

Celebrating George Wright: A Retrospective on the 20th Anniversary of the GWS

Pamela Wright Lloyd

A Personal Tribute



On February 25, 1936, at the age of 31, my father—George Melendez Wright—was killed in an auto accident. I was only two and a half years old, too young to remember him. But over the years I came to know him through the personal remembrances of my mother, Bee Wright Shuman, and other family members, friends, and colleagues, and written accounts of his life. I also came to know my father

Celebrating George Wright: A Retrospective on the 20th Anniversary of the GWS

through the legacy of his work, and, more importantly, through his professional writing.

George Wright was a pioneering and visionary biologist in the early days of both natural resource conservation and the National Park Service. Long before concepts and terms such as “ecosystem,” “environmentally sound,” and “sustainability” had been coined, George Wright’s ecological perspective and philosophy pointed to the need for a science-based management of the national parks.

At an early age, long before the 1970s and the modern environmental movement, I grasped the importance of what my father believed and stood for: his love of the wilderness and wildlife, his sure knowledge of the need to tread lightly on the natural world, and especially his first love—birds. As previously mentioned, I came to know George Wright principally from his eloquent writing, as with one of my favorite passages from the second essay of the Fauna Series No. 2, published in July 1934 (first delivered the previous May at the annual meeting of the American Society of Mammologists):

Conservation thus is seen to be not an end in itself or a creed over which men might fight according to personal prejudice, but a means for securing the maximum cropping of natural resources without destruction of productive capital. The forms of cropping include the realization of sporting, economic, aesthetic, and scientific values.... Much of man’s genuine progress is dependent upon the degree to which he is capable of this sort of control. If we destroy nature blindly, it is a boomerang which will be our undoing.... Consecration to the task of adjusting ourselves to [the] natural environment so that we secure the best values from nature without destroying it is not useless idealism; it is good hygiene for civilization.

In this lies the true portent of this national parks effort. Fifty years from now we shall still be wrestling with the problems of joint occupation of national parks by men and mammals, but it is reasonable to predict that we shall have mastered some of the simplest maladjustments. It is far better to pursue such a course though success be but partial than to relax in despair and allow the destructive forces to operate unchecked.

My father’s true and clear calling in life was not mine, but somewhere along the way—thanks to his books and articles—I was drawn to the beliefs on which his calling rested. In the quotation above, and in all of his written work, George Wright articulated a philosophy, indeed a vision, which not only transcends his life and times but speaks to us across the years with stunning clarity and relevance.

