

# The Northern Environment

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## Environmental Attitudes and Environmental Values

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The history of North America is the history of the frontier: of pushing back the wilderness, cultivating the soil, populating the land, and then building an industrial way of life. The conquest of the frontier in North America is a remarkable episode in human history, and it altered the face of the continent. The achievement was prodigious, and there is no need here to tell how transportation networks were evolved, cities founded, industries established, commerce expanded, and unparalleled agricultural productivity developed. The superabundance of land and resources gave rise to a conviction that the continent's resources were inexhaustible. Land on the eastern seaboard was abandoned almost as rapidly as it had been cleared. Thomas Jefferson wrote, "We can buy an acre of new land cheaper than we can manure an old one."

Cultivation of agriculturally unsuitable soils left a legacy of abandoned farms, rural poverty, ruined landscapes and silt-choked streams. Soil erosion and pollution by countless sources of domestic and industrial wastes choked many of our rivers, reducing a once bountiful fishery. The buffalo herds, estimated to number about 75 million, were reduced in only a few decades to a few hundred survivors. The prairies were ploughed and overgrazed, setting the stage for the disastrous dust-bowl conditions of this century. In *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote of the United States he visited in 1831:

The Americans themselves never think about [the wilds], they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature ... their eyes are fixed

upon another sight, [they] march across these wilds, draining swamps, turning the course of rivers, peopling solitudes, and subduing nature. [p. 47]

We should recognize the links between attitudes to environment and attitudes to native peoples. The assault upon the environment was also an assault on their way of life. To be sure, it was often an assault carried out under the banners of benevolence and enlightened progress, but it was nonetheless an assault. The native peoples and their land were, and to some extent continue to be, under siege.

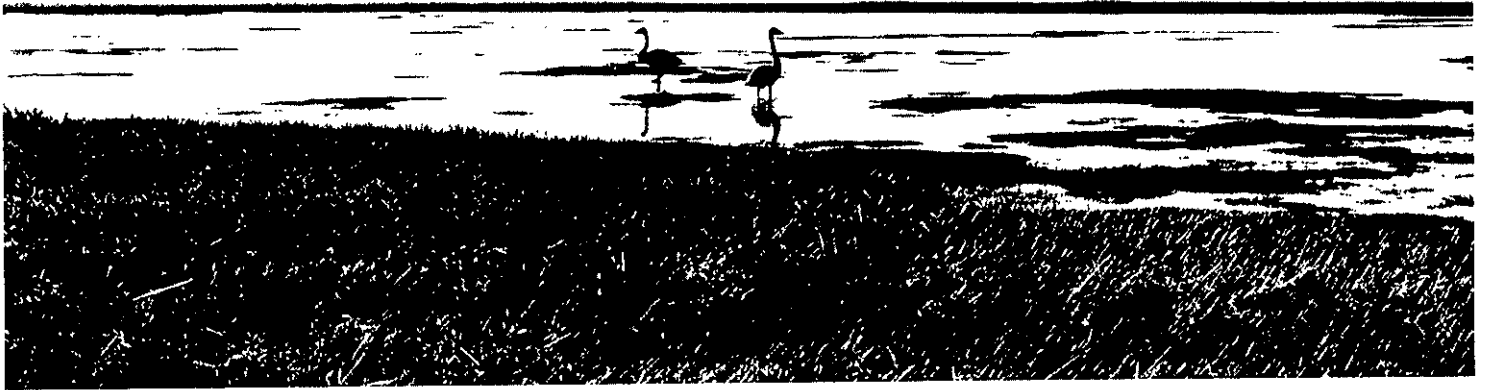
We have observed the passage of the white man from the eastern seaboard of North America into the great plains and yet farther west. He has penetrated the North, but his occupation of the North is not yet complete. There are those with an abiding faith in technology, who believe that technology can overcome all environmental problems. They believe there is no point at which the imperatives of industrial development cannot be reconciled with environmental values. But there are others who believe that industrial development must be slowed or halted if we are to preserve the environment.

Different views of the North can be distinguished by the emphasis placed either on the achievement of industrial development at the frontier or on its cost. A particular idea of progress is firmly embedded in our economic system and in the national consciousness; but there is also in Canada a strong identification with the values of the wilderness and of the land itself. No account of environmental attitudes would be complete that did not recognize this deeply felt, and perhaps deeply Canadian, concern with the environment for its own sake. The judgment of this Inquiry must, therefore, recognize at least

two sets of powerful, historically entrenched – but conflicting – attitudes and values.

In recent years, we have seen the growth of ecological awareness, and a growing concern for wilderness, wildlife resources and environmental legislation that parallels – although it does not match – the increasing power of our technology, the consumption of natural resources, and the impacts of rapid change. There are situations in which the two sets of attitudes and values simply cannot be reconciled. The question then turns on the depth of our commitment to environmental values when they stand in the way of technological and industrial advance.

This opposition of views is particularly clear in the North. The northern native people, along with many other witnesses at the Inquiry, insisted that the land they have long depended upon will be injured by the construction of a pipeline and the establishment of an energy corridor. Environmentalists pointed out that the North, the last great wilderness area of Canada, is slow to recover from environmental degradation; its protection against penetration by industry is, therefore, of vital importance to all Canadians. It is not easy to measure that concern against the more precisely calculated interests of industry. But we must accept the reality of this opposition, and we must try and face the questions that are posed in the North of today: Should we open up the North as we opened up the West? Should the values that conditioned our attitudes toward the environment in the past prevail in the North today and tomorrow? Perhaps we can see the force of, and even some answers to, these questions by examining the concept, as it has developed, of preserving the wilderness on this continent.



## Wilderness

Wilderness is a non-renewable resource. If we are to preserve wilderness areas in the North, we must do so now. The available areas will diminish with each new industrial development on the frontier. We have not yet in Canada developed a legislative framework for the protection of wilderness, but a model exists in the United States.

A century ago, for the first time in history, a tract of land in its natural state was set aside for its own sake, for its intrinsic values, not for the resources it might later provide. That was Yellowstone National Park, and it marked the beginning of the national park system. This idea of preserving unexploited and superb examples of nature was adopted within 15 years in Canada, and it rapidly spread to other nations.

Initially, Canadian and American parks seemed to be designated to preserve natural geological features found in magnificent settings, such as geysers (Yellowstone, 1872) and hot springs (Banff, 1885). In a few years, concern for the giant trees of the Sierra Nevada led to the establishment of Sequoia National Park, and plant life came to be regarded as a valuable component of land in its natural state. Then wildlife was accorded recognition. The idea of preserving wilderness itself continued to develop, culminating in the passage by the United States in 1964 of the Wilderness Act. This Act, in defining wilderness, called it a place:

where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. [p. 1]

I rely here on American experience because I see no difference between the United States and Canada in the perception

of environmental values. I have heard witnesses from Alaska and the Lower 48. What they said about wildlife and wilderness did not distinguish them from Canadians, but rather reinforced my impressions of the values that Canadian society now embraces.

Let me be clear about the importance that is hereby accorded to wilderness. No one seeks to turn back the clock, to return in some way to nature, or even to deplore, in a high-minded and sentimental manner, the real achievements of modern-day life. Rather, the suggestion here is that wilderness constitutes an important — perhaps an invaluable — part of modern-day life; its preservation is a contribution to, not a repudiation of, the civilization upon which we depend.

Wallace Stegner wrote in 1960:

Without any remaining wilderness we are committed ... to a headlong drive into our technological termite-life, the Brave New World of a completely man-controlled environment. ... We simply need that wild country ... [as] part of the geography of hope. [cited in W. Schwartz, *Voices for the Wilderness*, p. 284ff.]

The difficulty in describing the importance of wilderness is that you cannot attach a dollar value to it or to its use and enjoyment, any more than you can to the rare and endangered species, or to archaeological finds. The value of wilderness cannot be weighed in the scale of market values. It is a national heritage. Many who sense change everywhere, recognize that our northern wilderness is irreplaceable.

Sigurd F. Olson, an American naturalist, writing of the Canadian North in *The Lonely Land*, said:

There are few places left on the North American continent where men can still see the country as it was before Europeans came and know some of the challenges and freedoms of

those who saw it first, but in the Canadian Northwest it can still be done. [p. 5]

Wilderness implies to all of us a remote landscape and the presence of wildlife. I think there are three kinds of wilderness species. The first are species that, because of their intolerance of man or their need for large areas of land, can survive only in the wilderness. Such are caribou, wolf and grizzly bear. These species require large areas of wilderness to protect the integrity of their populations and preserve their habitat. Second are the species that conjure up visions of wilderness for every Canadian, although they are often seen in other areas, too. I do not believe there can be a Canadian anywhere who does not think of wilderness on hearing the call of a loon or of migrating geese. Third are the rare and endangered species that do not inherently require a wilderness habitat, but, because they are tolerant of man, have been driven close to extinction. The peregrine falcon, trumpeter swan and whooping crane are well-known examples of species that are abundant (if abundant at all) only in wilderness areas. Our concern is that the process of adaptation and evolution through millennia of each of these species should not be ended. We cannot allow the extinction of these species, if it can be prevented. These species, like wilderness itself, need protection in the North today.

Wilderness is a resource that can be used by both public and private interests, in both a consuming and a non-consuming way. A consuming use of the wilderness destroys or degrades it, and so decreases its value for other users. Industrial and commercial interests are almost invariably consumers; they do not use the wilderness itself, but some aspect of it. Non-consuming use is represented by the traditional pursuits of the

Whistling swans in the Delta. (C. & M. Hampson)

Arctic tern on nest. (C. & M. Hampson)

Ermine. (NFB-Cesar)

Red-throated loon on nest. (W. Campbell)



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native people, and by certain recreational activities.

To some people, the notion of preserving a wilderness area inviolate from industry is anathema – as though we were on the brink of starvation and could not survive without exploiting the resources of every last piece of ground in our country. They would argue that the urge to develop, to build, to consume, is fundamental to man's very nature and that this urge ought not to be checked; even if, were we to follow this urge, it would produce no more than a marginal – perhaps even an illusory – increment to our material well-being. But this argument would apply to northern wilderness areas only if there were no other way in which, and no other area where, man could satisfy this urge. This manifestly is not the case.

## Wilderness and Northern Land Use

If we decide to preserve the wilderness, then we must withdraw from industrial use the land designated as wilderness. This decision would have certain implications in respect of land use and land use regulations in the North.

Wilderness parks in the North would be a logical extension of our national park system. In fact, some of the provinces have already established wilderness areas. There have been many intrusions into the great national parks along the Alberta-British Columbia boundary. Two national railways

run through these parks (although both were there when the parks were created). The Trans-Mountain oil pipeline from Edmonton to Vancouver and the Trans-Canada Highway cross Jasper National Park. But these national parks are not – and were never intended to be – wilderness parks. In the North, certain ecosystems and certain migratory populations can be protected and preserved only by recognizing the inviolability of wilderness. Our national parks legislation, as it now stands, is not adequate to preserve northern wilderness areas, which, if they are to be preserved, must be withdrawn from any form of industrial development. That principle must not be compromised. It is essential to the concept of wilderness itself as an area untrammelled by industrial man.

Virtually any northern development must involve land, and in areas such as the Mackenzie Delta there has been, during recent years, a dramatic increase in the number of competing uses to which the land is put. The potential for chaotic development, degradation of environmentally important areas, the overwhelming of native people's interests, or even a stalemate in the conflict of interests, is great.

The Mackenzie Valley and the Western Arctic are still at an early stage of industrial development, and the latitude of choice that can be exercised for the future of these areas is still considerable – at least in comparison with most parts of Canada. Nevertheless, with each passing season, and with each decision by the public and private sectors concerning townsite development, transportation facilities, municipal or industrial use

of land, or resource development, the number of options is decreased.

We should recognize that in the North, land use regulations, based on the concept of multiple use, will not always protect environmental values, and they will never fully protect wilderness values. Withdrawal of land from any industrial use will be necessary in some instances to preserve wilderness, wildlife species and critical habitat. Parliament contemplated that withdrawals of land in the North would be made. The Territorial Lands Act provides for lands to be reserved for special purposes such as recreation sites and public parks (under Section 19[b]), for the general good of native people (Section 19[d]), and for use as national forests or game preserves (Section 19[e]). Despite these provisions, no attempt has yet been made to preclude industrial development in any part of the Territories; instead the policy of multiple use has been followed.

In two recently prepared studies on land management North of 60, *Land Management in the Canadian North* by Kenneth Beauchamp and *Land Use and Public Policy in Northern Canada* by John Naysmith the authors argue that we must confront the question of land withdrawal versus its regulation for multiple use. I think they are right.

We should include in our National Parks Act a provision for a new statutory creation: a wilderness park. It would consist of land to be preserved in its natural state for future generations. In chapter 5, I shall recommend that such a wilderness park be established in the Northern Yukon.

