

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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REMARKS OF SECRETARY OF THE INTERIOR THOMAS S. KLEPPE
BEFORE THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION'S ANNUAL CONFERENCE
LOUISVILLE, KENTUCKY, MARCH 20, 1976

Americans have always been captivated by the idea of new frontiers. We believe there will always be more rivers to cross and mountains to climb. No people or society on earth is as mobile as ours. Americans represent a dynamic, new breed in the march of mankind.

The modern age seems to be domesticating the American. He or she walks in what are sometimes called asphalt jungles. Skyscrapers and other tall buildings dwarf those who dwell in them. Americans are more and more urbanized in ever-spreading metropolitan areas. The modern American appears to be fenced in by not only his surroundings but the city way of life he leads each day.

These are some of the impressions that a Bicentennial visitor might gain in traveling around our country this year. Yet, beneath the surface of American life, another picture emerges. It is a far different view of what is happening in our society.

More and more Americans are returning to live in rural areas. Never before in our history has there been such concern about our quality of life--air, water, the environment. Never before has there been greater public concern about the welfare of American wildlife. Public interest has developed into national interest and concern.

The welfare of our wildlife has become one of America's new frontiers. American society has come full circle--from our sophisticated urban enclaves, we are developing entirely new concepts about the use and preservation of America's great outdoors.

Wildlife organizations increase in membership. New such organizations are formed. Television, the general press and advertising abound with wildlife information. Endangered species has become a household term. The courts bring forceful attention to wildlife issues. We at the Interior Department are no strangers to that scene.

The era of public apathy about the Nation's wildlife resources is past. We live in the age of awareness. People want to resolve issues. They want decisions. I agree. At the same time, we must resolve these issues in an orderly manner within the budgetary and legislative resources currently available. The quick fix, as with our economy, is not necessarily the answer. The best solutions may be slow but sure.

For about 15 years, much of the emphasis on wildlife issues has been negative. We have not done this and we have not done that. I am neither a biologist nor an apologist, but I would like to spend some time with you today discussing the positive--what has been done and what can be accomplished for American wildlife in the future.

Make no mistake, wildlife has some very real problems facing it--preservation of habitat being one. I am going to Florida after this meeting to look into that subject first-hand. I applaud your Federation program to save our wetlands.

In this Bicentennial year of 1976, however, I think it appropriate that we pause and look back to get a balanced view of our wildlife history. For the sake of meaning and brevity, let us consider the past dozen years. I have reviewed these years and am impressed with how much has been done for wildlife.

Since 1960 there have been at least 11 major pieces of legislation signed into law that directly or indirectly benefit wildlife.

They range from the three versions of the endangered species act, through the aerial hunting act, to the recent extension of the wetlands loan fund. They protect wild and scenic rivers and historic sites. They sharply curbed illegal commerce in marine mammals. They set aside wilderness areas. They prohibit the use of certain pesticides. They declare a national environmental policy. They give the little man in this country the legal power to challenge the so-called system as an individual in behalf of wildlife.

In my opinion, this is an eloquent and dramatic list of laws to be enacted by any one government in such a relatively short time.

That is one reason why I am positive about the future. I believe these laws have greatly changed the wildlife scene. Many have not realized this yet, because we are in the troublesome period of implementing these laws. It is a period of adjustment that is seemingly inefficient.

Under the big sky and openness of the Dakotas I learned to respect the healing qualities of time. I think time will have its effect on the working of these laws.

I am positive for a second reason. The Congress, in fashioning this new environmental legislation, had the foresight to invite the public more deeply into the Federal decision-making process than ever before. Specific passages in many of these environmental laws prescribe the methods by which the public can influence and even oversee the implementation of these laws through the courts. Believe me, I know.

This aspect of the environmental movement is, perhaps, the most hopeful for our Nation as a whole. My legal staff might raise a few questions with me on this point. So would some of the scientists who have been writing so many environmental impact statements.

But frankly speaking, I welcome those aspects of the environmental laws that encourage and specify public participation. It is the concerned citizens of this country--like the members of this organization--that keep all of us on our toes.

I think of this new public involvement in natural resources management in much the same way as the English system of justice viewed the legal profession. They left the big decisions up to the common man when they evolved the jury system. Our scientists in a sense are the lawyers. The jury today in the wildlife field is the public at large. In my view that is how it should be. We work for you and all Americans.

I am positive about the future of wildlife for a third reason. I have been closely reviewing events of the last few years. That review of our operations was truly noteworthy to me when I considered the tight dollar restrictions under which the Federal Government has been operating.

Despite a persistent shortage of manpower, our scientists have handled an amazing number of endangered species cases. Three trout species have been removed from the list as endangered. This event went largely unheralded in the press, but it is what the endangered species act is all about--to reduce the number of creatures on the endangered species list. We are now confident that these three trout are once more healthy in the wild because of State and Federal lab and field work in their behalf.

The American alligator is so numerous now because of State and Federal controls. We may have done too good a job. I hear of alligators invading golf courses and suburban housing developments in the Southeast.

We are in the final phase of removing this animal from the endangered species list over as much of its habitat as we can. It took nine years to reverse this trend.

We have made a hard decision on the grizzly bear--an emotion-provoking animal wherever it is discussed. It is a decision that does not please those who want complete protection or those who want none. As a threatened species, the grizzly now receives strict Federal and State protection. At the same time, we allow extremely limited hunting where its populations are healthy enough to do so.

The list goes on. We have taken formal action on the gray bat, the Cedros Island mule deer, the peninsular pronghorn, the Mexican wolf, three Hawaiian birds, three sea turtles, and the tiny snail darter.

In all, since the 1973 endangered species act was passed, we have reviewed--in one stage or another--over 3,200 species of plants and animals. As a practical matter, the enormity of the listing process is reflected in the cost in manpower and dollars. On the average it takes 36 days of one biologist's time and five days of a clerical person's time to comply with the formal listing requirements of the law.

Despite their workload our scientists have taken the endangered species act to heart. We have broadened its coverage to the underwater and underground domains of what we call "the little knownuglies"--the worlds of clams, snails, crustaceans, and lizards. We have also begun investigating the realm of 40 species of butterflies--insects.

More than 2,800 plant species are presently under consideration for formal listing. Among them are the Florida royal palm, several types of oak, ash, cypress, and willow trees, plus a considerable number of shrubs and grasses. We have developed a new concept of protecting the "critical habitat" of an endangered animal or plant. This is a new approach and we are confident it will work to the benefit of wildlife.

In the other areas of wildlife management, we are making gains. Almost two million vital acres of wetlands have been set aside since 1961 for waterfowl breeding and nesting. Of course, more needs to be set aside.

The first live Atlantic salmon quietly returned to the Connecticut River last summer and swam up to the Holyoke fish ladder in Massachusetts. To me that was a real wildlife bicentennial event--the start of an exciting effort to reestablish the salmon in eastern streams where it has been absent for many years. That was just a hint of what is to come. Muskox are doing so well in Alaska that we exported 40 of them to the Soviet Union last year. This was part of an international effort to share our success with a nation where this species has been lost.

Our laboratory work is paying off. It may not sound like much but a broken back syndrome in catfish has been identified. This has been caused by a spray used on cotton crops. Catfish are an important commercial fish crop in many parts of the South.

We have come up with a practical way of identifying and dealing with duck diseases when they break out in the wild. Our pesticides research shows that the influence of DDT is on the decline nationwide. Yet another source of pollution --known as PCB's--was discovered in the laboratories and plans are being drawn up to deal with it.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is providing major ecological expertise to help guide our Department's energy decisions--including coal, oil shale, geothermal, and outer continental shelf oil and gas developments. This effort will assist us in minimizing damage from energy developments. It will allow us to avoid highly sensitive fish and wildlife habitat where disturbances would have a serious environmental impact. Among several efforts, the Fish and Wildlife Service is looking at the implications of energy development on the limited western water resource.

The Service's energy activities involve contributions from State fish and wildlife departments, other government laboratories, private industry and universities. These combined efforts make it possible to understand the environmental implications of energy decisions. We can better control disruption and assure rapid recovery of disturbed areas.

The list of accomplishments could go on. The point is this: These results of the past year or so are just the beginning of a payoff period for the public. They come from investments and decisions made 10 to 12 years ago. Simply put, results take time.

With continued public awareness and support, we will see more results over more time.

That is not to say that easy times are ahead. I compare the wildlife situation today with the idea of a big battle. At this moment we are in a position very similar to that of an army before the battle. We have gone through an enormous logistics effort to marshall the men and machines of war. It took years of intense effort to assemble, train, and deploy these resources. That is where we are today on the wildlife scene, as I see it.

We have gone through the era of defining our objective, getting ourselves organized and deploying to gain our objectives. We are today poised on the edge of the great fight. We must yet exert an enormous effort before we can claim victory.

As my analogy suggests the battles ahead are no mere skirmishes. They are major confrontations. The largest single threat to wildlife today must somehow be conquered. That threat, of course, is the loss of habitat. If this battle is not won, then the wildlife laws, the research work, the management of refuges, and the enforcement of the laws will be diminished in effectiveness.

There is considerable development in the country that has not considered the best interests of wildlife. Poor land use planning has characterized too many local decisions. Some of the massive engineering projects that have been undertaken in this nation can only be described as unthinking as far as preserving wildlife values are concerned. There are far too many valuable wetland areas being drained each year for conversion to croplands. These are the battles that lie ahead. As you all well know, they are not and will not be easy victories. The fish and wildlife resources of the country need a voice and a vote for their best interests. I hope to be an energetic voice in that future and I will cast a vote of responsibility toward our wildlife. I know that you and the Federation joins me in behalf of protecting our natural resources.

Together, we can accomplish much. We can help lead the American people to their newest and greatest frontiers.

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