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THE RELATION OF WILD-LIFE CONSERVATION TO EROSION CONTROL

A radio talk by Ernest G. Holt, Chief Forester, U. S. Soil Conservation Service, La Crosse, Wisconsin, broadcast in the Conservation Day program, National Farm and Home Hour, Friday, May 24, 1935, by 60 stations associated with the National Broadcasting Company.

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Folks, I have travelled several hundred miles to get to talk to you today, and I didn't come down here to Chicago to work off any parables. But I do want to point a paradox. Not until a dark cloud rolled up out of the West to obscure the sun over half a continent did the people of this country see something that vitally concerns everyone of us.

You know, we Americans think we are pretty smart, and we are quick to resent anything being put over on us. Yet, we are the victims of a mighty grim joke. For three hundred years we have been putting over on ourselves something which, had it been attempted by another nation, would have brought an instant declaration of war. I refer to the most colossal destruction of good agricultural land that the world has ever witnessed in a like space of time.

Although much of our land has known the plow for scarce a generation, we have practically ruined for further crop use no less than 100 million acres. Could this wasted land be restored and divided into farms of 160 acres each, it would support 625 thousand families. Of course, this hasn't taken place overnight, but it is still equivalent to driving from their original homes at least two million persons -- half the enrollment in the United States Army during the World War. Had half of our army been driven out of France, we would have considered our defeat decisive, yet we have looked with complacency upon this tragedy that has befallen, and is still befalling, such a tremendous number of our farmers. This destruction of our most basic natural resource is continuing at the rate of more than 100 thousand acres a year.

These dust storms that have at last made us realize that something is wrong are merely symptoms of a disease that the white man brought to this country. The disease is erosion. Whether the onset is due to wind or water, the underlying cause is the same -- the reckless manner in which we have stripped our virgin soils of their original cover of vegetation, and have cultivated them without any regard to their composition or steepness.

What has all this to do with wild-life conservation? Well, I'll ask you one. When you have to shut every door and window, or wear a damp handkerchief over your nose to escape suffocation by dust, what do you suppose the birds and animals are doing? And when you let your soil wash away from beneath your feet, what of the creatures dependent on that soil for their homes and their food supply? Without some sort of vegetation, animal life simply can not exist, even in the ocean.

If any of you are as grey-headed as I am you won't have any trouble recalling the time when we had plenty of good shooting and good fishing. Where is it now? In answering that question, for heaven's sake don't pull that old worn-out alibi that the "vermin" got the game and fish. When conditions are made impossible for game, they are also made impossible for so-called vermin. The truth is, our game and fish resources have been depleted for the same reason that our soil resources have suffered such heavy damage from erosion.

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We cut down our woods, plow up our prairies, even burn the last miserable weed out of our fence corners; then we blame the disappearance of our game birds on the hawks and owls. We rip the protecting vegetation from our hillsides and turn thousands of tons of silt into our streams; and when the trout disappear we go out and shoot the herons and kingfishers. Earnestly now, is this logic? Whatever it is, it is wholly unscientific.

Over in Iowa there's a chap named Errington who has been prying into the personal affairs of quail for years. Only a couple of weeks ago he told me his researches have shown that if a certain quail range is capable of wintering a dozen birds, only a dozen will survive even though 50 start. Conversely, 10 or 12 starting the winter will very likely all survive. And in either case the number of predators present, or their entire absence, is without effect on the carrying capacity of the range.

Ralph King, another friend of mine, who works on ruffed grouse up in Minnesota, has found that even 16 great horned owls living on his observational area did not cut the grouse population below the carrying capacity of the range, and that lessening the number of predators had no effect in raising the grouse population.

Gentlemen, this simply means that if we are ever going to get anywhere with a wild-life restoration program, we have got to quit wasting time passing the buck to everything under the sun and start rebuilding the habitats we ourselves have destroyed.

In this work, erosion control and wild-life welfare go hand in hand. Vegetation is essential to both. Any operation for the control of erosion that restores vegetation to our denuded land directly benefits wild-life. But the Soil Conservation Service goes farther than that, and is definitely writing wild-life conservation into its broad program of correct land use. In cooperation with the Biological Survey -- a fellow agency of the Department of Agriculture -- the Service is utilizing the knowledge and experience of trained biologists to help restore some semblance of the conditions that made this country a wild-life paradise before the white man despoiled it.

But these men can not do the job alone. They may have the scientific skill and be able to demonstrate the proper technique, but the really important part is up to you who own the land. How about that rough corner on your farm, where the gullies have started? What about those fence lines, as clean as your parlor floor? What about that creek bank that your cattle have grazed until not even a willow can get a foothold? Get shrubbery back in those places, and a little grass for nesting cover, and see how quickly your farm can boast something in the way of wild-life besides grasshoppers and potato bugs.

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