

We Should Listen to Teddy Roosevelt

We have all heard of Teddy Roosevelt, the 26th President of the U.S. from 1901 to 1909. He was at one time or another during his life considered a statesman, author, explorer, soldier, naturalist and reformer. He rode with the Rough Riders in Cuba in the 1890s, served as Governor of New York, Vice President under William McKinley, and became President when McKinley was assassinated.

He can be considered the nation's foremost naturalist and conservationist for what he accomplished during his tenure as President. He established the U.S. Forest Service, 5 National Parks, 18 National Monuments, 51 Bird Preserves, 4 Game Preserves, and 150 National Forests totaling 230 million acres of government land with some form of protection.

In 1916, Roosevelt wrote the following"

"Defenders of the short-sighted men who in their greed and selfishness will, if permitted, rob our country of half its charm by their reckless extermination of all useful and beautiful wild things, sometimes seek to champion them by saying 'the game belongs to the people.' So it does; and not merely to the people now alive, but to the unborn people. The 'greatest good for the greatest number' applies to the number within the womb of time, compared to which those now alive form but an insignificant fraction. Our duty to the whole, including the unborn generations, bids us to restrain an unprincipled present-day minority from wasting the heritage of these unborn generations. The movement for the conservation of wildlife and the larger movement for the conservation of all our natural resources are essentially democratic in spirit, purpose and method."

For the record, Roosevelt was a Republican.

The "short-sighted men" he was referring to were those who opposed early hunting restrictions and the establishment of wilderness areas designed to protect all wildlife, game and non-game species. It should be noted that Roosevelt was widely known as an avid hunter throughout his life, so hunters could hardly have had a more kindred spirit as President.

Back in the late 1800s and early 1900s there were subsistence hunters (people who hunted as a major part of their food source), sport hunters and commercial "hunters", (most of the latter were probably better described as "harvesters"). Many people believed that any predator of game animals should be killed to increase the number of game animals for hunting, but at the same time many also resisted any effort to limit the number of animals, the season or the method of hunting or any restrictions as to where animals could be hunted. There was even a view that because, as stated above, "game belongs to the people", it was OK to pursue game onto anyone's property without permission.

Some of these attitudes led to, or contributed to, such things as the near extinction of the buffalo, the near extinction of many egrets and herons (for feathers for ladies hats), the extinction of wolves in many areas, and, two years before Roosevelt's quote above was written, the extinction of the passenger pigeon.

We have come a long way since then. Few of us need to hunt in order to eat. Commercial hunting and trapping has largely disappeared and is now limited mostly to nuisance species such as feral hogs and other exotics. And today, sport hunters and current regulations are mostly a force for good for managing wildlife and their habitats. But now there are a lot more of us and we have to work harder at, as Roosevelt said, the "conservation of wildlife and the larger movement for the conservation of all our natural resources".

What struck me most about Roosevelt's quote above was the idea that we should be thinking not so much about ourselves, but about the unborn generations. And how would we feel if 50 or 100 years from now those generations looked back at the early 21st century with the same disappointment, and sorrow at how we managed our natural resources, our native habitats and our wildlife as we do now when we look back at the late 1800s and early 1900s.

In 1947 Aldo Leopold wrote, "Men still live who, in their youth, remember pigeons; trees still live who, in their youth, were shaken by a living wind. But a few decades hence only the oldest oaks will remember, and at long last only the hills will know."

Let us keep future generations in mind and treat our native lands and waters, plants and animals as if our successors are looking over our shoulders.

Until next time...

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