

Frontlines

Following in Teddy Roosevelt's Conservation Footsteps

The concept of setting aside land for any but immediate human needs is a fairly modern one, only a century old as embodied by the National Wildlife Refuge System.

It strikes me that an awful lot of human evolution (and species extermination) had to occur before we noticed the irreversible losses our collective ignorance was causing. Even today only a woefully small percentage of us have any notion of the inter-relationships of life on Earth. Over the course of human history “nature” has been a word synonymous with “food.” The wave of extinction which followed the human migration into the western hemisphere is stark evidence of hungry predators who efficiently exterminated the slow and tasty in a wave of exponential human population growth. Only much later did Native Americans develop a culture that enabled them to live in harmony with nature.

What were the origins of the modern concepts of ecology and environmentalism, of biodiversity and land preservation? I suspect that among the earliest hunter-gatherers, the tribal leader often entitled himself to the best hunting land. The concept of the king’s hunting preserve is one thus based first on prowess, then authority, and by the Middle Ages, the concept that the king’s authority was enhanced by success in hunting.

The English sense of parkland for human recreation, in which nature was controlled and defanged, is still an essential part of any open space program, and botanical gardens, zoological parks, athletic complexes, mixed human use parks and a thousand variations of service to basic human needs for escape, release and recreation all miss the mark set by refuges.

Teddy Roosevelt has been the subject of recent re-evaluation and has grown in stature in the American psyche. It was his love of the outdoors that led to the establishment of the first national wildlife refuge, Florida’s Pelican Island. Old Teddy did his share of hunting and fishing, but his vision reached further and he accurately envisioned the continued loss of natural areas critical to the animals he so loved and other less conspicuous organisms essential to the chain of life. Thus was born, at last, the concept of land set aside for nature as its primary function. For the first time, anthropomorphism did not dominate our sense of proper land use. Thanks to the vision of a president elected as a warrior, the concept of the inter-connectivity of life is now recognized throughout the world.

Delaware’s two national wildlife refuges, Prime Hook and Bombay Hook, are wonderful examples of land management with the emphasis on nature as a coherent whole, not nature for the immediate satisfaction of man’s needs, pleasures and inclinations. Man touches lightly on these sanctuaries and nature comes first, from migratory shorebirds, horseshoe crabs, waterfowl, the elusive and endangered Delmarva fox squirrel, amphibians and reptiles and a broad cross-section of Delaware’s plants from algae to majestic oaks.

Human use of our refuges is carefully guided, yet a visit to either Prime Hook or Bombay Hook is surprisingly rewarding. Both refuges are staffed with true believers who are glad to explain their mission and are loving of the lands and waters they protect. I suspect much of their deep knowledge of their natural resources comes from their hearts and souls, not their job

descriptions. Trails and overlooks abound, and dozens of educational programs fascinate an ever-growing public.

Besides simple admiration, how do we in DNREC fit into this new concept of lands set aside for nature? Very well. Our own parks and wildlife areas are second to none in their accommodation of all of Delaware's living resources and even our high-use Atlantic seashore parks have their secret areas and acres set aside for the smallest and rarest of our creatures.

What's ahead? Plenty. The green infrastructure component in Governor Ruth Ann Minner's Livable Delaware is even now being integrated into biodiversity, a major departmental initiative. We are acquiring land through the Open Space Program and preserving and enhancing our already extensive holdings in the interest of all of nature. Every day more Delawareans follow Teddy's lead in saving a vanishing world for those yet unborn. And, to come full circle, we homo sapiens, Earth's dominant species, have finally evolved to an understanding of nature's place in the grand scheme of things.

John A. Hughes
Secretary