

Letter from Gustavus

The Will to Live in a Livable Future

March 19, 1996

I have recently been involved with a broad-scope stakeholder group that is trying to resolve the dilemmas created by commercial fishing in Glacier Bay National Park, Alaska. The incongruity of commercial fishing in park waters jolts park people and environmental groups accustomed to Lower-49 National Park standards.

The contradiction stems from a history of commercial fishing in marine waters that later were incorporated into Glacier Bay National Monument (redesignated "National Park" in 1980), and subsequent special regulations for the continuance of such fishing. Several related matters compound the issue: the Redwood National Park Act amendment of 1978, which prohibits extractive commercial activities in National Parks unless specifically allowed by statute; ambiguities in the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act of 1980 regarding this old-line, Lower-49-type park; and ongoing marine-waters and fisheries-management jurisdictional disputes between the state of Alaska and the federal government.

This stew of local history and evolving National Interest Lands policy simmers in a political context militantly antipathetic to government in general and to preserved public lands specifically. Especially this is so in Alaska, which contains two-thirds of the total acreage of the U.S. National Park System (and a similarly large proportion of the National Wildlife Refuge System).

This Glacier Bay controversy (and many similar ones) gets little calming assistance from Alaska's exploitation- and development-oriented congressional delegation, which, in the present Congress, wields immense and inimical power over the nation's preserved public lands.

In such an ambiance it is not surprising that the values of strictly preserved lands, of sanctuaries and refugia, are not common coin amongst Glacier Bay's interested stakeholders. I want to be very clear that the fisherfolk in these conversations are good people—several of them my neighbors. They naturally start from their own economic interests and historical dependence (as a class) on Glacier Bay waters. And remember, for many years commercial fishing in park waters was sanctioned (and still is, conditionally) by National Park Service regulation and pronouncement. I believe it fair to say that, from my associa-

tion, the local fisherfolk have as great a love of this land- and seascape as I do—though we approach it somewhat differently.

Rather, the divide between park-and-preservation people and commercial-fishing-use people is the concept of pure preservation. The notion that in some chosen places Nature—untrammelled by consumptive human use—should have its way, its rhythms and seasons and cycles undisturbed by humans:

For the places' own sake. Because Nature, in all its manifestations, was here long before we came along.

Or, progressing to a different sort of utilitarian perspective, such chosen places reserved as biological benchmarks to help us monitor and measure the global changes wrought by pervasive human pressures across the biosphere.

Of course at Glacier Bay, as is the case in most national parks in the United States and elsewhere, visitor use does have a trammeling effect—cruise ships, tour boats, chartered sport fishing, backcountry camping at limited or wildlife-concentration sites, flight-seeing, etc., all intrude on Nature's pure regime. To further attenuate the Platonic preservation ideal of Nature insulated from the human factor, consuming humans have been featured at Glacier Bay over several thousand years, and descendants of the Earliest Americans are still around and still view this place as theirs (as, with variations of nomenclature, is the case in national parks around the world).



Thus, we in the preserved-lands business have a tough time in the best of times convincing anyone—especially one with an economic stake—that preservation of Nature can be pure, in this time or in any pragmatically relevant time in the past. People as we know them, or their hominid ancestors, have been whacking away at Nature, as a part of it, for about 4 million years.



The idea of preserved lands (i.e., those saved from human exploitation) is very recent. It arose in the 19th century in direct response to what even then was seen as the human juggernaut powered by coal and industrialization. The world was being tamed in the far places by heroic explorations. Nearer home, Henry Adams' symbolic dynamo was chewing up the local glades and streams, the green grottoes once filled with dreams. At the heart of this idea was a view

of Nature redolent of the Romantic movement of that pivotal century: the sense that in an evermore complex and mechanical and dreary world there must be places where the higher aspirations of the human soul could flourish. It was in this soulful soil that the first national parks germinated.

Right here, in the United States. A blessed place that, compared with the rest of the world, was land-rich. Its social surplus was most readily expressed in its continental expanse, with vast sectors of the trans-Mississippi West practically uninhabited compared with the eastern shores—and unimaginably vacant for the teeming masses of Europe, Asia, and Africa. They had their tombs, cathedrals, and monuments—crowded round by fetid cities. We had God's works in remote places, trod only yesterday by an ancient nobility clad in deerskin robe, shod in moccasin.

How impractical this all was, even then (except for railroads needing passengers to and through the empty regions). How doubly impractical now—now that our social surplus has been expended.

Yet, if we think more deeply, the idea of preserved vignettes of primitive America still expresses much of the spirit of this nation. The idea has the practical aspect of providing solace for overstressed people (Adams' dynamo now screams and threatens to pull its anchor bolts right out of their sockets). These same increasingly urbanized folks can also stand a bit of education into the wonders and ultimate controls of Nature, and of our historical relationships to it—most of them destructive.

And still, these places, inherited from people who left them after thousands of years of use in a condition that we would later call "wilderness," can serve as biological benchmarks. For they are the least disturbed of all landscapes in this world, excepting only Antarctica.

And what of the idea that there are some places of such exquisite aesthetic and spiritual significance, of such physical or biological specialness, that we as a species can defer to a higher order of value than the simple exploitative? Would we condone the slashing of great paintings, the breaking of statues and ceramics and buildings from another age? The burning of a library such as that of Alexandria? Of course not. Then why cannot we attribute non-utilitarian value—for its own sake—to such things as Nature? (Not to mention the utilitarian value of the Alexandrian library that, say, biodiversity represents.)

And even if we cannot see such values in the press of our own time-bound circumstances, why cannot we be conservative, in the most inclusive sense of that term—of rain forests, places of natural beauty, habitats, species? Both for practical and for intangible-values purposes. As a favor to our children and their children. As a statement of our faith in them to find values in things and places that we, in our primitive and confused time, cannot properly evaluate. This is the calling of the social contract, which, if it means anything, is inter-generational.

Would any of us want to come into a world so used up that there were no fresh and pretty places left? No places to discover? Of course not. Yet we are on our way to leaving such a world to those who—unless we alter course—will curse us to eternity for our unforgivable sin of ignorance and self-indulgence.



We are truly at a turning point. The human condition—despite futuristic blather—is regressing by way of its increasing numbers and impact on a fragile and finite world. All objective signals support this assertion. Yet, just as we have arrived at that dismal juncture, we have arrived also at levels of understanding about our sustaining world, and modes of instant worldwide communication, that would allow us as a species to put the brakes on and change course for a productive, sustainable future.

It is my belief that right now, in this present moment of emergency and potential choice, the national parks of the world can help guide that choice. By, among other things, making us make decisions. If we decide to hold on to these special places (including all equivalent preserves) we will be stating our faith in a future worth being born to. If we use them up, we will have decided that there is no future worthy of our concern, even if our children do have to live in it.

In our plaintive preservation literature we have often used the metaphor of the canary in the mine—the parks as signal of the world's health. Usually, this figure has related to the physical health of the world. Now it relates to our will to live. That's what the canary in the mine was all about.



Well, that's what a few days' meetings on commercial fishing in Glacier Bay National Park have generated in one person. It makes me wonder what thoughts would flow if all the visitors and protectors of the world's national parks could state the values of their park experiences in one great big petition to save the places they treasure. And, of course, be used as standards for a livable world. That is their greatest value.

Imagine a world that lacked these standards.

