

America's Last Wild Lands – Past and Present

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[Part One]

Thank you Pat. It's great to be here and see a lot of old friends and colleagues that I worked with for a long, long time. I always think about the experiences that I've had and especially the time I spent fishing, which is where I feel I really learned more about conservation and people and the land and water than probably all the years I spent in college. And little did I know that in my future career there would be a consolation prize, and that's that my office would overlook the body of water that produced the U.S.-record carp. And this is not a fish story, Tony, this is the tidal basin—a 57-pounder caught in 1983, Jim—no fish story.

I notice everybody is sitting by the door. I used to try to do that at Congressional hearings—but it did not help. I think I've probably had more than one person's share of debates and hearings and dialogue about a whole variety of land management issues, conservation issues, fish and wildlife issues over the years. And one of the things that especially later in my career I started spending a lot of time reading about: the history of conservation and where we've come as a nation.

I'm going to get just a little bit philosophical for a few minutes and ask you to put this time frame that we're in today in a larger context. In fact, Jim Martin—if you were on the Salmon panel this morning—Jim talked about the importance of the long view of thinking about literally hundreds of years, not just election cycles or economic cycle, and that's so important. In the book that Chris and Jack Williams and I did, we focused on public lands and it became clear to us that we're sort of transitioning from a second to a third general philosophy in this country.

The first started when the first Europeans arrived on the shores of the New World, and that's what we call the Tame-and-Conquer Era. This was an agrarian society coming over from Europe

and these tremendous forests, these rivers, were obstacles. There were bears and wolves that could hurt your kids and they had to be conquered and tamed. They were something that was feared. This era lasted until almost the Civil War. In fact, as we moved to different parts of the country, the transitions were variable.

And then we sort of moved into the Man-Over-Nature Era, the utilitarian era where we can make it better. We can replumb the West. We can build dams. We can harvest forests. We can do all of these things and make it better.

And starting about the time of Aldo Leopold and his influence—we weren't calling it ecosystem management at that time. But it was really beginning to evolve where we were taking a look at the big picture over a longer time frame. We took to the air as a society in the 1950's, and we began to look down at the land and see the watersheds and the large landscapes as opposed to just the view that we could see from the ground. And that brought a whole new perspective to where we are.

Today I would venture to say that we're teetering somewhere between the utilitarian and the ecosystem era of how we look at things and we take a few steps back and we may take a few steps forward. And it's sort of in that context that I'd ask you to think about where we are, where fish and wildlife management, where the wild lands all fit into this context.

Thomas Jefferson, probably one of our most well-informed scientists as a President, and someone that was probably more closely linked to the land than almost any other President we've had, commissioned Lewis and Clark to go west, to explore this unknown, to traverse the Missouri River and document what they saw. And this in a sense was the first systematic approach that documented the beauty, the vastness of the West. They subsisted on hunting and fishing. They catalogued the species of fish and wildlife. They recorded what they saw—the hundreds of thousands of bison, the new species and all of that.

In 1847, another famous conservationist, George Perkins Marsh, who was a congressman from Vermont, gave a seminal speech about the destructive timber harvest that was going on in the eastern United States and the fact that we had to do something different as a society.

In 1849, the Department of Interior was established. That same year, the New York Association for the Protection of Game was founded, which was likely the first wildlife conservation organization in the United States.

In 1850, Thomas Ewing said this in his report to the Commissioner of Patents, I quote: “The waste of valuable timber in the U.S. will hardly be appreciated until our population reaches fifty million. Then the folly and short-sightedness of this age will meet with the degree of censor and reproach not pleasant to contemplate.” Unquote. Ewing goes on to write this about bison: “It should never be said that the noblest American indigenous ruminant shall become extinct.” And we missed that bullet, but not by much.

Henry David Thoreau, 1854, his famous quote at a lyceum in Concord, Massachusetts: “In wildness is the preservation of the world.” So the philosophers now are beginning to get involved in this land and what they see and what they feel. And in 1860, Frederick Edwin Church painted a masterpiece called “Twilight in the Wilderness”. And now we begin to see the artists provide visual images of what this wild landscape might be like. And that spurred another set of artists to do more landscape painting, sort of establishing the record of the beauty and the vastness of what we have in the American West.

And perhaps one of the most influential books on conservation certainly in the 18th century was written also by George Perkins Marsh, published in 1874, titled “The Earth as Modified by Human Actions”. And it was this very book that provided the foundation for people like Theodore Roosevelt, like Gifford Pinchot, like Aldo Leopold, like John Muir and many of the early conservationists as we begin to rethink our interaction with the land that was so important.

In 1885, the Adirondack Forest Preserve was set aside and this is the quote: “Shall be forever kept as wild forest lands.” Unquote. And of course we're all familiar with the Teddy Roosevelt

era. And perhaps another President that was one of the more informed scientists of our country with the establishment of the national forests, the national parks, the national wildlife refuges—millions of acres of lands that today belong to all of the American people, that are, in a sense, our birthright, something that we as citizens of this country own and we cherish so deeply.

Aldo Leopold, as a young Forest Service employee, as an avid hunter and, by the way, an expert archer, was one of the first scientists to begin to make systematic observations of the land, and he did this while hunting and while riding the range in the Southwest. He was one of the first to really begin to think deeply about the interactions between predator and prey, between habitat, fish and wildlife populations, and founded the science of wildlife management a few decades later. In 1924, Leopold moved to Madison, Wisconsin and it was that same year that the Gila Wilderness Plan was adopted by the Forest Service, a plan written by Leopold.

And should you think that the roadless debate is one that's something that I brought on, the first roadless area inventory was conducted in 1926 by the Chief of the Forest Service with concern over the fate of the Boundary Waters Canoe Area in northern Minnesota. And, in fact, the Forest Service that year inventoried all tracts of land larger than 230,400 acres and there were 74 of those. And I ask you, how many do we have today that size? And where are they? And so it's in that context I want to read you an Aldo Leopold quote and then I will sit down. Doug will talk a little bit about the history of the Wilderness Act and values that he holds dear. And then we'll talk a little bit more about wild land values. But this is in a sense one of my favorite Leopold quotes. And it's this: "This country has been swinging the hammer of development so long and so hard that it has forgotten the anvil of wilderness which gave value and significance to its labors. The momentum of our blows is so unprecedented that the remaining remnant of wilderness will be pounded into road dust long before we find out its values." He wrote that in 1935.

[Part Two, following a break for Doug Scott's presentation]

I was asked to talk a little bit about why wild lands are important. And I suspect that you already know. If you didn't, you wouldn't be here. And you know in your gut why they're important. I want to tell you a couple stories and a little bit about why they're important to me.

I know some of you know the country where I grew up very well, 25 miles from Hayward, Wisconsin in the Chequamegon National Forest. And growing up in a place like that, one of the favorite things that my grade school friend and I would do in fourth, fifth grade is we'd skip school and go trout fishing like all little boys dream to do. And we had places we would go and it was always adventurous to hike into the farthest place, the trout pond, the trout stream, and we had one favorite place that was about a two-mile hike and we always caught big trout—well, I remember almost always, well, most of the time. Sadly enough, shortly after I went to college and snuck back to that place, half of the land was owned by Consolidated Paper, they had put a major road into it and logged it and the trout were gone and the human use of that landscape had changed.

Another example which is practically adjacent to land that I still own in the Weasel Creek, Venison Creek area was also, this one was six or seven miles across and it was fun to hunt because you could go in the woods and swamps and you didn't see any red, you didn't see any orange, you didn't see any other hunters. I was going to school in the central and southern part of the state and really didn't enjoy hunting that much because every place you looked there was another hunter. And this is what wild land means to me.

And Doug articulated the importance of wild lands in many ways and there is some fairly sobering statistics of what's happening, especially when we put this in the big picture context, the historical context, and that's the fact that from 1978-1994 an average of 8700 acres/day of open space, farm land, prairie, wetlands is developed into a more intense use. From 1992-1997, we had increased development. The number of tracts of forested landscape 50 acres or less doubled in a couple of decades. That really brings meaning to Will Rogers' quote "Buy land,

they ain't making it anymore.” It's very simple—you take thousands of large tracts of land and subdivide them into literally millions of acres of small tracts.

Interesting headline in The Spokesman-Review yesterday, “Kootenai County Idaho—Rathdrum Prairie Disappearing Fast”. The beat goes on with development.

Private lands: increased number of ‘No trespassing’ signs. Public lands are one of the great resources that we have. And yet in my home state, the tranquil Midwest, we've just seen a number of members of the state legislature introduce a resolution for the state to take over the national forest which is a little bit surprising given the fact that the timber harvest has been increasing for about the last twenty years. But I really don't know the rationale for that. But the bottom line is this is land that belongs to everybody that we're talking about.

The spectrum of the recreation opportunity that we're losing the most rapidly in the United States is this wild land landscape. Hunting, fishing, the lands that produce the cleanest water. Doug mentioned the quality hunting and fishing. The Trout Unlimited staff has just done a fantastic job in my view of pulling together fish and wildlife habitats as they relate to wild lands—in fact I think, Keith, you're having a press conference later this afternoon and I'm going to be there just to hear what you have to say and I encourage everybody else to attend as well.

So trophy hunting, highest biodiversity, exotic species, one of the major problems we have in this country and in fact all over the world. And there's something that invasive weeds have in common—they thrive in disturbed habitats. Our wild lands are landscapes with the highest biodiversity with the native animals are the most resistant and it doesn't cost very much. The last stronghold for rare species and the list goes on and on of why these wild landscapes are so important.

And in closing, I want to challenge all of us in the hunting and fishing community: Why have we been absent for so much of this debate? Why in some cases have we been so gullible and not dug into the facts as they're presented? I was fascinated to hear this morning at breakfast that the Clinton Administration had closed millions of acres to hunting. Tom Warden asked me what I

thought about that and I said I'd been a fish and wildlife biologist in the public agencies in the Carter Administration, the Reagan Administration, Bush I, Clinton and for a short time in Bush II, although they really didn't want to listen to me very much and I'd ask you to challenge the NRA—where is this, where are these millions of acres that have been closed? Because what we've seen happen is the radicalization of something that we were very unified on as a nation, and I just simply use that as an example, not to pick on any organization—at least not without asking how much land are we going to lose, how much quality hunting land are we going to lose to oil and gas development as we attempt to wring every last drop out of the public lands in the country, which to me doesn't seem like a very conservative thing to do but I'm not here to talk about my biases. These issues that we're talking about really haven't been politicized for very many years and somehow we have to break out of this mold.

The first set-aside of lands for aesthetic values was done by Abraham Lincoln on July 1, 1864 where he set aside the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias for rest and recreation. Doug mentioned another President that signed the Wilderness Act, a President not necessarily known for conservation values that signed the Wilderness Act, Lyndon Johnson, also in the heat of war. Richard Nixon, no liberal by any account, did so much for conservation in the United States, creating the Environmental Protection Agency, the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, the Marine Mammals Protection Act, strengthening the Endangered Species Act, and the list goes on and on.

So why is it that we're in this pitched battle now? And I would like to think that are we moving out of it, Doug, with some of the things that I learned today that I didn't know about what this Bush Administration might be planning. I hope that's the case. But my plea to you is get involved. It's the anglers and the hunters that probably stand to lose the most in this debate. And roll up your sleeves, provide the information, ask the hard questions, dig into the science because the future of this tremendous heritage that we have is really at stake because when it comes to wild lands they 'just ain't making it anymore'.

Thank you.