

Letter from Gustavus

A New Day Dawning

December 10, 1992

Let us keep our silent sanctuaries,
for in them the eternal perspectives are preserved.
— S enancour

In preserved lands and hallowed grounds people of the United States (and around the world) find solace in storm-driven times. These refuges of the spirit lift us above present urgencies, restore our judgment, and, like beacons, correct our errant courses, both private and public.

Yet, over the past dozen years, the public lands of the United States have suffered assault and regression—preserved lands corrupted for profit: utility lands wantonly wasted and mistreated. Public trustees of these lands, symbolized by the incorruptible ranger, have watched their landscapes degrade, and been forced out when they objected. Political appointees debunked their professional standards and rejected their advice. Thus the nation’s sacred and secular landscapes have been debased and their guardians become unwilling accessories or outcasts.

Well, there is a new day dawning. It showed at the George Wright Society’s Seventh Conference in Jacksonville, Florida, November 16-20, 1992. This was a broad-based public lands forum hosting representatives from all major U.S. federal land-management agencies, along with park and resource-management people from state agencies and several other countries, and many others.

From the still-effervescing wake of the U.S. election, ideals long caged and clipped rose on strong wings. Indeed, the mood of the conference

partook of an old-time tent revival meeting. Smiles and high hopes abounded. (A published volume of major papers and proceedings will share the good news and the substance of the conference in 1993.)

Consider: This was the fifth George Wright Society conference held during the ideological winter of our discontent. This seemingly endless era—symbolized by the primitive notions and radical actions of U.S. interior secretary James Watt—reversed evolution, taking public-land policy and practice back to the Robber Baron epoch. At Jacksonville the lowering clouds had already started to break, and their rosy hue gave promise of returning enlightenment.

It must be noted that during the warped times now mercifully ended, the George Wright Society meetings and the pages of its quarterly, the FORUM, gave many of us the opportunity to reaffirm the honorable history and the intelligent practice of U.S. conservation law and policy, whether of the John Muir or Gifford Pinchot tradition. And in these times of stress the Society broadened its concerns, beyond parks and equivalent reserves, to include those protected lands that provide essential commodities for the nation. Despite past differences of philosophy and use, many agency managers found common cause in the threat to dismantle conservation as a whole. Today, as never before, the idea of a public lands mosaic is understood and supported by public-land managers. Preserved lands are parts of that mosaic; commodity lands make up the other parts, with sustained use the objective where possible, and rehabilitation where necessary. On the broader conservation front, these different kinds of public lands can and in the future must be complementary if watersheds, forests, soils, and ecosystems are to be maintained. As always, these are the nation's primary wealth—all other derive therefrom. Perhaps we should take comfort from the good that James Watt and his accomplices have done. He has forced us to a new synthesis. The term "wise use" will one day be restored to intelligent discourse.



The election has not solved all problems. Nor, in the straitened circumstances of the new administration—heir to domestic neglect, fiscal disaster, and foreign disorder—can public-land trustees expect massive transfusions of money and positions. We *can* expect a sympathetic philosophical and political climate—one that restores the balance between public and private functions in this country, that rebuilds pride in public service, that revives enlightened conservation policy and a government of laws.

For the first time in many years, firing-line practitioners—superintendents, district managers, rangers, scientists, resource specialists, interpreters, maintainers—will look up the chain of command and see at least some smiling faces. They will be *encouraged* to be active, assertive guardians of the lands and resources in their charge. The expression of ideal or aspiration or even professional common sense will not be followed by the automatic kick in the groin. Imagine standing tall again, instead of hunched over and sideways! Imagine waking up and rushing breakfast

because you've got exciting work to do—carrying on that work with friendly, supportive people and supervisors that urge you on—coming home tired but happy because you've pushed forward in something that counts. These things we can expect soon. And then we'll find a way to take care of the long-term needs and backlogs.

Meanwhile, we must all start adjusting to life in the sun again. The mushroom life is over. *This will not be easy.* Our spiritual and emotional reorientation is prerequisite to the full measure of good we can do. Smart supervisors will take heed, will think deeply about the mode and substance of these personal transformations—especially among young employees who have never experienced positive, as distinct from suspect, public service. Good leaders will help themselves first, then show the way to tap the latent energy of an idealism that, for many, has had no place to go. This is the first task.

Keep the faith,

Bill Brown