

Preserving Nature in Parks*

by R. Y. Edwards, Victoria, B.C.

Some of you, I am sure, are going to be startled by what I have to tell you tonight. It would be so easy if I could give you the clear, simple message that we need more parks in which to preserve more nature. But the issue is more complex than this, as you will soon see.

There is much confusion abroad about parks and the preservation of nature, and there is nothing like confusion to foster wasted effort and to limit accomplishment. The preservation of nature in Canada will continue to be severely hampered until there is widespread understanding amongst us naturalists and amongst our friends over the limited role that parks can play in this preservation.

To put it bluntly, parks often destroy nature. At the same time, much nature is being preserved in some parks. So here in a nutshell is the confusing situation which I have been asked to talk about tonight.

Let me begin by telling you about a friend of mine. He earns a good living by guiding people into part of central British Columbia that is wilderness. Here I use "wilderness" in its oldest North American sense, to describe a land beyond the frontier of civilization, a land as yet completely untamed. For money—a lot of money—my friend will take you into some of the wildest country still to be found south of the far North. Here you will ride with a string of good pack horses, and sleep in canvas camps where the campfire cooking is plain, and good.

This friend of mine loves wild country. Excitement flashes in his eyes

when he talks of a big bull caribou on a far skyline, or of ptarmigan chicks in the flowering heather; and his word pictures of superb mountain scenery are vivid verbal paintings that could only come from a deep love of what he saw.

Many of his customers are hunters. My friend is a hunter of sorts, but an unusual one. Animals are not valuable to him simply as meat, or as trophies, or as dollars from hunters; they are valuable for what they are, things alive and wild in wild country that is their native home. He regards the killing of a few animals as a regrettable necessity, so that he too can make a living in this wild and lonely country.

This man is a naturalist. He loves the earth and the wild things that live in wild places, and he works hard at understanding the things he sees in nature. What better naturalist can there be than this?

When you love something, you hope it will not be destroyed. Naturalists, because of their interests and because of the way they think, are forever hoping to preserve the nature that has given their lives beauty, and enthusiasm, and companionship, and a host of other satisfactions. Our wilderness naturalist is no exception. He has spent long hours in his saddle, and sleepless nights in his blankets, thinking about how to preserve the wonderful country he works in, the country that he thinks is the best that this earth can offer. Before he discussed his problem with anyone, he had most of his answers thought out. And at the time I am talking about, I must admit

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Sask. Gov't. Photo

"Keep your bulldozers out of there." Cypress Hills as seen from Bald Butte.

that I had done little thinking about such matters.

Then, as now, I worked for British Columbia's Provincial Parks Branch. We believed that the parks in British Columbia were not just good—they were among the best anywhere. These were the days when roadside campgrounds were still novel, yet numerous enough to bring a chorus of heady praise for our genius. And in a few large parks we had just put in enough roads and buildings to convince ourselves that we, not God, had made these parks. Looking back I am reminded of bantam roosters. We thought ourselves important, and we acted important, but the result was a bit ridiculous.

When my friend first talked of his dream to preserve this wilderness, I naturally thought that he was pro-

posing this area for yet another glorious provincial park. I was wrong. I will never forget his look of astonishment when he realized what I was thinking.

"You're not serious," he said. "One of the surest ways to ruin that high bunchgrass country would be to make it a park. Keep your bulldozers out of there!"

Apparently one of his favourite nightmares was a vision of his Shangri-la full of roads, and cars, and people, and motor boats, and garbage, and Park Planners planning further desecrations.

He didn't want a recreation area. He wanted a natural area. He knew that in parks there may be much naturalness, but that recreation is apt to dictate how much naturalness—

how much nature—shall remain. Many a park is supposed to be a “natural area for the use and enjoyment of the people,” but by the time the using and enjoying people have trampled all over the nature while using and enjoying it, there is not much doubt over whether recreation or naturalness is the dominant purpose of parks.

It's ten years now since my wilderness friend straightened me out. And since then I've been involved in the same plot several times, each time with a different hero and each time with different scenery on the stage. Recently the hero was a dear old lady, grown a bit vague for her many years, but she had lived much of her life on a bit of hillside on Vancouver Island, and she was not vague about wanting her little world of nature preserved. There were old Douglas firs on the property fit to make a logger's eyes shine, and she wanted to be sure that her giant trees stayed out of loggers' hands. She knew where the first trilliums bloomed, and where the calypso orchids were hidden in the springtime. She knew where the pheasants nested, and she knew the time on the calendar when the sea blush would paint the rocky hills with pink. And swallows came to her eaves every year. She wanted things like these to live after her, so she invited us to visit one day. We got along well as we viewed her treasures, then had tea. And then she told me: “I'll give it to the government as a park, and all I ask is that people be kept out.” I was not strong enough to tell her, then, that the Act—the law—controlling my office says that parks are for people, and it does not even mention nature. Not all parks Acts are so lopsided, but I suspect many are.

So here again was a naturalist in love with land, trying to preserve it, and this time I was able to see that a park, in the usual sense, would not do what she wanted done. The big firs would be safe enough, but trilliums and orchids, and sea blush, and pheasant eggs, were not compatible with the big feet of concentrated humanity. Some nature can mix with people, some cannot. Until you know this there is danger of trying to do the impossible in parks. The moral of all this is clear and simple: nature is not al-

ways adequately preserved in parks when you want a gem of nature preserved put a park around it at its peril, for a park could be the last thing you want.

—I know some high mountain meadows so filled with flowers in summer that a park was made to preserve them. A road now cuts like an open sore in the earth across this high country, and too many trampling feet are destroying the very flowering plants that attract them. The nature that is so attractive is dying from too much popularity.

—I know another park paradise in the clouds where feet have not just killed the delicate alpine vegetation, the feet have left the soil naked to the heavy rains of the coast mountains, and deep, ugly ditches, carved by erosion, have scarred the scenery forever.

—I know where once in a park was a lovely old stabilized rockslide at the foot of a steep mountain slope. The rocks were green with mosses, and among the rocks was the only rock rabbit colony to be found for miles. Rock rabbits are real little rabbits with short ears that live in tumbled rocks. Anyone who knows the mountains of the northwest has fond memories of rock rabbits sitting fully exposed on rocks, calling greetings to hikers as they pass. There are now no rock rabbits, and no rockslide in this place. My favourite rockslide was in a park, but parks have roads, and roads need rock. Where once were rock rabbits among mossy old rocks there is now a scar on the mountain slope decorated with some oil cans and bits of rusting machinery.

—I know many parks where roadside flowers turn the brown of sudden death each summer when they are touched by “weed killers,” and where this ugly blot on the landscape is considered to be efficient park management.

—I know parks where the dead and dying trees to be found in almost every healthy forest are considered eyesores or perhaps they are just vaguely labelled dangerous, but in any event they are things to cut down, and to cut up. A need for firewood is



"Trampling feet are destroying the very flowering plants that attract."

usually involved to complicate the motives for removing these trees, but regardless of purpose, this practice removes habitat for a host of forest animals, from ants to woodpeckers. Someone has said that a tree is never so alive as when it is dead. By this standard, many a park forest is not very much alive.

—And I know parks—often the same parks where money is wasted on removing dead trees—where living trees are defended with a fervor akin to old-time religion and heaven help the bird, or mammal, or insect that eats trees. One wonders when parks are not parks at all but tree farms; and when park management will shake itself free of cellulose forestry.

—I know parks where

—horses eat away the show of wild flowers every year.

—where people carry off boxes filled with mountain plants for their gardens.

—where park wardens set snares for wolves.

—where government men drop deadly 1080 baits from aircraft.

—where sprays deadly to animals fall from the sky every year.

—where there is logging with all the destruction and mess and tangle and clatter that must result from logging.

—where cattle graze unrestricted.

—where exotic species are deliberately introduced into the park fauna by the park administration.

—where just about any destructive force that you can think about is to be found destroying natural fauna, or flora, or geological features, or things of historical value.

This is a sad picture that I am painting, and I must take care not to overdo it. But I have painted it because the most important message that I can give you tonight is this: "Beware of parks as nature preserves."

Appropriate here is the philosophy of an old southern gentleman, found sitting contentedly in the sun. He was asked the secret of attaining a happy old age, and he said: "I avoids the impossible, and I co-operates with the inevitable." This sounds like a successful formula.

Avoid the impossible. Don't try to preserve delicate nature in a park that will destroy it.

Co-operate with the inevitable. If a park won't do the job, call a spade a spade and try to establish a nature preserve or something equivalent. Ontario has a growing number of nature preserves, some purchased by naturalists' organizations, and some established by government under a so-called Wilderness Act. I don't agree with the use of the word "wilderness" here, but the result is impressive, regardless.

Canada needs to preserve bits of undisturbed wild land. We must do this for the same reasons that our museums preserve old steam engines, or old furniture, or old dinosaur bones. By comparison, it is far more important to preserve parts of the countryside. I don't want to belittle the great value of old bones, or of antique engines, but they cannot have nearly the importance, today or tomorrow, of a living, breathing metropolis of plants and animals located where it belongs on native ground.

As a Canadian, as a forest dwelling Canadian, I am disturbed at how little I hear about nature preserves on my prairies. Perhaps I am just out of touch, and much is happening that I haven't heard. I will be delighted to hear that this is so.

I have, however, heard about your thoughts of a large grassland park in your southwest, and I find the idea exciting—with some misgivings over the word "park" which you will now understand.

Because of these misgivings, I wonder if everyone is clear on what is wanted—or needed.

—Are you after preservation as real and as full as possible? This is difficult to do politically for it may lose votes and will probably gain very few, but in practice it is easy to do—you just lock up the countryside.

—Or, are you after preserved prairie 'on show to the interested public? With people trampling about there will be problems in preserving prairie, but it can be done with good planning and a few compromises.

—Or are you after prairie of any quality as an atmosphere in which people will recreate according to their wishes? This is simply providing space with prairie flavour. Space, with flavour, is about all that most National and provincial parks provide. Are you after such a park?

Again, don't misunderstand me. Much nature is preserved in Canada's parks. But this preservation is usually a partial thing, as was clearly stated by Resources Minister Laing in his encouraging statement on National parks policy made in September. I wonder if native prairie can withstand only partial protection, and remain anything worth protecting from the naturalist's point of view. A million people can come to look at a mountain, and the mountain will still be there. Fifty thousand people can beat a path to a Douglas fir, and it will still be there next year unchanged. But long before a hundred people have come to see a little prairie anemone, there won't be much left to see. Prairie vegetation cannot withstand Coney Island use.

But Canada needs a national prairie park or prairie preserve of some kind. If it not already too late, suddenly, very soon, it will be too late. As with the Passenger Pigeon, too late is a frighteningly final condition.

I suggest that we should have both a national prairie park, and a national prairie preserve, side by side. The park would be for people to walk in, and

camp in, and drive in, a place in which to learn something of the old prairie where a man can stand in wild space and look to the rim of a wild world. Future generations must know old prairie, not from books, but from experiencing it and if this human use, this park use, should leave some of the prairie park a bit shopworn, inspired park planning and careful park management will help to keep the damage to a minimum.

Adjacent to this park a prairie preserve should serve science, and education, and the great human need to understand. One part of the preserve, an inaccessible part perhaps, should be an outdoor laboratory and classroom for intensive study. This research area should serve mankind with knowledge, so that the prairie which almost vanished before we knew it, will still be better understood. The rest of the preserve should be devoted to controlled use by visitors confined to paths and trails, with interpreters—like park naturalists—explaining the wonders of the grasslands, and doing this by using all the tested techniques that Park Naturalists use throughout North America. Here there should be a museum, guided walks, outdoor talks, nature trails,

booklets, and these could easily attract tens of thousands of Canadians a summer. This is no wild prediction. Last summer, in hundreds of less glamorous places throughout North America, naturalist interpreters were swamped by millions and millions of people eager to hear what they had to say. Prairie interpretation would pack them in; and good planning would save much of the prairie from damage too.

In many parks in America today there are zones of protection such as I describe here. Rarely, however, are these zones planned zones. They are rather accidents of time and space and the limited mobility of people. Sooner or later the unused lands in these parks will be trampled unless policy changes.

In Canada's prairie shrine, preservation by chance would not be good enough. Rather planning and management must ensure prairie for recreation, prairie for interpretation, and prairie for scientific investigation.

Give me a prairie monument like this, and I would have another major reason for wanting to know Saskatchewan.

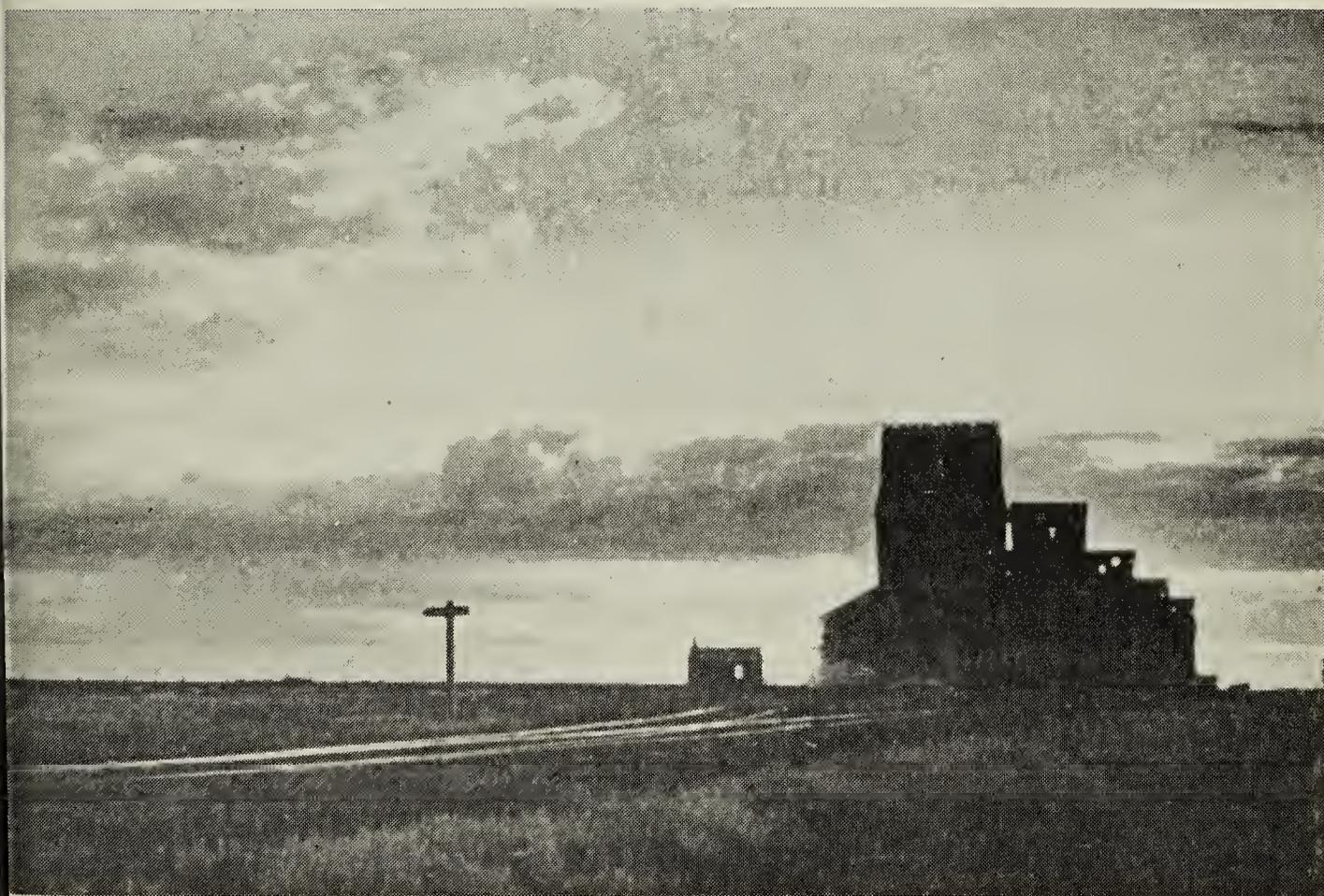


Photo by Dick Bird.

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