

EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP FOR CONSERVATION'S FUTURE

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I believe it will be in this century that the great significance of conservation will be realized. With seven billion human beings demanding so much of one good planet, it is now inevitable that a collision between our numbers and our expectations will occur. The desire of people everywhere for a full and reasonable life has placed unprecedented demands on natural systems. If



Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1919) continues to cast a long and profound shadow in American conservation circles.

this is true, then the great notion launched upon the world over 100 years ago that we call conservation will become the one idea that can truly save humanity. In its embrace will lie our future – one only possible if the great web of life upon which we and all creatures depend is protected and sustained.

How was it that individuals like Theodore Roosevelt, George Bird Grinnell, Gordon Hewitt and Sir Wilfred Laurier were able to see so clearly the problems of excessive natural resource use and to predict such dire consequences for North American society? More importantly, how were these individuals able to instill these notions in the political and economic institutions of their time? How, on a continent with vast areas still unoccupied, with an extraordinary abundance of natural capital and very few people by today's standards, did a movement centered on the conservation of nature and the wise use of renewable natural resources take hold? What are the secrets to their effective conservation leadership?

It is natural enough that we should develop an impression that only individuals of social or political prominence were responsible for conservation's success; that political influence is the essential runway for great ideas. Thus, it is not surprising that so many conservation organizations today focus on attaining political influence as a means to advance their programs. Furthermore, it would be ridiculous to suggest that engaging the political process in a democratic environment is without utility or impact. I suggest that if democracy has taught us anything, it is that the wishes of the people, when expressed, will override any other political agenda.

Despite this salient truth, the conservation movement has to a large extent moved away from an agenda of trying to convince society of its social, cultural and economic value. To what end, we should certainly ask, for this was the truck and traffic, indeed the very *raison d'être* of our birth and founding. It was the rallying cry of our leaders and the great hope of our visionaries. It was the dialogue in our meeting halls and our back rooms, in our pubs and our restaurants, in our club houses and offices; in the parlors and storefronts, the newspapers and magazines of our earliest, and I would argue, our greatest time in conservation. Regrettably, this trade for public influence has been set aside. We no longer strive for the hearts of our nations'

publics. We have replaced this with an emphasis on membership rosters and obtaining political influence, both often emphasizing specific issues that can hardly be viewed as being of the greatest public value or concern. The result has been an indifferent public, by and large, and one totally uninformed about conservation issues and the relevance of hunting in modern times.

Isn't it time for this to change? Isn't it abundantly clear that the elephant in the room for hunting and for conservation generally is the public we have failed to engage? Isn't it time to delve into the true nature of conservation leadership and adopt those principles for moving our agenda forward? Isn't it time to remember that just as a man must draw back to leap, so too must a society or intellectual movement? If one studies the progress of ideas – indeed the very nature of progress itself – this conclusion is inescapable. I am prepared to argue that we have been treating the issues of hunting's relevance and conservation's importance as though they were marketing slogans for the advancement of our organizations, rather than matters of profound significance to the quality of our lives and the essential worth of our nations.

Yet this worth was precisely the message of those great founders of our conservation movement. It is important for us to remember that individuals like Roosevelt and Laurier viewed conservation not only as a matter of national concern, but also as a matter of national relevance. Relentless citizens, they sought to improve the inherent worth of their countries and recognized that prudent, wise use of natural resources and the conservation of wildlife were signatures of progressive leadership. Yet, regardless of their political influence or personal prestige, these wise leaders understood that no such turn of society's wheel could be made without the hands of the public upon it. Conservation pioneers knew that to carry the great ideas forward, they needed more than an influential office, a few political allies or a devoted club membership. They understood that in democracies something greater than the individual exists, regardless of how



significant the individual is. They understood the mechanics of change.

Yet, paradoxically, these men also recognized that nothing moves beyond the conceptual unless an individual or group decides to accept the yoke of leadership and take action. They imparted two essential truths: First, that while the individual and his allies may incite, only the masses may ultimately succeed. However, on the other hand, the masses must be catalyzed to action. The good news in all of this, it seems to me, is that the public's current indifference may be the greatest of all opportunities for ideas to take hold. In some regards, the most fertile ground is always that which lies unfurrowed. Indeed, I suggest this is in part why Roosevelt and company were so successful in their time, bringing a new idea to the national focus of proud and emergent North American nations.

What then are the true lessons from our conservation past? How did the legendary heroes of conservation accomplish what they did, against such improbable odds? Was it all a matter of size, influence and power? I should think not. Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir and George Bird Grinnell were probably three of the most successful conservation leaders of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Between them, they launched both the wilderness movement and the North American wildlife conservation success story that we benefit so extravagantly from today and which together encircle one of the greatest achievements of modern society. The vision they crystallized and the pathway to progress they engineered are lessons in success. I suggest we study them closely.

In doing so we will discover that size, influence and power are not the real wings of leadership, as significant as they might be. Discovering and discoursing with the public and delivering to them the ideals we believe to be of importance and value – this is the hallmark of leadership. This is what Roosevelt, Muir and Grinnell excelled in, and why they and Laurier, Hewitt and all those other conservation rebels devoted their energies towards public engagement. For if our efforts are not directed to the good of society, rather than to our personal or organizational largesse, can we really defend our efforts as an exercise of the national interest? Isn't our goal to ensure a future for our national treasures of wilderness and wildlife, of cherished cultures and traditions such as hunting and all that incredible experience entails? I believe our conservation organizations are getting off track, though our motivations may be above reproach. Believing that more members or warm handshakes from the political insiders will give us more influence, have we forgotten the true mission of our leadership as well as our best chance of accomplishing it?

We seem to believe that more of the same will lead to the change we seek. I do not believe this. It is like constantly redesigning the car when what we really need is an aircraft. Like true leadership, the winds of change also require wings – not bigger wheels. No matter how improbable or chaotic, these wings will be fashioned in the hands of the common people. Our movement must get back to a dialogue with them. *GT*

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