

CONSERVATION AND UNDERSTANDING

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The tempers and tempests of conservation have surged across the matter of saving the landscape from the pressures of an exploding population. It is self-evident that certain representative large tracts of native habitat must be preserved and protected against encroachment and exploitation by man. Much less self evident are the reasons for setting aside large reserves. Many people of the Christian world operate with the doctrine that nature serves man; that nature and native habitats are for man's use; and they do not look on man as a part of nature. This immediately forces the issue concerning the reasons for setting aside natural reserves; it is a reason of use. The matter of use means different things to different people. To many, a piece of native landscape, is for floating, or camping; motor boating or hiking; sailing or horseback riding; swimming or picnicking. To some it is a place where rare birds, animals or plants are found, or a remarkable geological or topographical feature of the earth's surface.

Conservation, the idea of having plants and animals, of pieces of the landscape, is a tangible and emotional experience in which the consequences of our action are seen before us and are walked upon and touched as we reach out. Less tangible but enormously essential to all of mankind is the use of the landscape for understanding the natural history of the planet earth. How many of us realize that unless something is done soon, future generations may be denied forever the opportunity to understand the evolutionary and ecological genesis of the planet on which we live? We have been denied by our own actions and by the actions of those who preceded us, the opportunity to understand many things concerning our natural environment, of our changing environment, or of the immediate past history of the earth's surface. Without history and without an understanding of the physical and biological evolution of the world around us mankind is susceptible to the catastrophic impact of his actions on his own habitat.

Man is an intimate part of nature, not one who is above or removed from nature nor designed to exploit and use nature, but man and nature are one and the same thing. Who among us would advise that we build a bridge across the Mississippi without employing the engineer who understands the principles of bridge construction? Someone did just this many years ago at Tacoma, Washington, and the bridge collapsed in a high wind. Who among us would deny that we must understand and give attention to every last detail in the construction of a jet aircraft for safe passage? Yet someone made just this mistake a decade ago when the British Comets (pioneering jet passenger travel) exploded in flight. Then why must we persist, as a civilized, modern nation, to live and expand and to involve ourselves more and more critically with our environment without a strong program to understand the world in which we live? By understanding I do not mean simply to describe the physical and living world around us, but describing it is the first step in the process of understanding. We are currently collecting and recording the organisms from the world's habitats at a reasonable rate, but the rate must increase, particularly for tropical regions. However, our efforts to understand the intricacies of the natural habitats of the world are shocking little at a time when man's need for this understanding is becoming desperate.

It is a fine thing to conserve natural habitats—the Grand Canyon, the Redwoods, the native prairie, the Great Smokies and many others—but in addition we must marshal our forces for understanding them. The collecting of knowledge and the pursuit of understanding is not as tangible as redwoods, rivers, mountains and canyons, but it is every bit as essential. All the saving of natural habitats will be to little avail if we do not strive for a vigorous program in the