the frontiers of learning, development of technology and appropriate joint applications of the two. The second is the human spiritual development that broadens ethical consideration beyond humans to include the land itself. The third is the education of the generations as to their role and responsibilities as stewards and discerning users of the Earth's bounty.

To my thinking, the most incredible of the many miracles involved in evolution or creation or both is the emergence and enhancement of the human mind and spirit. We have yet to fully tap either resource. Therein lies one way out of our dilemma related to the environment and our role in it.

Clearly, *Homo sapiens* has always exploited the environment in order to live—and will do so tomorrow and all the days after that. There is no question of that. The challenge, then, is to live within or lessen the constraints of that environment so as to pass on to future generations opportunities similar to those that we inherited and enjoyed. There is potential for magic here: an alchemy of ever-increasing knowledge and experience mixed with enhanced technology with a significant pinch of the divine spark that resides in the human mind and spirit that yields new understanding and capability.

The trick will be to bring rapidly expanding knowledge, increasing understanding, and burgeoning technology to bear significantly on environmental problems. Success will rest largely in the realm of the intersection of politics, economics, law, religion and philosophy—and, perhaps, most important, in the realms of education, research, and application.

Education is essential, and occurs at multiple levels. The young people doing their graduate research in the University of Montana's Boone and Crockett Program, and those at numerous other universities that educate natural resource professionals, will not be awarded a minor in "doom and gloom." Rather, they—and you—have been exposed to a spirit of optimism that says things can get better. They are instilled with a sense of duty to "make it so," and the belief that you can do just that. Tomorrow can be better than today. It is their—and your—duty to strive to ensure that outcome. I believe they will succeed. But that prediction will only come true if the societies within which they—and you—will live and work can accept constraints and new ways to assure exploitation of resources in a sustainable fashion.

Such understanding of these matters as currently exists in the body politic is fostered by the educated approaches of the day, whether obtained in school or from the media or both. Such education far too often portrays forestry, ranching, farming, mining, oil and natural gas extraction, fishing, and other actions as "evil" acts carried out by greedy, uncaring people.

Wait a minute. The people engaged in these activities produce the base resources upon which we depend to live and even live the "good life." More and more people, adults and children alike, have no first-hand experience with where the necessities of life originate. For many—too many—food comes from a grocer, cars from the dealer's showroom, gasoline from the service station, natural gas from the pipe that comes in behind the garage, boards from the lumber yard, and electricity from power lines.

Have these activities that supply such goods and services always been carried out in a fashion that we would deem acceptable today? The answer is, most obviously, "no." But that was yesterday, and today is today, and things have changed for the better. Are there ongoing practices that should be changed? The answer, most obviously, is "yes." But that is today, and tomorrow is coming, and things can change for the better. The new, fancy name for this age-old process is "adaptive management," whereby we do, then we evaluate results, revamp, alter our approaches, and try again—doing a better job each time.

Mr. Sheen indicated that not enough people are getting the message concerning our collective environment and the human role as responsible stewards. By and large, he is correct. But think about the following observation. In a democracy, decisions are made by the majority of the minority that cares. That observation gives me hope because there is a defined target audience—those who care deeply about the issue. Environmental extremists and environmental exploiters have, therefore, astutely targeted educators and the media for propaganda efforts related to their particular viewpoint, and have done so very effectively. In doing so, they have created a conflict industry that thrives on the battle. There are no solutions in such conflict carried too far for too long by those who profit from exacerbating warfare. It is time to heed the age-old admonition—"Come, let us reason together."

Let's face it—stories related to environmental doom and gloom and seemingly intractable related problems simply make better news stories. So, oddly enough, in Mr.

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Sheen's statement, lies the glimpse of an answer. Education and facts aimed at the target audience that cares or can be enticed to care about the environment can be dramatically effective.

There are many millions who care about issues related to the environment, and many millions more who can be enticed to care. They come to their caring by different and circuitous routes—some are hunters, some are fishers, some are farmers, some are ranchers, some care about clean water, and some about clean air, some about scenic beauty, some about maintaining a way of life, some about making a living, and some about sustainable management of natural resources. But *they all care*—a little or a lot. And, more significantly, many care not only for themselves but also for others—and they care not just for today, but for tomorrow and all the days after that.

Success will rest largely in the realm of the intersection of politics, economics, law, religion and philosophy—and, perhaps, most important, in the realms of education, research, and application.

We are, I think, in the midst of an ongoing evolutionary process in how we perceive ourselves in relationship to nature. We have begun, at last, to extend our concept of ethics beyond human bounds to the collective whole of which we are but a part—the land itself. The ecologist/philosopher Aldo Leopold (see article on page 34 of this issue) put forth the premise that we could never consider ourselves fully civilized until we embraced such an ethic. He suggested that such an ethic could be as simple as understanding that an action that sustained the integrity and beauty of the land was right, and actions that did otherwise were wrong.

We are coming to grips with our place in, and relationship to, nature. We are making progress. Too little and too slow, but progress nonetheless. We can, should, and will do more and faster. That will continue to accelerate. Things are not hopeless. These times may well be among the most exciting and promising times in human history to be alive—and to be alive with a chance to make a difference.

But these things can and will occur only when we focus energy and resources on the most important challenge that we humans have or ever will face. That challenge lies in living perpetually and well on our Spaceship Earth, passing on our heritage of the good Earth from generation to generation intact (or perhaps improved) by our stewardship.

Consider the billions of dollars of resources and the human capital that we have spent to go to the moon and beyond, to map the human genome, to develop and maintain incredible engines of war, to develop a missile defense system, to wage all the wars of history, and other similar endeavors. These efforts exemplify the almost unfathomable potential of the human mind and spirit coupled with adequate resources to accomplish a priority mission. Perhaps it is an impossible dream, but can we dare dream of what we could achieve *if* . . .

But such activities are but a sideshow, truly much sound and fury signifying nothing, if Mr. Sheen is correct and we are indeed approaching the end times in terms of our spaceship's ability to maintain integrity. Old sailors learned quickly that their most important task was to maintain the integrity of the vessel. Once that integrity was attained and maintained, attention and resources could be directed elsewhere—but only then.

Relative to costs of other endeavors, the expenditures needed to assure the knowledge, understanding, and the application of that knowledge to maintain the hull of Spaceship Earth are not exorbitant. Even those levels are, quite obviously, difficult to attain and maintain as the focus of our collective will. Even in the United States and Canada, among the richest and most powerful nations in human history, both in terms of a portion of gross national product or of national budgets, expenditures to deal with continuous maintenance of Spaceship Earth are dwindling. They are dwindling not because we cannot afford the expenditure, but because we have other political priorities. Are these priorities misplaced? The answer will be "yes" if insufficient attention is paid to hull maintenance.

We know what we need to do. We have enough experience, enough knowledge, enough technology, and enough skilled people to make dramatic headway on heading off, mitigating, and repairing environmental problems. We can begin. And we can do more and better over time.

So, in the end reckoning, it comes down to a question of focus, will, understanding, setting priorities, and caring. Each of those factors is subject to change. They *will change* as more and more people understand what we are up against and know and believe that we can change focus, and that our redirected efforts can be effective.

I admit to being a resolute optimist. But I am not a Pollyannaish fool. We do have big problems and things are getting worse over much of Spaceship Earth. But it is not too late. We can change. Will we? This new century will, likely, tell the tale.

I finish with comments that parallel the quote made by Mr. Sheen:

We can, at least to a significant extent, repair the mistakes of the past and prevent such mistakes in the future. I know that this can be done. Thousands of colleagues and fellow citizens feel the same. There is a widespread and increasing awareness of our problems and opportunities. We are moving forward—much too

slowly, but forward nonetheless. We can, should, and will do more simply because we have no other choice. Such is not only possible—it is imperative. Those things that need to be done will be done by those who view life as a challenge, and do not choose to go quietly into the darkness. Life can be good. It can be even better.

All of those things *can be*—and, considering the alternative, must be. But they *will be* only if we care enough and do enough for long enough. They will be only if we can think across boundaries, only if we can understand that the entire human race is in this together.

We came far in the last century in terms of accumulating knowledge, increasing understanding, experience, technology, and amassing wealth in first world countries. The worldwide state of the environment and human population presents a mixed picture with more bad news than good. Yet there is enough good news to give a dedicated optimist hope and a stimulus for renewed vigor.

I refuse to sink into the darkness of spiraling pessimism—and I refuse to take my students there. I have only to look into the mirror to know that, personally, I am much closer to my end than to my beginning. That, sometimes, causes me to look ahead and wonder about what is to come.

I only wish that my years in the game were not coming to an end. Oh, to be 25 years old and able to pursue that quest, that dream, of living comfortably within our bounds. Maybe, after all, it is an impossible dream. But, most certainly, it is an imperative dream and the ultimate quest—literally "the only game in town."

I offer one of my late life decisions to lend weight to my statements. I retired from the U.S. Forest Service at the age of 62. Before becoming Chief of the Forest Service, I had attained the highest possible rank as a research scientist in the federal government. I had been frugal all my life, and my pension was generous. There were no worries over money. My office walls were adorned with symbols of most of the honors that could come to one in my profession. Logically, it was time for the rocking chair. I had done my time.

But, instead, I snapped up the opportunity to become a teacher. I will continue in that role as long as I can perform at an acceptable level. Some old friends have asked, "Why?" I teach because I want the vibrant young people with whom I interact to know that their world can be a better place. I, along with thousands of other teachers, am aiding in equipping them with the knowledge, spirit, and the determination to help make changes. All over North America and around the world, young people are graduating today prepared to enter various professions dealing with the management and welfare of natural resources. They are enabled by education and are dedicated to making things better.

I firmly believe that, in 40 years or so, one or more of them, heavy in both years and achievement, will address a university graduating class of 2041. What might the audience of proud parents, grandparents, friends, and new graduates expect to hear? The commencement speaker will acknowledge and express gratitude for achievements that have been made in the husbandry of the good Earth since the turn of the century. I think that she will marvel at the new understanding and knowledge that have come to pass. There will be recognition of a continuing evolution in the human mind and spirit. For many, if not most, personal and collective ethics will have been expanded from the human realm to include the good Earth itself.

The speaker might reach back 70 years into history to speak of the first photos that were beamed back to Earth from a space capsule orbiting the moon. Close your eyes and remember that image. There, over the horizon of the barren landscape of the moon, was the Earth shining bright against the blackness of space—it seemed so incredibly beautiful, so unlikely, and so delicate against the void. There, right there, was life! So far as we know, even today, it contains all the life that exists anywhere in the Cosmos—Spaceship Earth. There, shimmering in space, was our collective home.

For many this moment contained an epiphany—a flash of awe and an overwhelming appreciation of the responsibility that humans have to care for one another and for our collective home. Clearly we cannot care adequately for the Earth without full recognition that we must become and remain, at long last, our brother's keeper. Most humans do not willingly destroy the Earth except through ignorance or in desperation.

Then the speaker may recollect, with gratitude, the changes that have been made to deal with environmental problems when they were increasingly recognized as universal problems. She will praise those who resolutely refused to bow to hopelessness, and instead struggled mightily to make things better. The accumulated small victories that, over time, will have coalesced into ever larger gains. She will speak of problems that must yet be addressed, and will remind the audience that similar problems have already been overcome.

The speaker might well end with a quote from T.S. Eliot's *Little Gidding*:

We shall not cease from exploration
And at the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time

That Alpha and Omega—the beginning and the ending—she will remind us, is the good Earth itself. Such has always been, and always will be so. ▲▲▲