

From Aldo Leopold: A Sand County Almanac & Other Writings on Conservation and Ecology

Goose Music

Twenty years ago the game of golf was commonly regarded in this country as a kind of social ornament, a pretty diversion of the idle rich, but hardly worthy of the curiosity, much less of the serious interest, of men of affairs. Today scores of cities are building municipal golf courses to make golf available to the rank and file of their citizens. What has happened? Golf has not changed, and certainly not golfers. The change has been in the public viewpoint. Golf is no longer regarded as an ornamental sport, but as a valuable means of physical, mental (and to the golfer, spiritual) recreation. Golf has become a valuable part of our social economy. Of course it has always been valuable to society, but the twentieth century has been the first to realize the fact.

The same change of viewpoint has occurred toward most other outdoor sports—the frivolities of fifty years ago have become the social necessities of today. But strangely enough, this change is only just beginning to permeate our attitude toward the oldest and most universal of all sports, hunting and fishing. We have realized dimly, of course, that a day afield was good for the tired business man. We have also realized that the destruction of wildlife removed the incentive for days afield. But we have not yet learned to express the value of wildlife in terms of social welfare.

Some have attempted to justify wildlife conservation in terms of meat, others in terms of personal pleasure, others in terms of cash, still others in the interest of science, education, agriculture, art, public health, and even military preparedness. But few have so far clearly realized and expressed the whole truth, namely, that all these things are but factors in a broad social value, and that wildlife, like golf, is a social asset. But to those whose hearts are stirred by the sound of whistling wings and quacking mallards, wildlife is something even more than this. Golf is an acquired

taste, but the instinct which finds delight in the sight and pursuit of game is bred into the very fibre of the race.

Golf is a delightful accomplishment, but the love of hunting is almost a physiological character. A man may not care for golf and still be human, but the man who does not like to see, hunt, photograph or otherwise outwit birds or animals is hardly normal. He is super-civilized, and I for one, do not know how to deal with him. Babes do not tremble when they are shown a golf ball, but I should not like to own the boy whose hair does not lift his hat when he sees his first deer.

We are dealing, therefore, with something that lies pretty deep. Some can live without opportunity for the exercise and control of the hunting instinct, just as I suppose some can live without work, play, love, business, or other vital adventure. But in these days we regard such deprivations as unsocial. Opportunity for exercise of all the normal instincts has become to be regarded more and more as an inalienable right. The men who are destroying our wildlife are alienating one of these rights, and doing a terribly thorough job of it. More than that, they are doing a permanent job of it. When the last corner lot is covered with tenements we can still make a playground by tearing them down, but when the last antelope goes by the boards, not all the playground associations in Christendom can do aught to replace the loss.

One of the anomalies of wildlife conservation is that our social asset is being destroyed by the very instinct, for the exercise of which we seek to preserve it. I have often wondered why many Americans, decent at home, are such barbarians afield. I think they must be exaggerated "throwbacks" to the old days when the gentle art of poaching was one of the standard accomplishments of a self-respecting yeoman. If the King still owned all the game, I think I should make a very good poacher myself. I often feel the promptings of breed. I own I would rather kill a mess of mallards shooting with the hoi-polloi just outside the gun club fence, than to kill a backload on the baited preserve. But the King no longer owns the game. It

belongs to my friends and neighbors. The gentle art of poaching, therefore, has assumed a new complexion. The poacher is no longer a hero, but a thief. In time he will come to realize this. It is the duty of the forward-looking citizen to speed the day, and of the law to regulate the poacher's conduct meanwhile.

If wild birds and animals are a social asset, how much of an asset are they? It is easy to say that some of us, afflicted with hereditary hunting fever, cannot live satisfactory lives without them. But this does not establish any comparative value, and in these days it is sometimes necessary to choose between necessities. In short, what is a wild goose worth? As compared with other sources of health and pleasure, what is its value in the common denominator of dollars?

Last week I went to hear Sousa's band. It stood me two iron men. They were well spent, but if I had to choose, I would forego the experience for the sight of the big gander that sailed honking into my decoys at daybreak this morning. It was bitter cold and I was all fingers, so I blithely missed him. But miss or no miss I saw him, I heard the wind whistle through his set wings as he came honking out of the gray west, and I felt him so that even now I tingle at the recollection. I doubt not that this very gander has given ten other men two dollars worth of thrills. Therefore, I say he is worth at least twenty dollars to the human race. My notes tell me I have seen a thousand geese this fall. Every one of these in the course of their epic journey from the arctic to the gulf, has on one occasion or another probably served man to the equivalent of twenty dollars.

One flock perhaps has thrilled a score of schoolboys, and sent them scurrying home with tales of high adventure. Another, passing overhead of a dark night, has serenaded a whole city with goose music, and awakened who knows what questionings and memories and hopes. A third perhaps has given pause to some farmer at his plough, and brought new thoughts of far lands and journeyings and peoples, where before was only drudgery barren of any thought at all. I am sure those thousand geese are paying

human dividends on a value of twenty dollars each. But the resulting \$20,000 is only an exchange value, like the sale value of a painting or the copyright of a poem. What about the replacement value? Supposing there were no longer any painting, or poetry, or goose music? It is a black thought to dwell upon, but it must be answered.

In dire necessity somebody might write another Iliad, or paint an Angelus, but fashion a goose? “I, the Lord, will answer them. The hand of the Lord hath done this, and the Holy One of Israel created it.” Is it impious to weigh goose music and art in the same scales? I think not, because the true hunter is merely a non-creative artist. Who painted the first picture on a bone in the caves of France? A hunter. Who alone in our modern life so thrills to the sight of living beauty that he will endure hunger and thirst and cold to feed his eye upon it? The hunter. Who wrote the great hunter’s poem about the sheer wonder of the wind, the hail, and the snow, the stars, the lightnings, and the clouds, the lion, the deer, and the wild goat, the raven, the hawk, and the eagle, and above all the eulogy of the horse? Job, the greatest dramatic artist since the beginning of the world.

Poets sing and hunters scale the mountains primarily for one and the same reason—the thrill to beauty. Critics write and hunters outwit their game primarily for one and the same reason—to reduce that beauty to possession. The differences are largely matters of degree, consciousness, and that sly arbiter of the classification of human activities, language.

If then, we can live without goose music, we may as well do away with stars, or sunsets, or Iliads. But the point is that we would be fools to do away with any of them. What value has wildlife from the standpoint of morals and religion?

I heard of a boy once who was brought up an atheist. He changed his mind when he saw that there were a hundred odd species of warblers, each bedecked like to the rainbow, and each performing yearly sundry thousands of miles of migration about which scientists wrote wisely but

did not understand. No “fortuitous concourse of elements” working blindly through any number of millions of years could quite account for why warblers are so beautiful. No mechanistic theory, even bolstered by mutations, has ever quite answered for the colors of the Caerulean warbler, or the vespers of the woodthrush, or the swansong, or—goose music. I dare say this boy’s convictions would be harder to shake than those of many inductive theologians. There are yet many boys to be born, who like Isaiah “may see, and know, and consider, and understand together, that the hand of the Lord hath done this.” But where shall they see, and know, and consider? In museums?

What is the effect of hunting and fishing on character, as compared with other outdoor sports? I have already pointed out that the desire lies deeper, that its source is a matter of instinct as well as of competition. A son of a Robinson Crusoe, having never seen a tennis racket, might get along nicely without one, but he would be pretty sure to hunt or fish whether or no he were taught to do so. But this does not establish any superiority as to subjective benefits. Which helps the more to build a man?

This question (like the one we used to debate in school about whether boys or girls are the best scholars) might be argued till doomsday. I will not attempt it. But there are two points about hunting which deserve special emphasis. One is that the ethics of sportsmanship are not a fixed code, but must be formulated and practiced by the individual, with no referee but the Almighty. The other is that hunting generally involves the handling of dogs and horses, and the lack of this experience is one of the most serious defects of our gasoline-driven civilization.

There was much truth in the old idea that any man ignorant of dogs and horses was not a gentleman. In the West the abuse of horses is still a universal blackball. This rule of thumb was adopted in the cow country long before “character analysis” was invented, and for all we know, may yet outlive it. But after all it is poor business to prove that one good thing is better than another. The point is that some six or eight millions of

Americans like to hunt and fish, that the hunting fever is endemic in the race, that the race is benefited by any incentive to get out into the open, and is being injured by the destruction of the incentive in this case. To combat this destruction is therefore a social issue. The difficulty, however, is not so much in proving this principle in the abstract, as in getting people to see and respect its applications.

I have seen many a women's club pass resolutions on bird protection, but the "aigrettes" do not come off. I have seen many a law-abiding citizen sit down to a banquet of illegal quail-on-toast, and loudly proclaim his sportsmanship or patriotism. Many of the "best people" at our summer resorts unblushingly buy trout or grouse or venison, and feel delightfully wicked about it, because they see nothing broken but a law. Members of the "Four Hundred" in a middle-western town I know of openly flout the spring-shooting regulations, and their friends accept with warm thanks the ducks thus stolen from their sons. Nightingales tongues were doubtless merely meat to Nero, but it is about time to expect enlightened Americans to know and do better than he.

To conclude: I have congenital hunting fever and three sons. They are little tots and spend their time playing with my decoys and scouring vacant lots with wooden guns. I hope to leave them good health, an education, and possibly even a competence. But what are they going to do with these things if there be no more deer in the hills, and no more quail in the coverts? No more snipe whistling in the meadow, no more piping of widgeons and chattering of teal as darkness covers the marshes; no more whistling of swift wings when the morning star pales in the east! And when the dawn-wind stirs through the ancient cottonwoods, and the gray light steals down from the hills over the old river sliding softly past its wide brown sandbars, — what if there be no more goose-music? I suppose they will have to play golf.

Manuscript, c. June 1922

