

DAVE FOREMAN'S
AROUND THE CAMPFIRE
"THE BEDROCK OF THE CONSERVATION
MIND"

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In the last "Around the Campfire" I argued that Nature conservationists, who work to protect wilderness areas and wild species, should be called conservationists, and that resource conservationists, who wish to domesticate and manage lands and species for the benefit and use of humans, should be called resourcists. I also believe that Nature conservationists are different birds than environmentalists, who work to protect human health from the ravages of industrialization, and that therefore there is not a single "Environmental Movement." When environmentalists turn their attention from the so-called "built environment" to Nature, they can take either a conservationist or a resourcist pathway. I've named environmentalists who have a utilitarian resourcist view "enviro-resourcists." I've ruffled some feathers with this view. I've ruffled even more feathers lately by warning that enviro-resourcists have been slowing gaining control of conservation groups, thereby undercutting and weakening our effectiveness, and that Nature lovers need to take back the conservation family.

Before I can argue for a Take Back Conservation campaign, I must first answer a basic question: What are the field marks of Nature conservationists? Aldo Leopold pointed out the heart-most when he wrote in the first line of *A Sand County Almanac*, “There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.”¹ Conservationists are the “Cannots.” We should wear that badge proudly for it speaks to our wide-rooted sanity. We have a deep tie to wilderness and wildlife. Some of us are moved more by the challenge, inspiration, and solitude of the big outside; others by sublime natural scenery. Yet others of us are caught up by the frolicking rough-and-tumble of animals and plants in the theater of evolution. Many of us need to get out and dirty in Nature; others are happy to know that wilderness is outside the lodge picture window from the comfort of their easy chairs and brandy snifters. Regardless, it comes down to a love and respect for wild Nature. Whether we are fully aware of it or not, I think we conservationists are enthralled by self-willed lands, waters, and animals...even when they are dangerous. We need to know that there are things undomesticated, carrying on their evolutionary adventures without regard for humans. We see forests, not two-by-fours; we see animals, not meat or pests; we see rivers, not hydroelectric power. At our deepest we believe that other species should be safeguarded for their own sakes, whether they have value of any kind for humans, or even if they are a threat or a bother. The founding editor of *Conservation Biology* and author of one of the few essential conservation books, *The Arrogance of Humanism*, David Ehrenfeld, calls this the “Noah Principle”: ecological communities and species “should be conserved because they exist and because this existence

¹ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac And Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), vii.

is itself but the present expression of a continuing historical process of immense antiquity and majesty.”²

In other words, whether we think about it or not, we Nature conservationists generally want to protect wild Nature—places and wildeors—for their *intrinsic value*.³ Arne Naess, the grand old Norwegian philosopher and mountaineer who founded the high-minded Deep Ecology movement, worked out a formal philosophical argument for the intrinsic value of other life forms. But even for professional philosophers like Arne, celebrating the intrinsic value of all species comes first and foremost from the evolutionary heart—just as it does for all kinds of other Nature lovers. Since at least the time of John Muir, a gaggle of Nature conservationists have spoken out about how they value other species for their own sakes. The late Canadian naturalist John Livingston wrote that wildlife conservation is “The preservation of wildlife forms and groups of forms in perpetuity, for their own sakes, irrespective of any connotation of present or future human use.”⁴ He elaborated, “In essence, wildlife conservation is the preservation of nonhuman beings in their natural settings, unaffected by human use or activity, uncontaminated by human antibiosis, emancipated from human serfdom.”⁵ Of course, humans also can enjoy and seek to preserve other species out of curiosity, for their beauty, because of their important ecological roles, and so on. But when it comes right down to it, we conservationists protect wild things for their own worth without

² David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1978), 207-208.

³ *Wildeor* means “self-willed animal” in Old English.

⁴ Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*, 17.

⁵ Livingston, *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation*, 18.

requiring that they have an economic or even aesthetic value. The weight of conservationists with whom I have worked over the years would agree with this view. Those conservationists are the true experts on the conservation movement and on conservation philosophy. Lots of Nature conservationists rarely think about such lofty concepts as intrinsic value and work to save their favorite places or to protect their favorite critters. Protecting wild things for their own sakes is for many an unstated assumption deep inside. A given. Based on the hundreds of folks I've worked with over the course of four decades, I think if pressed most would acknowledge that species and places should be saved for their own sakes.

The original meaning of wilderness in Old English, let us remember, is “self-willed land.” Likewise, *wildeor* meant “self-willed beast.” Wilderness can also be interpreted as “home of self-willed beasts.” Being self-willed, it would seem to me, strongly implies that something is its own thing and not a possession or resource of another. In a nutshell: Conservationists work to keep human will from domesticating all Nature. Resourcists work to impose human will on Nature, including even wilderness and wild predators, through some degree of management.⁶ *Whose will?* is the bedrock question behind conservation battles, whether battlers on either side are aware of the question or not.

Our work is based on these values. We strive to safeguard wildlands as legal wilderness areas or in like strictly protected categories. We shield endangered, threatened, and sensitive species. We bring back wolves, lynx, black-footed ferrets, bolson tortoises, humpbacked chubs, California

⁶ Management of people in wilderness areas is an entirely different matter. So is temporary restoration management to help heal human-caused wounds to the point where the wilderness can begin to heal itself.

condors, and peregrine falcons to their former homes. We fight dams on rivers that yet flow free. We guard the holiness of national parks. We try to block feckless off-road vehicle hooliganism; sue against careless logging, mining and energy extraction in wild places; cheer on with dollars those who confront whalers on the high seas; appeal sloppy, land-degrading livestock grazing practices....

For too many years the conservation movement has been drifting away from its most basic values. This drift has two currents pushing it. One, some conservationists are afraid that straight talk about the intrinsic value of Nature and wild species will turn off people. Two, a growing number of conservation group leaders do not themselves believe in Nature for its own sake. David Johns writes in an email message that “some conservationists seem to be not just using anthropocentric arguments to advance rewilding goals, but are, in fact, backing off of rewilding goals in favor of sustainable development nonsense.” In this way, the soul of conservation is being sucked away and drowned. The shift to resourcism can be subtle, even unconscious. When we don't talk about Nature, it fades from our minds—and our press releases.

David Ehrenfeld warns in *The Arrogance of Humanism*, “Resource reasons for conservation can be used if honest, but must always be presented together with the non-humanistic reasons, and it should be made clear that the latter are more important in every case.”⁷ He explains that “there is simply no way to tell whether one arbitrarily chosen part of Nature has more ‘value’ than another part, so like

⁷ David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance Of Humanism* (Oxford University Press, NY, 1978), 210.

Noah we do not bother to make the effort.”⁸ He continues, “I have tried to show...the devilish intricacy and cunning of the humanists' trap. ‘Do you love Nature?’ they ask. ‘Do you want to save it? Then tell us what it is good for.’ The only way out of this kind of trap, if there is a way, is to smash it, to reject it utterly.”⁹ Decades earlier, Aldo Leopold warned that “most members of the land community have no economic value.” He urged against inventing “subterfuges to give it economic importance.”¹⁰ I can offer no better advice to young conservationists than what these two wise men give. Species and other parts of the land community deserve to exist for their own sakes. Do not rely on or exaggerate the economic values of wildbeasts and wild places. When someone asks you about a certain species, “Well, what good is it?” there is only one suitable answer, “Well. What good are you?”

We should not be shy about saying, “I love wilderness and big cats!” Celebrating the intrinsic value of all life forms and the dazzling dance that has brought this diversity into being is the bedrock of the conservation mind. We conservationists need to reaffirm our biocentric values even if we worry that they may be a hard sell to the public, which, as several public opinion polls show, is not necessarily so.¹¹ If we do not stand up for Nature for its own sake, no one will. If not us, who will lead society into a new relationship with Nature? Moreover, by denying our values to ourselves and by hiding them from others, we will do immeasurable harm to our own sanity and integrity. Like Peter denying Christ thrice before the cock crew, we will become miserable, pitiful wretches.

⁸ Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance Of Humanism*, 208.

⁹ Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance Of Humanism*, 210.

¹⁰ Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac And Sketches Here and There* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), 210.

¹¹ I discuss some of these polls in my forthcoming book, and will present them soon on the Rewilding Website.

Biologist Campbell Webb, who works in the tropical forests of Indonesia, writes in *Conservation Biology*, “Finally, perhaps the healthiest thing we can do for our peace of mind is to speak our mind...we value [natural places and species] just for being. And yet many of us have been acculturated to present only utilitarian arguments for their preservation...Perhaps the time has come to stand up and speak our minds clearly, especially because most anthropocentric, utilitarian approaches have failed to slow the destruction....”¹²

I am proud to see more and more field biologists standing up like Webb and defending the intrinsic value of other species. Mike Parr, secretary of the Alliance for Zero Extinction, a new group working to save the species facing “imminent extinction,” says, “This is a one-shot deal for the human race. We have a moral obligation to act. The science is in, and we are almost out of time.”¹³ Many of those who work for zoos and who are funded by zoos for field research are heroic defenders of wild Nature for its own sake. You don't put your life on the line in a vicious, cannibalistic civil war unless you care about the inherent value of the gorillas you are defending.

For the last fifteen years I've been crisscrossing North America arguing for the protection and reintroduction of large carnivores because of how they exercise “top-down regulation” of prey species to the great benefit of ecosystems.¹⁴ This is what rewilding is all about, after all. However, even this is a utilitarian argument of a sort. The real reason for protecting and restoring large carnivores is for their own sakes. Scientists at the Wildlife Conservation Society have just edited a book that carefully weighs how a variety of carnivores around the world actually

¹² Campbell O. Webb, “Engineering Hope,” *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 19, No. 1, February 2005, 277.

¹³ Ed Stoddard, Reuters, “Study Pinpoints Species Facing Extinction Threat,” December 13, 2005.

¹⁴ Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004).

function for the health of the ecosystem: *Large Carnivores and the Conservation of Biodiversity*. Nonetheless, Justina Ray and her coauthors write, “We suggest that it is important to distinguish between value-based and science-based reasons for carnivore conservation—understanding that the two can be integrated. Too often scientifically grounded principles to justify carnivore conservation have obscured the more fundamental aesthetic and ethical values that lie at the root of many who argue for their conservation.”¹⁵ Carnivores have both intrinsic and instrumental value. The intrinsic values are the bedrock on which the others stand.

We may fear that most Americans, Mexicans, and Canadians (and other peoples) are not biocentric believers that other species have a right to exist for their own sakes. At least, most are not hard believers in a Nature-first ethic. We should not worry so much. Jack Humphrey, the webmaster for The Rewilding Institute and former executive director of the Sky Island Alliance, writes in an email, “These days I am more of an outsider than the insider I used to be in the conservation community and I can tell you with 100% confidence, the conservation movement has NOTHING to lose by being bold, outspoken, and unmovable on our issues. Why? Because the movement isn't even on the radar of the average people in this country.”

From talking with hundreds of people and from my studies of public opinion polling and focus groups, however, I believe that a host of people is swayed by biocentric arguments or at least by the feeling that wild Nature is *good*. I also believe that emotional pleas to protect wild animals and wild places grab people. Last summer, for example, I ran into an average Jose on the wilderness-edge trail

¹⁵ Justina C. Ray, Kent H. Redford, Joel Berger, and Robert Steneck, “Conclusion: Is Large Carnivore Conservation Equivalent to Biodiversity Conservation and How Can We Achieve Both?” in Justina C. Ray, Kent H. Redford, Robert S. Steneck, and Joel Berger, eds., *Large Carnivores and the Conservation of Biodiversity* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2005), 424.

near my house. He knew little about conservation issues, but let me know that he loved seeing snakes on the trail and thought they had a right to live their own lives without being harmed by people. I commonly have such encounters with folks from all demographic groups. I am friendly and skilled in bringing up such subjects on the trail and getting people to reveal their true feelings about Nature to me. I think that getting someone to defend Nature for its own sake to a stranger strengthens the ethic in his or her own mind and actions. Try it.

At my talks before various audiences, including zoo members, biologists' conventions, universities, conservation conferences, and the general public, I offer Leopold's passion, "There are those who can live without wild things and those who cannot." Then I ask, "How many Cannots are here?" After letting it soak in for a few seconds, I say, "Raise your hand if you are a Cannot." Nearly all hands are raised with much chuckling.

People have calendars on their walls and photo books on their coffee tables with wild animals in their wild habitats; people watch Nature shows on television. People are gripped by wild animals; their souls glow in the shine of the wildeor; they like them! Remember that most public art of Nature (such as calendars) does not show people (though increasingly, due perhaps to the creeping resourcism I've been warning about, the magazines of the big conservation groups have been putting people on the covers).

A few weeks ago, I gave a talk at the annual meeting of the Southwest Chapter of The Wildlife Society. Most members work for federal and state wildlife agencies, or at universities. And most would think of themselves as in the resource conservation camp (resourcism) and would consider my kind preservationists. Protection of the Mexican wolf is a volcanic issue at this time in the Southwest. Instead of my regular slide lecture on the North American Wildlands Network, I gave a talk about the need to protect wilderness and species

for the their own sakes, because they are the building blocks of evolution, stressing the need to get tough with protecting the Lobo. Much of this column was mixed into it.

At the beginning, I asked who was a Cannot. After a couple of seconds of nervous looking back and forth, nearly everyone raised their hands. Afterwards a couple of good ol' boy wildlifers asked me if I had some "Cannot and Proud" bumper stickers and said they'd put them on their pick-ups. A woman who worked for the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service and who gave a very soft speech before mine thanked me for reminding her what her job was really about. I got an email the next day from a tribal wildlife manager for a southwestern reservation thanking me, and telling me how important it was for him and his crew to regularly hear my kind of values-based message. I also heard that a saddle-hardened, cynical old-timer with one of state game agencies had told a friend of mine how moved he was by my talk.

Now, I don't pass on these reactions to boast, but to show just how damned important it is for us to talk about our love for wild Nature and how we must protect species and wilderness simply because they exist. In doing so, we make a difference. You don't know whom you will reach and what they might do in the future. This is especially important with folks who we think are jaded, or who we think are resourcists. A couple of days ago, I gave a similar talk to a convention of the public affairs officers for the Southwest and Rocky Mountain regions of the Forest Service. Even with this audience, I opened some minds, soothed others, and encouraged the Nature lovers by talking straight about values, about protecting wild things for their own sakes.

Leopold's line, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot," followed by the question, "How many of you are Cannots?" is the best icebreaker I have yet discovered. And I only found it a couple of weeks ago.

Use it. Be bold. Find other Cannots. Talk to them about wild things and how we must protect them for their own sakes.

Dave Foreman

Somewhere on the Rio Grande in a Canoe

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