



WHAT SHALL WE DEFEND?

By Dr. Valerius Geist

This article is adapted from a longer article by Dr. Geist. To access the full document, including references, contact the author at kendulf@shaw.ca.

A quarter century ago, the University of Chicago Press sent its authors a little book by Denham Sutcliffe. Entitled *What Shall We Defend?*, it was a collection of essays assembled posthumously by the devoted students and family of a literature teacher from a mid-western college. The title aroused my curiosity, and despite a mountain of material to read, I opened the book and was quickly taken in. Today, its coffee-stained cover, frayed edges, and crumbling binding bear witness to the handling it has received over the decades. Through many moves, I have guarded it jealously so that I could reach for it in times of need to recharge my soul and refresh my memory.

How could a mere teacher of literature so deeply affect an arrogant scientist like myself? The answer lies in the question Denham Sutcliffe pursued so effectively: what shall we defend? It is a question that forces one not merely to examine one's beliefs and values, but to move from detail to basis, from the tactical to the strategic, from the trivial to the profound. Sutcliffe clarified for me as none had before that my beloved field of endeavour, science, could not exist, let alone flourish, without the underlying humanistic values embraced by our society as stored and reflected in our literature and arts.

In my university career, I laboured in a professional faculty to transform good academic scientists into able professional scientists, competent to carry on their trade outside academia. I soon became aware of the deficiency of traditional university training in preparing scientists for life beyond academia. Much of our time in educating environmental scientists



Elk have recently made a comeback, after reintroduction, in the Suffield National Wildlife Area. D. OLSON

was spent rectifying that deficit. If I had my way, no student today would be allowed to study science and be let loose on laboratories or the field without a degree in the liberal arts.

The question "What shall we defend?" is highly relevant to those of us interested in wildlife and nature conservation. For instance, whether you are a proponent or opponent of Quality Deer Management becomes irrelevant without deer or deer hunting. It is the values that underlie the support of deer and hunting that I am prepared to defend. It doesn't help to point out how much hunters have contributed to the survival and return of wildlife if the reply is "I don't care!" The most beautiful ecological studies are irrelevant to conservation, should this be the prevailing public attitude. One must, therefore, strive to identify the fundamental societal values that make society promote wildlife.

Historically, hunting has been the greatest passion that assured wildlife its place on the landscape. These powerful urges to hunt wildlife appear to be deeply primordial. Most commonly

the passion to hunt expresses itself as a deep, life-long interest in and devotion to wildlife, often accompanied by considerable work, even sacrifice, by the hunter on behalf of wildlife. Witness the many organizations dedicated to the conservation of wildlife in North America.

How to explain that passion meaningfully to the public is a challenge. Careful discussions about human origins can help here, such as the capture by humans of the large protein store – the master nutrient – contained in wildlife, an achievement fundamental to the meteoric rise of our species. A good many scholars have dwelled upon how our past as hunter-gatherers has shaped the human species, but few have discussed this complex topic so knowledgeably and in such lucid, poetic prose as did the late Paul Shepard. In writing about his work, Florence Shepard explains how hunting for food and maintaining family life becomes a sacrament, a part of a great cycle of becoming and passing, births and deaths, and how the mundane becomes the spiritual.

We can safely assume, then, that as long as there is wildlife, there will be a powerful urge to hunt, that such a primordial urge cannot be abolished any more than love or hate. But this urge needs to be channeled intelligently into positive outlets.

Reduced to its essence, wildlife thrives where humans get something precious from it, which must be tangible for a majority of persons. However, that gain, tangible or otherwise, must not be seen as abusive of wildlife or frivolous by those who merely observe and who enjoy no tangible benefits or suffer costs. And these are in the majority. Consequently, the first objective to be pursued is to make wildlife very relevant to as broad a segment of the public as possible. The large land base beyond our protected areas, that is, the land from which we as a society reap sustenance via agriculture and products from raw materials, is here our chief concern.

What shall we defend? We shall defend in the first instance the idea that wildlife is there to be used, that wildlife is not merely an object of natural art to be admired in hands-off fashion. The challenge is to make the use of wildlife appealing. Its use can be ennobled by linking it to high ideals, to high status, to art, literature, tradition and to ritual – and the deeper the better. The destruction of global ecosystems is a topical concern. As long as there is a determined demand for wildlife, there will be a determined demand for wildlife habitat. The more species of wildlife called for, the greater the synergistic effect of keeping ecosystems complex and species-rich.

No, we cannot all turn into hunter-gatherers. Agriculture will remain to feed us all. However, we must keep alive the fundamental truth that hunting and gathering maintains the landscape rich and diverse in life, and raising crops for food does not. And nobody that I know of can make a better argument for that than ex-vegetarian hunter Ted Kerasote. Eating wild meat is a little step toward a more holistic global ecology. It is thoroughly ecological, it is thoroughly holistic, it is thoroughly good!

There is more to the question: What shall we defend? If you defend the sensible use of wildlife, you will

soon run into opposition from a small, energetic, well-financed, clever and media-wise group of people that espouse the doctrine that sentient beings must not be used by humans at all, only non-sentient ones, and that we must all become vegetarians. There are various variants of this doctrine, all purportedly aimed at reducing pain and suffering, aggression and violence, and thus turning Earth into a kinder, gentler place. Note that this philosophy – if one can call it such – is based on splitting life into a higher sentient form and a lower non-sentient one. In so doing, it denies the unity of life. And that is a falsehood.

Ever since Darwin, we have viewed life as united, and that unity has been demonstrated at great length by modern science, molecular biology in particular. A doctrine that denies the unity of life is not worth the paper it is written on. It has no basis in science. The fact is that all organisms sense injury to their self and proceed to repair themselves. The urgency with which repairs are initiated suggests that all organisms suffer, each in their very own way. That is a valid deduction from the unity of life, even though it is beyond scientific proof. As animals we are bound to eat life in order to live, and there is no way to escape inflicting suffering; any claim to the contrary I consider self-delusion. That we must

strive to limit suffering goes without question.

What we defend in this case is veracity, and we must not falter in its defence. We must know the limits to science and oppose its inappropriate uses. This is no easy task, I can assure you from personal experience. We must be vigilant that public policy is indeed based on science, and not on its pretense. To be effective, we must be prepared, and that includes some understanding of those who oppose us. To begin this endeavour, I recommend highly another little book entitled *Know Hunting*, written by a retired fellow biologist David E. Samuel.

Defend the sensible use of wildlife, defend veracity, but also defend the great gifts of those that went before us. They laboured so that you and I might enjoy wildlife, and that because of wildlife, we might enjoy a high quality of life. Defend the policies that made North American-style wildlife conservation the unequalled environmental success story of the twentieth century. It not only returned wildlife from the brink of extinction in less than a century, but it is a glowing example of how to use a natural, renewable resource in a sustainable manner, how a public resource can be used via the private sector to generate remarkable wealth and employment, and how commerce can be turned to



Adequate habitat in Alberta for animals such as these sheep in the Bighorn Backcountry is shrinking, largely due to increased human access. Appropriate human use of, and connection to, wildlife creates a demand for habitat. C. WEARMOUTH



"Foothills, Whaleback" © PAM WILMAN

support wildlife rather than destroy it. It is a system that arose via decades of grassroots democracy in action across this continent. It is the collective wisdom of those who went before us on how to maintain wildlife, despite conflicting demands on it.

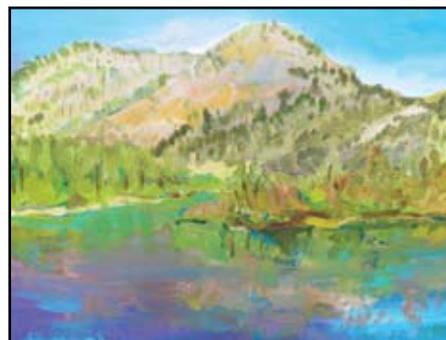
Yet we would defend nothing static, for as long as wildlife is a public resource accessible to all, this system of grassroots democracy will tune it to changing conditions as time passes. The North American system of wildlife conservation is a great cultural achievement of North American society – were it not also the best kept secret in North America.

I wish to point to some developments that need special attention under the heading "What Shall We Defend?" The last two decades have seen the growth of game farming, an industry devoted to raising wildlife for the sale of its parts in an open market. It is much supported by agricultural bureaucracies. This industry stands in opposition to every major policy of wildlife conservation in the North American conservation model. These are irreconcilable opposites and there is no escape from it. Game ranching systematically destroys the legislative framework that has been found effective in conserving wildlife. It is also a big disease bridge between livestock and wildlife; it is a threat to public health; it takes away living space from wildlife, which conventional ranching does not; and it has the potential to destroy the genetic integrity of wildlife through assured escapes and the genetic manipulation

of captive wildlife. Game ranching is a most potent threat to wildlife conservation in North America today.

We must also defend what was termed by Aldo Leopold the "democracy of sport." It is currently threatened, directly and indirectly, by the limiting of access to wildlife through the marketplace. Ultimately, that would limit access to wildlife to the wealthy, ruling elite, excluding the majority of North Americans in participating in the wildlife harvest. There are a number of such developments: the leasing of hunting rights on private property, the auctioning of hunts to the highest bidder, the shooting of big game on hunt-farms designated variously as *canned hunts* or *pet-shoots*, and in Canada the recent imposition of anti-gun legislation that insures that persons of modest or moderate means will be disarmed and cannot participate in wildlife harvests.

There are, of course, vigorous defenders of all these practices and in my experience very touchy defenders. However, the inescapable bottom line



"Crowsnest Lake" © PAM WILMAN

is that these practices tend to remove hunters from the field, diminishing Leopold's "democracy of sport." We need to address these issues, touchy defenders or not.

What shall we defend? It is a potent question, despite its simplicity, well chosen by the finely honed mind of a man of letters, Denham Sutcliffe. And yes, he was a hunter.

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"You can't conserve game by itself; to rebuild the game resource you must first rebuild the game range, and this means rebuilding the people who use it, and all of the things they use it for... The task grows greater year by year, but so does its importance. We begin by seeking a few trees or birds; to get them we must build a new relationship between men and land."

— Aldo Leopold