



One definition of Conservation is passing up some of the quick profits in the exploitation of natural resources in favor of preserving a natural environment that humans can enjoy. The public gains in the long run, both esthetically and economically.

And that's the kernel of the reason why conservation is always a struggle. Many want maximum economic "development" of community, town, county, or State, even if that maximum development involves misuse of natural resources. When it hits people in the pocketbook, that's when the real conservationists have to stand up and be counted. For many people, Conservation in that case is for someone else, some place else.

President Johnson has said that we are affluent enough as a Nation to maintain the good things of our natural environment as we continue to develop and grow. We are wealthy enough to forego the tearing up of our environment and still progress as a people.

But when we try to establish laws and rules against the total exploitation of natural resources, we step on the toes of those who would exploit these resources for maximum economic gain.

So it is with estuaries.

Estuaries, as one of our Bureau people put it, form a transitional area where the land reaches out into the sea and the sea into the land. This estuarine area, he said, is in some places richer than the richest farm land, for it is lavishly fertilized with inorganic nutrients which the land is continually pouring into it.

A panel of the President's Science Advisory Committee discussed estuaries in a report, "Restoring the Quality of our Environment," published in November 1965. That panel noted the remarkable assemblage of terrestrial and aquatic life in the zone of interplay between the margins of sea and land. It cited estuarine marshes in Georgia which produce nearly seven times as much organic matter per unit area as the water of the continental shelf, twenty times as much as that of the deep sea, and six times as much as average wheat-producing land. The report said:

"In 1960, estuarine dependent sea food resources supported about 90,000 commercial fishermen to whom they yielded 2.8 billion pounds. This quantity was worth 59 million dollars on the wholesale market. The resources yielded an additional 900,000 pounds to about 1,600,000 anglers. It is hard to evaluate recreational fishing, but if the amount spent specifically for fishing expeditions over and above normal

living costs be accepted as an index, the value of the sportsmen's catch of estuarine dependent fishes was about 163 million dollars."

In addition, the report mentioned waterfowl and shore birds that depend on estuaries, pointing out that these areas are items in our Nation's treasury of natural beauty.

Nature comes alive in estuaries. For many people in our teeming cities, estuaries are the only places near home where they can go to see and enjoy an unspoiled natural area.

But estuary areas are being destroyed at a rapidly accelerating rate. Everywhere you look along our Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, particularly in Florida, you see dredges gouging out the bottom, dumping the spoil on productive marsh areas. The same is true on parts of the Pacific Coast: San Francisco Bay, for example. This operation does double damage to the natural environment by scooping out bottom organisms and putting the material high and dry to cover up valuable coastal wetlands.

Much of this activity is designed to add new residential areas, complete with water and road access to each building lot -- the so-called Venetian development. Fly along our coastlines and you can see them by the hundreds. Dredging and filling of estuaries is also a busy activity to create new industrial sites, with convenient water transportation and waste disposal right at the front door.

About 30 percent of our population lives within 50 miles of our coastlines, and this, of course, has put great pressure on coastal areas. We have used our estuaries without regard for the damage to our environment. We have looked upon them as inexhaustible -- to be exploited, used, abused, filled, dredged, polluted, and otherwise despoiled.

Why, you ask, doesn't somebody do something about it?

The plain fact is that there are now no adequate public tools designed to preserve estuaries.

Destruction of our estuarine areas is a profitable venture -- profitable to the entrepreneur and enhancing to the tax base of the community. There are estimates that it is possible to double your money by dredging and filling estuaries and then by "developing" and selling the filled land. So it is that any workable system of saving estuaries means that some of this immediate economic gain to some interest will have to go unrealized.

Let me review some current proposals for preserving estuaries. Some of them have been discussed for several years; one of them is brand new.

Conservation agencies have long recognized that comprehensive studies of estuaries are needed. We already know that they are valuable, but we need to know much more about the relative quality as between one area and another; and where and how they fit into the life cycle of many fish and wildlife species. But study and research, by themselves, cannot save one square foot of estuaries.

A system of acquisition by public conservation agencies also has been proposed. This is an excellent approach, for the best estuarine areas should be in public ownership. But this system is limited. Hundreds of thousands of acres of estuaries need to be saved, but I doubt that any budget will soon have the kind of money necessary to acquire a significant part of them. Estuaries, moreover, are often interconnected through great distances. Consequently, acquisition of parts of them cannot, alone, save the estuary system involved.

Cooperative agreements between Federal and local governments to preserve estuaries is another approach with excellent potential. But this, too, has severe limitations. As I have pointed out, dredging and filling of estuaries puts money into local coffers. It would be generally difficult for local officials to be against an activity which brings payroll dollars into their communities and expands the local tax base, even if in the long term, economic setbacks are assured because of poor planning.

What then, if anything, can be done to save estuaries?

An answer was suggested by Dr. Stanley A. Cain, Assistant Secretary of the Interior, at a meeting in Chicago last November. Dr. Cain discussed a system under which those who propose to dredge or fill an estuary first be required to apply for and obtain a permit from the Department of the Interior -- the principal agency of the Federal Government charged with the conservation of natural resources.

All estuaries are legally navigable waters of the United States. The Constitution gives the Federal government authority over navigable waters, an authority which extends beyond the protection of navigation. For example, the Federal Power Commission uses the Federal jurisdiction over navigable waters as its Constitutional authority to require the licensing of hydro-electric plants on rivers and streams.

The Federal government, through the Corps of Engineers, already exercises authority over estuaries. A permit from the Corps of Engineers is now required prior to undertaking a project for dredging and filling. It is in this area that we have tried to protect estuaries.

We make recommendations, in some cases, to the Corps for denial or conditioning of permits. Regrettably, we have had little success. The Corps of Engineers maintains, perhaps rightly, that the 1899 Act which authorizes its licensing procedure also restricts it primarily to consideration of the effect of the proposed work on navigation. Let me emphasize that that concern of the Corps in the permit program is the protection of navigation, not the development and improvement of navigation.

So requiring a permit from the Department of the Interior for dredging and filling would not conflict in the slightest with the concern of the Corps of Engineers for protecting navigation. The Corps could continue its present program; in fact, its job of protecting navigation would be made easier by the denial of a permit by the Department of the Interior. In such a case, the Corps would be spared the expense and manpower required to investigate and review a permit application because navigation, along with fish and wildlife and natural beauty, would have already been protected by the permit denial.

This is the tool the Nation needs for saving estuaries. This is the way -- perhaps the only way -- the Conservation viewpoint can be injected into decisions about dredging and filling.

All this, of course, has implications for our own region. Chesapeake Bay is one of the finest estuary areas in the Nation. Perhaps some of you received a notice early this month from the Maryland Ornithological Society of Chestertown, marked "Please Read and Act at Once." The notice says that the upper Chesapeake is the largest unspoiled area on the Middle-Atlantic seaboard which provides freshwater recreation, and the only part of the Chesapeake Bay that can be used for swimming because it is free of sea nettles. The Society, concerned about proposed construction of a petrochemical plant along the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal, urges people to protest to the Corps of Engineers against granting a permit to dredge in and along the Canal and to construct berthing facilities.

Now it is true that the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal is not an estuary -- but it connects and affects two estuaries: Chesapeake Bay and Delaware Bay. The affair, however, serves to make my point. The Maryland Ornithological Society, and other conservationists, are urging people to write to the Corps in the hope that the permit will be denied. For this is now their only recourse.

It is a fact that some District Engineers of the Corps will condition, deny, or hold up permits because of effects on fish, wildlife, and other natural values. However, such consideration by them is necessarily a subsidiary factor in their decision, because their primary consideration must be protection of navigation.

What is needed is an authority to which ornithological societies and similar conservation-minded groups and citizens across the Country can appeal, where the decision as to granting or denying the permit for dredging is based primarily on considerations of natural resource conservation.

This permit system suggested by Assistant Secretary Cain, may, like other conservation proposals, be in for some rough sledding. Obviously, it would step on the toes of those who stand to make money from dredging and filling estuaries. I have suggested that the increase in payrolls and tax base resulting from the dredging and filling of estuaries may make it difficult for local officials to oppose, whatever their personal sentiments.

I wish to emphasize here that a permit system like this would not mean an automatic denial of every application to dredge and fill estuaries. There would be many cases where the natural values of an area that might be destroyed would be negligible; not every square yard of estuarine area is as rich and productive as the Georgia marshes mentioned by the President's Science Advisory Committee. In other cases, permits could be issued with conditions like those controlling the manner of spoil placement. The idea is not to halt all dredging and filling but rather to take into account the ecological effects of the proposed works in reaching a decision as to whether they should proceed.

Furthermore, many developers of estuary areas have a real appreciation of conservation values. Where this appreciation is backed by willingness to forego milking the last dollar out of dredging and filling, there might be little conflict with the proposed permit system.

But the permit idea has its drawbacks. It can be criticized because it would appear to extend Federal control in an era when Federal controls are under increasing criticism. Reasons for denying permits would have to be sound and they would have to be uniform around the Country. Finally, a program of this nature would require considerable funds for field work and inspection of applications, although most of the money conceivably could be provided by application fees required from those who desire permits.

Any such program would be carried out in close cooperation with State conservation departments. The Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife and other agencies of the Department of the Interior have a long history of joint action with counterpart State agencies. We know how to work with them; we couldn't do our job unless we did.

But the main argument on the pro side is that the permit system may be the only viable way to save estuaries. Grits Gresham, in the current issue of "National Wildlife," has written:

"One of the quietest crises in conservation has been the steady disappearance of our estuarine wild areas -- the shallow, fertile waters along our ocean coasts."

I think we have to say that the conservation of estuaries hangs in the balance. It is a question of whether we can afford to forego some of the unquestioned gains for real estate and industry that come from the dredging and filling of estuaries in order to maintain important public values.

But, as an Izaak Walton League friend of mine said to me a few days ago:

"Can we afford not to?"

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