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Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



The Rise and Fall of The Nature Conservancy Part I

We need to move past the place where we see people as essentially enemies of nature. We need to break down the barriers between urban and rural, between set-asides and sustainable use, between "us" and "them."

--Steve McCormick, President of The Nature Conservancy, 2005^[1]

Conservation strategies that lack meaningful core areas are naive, arrogant, and dangerous.

--Reed Noss and co-authors^[2]

The Nature Quisling

Along with the murky pull of enviro-resourcism away from wild-things-for-their-own-sakes conservation, I see some once-leading conservation outfits tiptoeing away from protected areas. Tiptoeing? I wrote that a few years ago; I fear it is no longer the right word. Now it is more of a trot, or even a gallop. Here the wonderful old Nature Conservancy (TNC) stands out as a quisling to the "Nature" it once shielded on scores of matchless hot spots of biodiversity all over the United States. The quote above from Steve McCormick, then-President of The Nature Conservancy, forsakes the underlying beliefs and work of conservation; instead it states the beliefs and work of resourcism. The shift began about 1990 under John Sawhill, who was TNC's President before McCormick.

I was on the founding board of trustees for the New Mexico Chapter of the Conservancy in the 1970s and think I've been a member since the Late Stone Age. I long had a credit card that backed TNC. But I dropped my membership a few years ago after I saw that big business had more or less taken over TNC, and that TNC had hired top staffers who were resourcists,

not wild conservationists, who saw Nature not as the Tree of Life to be loved and sheltered, but as raw goods to gobble for growing billions of Men. I did not want to believe this takeover of TNC by energy, mining, logging, and grazing businesses and so I put off believing what I knew until I could no longer shut my eyes to it.

The overthrow of The Nature Conservancy by big business and get-ahead resource managers plays out in ugly shifts in how TNC cares for its lands and the wild things that dwell therein, and in TNC's thinking—philosophy, ethics, politics, and even in how the new TNC bosses see the science of biology.

There is a load of dirt in The Nature Conservancy's "portfolio" for us to look at here. Again, I'm not alone in my glumness. Some of America's leading biologists are deeply unhappy or cussedly angry over what a few sly ladder-climbers more at home with tycoons than raccoons have done to the once-great Nature Conservancy. They've done this hand-in-hand with donors and board members from big business—foremost from extractive industry and polluters, from mining, logging, energy, agriculture, chemical, development, and other landscaping and befouling multinationals. Grassroots conservationists have grown more and more upset as they see The Nature Conservancy going over to the dark side.

End of Protected Areas for TNC

In 2007, the executive director of a statewide wilderness club in the West told me what he and many of his fellows in the wilderness protection network thought, "TNC has totally lost its way. Apparently it is protecting private land so that it can even more scientifically exploit it for human benefits. And TNC donors thought their money was going to preserve habitats for wild species."

The beliefs laid out in McCormick's opening quote to this chapter are much more than a shift in how conservation should work; they are a wholesale spurning of what Nature conservation has been for over one hundred years. They also cast off what had driven The Nature Conservancy from its founding to its slipping away from conservation under John Sawhill in the 1990s.

Protected areas are the hallmark of conservation. It is what we do. It is what we have done since Yellowstone. The Wildlands Project book *Continental Conservation* says bluntly, "Conservation strategies that lack meaningful core areas are naive, arrogant, and dangerous." Resourcism, on the other hand, calls for resource extraction, "sustainable development," and management of whole ecosystems *without* protected areas or with only a few tokens (*ecosystem management*). *Continental Conservation* warns, "Such approaches assume a level of ecological knowledge and understanding—and a level of generosity and goodwill among those who use and manage public lands—that are simply unfounded."^[3] The new honchos of TNC are overbrimming with godlike gall in their belief that they can run wild things better than wild things can run themselves. Their new outlook gives the heave-ho to 1960s-1970s pollution fighter Barry Commoner's teaching "Nature knows best." The "Nature" TNC now wishes to "conserve" is more garden than wilderness, no longer self-willed but willed by kindly, wise TNC gardeners, who tell beavers, "Dam here, not there." "This high, no higher." "Our neighbors fear some of you are going to come on their land, so we're going to kill half of you, okay?" The Nature Conservancy now sees biodiversity as a natural resource, not as the Tree of Life to be loved and defended for its own sake.

We can see the harm done by the new TNC in two landscapes—the United States and the world. Here, I'll throw my rotten tomatoes at what TNC is doing in the US; I'll go after their worldwide misdeeds in the forthcoming *True Wilderness*. Here, I'll take the TNC tale of woe only up to the rise of their chief scientist Peter Kareiva. In *True Wilderness*, I'll deal with his freakish, farfetched rewriting of what conservation is, and how he thinks he should be acknowledged as the leader of worldwide conservation.

Nonetheless, I need to touch on worldwide conservation a bit to lay the grounds for what follows. Unlike wilderness and wildlife clubs in the United States that have been mostly grassroots and have only brought biologists on staff lately, scientists have staffed international conservation organizations since their beginnings in the 1960s. Some of these scientists have forgotten their roots and grown bureaucratic with the professional arrogance of resource managers. The shift over into resource conservation groups began thirty years ago as the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN), now the World Conservation Union (but keeping the IUCN acronym), enclashed so-called "sustainable development" along with or even *instead* of protected areas in Africa and elsewhere. John Oates, a leading monkey researcher in West Africa, has laid this shift bare in his unhappy but truthful book, *Myth and Reality in the Rain Forest*.^[4] This trend of backing off from highly sheltered National Parks and other wild havens keeps chugging away. The World Bank and other financial overlords

spurred this shift, backed by anthropologists, economists, agronomists, and other social and resource scientists. The anthology *Making Parks Work*, edited by John Terborgh and his colleagues, is a trustworthy and crushing answer to this shift to sustainable development.^[5] (Terborgh, by the way, is as highly acknowledged by those in his fields of tropical rainforest ecology, top-down role of large carnivores, and conservation biology as any living biologist. Indeed, were there a Nobel Prize for outdoors biology—not the lab-rat kind, John Terborgh would likely have one.)

Although The Nature Conservancy now seems to be following the IUCN-World Bank-Brundtland Report path, there is a key unlikeness. It is not so much the international poverty-alleviation and development crowd that TNC is in bed with, but with multinational resource-extraction big business. This is a big unlikeness. Sustainable development true believers do enough harm, but they are not Plum Creek, Rio Tinto, or BP. In the United States, national TNC and some of its state chapters are heading along this big business/resource extraction bearing, and also with smaller resource businesses such as ranchers, loggers and sawmills, and housing and retail developers. However, some chapters, such as the Adirondack Chapter of TNC, are staying mostly true to the founding vision. And some darn good conservationists and biologists still work for TNC.

The Rise and Fall of The Nature Conservancy

Understanding where The Nature Conservancy came from shows us how out of touch the new leadership is with the lore and soul of TNC. In 1917, early ecologist Victor Shelford led his fellows in the Ecological Society of America's Committee on Preservation of Natural Conditions to find spots holding representative ecological communities where succession and climax conditions were yet unaltered by civilization—in other words, patches of the most untouched forests, wetlands, grasslands, and such left in the United States. Many of these plots were small, unlike the big, sprawling landscapes in the National Forest backcountry Aldo Leopold and the early wilderness team were seeking.^[6] Shelford and fellows worked to bestir government agencies and private landowners to care for these representative samples as natural areas. The ecologists knew they had to work swiftly as many of the plant communities native to the US were going fast. Old-growth Eastern Deciduous Forest, canebrakes, Tallgrass Prairie, White Pine Forest, Longleaf Pine-Wire Grass Forest, Coastal Redwood Forest, and Southwest Riparian Forest were some of the embodying North American ecosystems being shoved by settlement and landscaping down the path of the buffalo and passenger pigeon.^[7] Such wild neighborhoods were the meaningful landscapes of America as seen and felt by the grandfathers and great-grandmothers of Shelford and his biology siblings. Shelford and others knew that without swift protection of the tag-ends left, such leftovers of how America looked would live only in the recall of old men and women and then only in books. Shelford's Committee looked at public lands for wild neighborhoods but understood that private land held many forgotten nooks of unlogged forest in the East and plant communities throughout the US not found on public lands.

Within ten years, Shelford and other ecologists learned that we needed to keep all wildlife, too. They boldly stood up against the National Park Service's wolf slaughter in Alaska's Denali (then Mt. McKinley) National Park. Shelford wrote in the Ecological Society's 1932 "Nature Sanctuary Plan" that, "Biologists are beginning to realize that it is dangerous to tamper with nature by introducing plants and animals, or by destroying predatory animals or by pampering herbivores."^[8]

After World War II, the aim of the Committee on Preservation of Natural Conditions became even more geared to shielding land—too much so for the Ecological Society, which was becoming an above-the-rumble scientific society. So those wanting to shield natural areas broke off to start the Ecologists Union in 1946, which became The Nature Conservancy in 1950. The Conservancy's calling was to find and buy key natural areas outside the public lands, help them regain health and wholeness, and then steward them as private preserves or pass them on to the Forest Service and other land management agencies. As the Conservancy grew, it began to set up state chapters to spread the workload. A chapter for New Mexico started in 1976 and I was asked to come on the fledgling board of trustees (I was the New Mexico representative for The Wilderness Society at the time).

But in the early 1990s, The Nature Conservancy shifted from being the leading private caretaker of biodiversity with its squirreled-away "ecological gems," to a nonprofit business boosting so-called "working ranches" and "working forests" where "happy logging" and other resource gobbling became the goal instead of sheltering wild things.^[9] TNC still does some good work shielding wildlife and wild neighborhoods here and there. Unwavering conservationists still work for it; but, at the top and as its Weltanschauung, it has steadily gone over to resourcism since 1990. TNC staffers who love wild things keep their heads low or are squeezed out. Or leave in sadness or wrath.

To take TNC along its new path, TNC's leadership knew it needed to get rid of its outstanding science staff. In the 1980s, Bob Jenkins, TNC's Vice-President for Science crafted a sweeping new path to find, map, and then shelter and restore the slipping-away wild things in each state. This work was done through "Natural Heritage programs"; TNC worked with each state's wildlife and park agencies to set them up and run them. Natural Heritage programs were a strong, workable framework and became a hub for national biodiversity conservation.

Then TNC hired a new President from the business world, John Sawhill.

A leading conservation biologist and keen watcher of the natural heritage programs from that time writes me,

From my observations, the unraveling of TNC science began in 1990 under then-new TNC president John Sawhill. Sawhill forced the resignation of Bob Jenkins, who originated the heritage programs and their methodology and was TNC's VP for Science. Further unraveling of TNC science followed with the decision (apparently Sawhill's) to jettison the heritage program network. [The natural heritage scientists were dumped from TNC and started a new organization, which was later named NatureServe.] TNC did give NatureServe a sizeable severance payment, which took care of them (barely, as I understand it) until they became self-supporting.

Erosion of science at TNC increased when Steve McCormick became president in 2001 and fired most of the top science staff and downsized the entire science program. He hired Peter Kareiva as one of his "lead scientists."

TNC did not fill their chief scientist position until recently, when Kareiva transitioned into that role, which may have happened before McCormick resigned in 2007, but probably not until under the new TNC president, Mark Tercek [hired from Wall Street].

In the next issue of *Around the Campfire*, I'll look at how TNC has been a lousy steward of some of its outstanding reserves.

Dave Foreman

Adapted from *Take Back Conservation*.



©Nancy Morton, taken on the Noatak

[1] Steven J. McCormick, "Beyond 'Man Versus Nature,'" *Nature Conservancy*, Spring 2005, 5.

[2] Reed F. Noss, Eric Dinerstein, Barrie Gilbert, Michael Gilpin, Brian J. Miller, John Terborgh, and Steve Trombulak, "Core Areas: Where Nature Reigns," in Michael E. Soulé and John Terborgh, editors, *Continental Conservation: Scientific Foundations of Regional Reserve Networks* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1999), 105.

[3] Reed F. Noss, Eric Dinerstein, Barrie Gilbert, Michael Gilpin, Brian J. Miller, John Terborgh, and Steve Trombulak, "Core Areas: Where Nature Reigns," in Michael E. Soulé and John Terborgh, editors, *Continental Conservation: Scientific Foundations of Regional Reserve Networks* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1999), 105. Noss's co-authors here, by the way, are among the most highly thought-of field biologists (those who still work outside and not only inside—the so-called lab rats).

[4] John F. Oates, *Myth and Reality in the Rain Forest: How Conservation Strategies Are Failing in West Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999).

[5] John Terborgh, Carel van Schaik, Lisa Davenport, and Madhu Rao, editors, *Making Parks Work: Strategies for Preserving Tropical Nature* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2002). In my forthcoming book, *True Wilderness*, I'll look more at the shift from National Parks to sustainable development as the goal for many international conservation organizations.

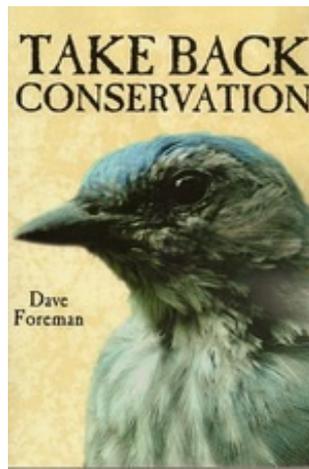
[6] Paul S. Sutter, *Driven Wild* (University of Washington Press, Seattle, 2002); Dave Foreman,

Rewilding North America (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004). Sutter's book shows the side-by-side paths of Wilderness Area and Natural Area workers.

[7] Reed Noss, Edward T. LaRoe III, and J. Michael Scott, *Endangered Ecosystems of the United States: A Preliminary Assessment of Loss and Degradation* Biological Report 28 (U.S. Department of the Interior, National Biological Service, Washington, D.C., February 1995); Reed F. Noss and Robert L. Peters, *Endangered Ecosystems: A Status Report on America's Vanishing Habitat and Wildlife* (Defenders of Wildlife, Washington, D.C., December 1995). In both of these landmark works, Noss and his fellows give the often-heartbreaking loss of acres and falling percentages of what is left of scores of North American ecosystems. Their reports are key references for conservationists and every conservation office should have copies.

[8] Victor E. Shelford, "Ecological Society of America: A Nature Sanctuary Plan Unanimously Adopted by the Society, December 28, 1932," *Ecology* 14, no. 2 (April 1933): 240-245. I'll look at this work more fully in *Conservation vs. Conservation*.

[9] Tom Butler, then-editor of *Wild Earth* in Vermont, came up with "happy logging" for TNC in the Northeast.



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