

PEOPLE OR HORNNED OWLS?

A talk to the Prairie Habitat Conference,
Saskatoon, April 16, 1975
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My text is taken from the Board of Inquiry transcript for the proposed strip mining and thermal-electric development, Poplar River Power Project (Vol. 3, p. 50):

Chairman: What expectations of improved quality of life (do you) see in this whole project?

Mr. S.: You mean people or horned owls?

Chairman: I have some greater interest in people than horned owls; I'm not at all interested in the horned owl.

Here, honestly expressed, is a viewpoint from which spring the major problems that bedevil the human race. Posed as a question, expecting a resounding negative response, it asks: "Can anything be as important as us?" It implies that human society exists apart from the world of nature and that "quality of life" pertains entirely to cultural things; to pay cheques and artifacts.

What sane person would be interested in saving horned owls if horned owl living-space can be made to yield consumables and jobs? After all, which is more important, people or horned owls, cereal crops or ducks, herefords or deer, forest products or caribou?

Humanity in general has not yet grasped the truth that we are earthlings, born out of and sustained daily by its water, air, soil, organisms. Missing still is a lively awareness of the biosphere, with its myriad and beautiful natural forms and sculptures, is man's habitat, essential to us in many respects, important in most

As an aside but pertinent to this point, the word "habitat" applied to humans is commonly taken to mean "habitation" — house, community. The definition slights the world of nature, the ground of man's continued existence. So, next year's world conference in Vancouver, "Habitat '76" will focus on urban living, and doubtless many optimistic proposals will be made to assure the future of humanity by redesigning our cities!

Hard-headed, "realistic" people do not accept one reason for preserving animals. If it can be shown that the hunting makes good sport, especially if the sport is marketable, then the merits of preservation can at least be argued. There is, of course, a long tradition of interest in animals large enough to be seen down the barrel of a gun (or, the water, large enough to take a lure). The tradition reaches its finest flowering in game farms and stocked streams, where animals are raised for ritual killing. Even though the trend today is toward "non-consumptive" uses, toward observing and photographing wildlife, the focus is still on us and our interests. The

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people first" proposition that guides our every action is wrong and dangerous.

If changes in attitude are to be made, it is necessary to understand the historical-cultural reasons for the contemporary disinterest, disdain and even fear of the natural world. Such attitudes are learned not inborn. Apparently the Greeks believed that the world around them was organic, important, sacred, and they peopled it with various deities. Pan, the all-god, father of the nymphs, dryads and naiads who inhabited groves and streams, symbolized with his wreath of leaves and his pipes the magic and revelry of life in nature. But somewhere in our later tradition the sense of mystery and sanctity was lost. As D. H. Lawrence pointed out, Pan with goat's beard and cloven hoof was transformed into the devil. Nature was "demythologized" and the door was opened to the so-called objective viewpoint that separates the observer from the world. Thus western scientific man can exterminate rare life forms, or carve up the biosphere, with colossal unconcern and no apparent qualms. In a relatively few generations we have lost our roots with the world that brought us forth in four billion years of evolution.

Perhaps the pendulum is swinging back. Certainly the "let it be" philosophy is gaining ground. A mere years ago the Saskatchewan public caught the idea that the only way to preserve wild animals (except in zoos) is through preservation of their habitat. The Saskatchewan Wildlife Federation has been increasingly effective in promoting this simple basic ecological concept. It may be a short step to the realization that, along with the other coinhabitants, the species *Homo sapiens* also needs his native habitat preserved. But first a *commit-*

ment of people with insight and belief is needed. Such commitment can only come from those with a love of nature.

You may remember that Aldo Leopold tussled with the problem in several articles called *The Land Ethic* and *The Conservation Ethic*. He attempted to provide, by analogy, a reason for care of the land. Ethics, he implies, are adaptive responses of the human race; they have social and survival values. What is accepted as "good" turns out to be the system of beliefs and behaviours that, through long experience, the race has found necessary for its continuation. First came the ethics of *individual* relationships (e.g., Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself), then the ethics of *societal* relationships (Thou shalt look after the greatest good of the greatest number), and now the first glimmers of the ethics of *ecological* relationships (Thou shalt protect and preserve the health, permanency and productivity of the earth). While Leopold thought of this last essential ethical step as just evolving, I am inclined to believe that it is already present instinctively in each of us, waiting beneath the surface to be released from the wrong habits and activities imposed by a misguided society.

The beauty of ethics, once the intuitive insight is given, is that it lifts questions of behaviour out of the arena of individual and social gain. An ethical person acts from conviction that what she is doing is right, regardless of whether or not it is profitable. A child who cares for his parents is acknowledging, consciously or not, a dependence on them that cannot be priced. Children of the earth should do as much. Everyone who controls a part of the earth — whether a city plot or a farm — should know the ethical responsibility of protecting and preserving, without being paid.

When judgements of what actions should be taken are made solely on an *economic* basis, environment always loses. The reason is that economics is necessarily man-centered, not biosphere-centered. Even the *ethical* actions that center on individuals and society — what we call “altruism” and “humanitarianism” — are to be viewed with distrust because, unrestrained by earth-care, they have ceased to be adaptive. Strange as it may seem, our conventional man-centered ethics are killing us. To the question “Shall we ruin the earth to feed starving humanity?”, the unconventional ecological highest ethic must say “No!”

It follows that there are various frames of reference to which the subject of “habitat” can be related. The narrowest possible view simply looks for space to raise selected animals for human use. Perhaps its ultimate outcome is the licensed angling for carp in artificial ponds on strip-mined lands, bird-watching in the city cemetery, or shooting ducks in a barrel. The broadest possible view looks to preservation of representative parts of the biosphere, with their full complements of land and water forms, plants and animals; *the preservation of large complete ecosystems that renew the earth simply by being there and producing clean water, fresh air, and life*. This is people habitat as well as animal habitat and, in the long run, I don’t see how we can settle for less. Between the two extremes lies a broad spectrum of “habitats”, for single or multiple human uses, for simple or complex preservation, for narrow goals or broad.

Most wildlife specialists are involved in management. Their employers would probably be unhappy if my thesis were widely championed, viz., that habitat in the broadest sense — equivalent to natural area, ecological reserves and wilderness — should be the center of wildlife interest. We must be realistic and concede that in this unenlightened age society is demanding a good deal less. Yet it is important that practitioners and professionals should also be leaders and set high goals. The public has a way of catching up quickly when the time and the ideas are right.

The title phrase “People or Horned Owls?”, and all other oppositions of the same genre, are really not questions and non-alternatives. We *must* protect and conserve the natural world, horned owls and all, because that is the *right* thing to do, because the earth *is* sacred, and because any other course denies our biological and ecological roots. And, as a fortunate spin-off, because this is the only road to survival. Given acceptance of such a stirring and worthwhile goal, the short-term day-to-day man-centered aims of habitat management can perhaps be seen in their correct perspective, contributing to but far short of the ideal and the necessary. Wildlife managers need to recognize a hierarchy of habitat goals, giving leadership and support to the primary one even while their bread-and-butter jobs require that they attend also to those that are secondary.

