

# ***Starker Leopold's Second Thoughts on the Leopold Report: A Recently Discovered Transcript of a 1975 Speech***

## **Preface**

*David M. Graber*

WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT IN THE NATIONAL PARKS, the report to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall by his “Advisory Board on Wildlife Management” in 1963, is arguably the single most influential advice ever given to the National Park Service (NPS) regarding the management and conservation of nature. The “Leopold Report,” as it quickly became known for its primary author, A. Starker Leopold, would reverberate for decades in the very guiding philosophy of NPS. Asked to solve a problem of how to handle excess elk in Yellowstone National Park, Leopold led his colleagues to propose what should be the fundamental goals, policies, and practices of nature management in all national parks.

The Leopold Report, the work of academicians and scientists, is nonetheless notable for its bold, simple, clear language. The words best remembered and most discussed are these: “As a primary goal, we would recommend that the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man. A national park should represent a vignette of primitive America.” In 1963, before continental drift was accepted as factual, before paleo-climatology and paleo-ecology had become established sciences, when ecosystem homeostasis still appeared plausible for the most part, and when the role native people had played for thousands of years on the American landscape was largely ignored, a “vignette of primitive America” offered powerful and understandable guidance to park managers.

By the 1980s, however, as the science of ecology had come to see most ecosystems in endless flux, and as Native Americans had achieved a measure of respect as ecosystem architects themselves, those same words had begun to make the report appear dated, albeit still highly influential. Moving past the canons of the Leopold Report and its vignette of primitive America was not so easily accomplished. Consequently, as a former graduate student of Leopold's, I was persuaded by a park superintendent, a chief of resources management, and a

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park scientist to arrange a meeting with Starker to express our concerns to him. He heard us out over lunch, expressed his sympathy for our situation, and told us that if we needed a new Leopold Report to write it ourselves!

Last year, Bob Barbee, a career NPS employee who served as a superintendent of several parks in the West and as a regional director, came across a talk given by Starker to the superintendents of the agency's former Western Region in 1975, during the period I was his graduate student. It appears to have been tape recorded, transcribed into typescript a week later by a "T. Allen," and then heavily pen-corrected by persons unknown. It caught the attention of some of us immediately because in it Starker recants his famous "vignette of primitive America" words, finding them "too narrow ... and restrictive," implying "stopping the clock." In its place, he proposes maintaining the natural biological and geological processes and accepting system dynamism.

There are a number of other interesting nuggets in this talk. Leopold speculates about the possible presence of wolves in Yellowstone and whether they have the critical mass to recover packs. Discussing the importance of fire in western systems that we need to learn to live with, before NPS had fully embraced fire as an integral process, he predicts that one day Yellowstone will experience "a big one" that will prove politically challenging, as indeed it was in 1988. He discusses the trade-offs of development in 100- or even 500-year flood plains, anticipating Mount Rainier National Park's washout of the Carbon River Road and the ensuing discussions of whether it would be sensible to replace it. Leopold urges the cessation of artificial fish stocking, which took place in many parks the following decade. He calls for the removal of ungulates and rabbits from the Channel Islands (among other places), which began in earnest several years later and was finally fully accomplished in 2012. This isn't to suggest that these progressive conservation ideas were known only to Leopold, or that they were entirely unfamiliar to the assembled park superintendents.

The fine teacher that he was, Starker knew how to rope in this audience with stories that served to illustrate his points, often peppered with the names of NPSers well known to his audience to provide them with the sense of being insiders. He knew full well what preoccupied these men most of the time as he closed with his big pitch:

I'm fully aware of the day-to-day pressures that are on you as superintendents and the sort of things I'm talking about by and large are not the daily pressures. The things you have to cope with are people, and all the problems concerning the facilities, the arrangements made for your visitors. In dealing with this problem, however, for goodness' sake constantly keep in mind that the park itself and the natural value that you are trying to preserve is going to be far more important 10 or 20 years from now than how well you handled your tourist traffic in 1975. As we look back on the administration of these areas, the important thing is going to be the preservation of the values in the park and not the development and preservation of the facilities for people to see them.

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