THE AMERICAN INDIAN AS CONSERVATIONIST

By N. B. Johnson

Indians in our nation have played a vital role in forming our American character. The sound of Indian words—Tulsa, Tahlequah, Okmulgee, Susquehanna, Mississippi—falls as a kind of music on American ears. Our military strategists early in our history adopted Indian tactics in battlefield maneuvering. Our preoccupation with outdoor camping, our boy and girl scout movements, all have drawn upon and been enriched by the lore of the Indians in wood and water craft.

Few people realize how completely the Indian people had spread over and occupied the new world. The Englishmen who landed on the Massachusetts coast encountered but a handful of native red men, and from that incident there grew up the impression that the whole of America was sparsely populated. After years of investigations of occupied sites, we have learned that population fluctuated greatly from area to area, and at different periods in the long history that preceded the coming of the white man. We now know that the Massachusetts area, just prior to the landing of the pilgrims, had been the

* N. B. Johnson, a member of the Board of Directors of the Oklahoma Historical Society, Justice of the Supreme Court of Oklahoma, and President of the National Congress of American Indians, appeared on the program of the 30th Annual Convention of the Izaak Walton League of America, which convened in Tulsa, Oklahoma, May 7, 1952, and addressed the convention on the subject, "The American Indian’s View of Conservation." This article is an adaptation of his address, excerpts from which were published in the July-August issue of the League’s magazine, Outdoor America. Welcoming the League to Tulsa, Judge Johnson said:

"It is most appropriate that the Izaak Walton League of America, one of the foremost of our organizations devoted to the cause of conservation, should hold its 30th Annual Convention here in Indian Country in the homeland of our first conservators. I am most happy, as President of the National Congress of American Indians, to join with others in welcoming the League to Tulsa. The City of Tulsa, as some of you may know, stands within territory that once belonged to the Creek Nation.

"The Creeks, along with the Cherokees, the Choctaws, Chickasaws and Seminoles, all of whom have lived here in the Eastern side of our State for more than a century, lived originally in the Eastern Seaboard States. Their coming to this country was not a voluntary act. A number of other tribes were brought here to what was first called Indian Territory. The first Indian removals of 120 years ago was one of the first of many schemes to solve the problems of the Indian people by taking their lands which the United States had pledged to be theirs as long as grass grew and water ran.

"The creation of an Indian Territory did not solve any Indian problems, but it did solve the problem of the white settlers on our Eastern Coast who needed more land. More than thirty tribes—better than 180,000 of our Indian people—live today in Oklahoma. Though in most cases these first settlers came unwillingly, their presence here and the part they played in creating homes in the wilderness and establishing tribal government of a high order have added immeasurably to the wealth and stability of our state."—Ed.
scene of considerable inter-tribal fighting, and that possibly an epidemic disease had also spread through the area. The number of people living there just prior to 1620 was probably considerably less than it had been a generation earlier. In other areas, notably in the great mound-building centers of the Ohio River Valley, the aboriginal population of a thousand years ago was perhaps as dense as the rural population in the same region today. The enormous earthwork structures which abound all through those Ohio River States could only have been accomplished by the labor of large bodies of men.

This new continent was not an empty desert land. People of the Indian race had explored and settled in every climatic zone of the two continents. They ranged from sea level to the mountains and regions of the high Andes, from the Arctic ice to sweltering tropical jungles. They accomplished vast adjustments of bodily and technical economy. They learned to survive where many men after them perished. Their tools, it is true, were primitive. They lacked in power machinery and may be for this reason, the Indians did not spoil the earth they lived upon by making it over with great slag piles or by exposing the top soil to wind and water erosion. Lack of machinery may have saved them or may be it was a fundamentally different outlook upon life. Indians were content to live with and be one with nature. They were not ambitious to master the universe.

Great changes came to the Indian world following the arrival of white men from Europe. I have read somewhere that Indians were not real conservationists. Many things were imported by Europeans which profoundly affected Indian hunting methods and attitudes toward game animals. The horse alone was enough to remake the living habits of a people who formerly traveled entirely on foot and had only the dog as a beast of burden. The coming of the horse meant greater mobility and made possible the great animal drives which in time would prove so destructive. The acquisition of the gun, later the rifle, which had killing power beyond anything dreamed of in bow-and-arrow days, offered a further temptation to kill in excess of the needs of the moment.

Perhaps the greatest change wrought in Indian economy resulted from the introduction of commercial hunting and trapping. Indians quickly learned to prize the guns, iron pots, steel axes and knives, and other tools of the Europeans. They found that they could obtain these articles in exchange for beaver and other pelts, buffalo hides

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1 In the preparation of this address, the writer has drawn on his many years of experience in visiting leaders of the various Indian Tribes, getting first hand information on the subject of Conservation. The writer is indebted to Mr. D'Arcy McNickle, a member of the Blackfeet tribe and author of They Came Here First, Tribal Relations Officer, Indian Office, Department of Interior, Washington, D. C. for valuable data furnished. Information was also obtained from the writings of Marius Barbeau, ethnologist and outstanding authority on Canadian Indians and Eskimos.
and meat. For years, thousands of buffaloes were slaughtered in the northern plains to make pemmican for the Hudson Bay Company posts in the far north. In time, the Indians discovered that by yielding so unrestrainedly to the lure of the trade goods, they had destroyed their own livelihood.

The fact that Indians were by nature conservationists can be demonstrated in other ways. A leading student and writer in the field of agriculture states that the practice of agriculture in the history of the world develops through three phases: first, is the exploitive phase, when men mine out the soil for what it is worth, then move on to new fields. This is obviously true under pioneering conditions when land is plentiful and people few. A second stage is reached when the pioneer farmers have gone their way and left a played-out and eroding land behind them, and men begin the slow and costly task of conserving and rebuilding what is left. Still a third stage of agricultural economy is entered upon when a people, pressed by great scarcity of land in a hostile environment, actually reclaim and bring under cultivation acres which nature left in a non-arable condition.

Indian civilization at its highest development was not only one of conservation but had advanced into the further stage of resourceful use and development by reclaiming land and making it fruitful. Thus, the Pima Indians of Arizona, half a millennium before Columbus, took water out of the Gila River in perfectly engineered canals and made many thousand acres of desert land to bear corn, beans, cotton, and other crops. Thus, too, the ancient Incas of Peru terraced whole mountainsides, carrying top soil in baskets when necessary to cover bare rock, and also brought irrigation canals through forbidding mountain fastnesses.

The Hopi tribe of northern Arizona, deep in the heart of the Enchanted Desert who were often threatened with starvation by drought, divided every crop of corn harvested into three parts: one for seed, another, for use as food and a third, for use in cases of emergency when lack of rain, storms or enemies destroyed the crops. In these exploits, and in others, the Indian people of long ago demonstrated true insight into the value of preserving while using the resources of nature. This insight has been slow in growing and taking hold in the consciousness of modern society.

We have moved far away from that ancient Indian world which conquered the wilderness yet lived as part of it. The early white settlers, in their eagerness to establish new homes and to develop wealth, thought these things could be accomplished sooner and more efficiently if the wilderness and the children of the wilderness were rooted out completely. So the forests fell, clean cut. Precious grass was plowed under in arid regions where only grass should grow. Our streams were polluted with the poisons of industrial activity.
Like the first farmers who farm exploitably, these first settlers mined out our resources with little regard for the generations that followed them in the land.

The day has finally come, however, when we begin to understand that it is economically unwise to harvest renewable resources without replacement, or to exhaust our non-renewable minerals, oils and gases at rates in excess of our actual needs. We begin to see the economic utility of a watershed still clothed with a cover of forest and humus.

Some years ago the Federal government adopted stringent measures in its treatment of the American Indian, particularly where his religion was concerned. The "white man's" mission in the West, in addition to acquiring the redman's lands, aimed at stamping out the aged culture which included pagan beliefs. Arts and crafts handed down from proud ancestors were ordered abolished. Several decades passed before administrators in Washington, D. C. realized that neither cannon nor gun powder will erase from the mind—no matter how primitive—the pattern of its religious convictions, however undesirable they may appear to the outsider.

The contributions made by our Indians to what we often refer to as the "American way of life," could be adequately listed only in encyclopedic form. They are that many. Few people know the important contributions of the Indians to white civilization and white culture. The Indians taught the white man how to cope with the wilderness of this new continent; taught him how to hunt, fish, trap and canoe. The Indians gave the white man the great gifts of cotton, corn, tomatoes, tobacco, peanuts, beans, squash, rubber, cocaine, cocoa and several types of melons and many other plants, and these have today become multi-billion dollar American industries. The story of how Squanto taught the colonists in Massachusetts to plant fish in the ground in order to fertilize their crops is often repeated in every school of the nation.

We would do well, in viewing the creditable record of the American Indians' past performances, to heed our red brothers, especially their spiritual convictions where a better understanding of natural life is involved. Indian religion, in both morality and practice, differed almost according to the tribe. Sometimes the variance was astonishing. The Apaches, for example, placed heavy emphasis upon masculine domination together with the development of fighting skills by the warrior. At the extreme opposite end of the pole the Zunis of New Mexico elevated femininity to a compelling position, and violence was regarded with extreme distaste.

Nevertheless the reverence for wildlife, among the many different tribes, was as one. The soul, they said, did not belong to the human alone but to all living things. Animals were endowed with feelings
and intelligence. They survived death either to wander about as disembodied spirits or to be born again in animal or human form.

I do not propose that upon the conclusion of this conference we all don Indian blankets and retire to Skelly Stadium to practice our totem dances. But I do offer the conviction that from a deeper understanding of the Indians' strong spiritual affiliation with wildlife we can develop within ourselves, as well as in all other Americans, the attitude that our strength, both personal and national, rests heavily upon the perpetuation of the great outdoor life.

Each year statistics present a clearer picture of "citified" Americans learning to borrow from the forces of nature to give them balanced perspective. They are refugees from their own Frankenstinian asphalt highways and concrete jungles. Their lives yearn for the elemental expression found in tramping through brush with only the sky as a roof. Winged neighbors, bright and melodious, encourage the frustrations met in the world of competition, to slip away into the night. And souls become alive with conscious pleasure from the dance of a boat underfoot.

Unfortunately, added to these blessings freely given by nature, comes the ominous sounds of the worst carnivore in the animal kingdom, the human who is eager to destroy for destruction's sake or to indulge a whim. All of us have seen him, and many—at least partly—have been him. For big bags and heavy catches are common ambitions, whether or not the game and fish will ever be constructively used. This situation exists primarily because outdoor enthusiasts hold for wildlife conservation, but they do not agree remotely upon how far restrictions should be carried.

No better instance could be cited than the grumbling, even complaint, heard about the country when the Izak Walton League had the foresight and courage to get the President of the United States to intercede in behalf of restraining air flight from traveling low over the American side of the Quetico-Superior National Forest, in Minnesota. We begin to appreciate what it can mean to a highly urbanized society to have within easy reach systems of state and national parks, monuments, and wilderness areas where men can for a little while find rest and spiritual renewal. Where the people of a busy work-a-day world can go and commune with nature and its visible forms.

I would like to make special mention at this time of the Quetico-Superior area in Northern Minnesota and the adjoining Ontario side of the International Border. Through the courtesy of the Department of Conservation of the State of Minnesota, I had the good fortune last year to be flown over a portion of this wonderful region of lakes, flashing streams, and primeval forest, which many people would like to see protected against commercialization and airplane traffic,
in order to maintain as nearly as possible the unadulterated wilderness character of some parts of the area. The Izaak Walton League has taken a leading part in this endeavor and has contributed many thousands of dollars in an effort to preserve it. In speak in general terms of the value of such a region. The day must never come when our American people lose contact entirely with the earth which supports us. What made our Nation great, I am convinced, was the long experience our forefathers had—and here I speak of our Indian as well as our European ancestors—in facing the basic issues of living, or winning food and shelter, and survival out of the wilderness. This was what taught us our inventiveness in meeting new situations. This was what taught us courage and self-reliance. And this was what taught us to respect the rights of others and to build a society of free men. Too many of us have moved away from the country and gone to the city. Too many of us have lost touch with the outdoors and all that can be learned from observing things growing and from solitude itself. We need our Quetico-Superior areas now and will need them even more desperately in the years and generations to come. I, as one member of our urbanized society, am most happy to join with an organization such as the Izaak Walton League in giving thought to the problems of conservation and the proper management of our natural resources.

It was no coincidence that the white man's arrival in Indian Territory brought also a steady decrease of animal life. As early as 1853, this was noted officially when Kit Carson, Indian Agent in New Mexico Territory, wrote to the Department of the Interior: "The game in the Utah country is becoming scarce and they (the Indians) are unable to support themselves by the chase and the hunt, and the Government has but one alternative, either to subsist and clothe them or exterminate them."

By this time hunters along the eastern coastline had clubbed the great auk, for its body oil, completely out of existence. The American bison, once counted to about fifty million, amounted, in 1890, to no more than five hundred. The passenger pigeon disappeared by 1913. We no longer have the famed Labrador duck or the Carolina paroquet, a bird with brilliant plumage, which was eliminated by commercial capture for domestic bird cages.

The same destiny was apparent for the American elk, the prong-horned antelope, the black and grizzly bears and the bighorn sheep, together with such notable birds as the trumpeter swan and the whooping crane. Fortunately, wild game refuges, established by both State and Federal government, were able to prevent any of them from becoming extinct. And gradually, through careful practice of conservation principles, both animals and birds alike are growing plentiful.
The American people were wise, indeed, when they allocated the proper authority to their State and Federal governments for the protection of their fish, animal and bird life. It has been since 1903 that the first Federal bird refuge was established at Pelican Island on the east coast of Florida. Today, we have close to 300 refuges for waterfowl and other species including big game. Over 18 million acres of land are retained in the United States, Hawaii, Alaska and Puerto Rico solely for conservation.

If such an expansive program were not in action to take care of our national fish supply, we soon would find ourselves without any water life at all. Consumer demand is tremendous. And as population and industry continue to grow the problem of maintaining game fish in our inland waters becomes more and more complex. The many reservoirs, ranging from small farm ponds to large lakes, still are not meeting the demands for pond fish used for stocking purposes. It is estimated on the basis of license statistics and other information that about 20 million engage in sport fishing each year. The annual catch of these fishermen probably amounts to at least 250 million pounds. On the inland waters the total yield amounts to about 85 million pounds.

Now that we are engaged in a national emergency many more problems have confronted wildlife conservation. Appropriation cuts in Federal expenditure normally allocated to this program will reduce the scope of services. Continued pressure is evident, therefore, to cut the stocks of fish and wildlife, to relax the standards necessary for their protection and to take untried short-cuts to management. And undoubtedly there will be certain special-interest groups seeking to exploit the situation by advancing projects for the use of a natural resource not actually associated with critical need.

Something obviously must be done. All of the American people have a direct interest in conservation, and they cannot afford to let their wildlife reserves become depleted. More specifically, for the commercial fishermen and trappers the interest is financial. For many others, the interest is recreation: hunting, fishing, photography, study and observation of wildlife. Others, still, enjoy more aesthetic aspects: painting and music based on the beauty of form in living nature. But no matter what the personal motivation may be, the importance of maintaining these reserves is there.

The responsibility necessarily rests upon the shoulders of the American people, not collectively as in tax collection but individually as John Smith and Mary Jones. Organizations dedicated to the outdoor life, such as the Izaak Walton League, should move to the front in putting across a popular movement among our people to help conserve their natural resources.
It is, of course, obvious that city people cannot put down their work and go out into the wilds to take care of wild life. But an immeasurable amount of good would be achieved were every citizen who ventured into those areas, to carry with him a true conservation attitude. That means, not self-denial, but rather self-restraint. Which is the more important to the sportsman, when the chips are really down: the number of animals he bagged or the amount of fish he caught, or the fact that he had been in the back woods to relax and get good exercise with plenty of fresh air.

We Americans are, truthfully speaking, a self-indulgent lot. Generous on the one hand, we throw away food and materials that peoples in other parts of the world would have given their eye-teeth to have. We do not conserve like the old pioneers who first crossed the Territory where we meet today. A wonderful industrial productivity and vast natural resources have let us become careless with a dollar or its equivalent. Once we have made up our mind to undertake a project, however, our enthusiasm is unquenchable. World War II proved this in many ways.

I propose, therefore, that we utilize this wonderful sense of effort, in maintaining our wild life by selling the public on cooperating with conservation ideals. As the man once said: "It pays to advertise." "Smokey Bear" has done much good in selling fire prevention.

It is the Indian attitude we want to put across, the almost spiritual concept of nature. The American farmer already understands. It is the city people who need re-education. Their mental barrier is steel and cement.

I recall a verse that goes as follows:

"The poet and ornithologist differ in ways absurd
One writes—'The bird is on the wing.'
The other answers—'No such thing!
The wing is on the bird.'"

More important yet, let us make every effort to keep the bird.