

Remarks in Remembrance of 1990

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The author delivered these remarks in accepting the Audubon Medal on December 6, 1990, in New York City.

Last spring—it must have been sometime in May—I received an exciting call from Peter Berle [president of the Audubon Society]. He said the Audubon board had met somewhere down in South America. I was being summoned to receive the Society's highest honor at the December meeting.

Peter needed to make certain that I would be there, and, without considering other possibilities (this was my 80th year), I hastened to assure him that Suzanne [Allen] and I would mark our calendar. I had witnessed this beatification ceremony several times, and I knew that the public would be held in suspense about it until late in the year.

In those intervening months, you get to wondering how this glorious thing ever happened to little ol' me.

And especially you think about the great people who received the Audubon Medal in previous years. To me the honor was always something akin to knighthood—with certain differences, of course. This distinction was conferred only once a year, and consistently the chosen one seemed to be a person who deserved it.

Here in Manhattan our thoughts turn naturally to the group of founding ornithologists who made bird watching famous in the environs of New York many years ago: Roger Peterson, Dick Pough, Bill Vogt, Joe Hickey, and others who have been great names in Audubon.

Vogt never got the medal because he did not live long enough. Hickey got it most recently. In considering what I might say or do, I reflected on his classic performance at some length. Some of you will recall that in response to public demand, he led the assembly in heavenly song.

It seemed like something I could do—after all, Hickey was only mortal. I expected to strike a blow for population control, and as a faintly original touch maybe I could invoke that stunning acclamation from the drinking man's hymnal, "Glory be to God that there are no more of us!"

It was a nice idea, but I couldn't remember any more of the words. (I do have one thing in common with a former President: I have a hard time remembering things.)

Reserving for the moment the subject of overpopulation, and turning aside from the great imbroglio in the Mideast, I will offer a few more ideas on a more modest theme—what 1990 has meant to me. I think this past year will have a special historic significance to Americans—at least to those who have some respon-

sible interest in the future. It seems probable that most of us will remember 1990 as the year when the United States Congress demonstrated for all to see their inability to handle the public's business apart from their personal affairs.

This perception obviously got to a lot of people, even school kids. I have a friend whose young son had an assignment in his high school history class to write a term paper on Congress. Evidently the teacher wanted to bring out a few points on the law-making process. Somewhat unexpectedly, the boy got interested, especially in the humanistic side of legislation. He called his paper "Congress and the Four S's." Some reading was required to get to the point, but it was finally revealed what the four S's stood for: senescence, seniority, senility, and cynicism. My friend says his precocious kid only got a B in the course, and now he wants to sue the school board.

We can be thankful that a few members of the Congress understand the relationship of human numbers to living standards and to resource use. But these few are outnumbered by a majority who have little interest in such abstractions. This is exemplified by recent proposals for legislation that would open wider our immigration floodgates to the great population surpluses of Latin America and the Far East—people caught in a bind who understandably would like to share our diminishing resource wealth, our great ideal of two jobs for every household, our health facilities, our welfare and educational systems. And of course they bring their birthrates with them. In 1990 the world's population increased by 93 million; each year that statistic grows by a couple of million.

The human environment is being subdivided, and the lots grow steadily smaller. Previous to the world population conference of 1984, this country was contributing \$38 million annually to international population programs. That year we withdrew all support for such activities. Today you can read the quarterly bulletin of the U.S. Agency for International Development without encountering the word "population."

This, the foremost problem of humanity—as someone aptly said, "the multiplier" of all our environmental and social ills. Maybe I should not be surprised, because in the past decade we have developed a national conspiracy of silence in regard to human numbers—actually it includes every aspect of human biology. Is this ignorance, dogma, or both? Can it be that our leadership simply does not care about the future?

This past year brought us the second coming of Earth Day. I naïvely expected an inspirational summing up of twenty years of conservation progress. It was a jarring disillusionment that so little was said about human numbers. The emphasis in various celebrations was on the many-sided issues of land, water, and atmospheric pollution and the huge—even prohibitive—cost of cleaning up our industrial act. Beyond doubt, the public needs such information, but the reports consistently failed to make the population connection. It appeared to me that the average citizen must have come away from Earth Day with the idea that environmentalism is a cult devoted to the theory and practice of trash disposal.

For better-informed persons there were some Earth Day consolations, especially in the superb environmen-

tal literature that is being developed. This is the information and philosophical resource on which plans for the future of humanity must depend. A major problem is that the bulk of our public do not read *Audubon Magazine*, *Natural History*, *The Amicus Journal*, *World Watch*, and books, bulletins, and articles by Paul Ehrlich, Denis Hayes, Lester Brown, and Herman Daly—obviously I slight the many by naming a few. It should be the policy of every conservation organization to get the enormous implications of population growth into the daily news where most people do their reading. Often we write on subjects where space is not sufficient for explaining relationships. But it does not take many words to mention them, and we should miss no opportunity to do so.

In such a meeting as this, I could not fail to recognize that National Audubon has long promoted an understanding of population issues. Most recently, president Russell Peterson strongly supported such activities, as does Peter Berle now. A few months ago *Science Magazine* carried an editorial on population in which its author, Constance Holden, complimented the Audubon program; Patricia Baldi's picture accompanied the article. This is unusual recognition.

The end of 1990 finds us in the middle of "the old-growth controversy." A knowledgeable editor told me that we have allowed the issue to be "trivialized" by representations that it is a choice between spotted owls and jobs. This, of course, is the kind of misleading one-liner dear to the hearts of politicians and the media.

It is more truthful to say that we are arguing for the right of the public to preserve, for present and future

non-destructive uses, the last ten percent of a forest ecosystem that took many centuries to develop and which, in practical terms, is not replaceable.

The old-growth has other than stumpage values. It is a scientific reserve in which we can continue to learn how natural systems work. They are the most complex entities that we know about in the universe, and we have only begun to unlock the secrets of their operation. Of course, also, the old-growth is a unique recreational resource. Its benefits could stretch indefinitely into the future. As we well know, such forests are high-quality watersheds: they stabilize soils, maintain fish habitats, and preserve other native wildlife, including, to be sure, the endangered spotted owl.

The loggers and their companies do indeed need the rest of the old-growth, for the value involved in cutting it off. Just as the loggers of a century ago needed the last of the great pineries in the Lake States and the Northeast. In Michigan we once looked at thousands of acres of stump fields and tried to imagine what a few square miles of those towering trees would be worth today. But someone needed them, nearly all of them, and they went to the mill. We found old farm houses with 20-inch floor boards of clear white pine.

In and before the early '70s we fought the battle of the redwoods. Someone needed those trees also. Environment-minded people wanted to keep them for durable benefits into the future. We got our Redwoods National Park, such as it is. After a generous Congress had bought off all the vested interests, it cost us more than all the lands in the parks before that time.

I think we must consider critically this matter of human need, for it is a bottomless pit. In a country without a population policy we will be getting down to the last ten percent of many things. There is no value from coast to coast and for miles out to sea that someone does not need. I doubt that immediate need is a useful criterion in planning for the future of any declining resource. You will have noted long ago that the most viable policy in this realm of planning is to require that all uses of renewable resources be sustainable. This, certainly, is the way to the greatest good for the most people, over the longest time.

In terminating this visit with many friends, I want to share with you something I found last summer when disposing of old archives. I don't know where it came from, but I think it includes some ideas worth remembering.

It was a few paragraphs on an old wrinkled paper, and in the upper corner it said, "The lesson." It had a short title: "The System of Nature."

I will read it to you:

In wild nature there is an ancient law well-known to those who seek their pleasure in the out-of-doors. It rules that every creature must live and die to such purpose that its species is preserved.

This natural law has scant concern for those born feeble or misshapen, for the sickly or disabled, for the doltish or unsocial. These unfortunates have but little time. It is to the common good that they should not pass on their faltering spark to sap the vigor of the stock and peril its survival.

In ages gone before, this husbandry of fitness made the deer more fleet that it might escape its enemies. It made the wolf sagacious and strong that it might capture

the deer. It caused the rabbit to be vigilant, and it muffled the wing beat of the owl. From its order came the song of the kinglet and the beauty of a butterfly.

In waters, woodland, lea, and desert, no living thing endures by privilege or is wronged in being extinguished. The rule is impartial. It sees no evil, knows no virtue. It led a legion of sturdy species through endless testing to the present. Those that could not abide the law were lost along the way.

Let none be doubtful that man, too, emerged from that sacrificial march, from natural havens where, few in number and in peaceful struggle, he gained support from the bounty of his habitat.

Now he comes to rule the universe. Uninstructed in natural law, in swarming numbers and with crude devices, he violates the tested virtues of the earth. He sanctifies the weak and cherishes the villain. He squanders his estate and makes no covenant with the future.

Man of today might well observe the frugal systems of the wild. Earth's creatures are his kin, their welfare his own. If he finds no meaning in his lineage, no sentiment for other forms of life, then the nature that gave him trial may yet find him unqualified.

Like the myriad of creatures that went ahead, man too could leave his unkempt scene. He could yield the earth to the roach, the opossum, and the ginkgo tree. His artifacts would wear away, and he would be gone—unrepentant, unforgiving, unremembered.