
 Letter from Gustavus

Values

April 3, 1995

I received some clippings from a friend. Among them was an article about our one-and-only Representative from Alaska, Don Young, commenting on the pestiferous kangaroo rat—a valueless nothing, according to the philosopher from Fort Yukon. (The accompanying photo shows him in his congressional office, its walls draped with gold pans and the hides of bear and wolf.)

Another article, by Jim Carrier (*Denver Post*, March 13, 1995) describes today's chinook salmon run on the Columbia River—once numbered in millions, now in hundreds—passing by a window in the bowels of Bonneville Dam, one salmon now and again. (A full day's count was 127.) He goes on to the implications of the "Farm, Ranch and Homestead Protection Act of 1995," a bill that would freeze the Endangered Species Act and undo dozens of hard-won, years-to-negotiate compromises and agreements to meet the needs of both humankind and neighboring critters. This bill would eliminate U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service consultations on such matters, replacing them with pronouncements on values (as above) by the ignorant.

Gone from public discourse is any sense of rational definition of decency and sustainability, as phrased, for example, by Sally Ranney of American Wildlands:

Protect the inalienable right of every American to clean water, clean air, clean food, the diversity of species endowed upon this country and ecological systems which will function sustainably in perpetuity.

And then we have news about National Parks upping their fees as budgets shrink. Here we are, cup in hand, a buck here, a buck there, hoping that Congress and other powers-that-be will hear our plea for some small increase in the percentage of such beggery that can be retained in the cup of the collecting park—to fill pot-holes and keep the latrines clean and flushing. We are not asking for increased services for visitors who have travelled across this country—perhaps once in a lifetime—to see their national parks and monuments, to expose their children to the greatness of this Proud Nation. Indeed, we are closing many of the sites and features that people have travelled to see. Nor are we asking for any-

thing-like-adequate funds to protect and preserve the fundamental fabric of these shrines of Natural and National History. No! We are squeezing and genuflecting as hard as we can just to keep the places open and operating. To hell with the next generation and what they will find in these degraded National Treasures. It's pot-holes and pissoirs that consume our funds and energies.

I look back a millennum and envision Europe's peasant societies building hundreds of great cathedrals with nothing but faith and hard work. And I compare that dirt-poor era with our own prodigal one. And I wonder why we are unable to maintain with dignity and display with grace our own Statements of Faith. It is a helluva commentary on where we are as a society. Selfishness, greed, Devil take the hindmost. All of these producing misery and beggery on our streets that would make an Egyptian alms-giver blanch.

Recently I was reading an excerpt from *The Wealth of Nations* by Adam Smith, the prophet and philosopher of laissez-faire capitalism. He listed the three principal functions of national governments: To protect the nation from external aggression. To maintain the domestic tranquillity. To preserve the national monuments.

It is time to reassert our values.

