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George S. Wehrwein

1883-1945

Conservation is our attempt to put human ecology on a permanent footing.

THE PROPHET Isaiah cried, "All flesh is grass." Here is an ancient fundamental principle in conservation. All social blessings stem from the land. George S. Wehrwein, in his brief life, proselyted for conservation of the soil. The land provides the prime essentials of life and its productivity controls the density of population. While a large number of the peoples of the earth live in hunger and die in squalor, our country has never known real want. This is a fortuitous circumstance. In point of time we but recently inherited a rich and virgin continent. As tenants we have done little to husband the productiveness of the soil.

He reiterated the catastrophic loss of the top soil formed by the slow weathering of the rocks over thousands of years. Particularly insidious was the sheet erosion on the more level lands since seldom noticed. The waters pouring down a hillside farmed without regard to contour formed gully after gully and converted the area into miniature "bad lands." At the present time two tons of earthy materials for each inhabitant go annually down our streams. Rivers once deep and clear are filled with sediment. Almost dry at one time, they are a raging flood at another. All the excellent top soil is as good as lost to humanity; penalty for its abuse, social ostracism.

Wehrwein deplored the reclamation of what have been called



waste lands. Thousands of acres of marsh in central Wisconsin had been drained and thereby ruined. The land proved to be unsuitable for farming and fires destroyed the accumulations of humus to form a real sandy waste. Land he pointed out has more than agricultural value. Far better would it have been in this case to have retained the areas for wildlife and recreation. Too often the result has been the creation of a sterile soil and a waste of human energy.

The time has passed when agricultural land should be mined. It was essential that the better soils be maintained in a high state of fertility by replacing the elements withdrawn by the crops. While leaching and erosion were great national problems, it was highly desirable to determine what could be accomplished by education and monetary grants before resorting to

federal control. There was still hope in the individual.

Wehrwein's survey of the lands of northern Wisconsin showed that the best economy lay in a judicious mixture of farming, forestry, and recreation. He was keenly aware of the increasing urban use of the northern lands for relaxation, and rejuvenation of mind and body. Forests and lakes bring peace, and the sight of a deer for many produces a stimulation that is long-lasting. The highways leading north should be beautified with trees and shrubs, and farm homes and villages kept neat. All unnecessary signs, so out of keeping with the landscape, should be banned. The impression on the mind comes from the imprint on the eye.

Large areas in the state are fit only for the growth of trees, but the investment of money for half a century prior to an adequate return had been a great deterrent to private forestry. The Forest Crop Law had failed to arouse the interest anticipated by its proponents. Wehrwein made a careful study of this law to determine why private forestry still languished. With characteristic realism he stated that individuals had not yet reached that stage of altruism where they could be expected to be interested in distant and uncertain returns. This type of risk fell properly within the province of private corporations and government.

No serious student of the land can fail to be troubled by the Malthusian view that population tends to outstrip the means of subsistence. The theory has not been disproved. As Wehrwein expressed it, man must die but he need not be born. This leads to consideration of the birth rate, the most sensitive of human problems. Man with his finite wisdom must still grope his way.

*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 third in a series of reprints from these.