



THE ROYAL BANK OF CANADA MONTHLY LETTER

VOL. 57, No. 8
(First published: May 1959)

HEAD OFFICE: MONTREAL, AUGUST 1976

Conserving and Using Our Open Spaces

EVERYONE has a life interest in conservation. For some, the stake is financial: farmers, commercial fishermen and trappers depend upon conservation of their resources for their livelihood. For others, the reward is health and recreation. Both sorts of people are concerned about preservation of our open spaces, our parks, our woodlands, our mountains and our streams.

Preservation of these is preservation of the basic resources of the earth which men and animals must have in order to live. Our physical environment governs our lives to an extent that demands thinking about.

It is time to think more earnestly than we have in the past. The tendency of our machine civilization is to wipe out every trace of what once was primitive wilderness. Joseph Wood Krutch, well known writer about nature, says in his book *The Great Chain of Life*: "If the earth is still livable and in many places still beautiful, that is chiefly because man's power to lay it waste has been limited. Up until now nature has been too large, too abundant and too resistant to be conquered." And there is more truth than poetry in the remark by Havelock Ellis: "The sun, moon and stars would have disappeared long ago if they had happened to be within reach of predatory human hands."

Though the history of exploiting natural resources on this Western Hemisphere has been relatively short, it contains many chapters of reckless waste and appalling destruction. Entire species of animals have been exterminated, or reduced to so small remnants that their survival is doubtful. Forests have been despoiled by uncontrolled cutting and by fire. Grasslands have been made desolate by over-grazing. Topsoil has been washed away.

As recently as the time of John James Audubon, whose remarkable pictures of the birds of America were published in 1830, few birds or mammals were in

danger of extinction; our land was still fertile and our streams ran clear. Then came what has been called the "terrible sixty years". Land was torn up by the plough without regard for its stability under cropping. Buffalo were exploited for their hides and tongues. Eggs of wild birds became objects of commerce, and bright-plumed birds were shot for the millinery trade. Fish were destroyed by removal of shade trees and the pollution of their waters by silt and refuse.

During recent years there has been a slight stirring toward good sense, but we are still full of inner contradictions. We set aside wild areas and then "improve" them out of all wildness. We spend in a profligate way to advance our comfort and convenience far more than people in other countries could ever afford, but we destroy in the process the very basis of comfort and life.

Point of no return

The wonders of the natural world, once destroyed, can never be replaced. It is our job as conservation-minded people looking to the future to maintain some sort of balance between nature and the appurtenances of our industrial age.

Conservation is the planned management and wise use of nature's resources. It aims, in co-operation with science and nature, to increase their quality, quantity and availability through the years. Conservation is not merely a subject for a school curriculum or for attention of game wardens and departments of the government: it is a way of life for all people.

Of course, the wise use of our limited resources means restraint of the few persons who through ignorance, folly, or greed try to satisfy their desires at the expense of all the others. The protection of the basis of physical life should not require enforcement, but when enforcement is necessary we should have no compunction about applying it.

Ontario found this out at the turn of the century. As W. J. K. Harkness termed it in an article in the *Canadian Geographical Journal*, "some nick-of-time legislation" had been passed in 1821 to protect fish and wildlife, but it was not until 1890 that a Royal Commission was appointed to make a comprehensive survey.

Atlantic salmon once abounded in Lake Ontario and its rivers, the Don, the Humber and the Credit; after 1897 the salmon was not seen. The passenger pigeons, once counted in the millions, and the wild turkeys, were already on their way out, and could not recover even under complete protection. The last passenger pigeon died in 1914.

It is to our credit that during the past fifty years we have become increasingly aware of the threat to our welfare. Governments, industry and people have gained knowledge about the need for conservation. Associations on all levels — county, community, province and dominion — are dedicated to the protection and improvement of forest and soil; of water, animals, birds and fish; of natural areas ranging in extent from watersheds to road-side parks.

The least we can do is to become informed about the problems and needs. We may go further by associating ourselves with organizations dedicated to one or another of the conservation efforts.

We need open spaces

What humans need for survival in a world containing powerful enemies, physical and mental, cannot be summed up in the food, shelter and clothing formula. They need to be linked together in society and to be able to break apart as individuals.

Open spaces provide fresh air and health, but they also provide the restful inspiration that nature gives to most of us. When we are in her domain nature has a way of soothing our fretfulness and easing our worries.

Hours in the woods or parks may write no exciting saga. They may be eventless. There is nothing to write home about except how the sunlight is green-filtered and cool with the breath of falling water; how the trail follows the stream up and up, over fallen logs, with the summons of the hidden waterfall luring you on. Or you may tell how, when you were thirsty, you drank from cupped hands at a spring bordered by trillium; and about the black bear that came begging as you ate your lunch at the broad rock table near the falls, and the chipmunks that gambolled in the pine needles at your feet. And yet such a letter home conveys the sense of a chain of life continuous and rich with the ages.

If we confine ourselves to our buildings — our homes, theatres, shops and offices — we are losing more than we know. The late Professor E. J. Urwick, head of the Department of Political Economy at the University of Toronto for ten years, wrote a book which he called *The Values of Life*. He said in it: "We are losing the capacity for wonder, the power to see and feel the miracles of life and beauty around us, without which our souls are half-empty and real fulness of life is denied us."

Our oldest resource

Canada's oldest natural resource is her wilderness. Some of it is being preserved; much more should be set aside before it becomes overrun.

Visitors to older countries notice that people there have a greater respect for natural features than we have hitherto shown. Perhaps it is because wilderness places abroad are wisely protected by folk tales and beliefs. In Ireland, for example, people do not meddle with the "fairy rings" or "lone trees" that dot the landscape any more than they would break down the bounds of a fairy fort. Consequently, there is a haven on every good man's land for small wild creatures and gay wild flowers.

Perhaps it is not modern to believe in fairies and leprechauns, but if they and the little light elves that inhabit the grassy verges of fields and the marshy banks of streams persuade us by promise or threat to preserve their homes they are doing us and our children's children a good turn.

On a larger scale, we need the spirit of conservation in our forests and parks. This may mean that we cannot gratify all demands for their use. Many of the things we go to the open spaces to enjoy are endangered because the facilities we demand for our comfort are crowding out the scenery.

In too many instances a big job of landscape destruction is undertaken to make the place more accessible, or to change its character. Take the pond that Thoreau made famous through his book *Walden, or Life in the Woods*. The four families which once owned the surrounding property gave it to Massachusetts to preserve for posterity. Today, instead of the peaceful pool about which Thoreau wrote, there is a bathing beach, and across the road there are trailer camps and hot dog stands. It takes an effort of the imagination to picture the tranquil solitude of Thoreau's Walden.

Even in national parks, the pressures are great for roads and tourist developments. To the south of us, Yellowstone Park is an example. The original stipulation that the area should be kept in its "natural condition" has not prevented the construction of more and more roads, the building of more lodges, the

provision of more parking space. Says a writer in *Vital Issues*: "There are places in Yellowstone that look as if they were trying to compete with an amusement park."

By contrast, *Canada Year Book* said of Algonquin Park, one of Ontario's provincial parks: "the present administrative policy is to encourage the establishment of commercial recreation facilities on the park fringes and to return the park itself to its natural condition."

Choosing a vacation spot

The more complicated our lives become, and the more elaborate the machinery of living is made, the more necessary it is to create the temporary retreat from reality which we call play. Recreation is a major need for old as well as young. As the German philosopher Nietzsche wrote: "In every man there is a child who wants to play."

Part of the standard of living in North America is the wilds of Canada. Gregory Clark went so far as to say in his booklet *With Rod and Reel in Canada*: "Canada is fortunate in having considerable areas unfit for anything forever save recreation."

There is no ready-made vacation pattern into which people of all sizes and shapes must fit. Some may like the thrill of digging in the ages-old badlands of the Red Deer River Valley, where dinosaurs disported themselves in the shallow sea of the Mesozoic Age. Others prefer the Annapolis Valley, where Champlain raised his habitation and founded the Order of the Good Time in 1606.

Snowy slopes, mineral springs, trout-filled streams, woods and hills peopled with game animals, mountain trails, sun-swept beaches: all these are to be found in Canada.

There is little difference, really, between the recreation needs of the business man who gets away from his office to fish a Quebec stream and the housewife who, in sentimental mood, sits in Beacon Hill Park in Victoria when the moon is on the wane and sees a ghostly company of Druids walking in solemn procession beneath the giant oaks. Both accumulate cherished memories of pleasant surroundings, the mental tonic of peaceful hours. For the time being they have escaped into another room of life.

Learning about nature

Out of a vacation spent in one of Canada's parks or open spaces one may carry away, besides pleasant memories, an intellectual increment. One may have absorbed some knowledge of the ways of squirrels or men.

One does not need to study, but merely to take in. Even the greatest biologists stammer in the presence

of nature. They do not know all the properties of living matter or all of its astonishing possibilities. To lesser people it is enough to see the beauty in the simplicity of natural things; to note how the myriad colours of moss on a rock show to their best advantage after a rainfall; to detect the grace of movement in a bounding deer; to envy, perhaps, the charming poise of a listening bird.

Some knowledge of the natural world should be part of every child's education: not the knowledge that is gained from textbooks or through class-room microscopes or by dissection of dead beasts, but knowledge of acquaintance. By giving children the opportunity to absorb nature we acquaint them with the sense that life exists even in the lowliest form of animal and the smallest sort of plant.

Living in the open spaces will acquaint us, and our children, with the biological problems of human survival in a world where Nature will always have the last word. It will encourage us to overcome unwarranted fears, because we fear mostly what we do not know. It will give us the broad view that develops mental fitness and emotional stability.

Alas! nature education in our schools often finds that it has arrived at a completely paved play yard. There are no ants for biology, no grasshoppers for arithmetic problems, no crickets for music, no weeds for pressing into albums, no pools with living drops for microscopic wondering.

What sort of open spaces?

The open spaces we need range from tracts that are thousands of square miles in area to little road-side picnic places with room for a couple of tables. The desirable feature is to have enough of them, preserved from invasion by predators of every sort, and located so that some of them are within reach of every Canadian.

Canada's national parks are areas set aside by the federal government "to preserve for all time the most outstanding and unique natural features of Canada for the benefit, education and enjoyment of Canadians as part of their natural heritage. They are dedicated forever to one use — to serve as sanctuaries of nature for rest, relaxation and enjoyment."

It was the discovery of mineral hot springs on Sulphur Mountain, near Banff, that led to the establishment of Canada's first national park. From this small area of ten square miles, set apart in 1885, the parks system has been extended until it embraces thirty separate areas totalling 50,000 square miles.

Every park has its special features, from fishing to romance. For the romantic interest we may go to

Prince Edward Island, where Green Gables, the farmhouse immortalized by Lucy Maud Montgomery in *Anne of Green Gables* is preserved amid beautiful surroundings: the Lake of Shining Waters, the Haunted Wood and Lovers' Lane.

Provincial parks, set aside and maintained by the provincial governments, total 100,000 square miles, and provincial forest reserves add up to 265,000 square miles. One of the best known is Algonquin Provincial Park in Ontario, only 175 miles from Toronto. In its 2,900 square miles there are countless wild birds and animals of many species living undisturbed by man, and anglers haunt its well-stocked lakes and streams.

Not everyone has an automobile or the time and money required to reach these national and provincial parks, so it is necessary to have municipal parks.

Much of the difference between towns in their general goodness of life for good people depends upon their intelligent provision of open spaces.

Absurd it may be, but every new generation seems to come face to face with the problem of open spaces and parks as if it were something new; but we know of town planning with an eye to beauty and space in the Old World from very early times. Today, many Canadian communities are growing up without direction, one "development" jostling another without regard for anything beyond using the land for houses and apartments.

What, specifically, should be sought? Ideally, every family should have access to a park big enough for all-day excursions; a wooded area; a protected place where wild flowers grow; a clear stream and a pool. These are to be our contact with nature, and are quite apart from school and other athletic grounds, tot lots and swimming places.

Some device of law should be found whereby these areas shall be kept for the people for all time. As things are now, by-laws of a few years ago can be removed from the books to allow use of park land for electric substations, filtration plants, parking lots or other accessories of our mechanization. Our plans need to be realistic and practical, yet we must make them with vision, knowledge and imagination if we are not to barter future health and happiness for an easy solution of some present problem.

As an example of planning of this sort, consider the programme of the Royal Botanical Gardens at Hamilton, Ontario. It includes science, recreation and education. It has a dozen areas, each with its own planned purpose: a picnic place, an autumn garden, a spring garden, a children's garden, a nature trail and wild-flower sanctuary, a sunken garden, a marsh waterfowl sanctuary, an arboretum, and a rock garden.

Why bother?

Why should we go to the expense and trouble of preserving open spaces and providing parks? Because life depends upon it.

The scampering of a squirrel, the ploughing of a worm, the flight of a bird, the honey-gathering of a bee — all these play their part in regulating the natural machinery of fertility and growth.

The protection of trees on our watersheds is essential to the collection, storage and distribution of water, without which we could not live.

We admire the wild flower for its beauty, painted by myriad artists, each with his own special skill, but the plant has a usefulness far more substantial than its aesthetic appeal. "When," said C. F. Kettering, Vice-President of General Motors, "a man comes to me and says, 'All of the major problems of science have been solved' — I like to ask him the simple question, 'Why is grass green?'"

The green leaf is the fundamental link between life on earth and the energy of the sun. By means of their green stuff — chlorophyll — plants are able to manufacture their own food from raw materials they gather from the air and soil. Animals lack this ability and could not exist without the food-producing plants.

Everything that has life, from the bird song that wakes us at dawn to the philosophy that stirs our minds as we linger by moonlight on a beach or a hill-top, is built of the product of green plants.

How close is the affinity between human beings and the trees, grass, shrubs, and flowers we wish to preserve in our open spaces? It is closer than most people realize. We may, as Donald Culross Peattie put it in his book *Flowering Earth*, lay our hand upon the smooth flank of a beech and say: "We be of one blood, brother, thou and I." Because the one significant difference in the two structural formulas is this: the hub of every haemoglobin molecule in man is one atom of iron, while in chlorophyll, the green stuff of the plant leaves, it is one atom of magnesium.

In earth's long history one species after another of animal and plant has disappeared, and one culture after another has passed to oblivion, because of its inability to adjust to environmental change.

Today it is necessary for mankind to regulate his use of resources and to manage earth's remaining capital more creatively if he is to survive.

We can adapt ourselves understandingly if we go into our open places, to learn by personal experience in field and forest, on mountains and beside the streams, that mankind is dependent upon the living resources of the earth and must do his part to conserve them.