

Keeping Our Wild Places Wild
Gaylord Nelson Retrospective Lecture Series

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I think our governments will remain virtuous for many centuries; as long as there shall be vacant lands in any part of America.

– Thomas Jefferson in a letter to James Madison

Lewis and Clark, observations from two centuries ago

Two hundred years ago this month Lewis and Clark were settling in for the winter at the mouth of the Columbia River near the Pacific Ocean. While Clark was on reconnaissance, Lewis and the rest of the Corps of Discovery were cutting trees and splitting logs for their winter shelter. On December 16, Clark wrote, “The winds violent. Trees falling every direction, whorl [sic] winds, with gusts of Hail & Thunder, this kind of weather lasted all day. Certainly one of the worst days that ever was.”

After over a year of arduous travel, the men of Corps of Discovery were sick and injured, they had boils and were tormented by fleas that made sound sleep impossible. Clark’s journals note that on December 23 a young Chief came with his brother and two women to barter for goods. Clark got an eight foot panther skin for six fish hooks.

The Corps of Discovery were the first to traverse the North American Continent, the first to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the first to catalog many physical, geological, and biological wonders, the first citizens of this young country to stand in awe of the majestic beauty of the wild western frontier. They were the first to describe what the land was like.

On June 13, 1805 Lewis wrote this about the Great Falls of the Missouri River, “I wished for the pencil of Salvator Rosa or the pen of Thompson, that I might be enabled to give to the enlightened world some just idea of this truly magnificent and sublimely grand object, which has from the commencement of time been concealed from the view of civilized man...”

The Great Falls of the Missouri are concealed from view today; they are submerged by a dam on the River.

Land: The Wealth of the Nation

To the fledgling nation, the seemingly endless western lands represented wealth. Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase in 1803 alone added 529 million acres of land to the public domain. But the capstone of our public lands was the purchase of Alaska, the

"northern icebox," from the tsar of Russia in 1867. 365 million acres for \$7.2 million, or 2 cents per acre. Not a bad deal.

Manifest Destiny was largely achieved by the end of the nineteenth century. The need for a change in national policy was building in the eastern United States, where virtually all land was in private ownership. East of the Mississippi River, forests had been cleared by settlers for fuel and agriculture or by timber companies for railroad ties and lumber. The nation's prime hardwood forests of the Appalachians and the great white pine forests of the Northeast and Midwest had been clearcut.

Fires were intentionally set on the cutover lands to eliminate slash. The 1871 Peshtigo Fire in Wisconsin remains the most devastating forest fire in U.S. history. It killed 1500 people and burned 1.28 million acres. Other fires in Michigan and Minnesota that same year burned over 3 million acres. Forest cover was destroyed and topsoil was either turned to ash or washed away by rains after the forests were burned. By 1900, some 80 million acres of charred and decimated stump-lands lay east of the Mississippi.¹

Through this, the land lost its ability to dampen floods and temper drought. Watershed function, the basic ability to catch, store, and release water over time, vanished on millions of acres. In other words, the land lost its resilience. It would take decades, if not centuries, to restore the shattered landscape.

Seeds of Change

The seeds of change that led to the first American conservation movement were well under way by 1850. But it didn't reach its climax until the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt. Like most major changes in national sentiment, a gradual awakening was punctuated by rapid spurts of change, triggered by specific events.

When colonists first arrived, the huge trees and dense forests were as foreign as this new continent itself. There was fear of attack by Indians and fear of wolves and bears lurking in the woods. The dense forests around settlements needed to be cut down for human safety and to enable farming and grazing. After the Revolutionary War, Americans believed that the frontier needed to be conquered. The seemingly endless land represented unlimited wealth.

The land at times was even used as currency when soldiers were paid in acres instead of dollars. For instance, an army private who fought in the Revolutionary War was granted 100 acres of land while a major general was granted 1100 acres.²

The Lewis and Clark Expedition demonstrated the vastness of the West. It highlighted the grandeur and beauty of the landscape. It recorded the abundance and variety of plants and animals. But there was little recognition of the need to conserve the land and other natural resources until Vermont Congressman George Perkins Marsh's seminal speech in

¹ S. J. Pyne, *Fire in America: A Cultural History of Wildland and Rural Fire* (Princeton: Princeton University Press)

² P. W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development* (Washington, D.C.: GPO:1968).

1847. He advocated a conservationist approach to the management of forest lands by calling attention to the destructive impact of deforestation. The Department of the Interior was established shortly after this in 1849, a year after Wisconsin was admitted to the union.

In the 1850 Report of the Commissioner of Patents, Thomas Ewing said: "The waste of valuable timber in the U.S. . . . will hardly be appreciated until our population reaches 50 million. Then the folly and shortsightedness of this age will meet with a degree of censure and reproach not pleasant to contemplate." Ewing warned that "the vast multitudes of bison slain yearly, the ceaseless war carried out against them, if continued, threatens their extermination, and must hereafter cause deep regret. It should never be said that the noblest of American indigenous ruminants have become extinct." Concerns regarding the long-term harm of deforestation appeared in government reports from 1850 through 1880, prompted largely by devastation of the Appalachian and Lake States' forests.³

By the mid-1800s, with Manifest Destiny being realized, sentiments favoring the aesthetic value of the land began to grow. Americans began to appreciate more deeply the scenic beauty of the landscape and call for conservation. American and European romantic literature and art began to extol the virtues of "nature appreciation." Photographs and lithographs of American scenery, especially in the West, stimulated wide interest and appreciation for the scenic and wild qualities of the landscape. Henry David Thoreau's address to the Concord, Massachusetts, Lyceum declared that "in wildness is the preservation of the world."

Artist Frederick Edwin Church in 1860 painted the masterpiece *Twilight in the Wilderness*, which inspired numerous artists of the Hudson River school to capture the awesome beauty of the American landscape. In 1854 Thoreau published the famous *Walden or Life in the Woods*. As the Civil War came to an end George Perkins Marsh published his ground-breaking book *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*, the first systematic analysis of the human impact on the environment.⁴

In 1864, in the heat of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was the first President to set aside land for non-commodity values. He granted Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias to the state of California to hold these lands "forever for public use, resort, and recreation." Forty two years later, in 1906, these lands became the core of Yosemite National Park. Following this, Congress established Yellowstone National Park in 1872, the first in the United States and the world, as a "public park or pleasuring-ground" for the benefit and enjoyment of the people.

³ T. Ewing, *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, House Executive Document, 31st Congress, 1st Session, vol. III, no. 5, pt. 2 (serial no. 570), U.S. Congress, House of Representatives, Washington D.C. 1850.

⁴ G. P. Marsh, *Man and Nature; or, Physical Geopgraphy as Modified by Human Action*, ed. D. Lowenthal (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University).

In 1873, Forest and Stream magazine was first published, with Theodore Roosevelt's friend George Bird Grinnell, as publisher and editor. Today we know it as Field and Stream. Forest and Stream became a favorite sportsman's magazine and a force in the conservation movement. Recreation pursuits, including hunting, fishing, and travel became more popular. In 1885, New York State established the Adirondack Forest Preserve that "shall be kept forever as wild forest lands."

The First National Preserves

Carl Schurz, a resident of Watertown, Wisconsin (part of his life) and Interior Secretary from 1877 to 1881, was the first cabinet member with an active interest in the conservation of natural resources. He advocated the creation of forest reserves and a federal forest service. In 1885, six bills were introduced in Congress to create public forest reserves. None of them passed. Similar bills failed to pass in 1888, 1889, and 1890.⁵ This sounds a bit like Gaylord Nelson's first Appalachian Trail legislation.

Finally, on March 3, 1891, the Forest Reserve "Creative" Act passed, empowering the president to create "forest reserves" by withdrawing forestlands from the public domain. On March 30, President Harrison issued Presidential Proclamation 17 creating the nation's first forest reservation—the 1.2-million-acre Yellowstone Park Timber Land Reservation lying just south of Yellowstone National Park in what is now primarily the Shoshone National Forest. Before his term ended, President Harrison proclaimed another 13 million acres of forest reserves in the West. The foundation for a National Forest System was laid.⁶

As the nineteenth century came to a close, five trends signaled the need for change in the management of the land that belonged to all the people, the public domain lands:

- 1) Growing western communities demanded dependable water supplies.
- 2) Growing public distrust of big industry including large timber companies;
- 3) Timber supplies were badly needed to replace the wood supply from cutover forest of the Great Lakes region; and
- 4) As the demand for timber products grew there was great concern of a timber famine.⁷
- 5) Western grazing and water wars were intensifying.

Conservation Emerges

The presidency of Theodore Roosevelt from 1901 to 1909 thrust the country into its first national conservation movement. Roosevelt acted energetically to expand federal forest reserves and establish the first national wildlife refuges and national monuments under the Preservation of American Antiquities Act of 1906. The Second American Forest Congress recommended in 1905 that all federal forest programs be unified in the Department of Agriculture. Congress acted on the recommendation with the passage of

⁵ H. K. Steen, *The Beginning of the National Forest System*, Publication FS-488 (Washington, D.C.: USDA Forest Service, 1991).

⁶ H. K. Steen, *The U.S. Forest Service: A History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1975)

⁷ C. F. Wilkinson, *Crossing the Next Meridian: Land, Water and the Future of the West* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1992).

the Transfer Act in 1905. With Gifford Pinchot as Chief, the U.S. Forest Service was established.

Western members of Congress were so opposed to the concept of federal forest reserves that in a subsection of the 1907 Agriculture Appropriations Act they took away the president's authority to enlarge or create additional reserves in six western states. With a stroke of political ingenuity and boldness, Roosevelt designated 16 million acres of forest reserves immediately before signing the legislation revoking his very authority to make such designations. These became known as "midnight reserves." Embedded in the same legislation was also a subsection that renamed forest reserves as "national forests."⁸

Recognizing that conservation must cross political boundaries, Roosevelt convened the first North American Conservation Conference involving Mexico and Canada. The conservation achievements of the Roosevelt administration were unprecedented.

The Evolving Land Ethic

The evolving land ethic is perhaps best stated in Aldo Leopold's famous book, *A Sand County Almanac*, published in 1949. Perhaps his most often quoted words are these "The practice of conservation must spring from a conviction of what is ethically right and aesthetically right, as well as what is economically expedient. A thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the community and the community includes the soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people."⁹

Leopold's work influenced the thinking of many future conservation leaders including a young politician from Clear Lake Wisconsin. This is readily seen in Gaylord Nelson's understanding the need to expand and accelerate land acquisition in Wisconsin. His chance came and he proposed the Outdoor Recreation Act Program or ORAP. Governor Nelson signed ORAP in to law on August 28, 1961.

The concept was simple, a ten-year, \$50 million program to acquire land for recreation and conservation purposes paid for by a one cent per pack cigarette tax. This innovative program quickly drew national attention and was modeled by other states. Interior Secretary Stewart Udall said it was the boldest conservation step ever by a state, in the history of this country. This popular and innovative approach would make Nelson the "Conservation Governor" and thrust him into the national spotlight. It put him on a path to be this nation's top conservationist in our second conservation movement.

Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, published in 1962, made millions of citizens aware of the prevalence and effects of toxic chemicals on human health and the environment. It brought into focus the practical aspects of Leopold's land ethic. *Silent Spring* made clear the inextricable link between the quality of our lands and waters and human health. Governor Nelson's ORAP program was already acting on Rachel Carson's important message.

⁸ G. Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (New York: Harcourt Brace 1947).

⁹ A. Leopold, "The Ecological Conscience," *Bulletin of the Garden Club of America* (September 1947):45-53.

Two years later in 1964, as a U.S. Senator, Gaylord Nelson introduced legislation to protect the Appalachian Trail. His statement was “The mental and spiritual well being of the people may depend upon sufficient places to retreat for contemplation and to commune with nature.” Like the early forest reserve proposals ¾ of a century earlier, Nelson’s measure didn’t pass, but was enlarged into the popular National Trails system signed by President Johnson in 1968. Today we have the Appalachian Trail, Pacific Crest Trail, the Ice Age Trail, the North Country Trail, and many others.

The gregarious and popular newly elected U.S. Senator from Clear Lake quickly became a conservation leader in the 88th Congress. This ultimately became known as the “conservation congress,” for its passage of landmark legislation, such as the Clean Air Act, the Land and Water Conservation Fund, the Wilderness Act. In his 1965 State of the Union Speech, President Johnson declared, “The next decade should be a conservation milestone.” With Nelson as a leading conservation champion President Johnson’s State of the Union prediction turned into our second great conservation movement. But it wasn’t a cake-walk.

Around the time that Gov. Nelson signed ORAP into law and *Silent Spring* was published, approximately 11,500 American troops were in Vietnam. Over the next decade, more than 58,000 Americans would die in a war that became the focal point for many citizens’ disillusionment with the federal government. Popular opposition to the war intensified over the years, as antiwar protestors teamed with civil rights and human rights activists. They led teach-ins and sit-ins at college campuses across the country.

In the spring of 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson seized the moment and initiated the first Earth Day as a nationwide teach-in on the environment. An estimated 20 million people participated in demonstrations. Ten thousand grade schools and high schools, two thousand colleges, and one thousand communities were involved.¹⁰

Public distrust of government, especially the executive branch crystallized during the Nixon Watergate scandal in 1973. Through this period Congress passed numerous laws exerting legislative direction over matters historically left to the executive branch. Many of these laws were designed to do two things: 1) to protect the environment and 2) to open federal land management to greater public participation and scrutiny. Gaylord Nelson was a leader or key player in virtually every issue.

If I tried to cover everything Gaylord Nelson did we’d be here until morning, so I’ll only mention a few key laws as well as what’s happening with these laws today in Washington

The National Environmental Policy Act required public disclosure and citizen involvement in federal land management actions. The Clean Water, Safe Drinking Water, and Clean Air acts were intended to ensure basic protection for the nation’s water and air resources. Now many provisions have been or are being gutted by the Bush Administration and Congress in favor of big business profits.

¹⁰ G. Nelson “History of Earth Day,” Speech to the Catalyst Conference, Illinois, 1980.

The Endangered Species Act required the protection of rare and imperiled species and the habitats on which they depend. This year the leadership and members of Congress are working to remove the critical habitat provisions of the Endangered Species Act. Even a child knows that you can't separate any organism from its home and expect it to survive and thrive.

Another landmark federal land management law passed in 1976 with Nelson as a strong proponent. The Federal Land Policy and Management Act of 1976. This was first recognition by Congress that remainder of the 1.8 billion acres of public domain land should remain in public ownership.

A few days from today, the U.S. House and Senate Conference Committee will be meeting to decide the fate of a provision inserted into the Budget Reconciliation Act by U.S. House representatives Pombo and Gibbons. Their far reaching rider was attached to the budget bill quietly, by a margin of two votes. It allows the sale of our public land under the provisions of the 1872 Mining Law at bargain basement prices to mining companies and developers. This is nothing more than a sell-out of the people's land with most unaware of that it is even happening.¹¹

If you want to know more about this misguided public policy, see the opinion piece I wrote with former Forest Service Chief Jack Ward Thomas that ran in the Wisconsin State Journal last Sunday.

The Last Wild Places

In an essay written in 1935 "*Why the Wilderness Society*" Aldo Leopold stated, "This country has been swinging the hammer of development so long and so hard that it has forgotten the anvil of wilderness which gave value and significance to its labors. The momentum of our blows is so unprecedented that the remaining remnant of wilderness will be pounded into road dust long before we find out its values."

During his lifetime Gaylord Nelson did more than perhaps any other American to keep wild places wild. Here are just a few that I haven't mentioned earlier, he was most proud of:

- He co-sponsored the Wilderness Act. We now have over 105 million acres of our Wilderness Preservation System.
- Expansion of the national wildlife refuges to over 92 million acres of land, triple the acreage in 1970.
- Designation of more than 150 wild and scenic rivers, with over 10,000 miles protected, including Nelson's beloved St. Croix River. [from page 83, *Beyond Earth Day*]

¹¹ Note that the provision was eventually pulled by its sponsors because of intense public opposition, especially from the sportsman's community.

And as a perpetual memorial to him, the Gaylord Nelson Wilderness on the Apostle Islands was established last fall.

I am very proud to have been part of one of Gaylord Nelson's last National public policy activities. On January 9, 2001 he introduced President Clinton at the Botanical Gardens in Washington, DC for the announcement of the Forest Service's Roadless Protection Rule, to keep 58 million acres of National Forest roadless areas, just that way for future generations. Like other conservation measures, the Bush Administration continues to work hard to kill that policy.

Gaylord Nelson wrote the following essay which was published in 2003 as a Focus Essay in a book I co-authored with Chris Wood and Jack Williams titled: *From Conquest to Conservation: Our Public Land Legacy*. The essay title, and words are Gaylord's: *Enduring Values of Our Public Lands: Peace, Wilderness, and Beauty*. Gaylord's words communicate his thoughts about land and conservation far better than I could.

“America has a special love affair with its public lands—the only large, wide-open spaces left that still resemble the lands our ancestors viewed when they came here. This huge estate totals 623 million acres or almost a million square miles. It is a remarkable mosaic of forests, plains, mountains, valleys, rivers, lakes, seashores, deserts, and marshlands.

While we properly fuss and worry about endangered species, we tend to forget that perhaps the most important “endangered species” of all is America's unique heritage of wildlands, wilderness, and natural landscapes. Let's take a quick look at where we were, where we are, and where we are going. A few numbers will tell the story—a story that will alarm everyone who is concerned about the legacy we leave to our children and the generations that follow.

Back in 1930, there were about 3 million recreation visits to the national parks; in 1950, there were 30 million; by 1999, there were about 300 million—a hundredfold increase in seventy years. At the current rate, many of our national parks, national forests, national wildlife refuges, and BLM public lands soon will resemble little more than noisy, crowded theme parks. If we try to duplicate on the public lands every activity permitted on the private lands we will quickly destroy the special quality of these natural landscapes.

Most people are attracted to the public lands for their scenic beauty and peace and quiet. They go there for sightseeing, camping, picnicking, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, bird watching, hunting, fishing, hiking, photography, and other light-impact activities. Unfortunately, the proliferation of off-road vehicles (ORVs) is rapidly destroying the natural qualities that we hold dear. The all-terrain vehicles, motorcycles, jet skis, and snowmobiles are heavy-impact and noise-intrusive vehicles. The Forest Service estimates that ORV use will increase from 5.3 million visitor-days annually twenty years ago to a projected 118 million visitor-days per year by 2020—just in the national forests!

More than fifty-two years of active involvement in conservation matters leads me to the conviction that a large majority of our citizens would support whatever measures may be necessary to maintain the integrity of our last great natural landscapes. By this standard, only those activities that are sustainable without environmental deterioration would be permitted on public lands. What a difference it would have made had we listened to the words of wisdom about our public lands by observers of another era.

In 1912, James Bryce, British ambassador to the United States, had this to say about Yosemite National Park: “What Europe is now, is that toward which you in America are tending. Presently, steam cars stop some 12 miles away from the entrance of Yosemite. . . . Surely development should come no closer. . . . If you were to realize what the result of the automobile will be in that wonderful, that incomparable valley, you would keep it out.” No one paid any attention to Mr. Bryce. So now that “wonderful, that incomparable valley” has traffic jams during the day and evening accommodations for 7500 people. The night scene has been described as looking like downtown Los Angeles. Surely this is not what we want for our national parks or other public lands.

In 1985, Governor Bruce Babbitt testified at a congressional hearing that the airplane noise in the Grand Canyon is “equivalent to being downtown in Phoenix at rush hour.” That’s a far cry from Zane Grey’s description of the Grand Canyon in 1906 when he wrote: “One feature of this ever-changing spectacle never changes, its eternal silence.”

In the 1920s, Charles Russell, the great cowboy painter, described his view of what we are doing to the land and what we should do about it in the rough and ready language of the cowboy West. After listening to a long run of self-congratulatory, windy bombast by boosters from Great Falls, Montana, he finally got his chance: “In my book, a pioneer is a man who turned all the grass upside down, strung barb-wire over the dust that was left, poisoned the water and cut down the trees, killed the Indian who owned the land, and called it progress. If I had my way, the land here would be like God made it, and none of you sons of bitches would be here at all.”

The bottom line comes to this—in the next few decades when total recreation visits to the public lands expand to one and one-half billion or more and the off-road vehicular mix expands by a factor of four or more then, sad to say, our rare heritage of natural lands could be history. The only way to save these special lands is to change the current management practices dramatically—and soon. This will mean significantly reducing all activities that degrade the land or water, impact on critical habitats, or intrude upon the tranquility and enjoyment of these lands. This is the critical imperative if we are serious about preserving the last large natural landscapes left within our boundaries.

No other nation has undertaken to set aside such a large and magnificent portion of its landscape as a commons for the use and enjoyment of its citizens and to provide such a varied habitat for its wild creatures. If a significant slice of natural America is to be preserved for this and future generations, it must be here on these lands. There is no other place.”

What has happened to the support base for conservation of our natural resources in the past 20 years? Why has the political party of Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, and Richard Nixon, the party who championed conservation for over a century, abandoned its conservation roots? Why has conservation become a divisive partisan issue?

For example, Wilderness Act passed the U.S House of Representatives by a vote of 372 to 12 and the U.S. Senate by 92 to 1. Because our leaders like Gaylord Nelson worked with a bi-partisan spirit and put people and land ahead of greed and political and economic gain. Today the Wilderness Act and virtually all of our hallmark conservation legislation wouldn't even make it out of legislative committees. If it did it would be dead on arrival at the White House. And even more important question; why are voters allowing this to happen.

Where do we go from here?

Demand that our political leaders take the partisanship out of conservation and all of their work representing "we the people."

The provisions of Governor Doyle's Conserve Wisconsin Initiative should become Wisconsin's conservation initiative, with strong bi-partisan support. Protecting our water, ensuring a sustainable energy future, and protecting our lands is not partisan. Tell your elected representatives to cut out the partisanship and play nice in our best long-term interest or as voters we have the responsibility to throw them out.

It was progressive, forward thinking, conservation minded leaders like Governors La Follett, Nelson, Knowles, and Earl that put and kept Wisconsin as a leader in conservation. Only by working in a bi-partisan manner can this state regain this national leadership.

Wisconsin needs a state-wide water strategy before the "water wars" escalate. We only need to look to western states water problems to see what's headed our way. I encourage Governor Doyle to petition the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture to ensure that roadless areas in the Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest remain roadless. And include other areas also have attributes that merit inclusion. Get engaged at all levels. Don't wait for policies or answers to come out of Washington DC or up State Street here in Madison.

The 1960's though the 1980's were a time when federal and state governments were in the lead in creating conservation policy and regulations. That era is over. Now, I believe progress will come from local communities, local coalitions of concerned and informed citizens.

Smart Growth means just that. Local governments and private landowners have an important role especially in discouraging sprawl and preventing further fragmentation of this state's great northern forests.

We need a fully funded State Forest Legacy program to safeguard their environmental, economic, and recreational values to the state. One of the best ways to protect our forests is to keep working forest working, but working in a sustainable way, protecting all forest values.

We need to protect the best of what's left and restore the rest.

We have a better understanding of science, of ecosystems and conservation biology than ever. We understand the value of biodiversity and genetic diversity. We understand the importance of connectivity and corridors of the land, habitats and waters. We understand ecological services that are this planet's life support system.

We need to think long-term. The question we should all be asking ourselves and each other is what do we want Wisconsin to look like in 50 or 500 years.

During the last ½-century this country has seen the most massive movement of people from rural to urban in history. Yes, it may be a better life, but it has come at a price that is not likely sustainable. As Gaylord Nelson said, we are spending the capital of future generations.

Today our small children are not only suffering from obesity they are suffering from "nature deficit disorder." The National Environmental and Education Foundation reports that the average young child spends 6 hours and 13 minutes in front of a TV, computer, or on the internet and almost no time playing outdoors.

We must invest in environmental and conservation education at a massive scale, "leaving no child behind." Our challenge is to connect people to nature. That doesn't mean that we all have to live in the woods or out on the prairie. We simply need to understand and appreciate what the wild places and the land does for us. **We must act to restore and maintain the health of the land and keep wild places wild.**