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Conservation and Natural Beauty

Once a powerful factor in American politics, the conservation movement is relatively weak, and divided as to objectives. During the heyday of Theodore Roosevelt's administration, tremendous progress was made in setting aside large areas as national parks. After the initial success, the movement chose to pursue other social objectives and gradually lost its force. During Franklin Roosevelt's administration there was another peak in conservation interest and accomplishment. In contrast to these two exemplary periods there have been other times of less activity. Vigor and initiative in conservation were lacking at a time of great expansion in population and industry. We permitted the pollution of most of our great rivers, the proliferation of urban sprawl, and destruction of much natural beauty. Even the national parks have suffered. In the use of these priceless resources, a major criterion of progress has been increase in the number of "visitor days." As a result, part of Yosemite Park on a weekend is like a city slum.

The need for action in conservation has been recognized. More than 30 major organizations are now active. One of the most dynamic of these is the Sierra Club. Membership is relatively small (about 32,000), but it is growing fast, and it has become national in scope. The group is adept at mobilizing support in specific controversies. The Sierra Club played a large role in forcing the Pacific Gas and Electric Company to abandon its plans for a reactor at Bodega Bay. Lately, the Sierra Club has made itself heard with respect to the power lines associated with the Stanford linear accelerator. Unfortunately, these are local skirmishes, and while such skirmishes may be won and their winning may be exemplary, many others are lost by default. Thus, while a few battles go well, the war as a whole is lost.

If we are to arrest the trend toward mass ugliness we must do more than stop or modify a few construction projects. An outline of broader goals was enunciated by President Johnson in his message on natural beauty. He said, "Our conservation must not be just classic protection and development but a creative conservation of restoration and innovation." This statement should be viewed as a challenge to conservationists to come up with ideas and plans. At least one leader has done so. In a recent speech Russell E. Train, president of the Conservation Foundation, has suggested a number of types of initiative that might be fostered. For instance, he would increase the opportunities for recreation associated with limited-access highways. Through expansion of rights-of-way, it would be possible to provide footpaths, bicycle paths, trails to natural features, picnic grounds, and even camp sites. One can imagine, further, a series of small but beautiful plots devoted to local flora.

In a recent issue of this journal (*Science*, 3 December), E. C. Stone discusses the problem of preserving vegetation in parks and wilderness. He makes it clear that we have already unwittingly conducted large-scale ecological experiments in our parks. By controlling predators we have permitted overexpansion of ungulates, with resultant large-scale destruction of flora. By controlling fires we have changed the natural succession of vegetation. Perhaps in our approach to conservation and natural beauty we would progress best by making some experiments. We should give over much of the areas of our parks to wilderness, letting nature take its course, while observing closely what is happening. At the same time, we might well devote limited areas to controlled experimentation.

These are only suggestions for initiative. But they illustrate the kind of approach the conservation movement must make if it is to change from an effort devoted to rear-guard action into a dynamic force for constructive achievement.—PHILIP H. ABELSON