

FROM THE CENTER

Remembering Our Past in Preparation for the 21st Century



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Part of my job as the Boone and Crockett Professor at The University of Montana is, of course, teaching. As I have never been—at least in the formal sense—a “professor”, there have been many long hours put in for the preparation of my lectures.

My first course, entitled “Case Histories in Wildlife Conservation Policy”, has forced me to carefully review the history of wildlife natural resource conservation in North America. One of the advantages of my teaching that course is that I can bring my own experience of a 40-year career in natural resource research and management to bear in explaining to students “how things really happen” in addition to the textbook renditions. And, perhaps most exciting,

there is nothing like having to face thirty bright-eyed and bushy-tailed graduate and senior students every week. To emerge from such interaction with any semblance of honor requires that the professor be well prepared. Such preparation is a remarkable learning experience in and of itself.

In reviewing the history of wildlife and natural resources conservation and putting that in the context of my own career as a

state wildlife manager, a Forest Service research scientist, and Chief of the Forest Service, and now, as a professor, I was struck with the similarities relative to conservation issues of the period

1890-1910 to the era in which we find ourselves today.

In that earlier period, the nation was coming to grips with the awful truth that in the course of “taming” our land we had, almost, destroyed the wildlife and wildness that had so much defined our national character. To the lasting credit of a select few of our forebearers we, as a nation, pulled back from the edge of disaster. In studying this period for the first time since my student days of four decades ago, I was struck by the fact that this was not, at least originally, a mass movement. Rather, this was a movement initiated and guided by a few dedicated individuals. They blazed a trail over which others in the tens, hundreds, thousands and millions later traveled.

And, many—in fact most—of the key players were somehow connected through the Boone and Crockett Club. They were attracted together and bound there by a love for hunting and the land that produced the animals they pursued and the milieu within which their hunting and exploration occurred. And, they, through individual and collective effort, changed the course of conservation history.

Among other achievements, Boone and Crockett Club members were instrumental in the protection of the fledgling Yellowstone Park and, then, expanding the Park. Efforts to break up the Park were turned back and the Army was assigned to provide protection. This evolved into the Lacey Act of 1894 that, basically, set the Park Service on track. This was followed quickly by the establishment of Glacier National Park, the establishment of the forest reserves—and then the establishment of the National Forests and the U.S. Forest Service. The Club’s members were instrumental in encouraging the States to shoulder their responsi-

bilities for the welfare of wildlife and hunters.

And, these were only a few of the achievements during that crucial period. From these initial efforts grew the wildlife conservation movement that has proven so incredibly successful over the past century—particularly in the case of big game species.

Now, a full century later, the nation is at a crossroads as we set our course for conservation in the 21st century. The population of the United States has tripled over the last century and, consequently, there is significantly less wild land per individual and the value of wild lands spirals ever upward.

And, in the consequences of that spiral, lies great temptation to step back from the gains so clearly and dearly made for wildlife and the quality added to all our lives by wild lands and the enjoyment these lands afford—with hunting and fishing as significant attributes of that enjoyment. There seems to be an increasing pressure, for example, to “devolve” public lands into private or state ownership or management or control. Such is nothing new and the specter of devolvement of public lands or rights in those lands seems to reappear from time to time at what proponents putting the public lands into other hands discern as opportune moments.

That opportune moment seems to have emerged with a combination of frustration and confusion over the appropriate missions and interactions of various federal agencies, the so-called “paralysis through analysis” that afflicts decision making by Federal land managers, the uncertainties that produce increasing social and political instability in resource-dependent communities, the overlaps in agency missions, increasing politicization of natural resource management agencies, a

continuing diminution of commodities produced from public lands, and continued “down-sizing” of conservation efforts—in both dollars and personnel—in a period of burgeoning demand.

This litany of problems could be seen as demoralizing. Or, that litany can be viewed simply as problems requiring attention and demanding correction. First, is devolution of the public’s lands a viable solution to the problems of public land management? I think not, primarily because it seems unlikely that the American people would stand still for such action—at least not yet. However, unless the other problems that are producing increasing conflict over management and the increasing difficulty in instituting and carrying out any management are addressed and solved, the attractiveness of devolution will inexorably increase.

The next decade will encompass a crucial test in the saga of American conservation. Our predecessors of a century ago, facing far greater odds, changed history and provided us an unparalleled legacy of land and wildlife. They did not fail.

And, so, now it is our turn—and privilege—to bear the responsibility and the burden to sustain and enhance their vision that led to our heritage of land and wildlife and to pass that heritage on to generations to follow. To those of us who hold these things dear, what more could we ask to be here—in this time and place—with a chance to make a difference. For those who truly care about wildlife and wildness it is a moment to cherish. And, we will not fail.

Times have changed dramatically since the days of Roosevelt, Grinnell, Pinchot and the other early members of the Boone and Crockett Club set us on the conservation path to where we are today. What has not changed is the need for individuals to main-

tain that vision. The individuals in the Club made that difference once and can make that critical difference again as we move into the 21st century.

But, in the end there will be, as with the early Boone and Crockett Club members, a critical few who will make the difference. Those few will devolve the responsibility. And, as the founder of the Club, Teddy Roosevelt, said:

“The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood...his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory nor defeat.”

—in the last decade of the 20th century as it did in the last decade of the 19th century the arena awaits. That arena is always there. But now, it is our turn in the pit.

