

THE FUTURE OF MAN IN AMERICA

By Charles R. Van Hise, Published in the World's Work, Vol. XVIII, p. 11718.

Charles Van Hise * * * It is clear that the problem of the conservation of our natural resources is an interlocking one. If the forests are conserved in the rough lands and mountains, the streams will have an even flow, their navigability will be easily maintained, they will give a uniform water-power; the erosion of the soil will be lessened; the bottom lands along the stream will not be flooded. If the water-powers are developed, the consumption of coal will be lessened. If the elements which are changed from ore to metals are carefully saved--not being allowed to rust or to be lost--and thus utilized again and again, it will not be necessary to take from the mines so large an amount of ore, and thus less coal and power will be required for their extraction. The conservation of one resource assists in the conservation of all others. We should work with the agents of the earth rather than reverse their work, as we have been doing since American settlement began.

Intimately connected with the conservation of the natural resources is the conservation of humanity itself. Just as we have been reckless in the use of our natural resources, so as a nation have we been reckless of human life. We now know enough in reference to the prevention and cure of communicable diseases, we know enough in reference to improving the conditions under which the industries are carried on, so that, according to Professor Irving Fisher, the average human life might be lengthened by a third.

So far as we permit human beings to be created, it is plainly our duty to conserve them and, so far as possible, produce a happy environment for them. This great problem of the conservation of humanity is mentioned merely to put it in relation with the problems of the conservation of our natural resources, rather than to discuss it.

How long shall this nation endure? Or, more exactly, how long shall human beings occupy this land? It is only within the past two centuries that the lands of the country have been subject to agriculture upon an extensive scale, and the main drafts upon the soil of this country have been within the last century. We should think, not of a hundred years, or of a thousand years, but of hundreds of thousands, or of millions of years of development of the human race. There is no reason, from a geological point of view, why human beings may not live upon this earth for millions of years to come, perhaps many millions of years, and, so far as we are concerned, such periods are practically infinite.

These considerations impose upon us as our most fundamental duty the transmission of the heritage of our natural resources to our descendants as nearly intact as possible. This is an individual responsibility, as well as a state

and a national responsibility. There's a strongly developed opinion at the present time that the owners of great wealth, and especially those who control great natural resources, should act as trustees for the nation. This is easy to see; but every man who owns a farm is equally a trustee to the nation for his small property. If at the end of his life the farm goes to his son depleted in richness, he is as truly faithless to his trust as are the great interests, some of which think only of present gain, and wastefully exploit the natural resources of the country. Each in proportion to his own responsibility is a traitor to the nation. At the present time, fortunately, this sense of stewardship is gaining possession of those who control some of the great resources of the nation. As yet, there is scarcely a glimmering of responsibility in the case of the smaller holder of natural resources. But the future of the nation is safe only when small and large holder alike, from the man who owns forty acres of land to the groups of men who control the anthracite of the nation, shall administer their trust primarily for the benefit of the people now living and for succeeding generations rather than for themselves.

I do not hesitate to assert that, from the point of view of our descendants, this question of conservation of our natural resources is more important than any political or social question, indeed, more important than all political or social questions upon the solution of which we are now engaged. Not only is it more important, but it is more pressing, for already our unnecessary losses are irremediable, and the situation is growing steadily worse.

It is necessary that a great campaign of education be inaugurated at once with reference to the conservation of the soil, just as there has been a campaign of education with reference to the conservation of the forests. The task is an enormous one, indeed vastly greater than that carried on with reference to our other resources, because of the fact that the land holdings are so subdivided; but the campaign of education must be carried on, and, as a part of it, the laws must be developed, until we reach the situation where no man dares so to handle his land as to decrease its fertility. If present methods are allowed to continue, it is certain that in the not distant future this country will be able to support only a relatively sparse population. Only by the conservation of our soil, undiminished in its fertility, can we hope to be able to provide for the hundreds of millions of people who, in the near future in the United States, will be demanding food and clothing. The conservation of the soil is the conservation of the basal asset of the nation.

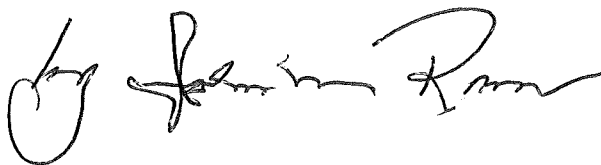
Similarly, the campaign of education in reference to the forests must be continued, and that with reference to the coal and mineral resources inaugurated; for only second in importance to the conservation of the soil is the economic mining and use of coal, the conservation of the forests, and the use of metals with the minimum waste.

"President Van Hise." *Wisconsin Authors and Their Works*. Madison: The Parker Educational Company, 1918. 272-276.
From the GLS Department of Special Collections reference room: PS 283 W6 R6 1918.

About Charles Van Hise

Professor Charles Van Hise, geologist and educator, was University of Wisconsin President from 1903 to 1918. Van Hise's forward thinking blended the *English model of liberal arts education*, the *German model of research and graduate education* and an *emphasis on outreach*.* **In 1910 he authored the country's first textbook on the conservation of natural resources.**

* Van Hise was a major player in shaping and implementing "The Wisconsin Idea."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Benjamin R. Van Hise". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "B" and "R".