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The necessity of changing what is possible: implementing large-scale wildlands protection

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Presented at 7th World Wilderness Conference Summit, 3 November 2001, Port Elizabeth, South Africa.

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The Necessity of Changing What is Possible: Implementing Large-Scale Wildlands Protection

David Johns, The Wildlands Project (now Wildlands Network)
7th World Wilderness Conference Summit, 3 November 2001, Port Elizabeth

It is a great pleasure and honor to be in post-apartheid South Africa.

I want to thank the conference organizers for inviting me and for all their work. And I want to thank all of you for being here.

The challenges we face as conservationists are enormous. So it is well that we were reminded yesterday of the long and costly struggle against apartheid. That struggle is an example for all of us. We are in the debt of those who waged that struggle not only for recent South African conservation achievements, but also for South African democracy. We conservationists are often targets of the powerful when unconstrained by democratic norms, laws, and institutions.

Before I talk directly about the Wildlands Project approach to conservation I want to say some things about the importance of wilderness.

In recent weeks, and especially since September 11, voices have been heard that say that in a world of violence, inequality, and evil, conservation is not a priority.

Such voices are wrong.

Two decades ago Erich Fromm, Alice Miller and Scott Peck wrote that evil is about murder, about non-biologically necessary killing. Such murder is pervasive, but evil is about more than just corporeal murder. It is also about murder of the spirit. It is about imposing control on living things: to render them convenient, pliable, dependent; to destroy spontaneity; to diminish unpredictability.

Paul Shepard told us that institutionalized evil finds its roots in our attempts to control nature. In our efforts to control nature we separate ourselves from it and do great damage to ourselves, making evil and a host of other maladies more likely.

The wild stands as the antidote to control.

At the 3rd World Wilderness Conference Jay Vest reminded us that the word wilderness comes from the old English and the Indo-European words that mean, literally "will-of-the-land or self-willed land. Land that is not dominated. Wild animals, wild water, and wild lands are free from control.

Let us remember that love and control are opposites.

To connect with wilderness is to be nurtured. It is to connect with our sanity. It is to connect with our deepest selves.

It is sea water that flows in our veins. Some other things as well these days, and they are toxic.

The wild is our true home. Just 2000 miles north of here, on the savannas of east Africa, we were born.

If we lose wilderness, we are lost.

We believe that to protect the wild we must protect those things that make a place wild: unencumbered ecological processes and biodiversity. We must especially focus on wide-ranging species and top predators because they are not only the most threatened by our activities, but because if we protect them much else is protected. Thus, large-scale wildlands conservation is essential.

In addition to the biological and ethical reasons for large-scale wildlands protection, there are also important human reasons.

First, we need self-willed lands and waters because we are poor ecosystem dominants.

The cultural and behavioral plasticity that permits us to adapt to any ecosystem on earth by developing technology and changing our social organization, also allows us to impoverish and destroy ecosystems.

The hierarchical nature of virtually all extant human societies insulates decision-makers from the consequences of their ecologically destructive actions.

As a species we are easily blinded to the long-term ecological deterioration we cause.

The social dynamic of growth that generates ever more people and higher levels of consumption, while not intractable, admits to no easy solution. It has deep temporal roots. Over 2500 years ago the Greek historian Thucydides quoted this description of the Athenians:

“(They) are addicted to innovation. They are daring beyond their judgment. They toil on...with little opportunity for enjoying, being ever engaged in getting. They were born into the world to take no rest, and to give none to others.” The roots of course are even deeper. We have been implicated in extinctions for at least 15,000 years and perhaps for 40,000 years.

This Athenian mind set dominates the world today. Not because we all subscribe to it but because we have allowed it to become deeply institutionalized.

Secondly, large-scale conservation is essential because small-scale conservation relies excessively on intensive human management. Our institutions are simply too frail and comparatively short-lived to be relied on as the main conservation tool.

Finally, nature is simply too complex for us to manage. To substitute our brains for evolutionary processes is to invite disaster.

So, what is our role in conservation? What can we do?

To protect what we love, what we need, we must protect continental systems of connected wildlands. *We must designate protected areas and connections not on the basis of civilizations' leftovers, but on the biological needs of key species and on what it takes to ensure fully functional ecosystems of all types.*

For North America we believe that 25% of the landscape should be strictly protected, with another 25% in some sort of lesser protection.

Critics sometimes say we are utopian and that our goals are impossible to realize. But politics is not just about the art of the possible, as it is said to be. Politics is also about the art of changing what's possible.

Many said that the fall of apartheid or the Berlin Wall could not be accomplished short of large-scale war. Both are gone.

Creation of a conservation vision and plan can in and of itself change the public debate. We will never protect and restore the natural world just responding to threats. We need a positive vision of what a healthy world would look like. This vision can inspire society and must guide our actions. Without such a vision we cannot hope to set the agenda. When the great U.S. civil rights leaders Martin Luther King came to Washington D.C. in 1963 he did not proclaim: I have a strategic plan. He said he had a dream, and called on America to fulfill it.

We start conservation planning by identifying wounds to the landscape: habitat loss and fragmentation, species decline and loss, invasion of exotics, pollution, and others.

We then develop, in consultation with scientists, activists, indigenous groups, agencies, landowners and others, action steps that must be implemented to heal these wounds. We also identify the institutions, public and private, that have the authority to make the needed decisions.

A political gap analysis is undertaken to identify which action steps are being addressed by NGOs and which ones are not. Action steps are also prioritized and resources dedicated on that basis.

It is useful to think of a conservation plan as the picture on the front of a jigsaw puzzle box. That picture is the vision as a whole. As with a puzzle, the vision is achieved piece by a piece or a few pieces at a time. This is achieved not by one group, but many. The great new challenge is how to

coordinate activity among the diverse group of NGOs that drive the process. This coordination function is the main implementation role of the Wildlands Project itself.

The conservation planning process is deliberately iterative. Early rough cuts can be used to guide action until the plan is formally completed. Plans in some sense, are never done, and must be adaptive.

Many of the tools we utilize to implement action steps are not new.

We rely on legislation and agency action to expand existing protected areas and to create new ones. Wilderness designation offers the strictest protection, but park status, wildlife refuge status, and other tools are also used. Examples of large-scale protection include the Muskwa-Kechika in British Columbia, The California Desert Protection Act, a recent proposal to protect public and private lands adjacent to Waterton Park that will ensure linkages to the Jasper-Banff complex to the north, and Cebadillas in northern Chihuahua.

Lands do not need to be pristine or near pristine to be included in protection proposals or even wilderness proposals. Almost all lands and Waters have been damaged to some degree, and the total of even lightly degraded lands and waters would not constitute a large enough base for conservation; restoration is a critical.

Implementation also includes changes in management regimes across the landscape. Pluie the wolf traveled hundreds of miles across thirty five jurisdictions over two years. In some jurisdictions she was safe. In others not. She was legally shot in Alberta. Management regimes must not only be the right ones, but must be coordinated across jurisdictions to be effective.

Connectivity is vital as the history of the grizzly shows. From a pre-European distribution consisting of western North America, the grizzly's distribution was reduced in the U.S. by persecution and habitat destruction to a number of islands by the 1920s. Even the wildest and remotest of these islands, isolated and small, could not sustain the great bears. Not even Yellowstone can sustain its population of grizzlies without connections. The Yellowstone to Yukon Conservation Initiative is proposing connections north from Yellowstone Park to Glacier-Waterton and northwest to central Idaho's Bob Marshall-River of No Return wilderness complex.

with These important connections rely on both public and private lands. We work directly with private landowners. And we work to change land-use and tax laws to support private conservation. Too many current laws discourage it, by subsidizing extraction and other harmful practices.

Can this work in a crowded landscape? Yes. Florida is a populous and rapidly growing state—one of the fastest growing areas in North America. An early wildlands-type plan, undertaken by Reed Noss, our first science director, was based in large part on the needs of top carnivores. This plan was refined by agency and NGO scientists and adopted by the state. Even with \$6 billion in

funding not all needed land can be acquired. In addition to land acquisition the state is using its land-use planning and permit process to steer development away from biologically important areas. It appears to be working.

Success hinges on much more than comprehensive conservation planning, sound strategy and the mobilization of conservationists and close allies. It depends on fashioning a broad chorus of organized interests in support of particular proposals. We are fashioning new coalitions with progressive business and labor organizations, with native groups, with religious groups and civic leaders.

Bruce Babbitt, after his appointment as U.S. Secretary of the Interior, told conservationists: Don't expect me to do the right thing, make me do the right thing. Political leaders, facing enormous pressure from development interests, need something to hang their hat on even if they want to do the right thing. We must provide it. Brock Evans once said that success depends on, endless pressure endless applied. But it also has to be enough pressure.

We are a species that can make choices about the habitat we use. Other species do not have that luxury.

We can choose to continue on the path of conquest and control and sink further into biological ruin.

Or we can choose, with generosity of spirit and truly informed self-interest, to embrace the wild—by helping it to heal, and by letting it be.

Thank you.