



A. W. SCHORGER*

Charles R. Van Hise, 1857-1918

Conservation . . . as it seems to me from the point of view of the not distant future of the human race, is more important than all other movements now before the people.

Xenophon boasted that the Divine Bounty has bestowed upon Greece inexhaustible mines of silver; yet, in the days of Pausanias these mines were not being worked. Gone is the word inexhaustible from the lexicon of the conservationist and changed is our concept of most phases of conservation. Seldom can the latter mean preservation. Conservation has become the husbandry of natural resources. No one grasped the present connotation more firmly or worked more strenuously for this interpretation than Charles R. Van Hise.

Consideration of the future came early in President Van Hise's life for in 1892 he gave an address on conservation. He was in the vanguard of the movement initiated by Theodore Roosevelt in 1908. Conservation became for him the most important problem facing the American people. So impressed was he by the simple fact that a body of ore once used is gone forever, that he advocated an embargo on

phosphates, so vital to the growth of crops. To him the well-being of the nation rested not on its stores of precious metals but on those which are cheap and plentiful. Guard them carefully. He perceived that the expanding steel industry was making such great inroads on our stores of high grade iron ores that their exhaustion was in sight. Today we face the reality and much effort is being made to win the ore economically from the mother rock, taconite.

Van Hise adhered staunchly to the principle of the greatest good to the greatest number as the controlling factor in the utilization of natural resources. Many products required millions of years to form and but few to exhaust. Has any individual, or group of individuals, the right to exploit the resources as they see fit? No, these products must be held in trust for the people. His solution lay in federal regulation. But no one could have foreseen the extravagance and inefficiency of modern government.

His book on conservation, a pioneer effort, made students think. It was brought home to them that conservation was not a simple subject dealing with a single resource, but with many closely related ones. There was no undue optimism on the rapid spread of the movement. Well he knew that only a cultivated minority would grasp the full significance of the problem and that inherently there was tremendous difficulty in impressing the masses. It was a distant hope requiring many years of education and the efforts of many men. The conservation movement was conceived and nurtured by scientists and its future lay in their hands.

* The late A. W. Schorger, a distinguished conservation leader himself and a former member of the old Conservation Commission, wrote a series of tributes to leaders in the field for a centennial conference held in Madison in 1949. This is the second of these the Bulletin has reprinted.