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A Need for Wildness

Dave Owens

Gentlemen, I thank you for this opportunity to speak to you once again.

There are certain traditions about a Kit Kat paper. The essayist is not to speak directly about his professional interests, and I shall not. I shall speak about my hobby-- if one may label as a hobby something that so passionately engages my heart.

My subject is "A Need for Wildness." The idea is Thoreau's, and I quote from Walden:

We need the tonic of wildness--to wade sometimes in marshes where the bittern and the meadow-hen lurk, and hear the booming of the snipe; to smell the whispering sedge where only some wilder and more solitary fowl builds her nest, and the mink crawls with its belly close to the ground....We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the wilderness with its living and decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain. We need to witness our own limits transgressed, and some life pasturing freely where we never wander.

This is my text for the evening; all the rest is a gloss upon it.

The obvious and demanding question is "Where do we find such wildness today?" It is available in parts of Alaska, Canada, Idaho and other western states. But I must hasten to add that even in these remote places the wilderness is under threat and pressure: threat from ranchers who want to graze public lands, threat from logging interests, threat from mining interests, and, perhaps most of all, threat from the sheer pressure of people seeking outdoor recreation.

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destroy whatever riverine habitat yet remains. The city is being slowly choked by shopping malls, condos, and freeways, each of which eats up land.

Consider just a few examples of what our society-- I can't call it our civilization--is doing.

At the turn of the century there were an estimated 40,000 tigers in India; today there are fewer than 2000. And this is not the result of uncontrolled hunting. Tigers in India have complete and absolute protection. The problem is population pressure. The tiger's enemy is the chain saw.

There were in quite recent times thousands of beluga whales in the Gulf of the St. Lawrence. There are now an estimated thirty. The cause of the decline is the presence of PCB's in the water.

In the last two years in the United States, 4,500 people were so seriously injured by chemical spills that they required hospitalization. Last August in Virginia a chemical spill ate through 18 inches of asphalt [Eleanor Clift, Newsweek].

Six billion tons of topsoil are lost yearly in this country by erosion.

One of the weird results of our patchwork of laws is that it is illegal to shoot an eagle, but there is nothing illegal about destroying the habitat in which the eagle lives. It is illegal to dig up endangered plants; it is not illegal to turn their habitat into a parking lot.

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What we are seeing is the unhappy continuation of a long-standing belief that the endless land is here to be plundered. Unfortunately the land is not endless. In proposing to drive the Cherokee and Choctaw Indians further west, President Andrew Jackson said, "Forests ranged by a few thousand savages"--there were really 60,000 Indians who had a well-established and sensible agricultural civilization--"must give way." How familiar it all sounds. Today the insistence is that millions of square miles of pristine Alaskan wilderness be opened for exploration and not held for the benefit of "a few elitest sportsmen and conservationists."

Presuming that a Kit Kat member who desires a wilderness experience can board a plane and reach areas that are still pristine, the question remains, "What about the millions of fellow Ohioans who must find their wilderness within the state or not at all?"

And lest you say, "Oh, come on; people are not that eager for the outdoors," let me tell you about an experience I had last summer. Each year on the last Saturday in June, Natural Areas and Preserves of ODNR has an open house at Cranberry Island in Buckeye Lake. This past June more than a thousand people came; and since the island is small and can accommodate only 40 or 50 people at a time, people stood in line for as long as two hours, almost entirely without complaint. There are no wild animals on the island; there are no rides; there are no hamburger stands; so what did they come to see? Orchids in bloom, pitcher plants, arrow arum, the island itself, which is a floating sphagnum mat. Don't tell me people don't care!

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Presuming that a Kit Kat member who desires a wilderness experience can board a plane and reach areas that are still pristine, the question remains, "What about the millions of fellow citizens who must find their wilderness within the state or not at all?"

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Don't tell me people don't care!

I think about my own wonderful boyhood when the world of nature lay free and open all around me. But where today do children play cowboy-and-indians; where do they fish and hunt and roam freely with the sun, and the wind, and the rain and the snow? Today as I drive about Franklin county, I see the steady retreat and destruction of every undeveloped corner, every stream turned into an open sewer and trash dump. The open fields are buried under shopping malls and condominiums.

Let me have a show of hands: in the last five years, how many of you have seen a wild orchid in bloom? have seen a bittern? have seen an eagle? have seen a fox. [The answer to each question was five or six people, not counting my guests who were all outdoor people.] I shall not ask if you ^{feel} ~~feel~~ any guilt that you have stood by while the opportunity for such experiences becomes daily less and less possible. I shall let your grandchildren ask that question.

According to the September 1985 issue of Audubon, "North Dakota's wetland complex is, biologically, one of the most valuable pieces of real estate on the planet. But those sloughs and marshes are being destroyed at the rate of 20,000 acres a year to produce wheatfields in a state where farmers are already strangling on their surplus production." The Nature Conservancy is fighting valiantly to save as much of these wetlands as possible. Ohio, 35th state in size, has no such vast areas; thus what does remain is doubly precious. Ohio's last great undeveloped wetland is near Sandusky Bay and the Conservancy is working for its preservation.

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If I am fair, I must allow you to ask, "Does all this really matter?" My answer: "By God it does!" Thoreau meant it when he wrote "We need the tonic of wildness."

Wordsworth meant it when he wrote:

The world is too much with us; late and soon,
Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers.
Little we see in Nature that is ours;
We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon!
This sea that bares her bosom to the moon,
The winds that will be howling at all hours,
And are upgathered now like sleeping flowers,
For this, for everything, we are out of tune;
It moves us not.

We need silence to rest our ears from the constant assault of urban life. We need peace to refresh our souls. We need the beauty of a world beyond our own making. Above all, we need to be reminded of who and what we are: animals who grew and evolved in a natural world, a world that feeds and clothes us, a world we do not own but hold in trust for future generations; a world that, clever monkeys that we are, we can degrade and blemish and destroy, but a world that we cannot create.

Need I remind you that no great religion ever came into being in an urban center? But all the heresies that plague us are the products of urban life?

But let us forget such high-minded thoughts. Let us be purely practical. These are the words of Catherine Caulfield in her 1985 book In the Rain Forest:

If even a small proportion of [the thousands of unexamined plants] turned out to be as useful as the wild yam [source of steroids], the rosy periwinkle [source of drugs against leukemia], or chinchona [used against malaria], any investment in finding and protecting such plants would be justified.

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Before we allow the destruction of any plant or animal, whether directly or by destruction of habitat, we should consider the words of Edward O. Wilson, professor of science at Harvard, holder of the Pulitzer Prize and the National Medal of Science.

The vast majority of wild plants and animals are not known well enough--certainly many have not yet been discovered--even to guess at those with the greatest economic potential. Nor is it possible to imagine all the uses to which each species can be put....Natural products have been called the sleeping giants of the pharmaceutical industry. One in every ten plant species contains compounds with some anti-cancer activity. Among the leading successes from the screening conducted so far is the rosy periwinkle, a native of the West Indies. It is the very paradigm of a previously minor species, with pretty five-petaled blossoms but otherwise rather ordinary in appearance, a roadside casual, the kind of inconspicuous flowering plant that might otherwise have been unknowingly consigned to extinction by the growth of sugarcane plantations and parking lots. But it also happens to provide the two alkaloids, vincristine and vinblastine, that achieve 80% remission of leukemia.

Against this call, let me note that by conservative estimate 300 plant species disappear every day.

It is time to come home to Ohio. How are we doing at protecting our natural heritage? Thousands of people are dedicated to the task. I would like to single out three organizations in particular for what they have done to save, cherish and defend those remaining bits of precious habitats for our grandchildren.

Right here at home is the Columbus and Franklin County Metropolitan Park District, which has ten park-preserves and controls and protects about 11,000 acres. The Division of Natural Areas and Preserves of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources controls about 11,600 acres in 68 preserves.

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And finally a private organization, The Nature Conservancy. Most areas saved by the Conservancy, more than 2 million acres nationally, are turned over to other groups to operate; for example, the Conservancy has made significant land acquisitions at Pickerington Ponds and turned them over to the Metro Parks to operate.

What is our part in all this? Some day the Metro Parks will seek a tax levy renewal; support it. Next tax time you can still divert your state income tax over-payment to Natural Areas and Preserves. And you can join the Nature Conservancy for ten dollars, and I shall be disappointed if you do not do so. But most of all you can cherish and visit these lovely spots.

Shortly I am going to show you some slides. They were not assembled without a certain degree of physical agony. The friends who cheerfully bear with me in the field are eccentrics: except for prairie plants, they believe that nothing interesting grows on smooth, flat, open areas. Everything worth seeing is at the bottom of a cliff, atop a small mountain, along a stream that is either choked with deadfalls or between banks 20 feet high, or in a fen or bog where I usually step into a muskrat hole and fall full length in nice gooey mud.

And now I want to take you on a walk to show you some of the beauties of Ohio.

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slide briefly and invited questions and discussion as we went along.

Perhaps the most interesting discussion arose from slides showing the pollution of Thoreau Lake at Blendon Woods from chemical run-off from a plant on Hamilton Road.