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Remarks to Natural Resources Council of America

"THE MISSING CONNECTION"

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It has been about three months since I was confirmed as Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. I've spent a lot of that time surveying the agency and its mission and considering its future course.

For better or for worse, the ways of any organization are grounded in its history, and change—if it is to be successful—must take into account that history. The Service's past has indeed been prologue.

The roots of today's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service are almost 100 years deep, beginning in two concerns at the turn of the century. The first was an economic concern about the effects of wildlife—positive and negative—on farmer's crops. The second, coming slightly later, was hunters' concern about dwindling populations of waterfowl and their habitats.

The Service's foundation, then, rests on two values of fish and wildlife—economic and recreational—and to this day, its traditional message has focused on the number of Americans who enjoy fishing, hunting, bird watching, and the social and economic benefits that accrue from those activities.

This traditional message is true and it has always been extremely persuasive in moving this country to a conservation awareness. It has achieved some enormous successes—everything from the creation of the National Wildlife Refuge System to the comeback of endangered species such as the bald eagle and peregrine falcon.

America has been willing to do more than any nation on Earth to conserve its wildlife. I believe this shows the deep love and concern Americans hold in their hearts for wildlife. Americans cherish their natural resources for recreation, for regeneration, and a rebirth of their spirit.

More than half of all American adults participate in some form of wildlife-related recreation. Three-quarters of these people enjoy nonconsumptive activities such as watching or photographing wildlife.

One of the most astonishing figures I've come across recently is the fact that each year Americans spend $2 billion on birdseed! Clearly, Americans love wild birds and the other wildlife species that share this planet with us.

And for those of us in the conservation movement, the profound human response to an encounter with wildlife in the field, or on the page or screen, has always been our most effective opening for reaching the public with a conservation message.

But, unfortunately, as I assess the current situation, I believe our conservation efforts are being hindered because the message is not getting from America's heart to its mind. There is a missing connection.

In their hearts, Americans cherish wildlife; they instinctively sense its intrinsic value, connect with its common life-force, and realize our shared destiny.

But many Americans have not fully made the connection in their minds between the fate of wildlife and its habitat and our fate, between its health and our health.

They have not made the connection between their actions or lack of action and the destiny of the ecosystems on which both humans and wildlife depend.

They have not made the connection between the welfare of unlovable little creatures like salamanders, bats, and mussels and the welfare of eagles, hawks, and bears, not to mention people.

And they have not made the connection between the well-being of our environment and the well-being of our economy.

This missing connection between America's heart and its mind is hurting us. It shows up in the headlines virtually every week, whether it's the spotted owl or the kangaroo rat or the desert tortoise. Complex issues are being reduced to rhetoric, and even demagoguery, and the kind of ridicule characterized in the Washington Post recently:

> . . . suddenly, you will have an entire industry being held hostage to an obscure animal—an owl, a tiny fish with a funny name—that hardly anyone but professional biologists ever heard of the day before . . . The owl is still putting people out of work; that's the cartoon.

One thing is certain: wildlife and its habitat are not going to win when the public debate over conservation is reduced to rhetoric and demagoguery. Despite its success and continued importance, the traditional message of wildlife as recreation and a source of economic activity is no longer adequate.

Unless we change the message, we will continue to struggle. We will continue to run into resistance in places where we should have support. We will continue to take one step back for each two steps forward.

We cannot rely too heavily on economic justifications for our conservation efforts. The Fish and Wildlife Service frequently points out, for example, that wildlife-related recreation accounts for $59 billion in spending each year, or 1 percent of our entire gross domestic product. This is an astonishing figure, and obviously thousands of people's jobs depend on this wildlife-related spending. It certainly is worth noting. But it is not the rock upon which we should build our case for conserving our wildlife and its habitat because we invite the devastation of species that people will not pay to see or use.

Likewise, we have placed an increasing emphasis on wildlife's entertainment value. Watchable Wildlife programs that feature beautiful species such as geese, eagles, elk, and antelope offer great opportunities to open up people's eyes to the natural world. And we can use these programs to educate people about the importance of wildlife and its habitat. But we shouldn't let the beauty or desirability of wildlife become the reason for conserving it because the measure of wildlife value becomes its rating in the "cute and cuddly" index.

Even if not a single job were created, wildlife must be conserved. Even people who won't or can't go out and marvel at the sight of a flock of migrating geese or a herd of Rocky Mountain elk must take up the cause of wildlife conservation.

Why? Because we are linked to it, and it is in our immediate self-interest to care about it. Because it is species that don't create jobs and aren't charismatic are often the critical components in the web of life and serve as invaluable indicators of what is going on in our environment. When we see the snails and the mussels and the lichen in trouble, it is often a signal that the ecosystems upon which we, too, depend are unraveling.

Take the Bruneau Hot Springs snail, for example, a classic case of a little species in the middle of a big controversy. Farmers in Idaho are up in arms because of the listing of the snail as endangered. After all, who cares about a snail no one ever sees when there are jobs at stake?

But the fact is, the snail is simply a weather vane for a much greater threat to farmers and others in the region, in this case the steady decline of the regional aquifer in the Bruneau Valley. As George Frampton pointed out in an excellent letter to the editor of the Wall Street Journal, the aquifer problem will exist whether or not we list the snail. The snail is the messenger telling us that a water problem exists and must be dealt with or the ecosystem and agriculture upon which human beings depend will continue to crumble. Once again, the local reaction is quite literally to kill the messenger rather than heed the message.

We've seen the same scenario played out across the country, whether in the old growth forests of the Pacific Northwest or the Edwards Aquifer in Texas or the "river of grass" in the Everglades.

Yet the message does not seem to be getting through to many Americans—they aren't making the connection.

For all of us in the conservation movement, getting Americans to make this connection is not a side issue to be dealt with as an afterthought. It is essential to our mission.

This is particularly true as we approach the reauthorization of the Endangered Species Act. Now is the time we must make our case with the American people. As well as forwarding a new understanding of wildlife, we must emphatically demonstrate that the Act has been, for the most part, a success and it deserves their continued support.

To begin with, there are a great many endangered species success stories out there that are not fully appreciated by the American public. These include not only the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon but also the whooping crane, the California condor, the black-footed ferret, the Aleutian Canada goose, the greenback cutthroat trout, the red wolf, the American alligator, the Palau dove—the list goes on.

And on the other side of the controversy, the damage to economic development has been grossly overstated. For example, of the 118,000 informal and formal consultations required of other Federal agencies under the Act from 1979 to 1991, only 33 development projects were halted. That is one project halted for each 3,578 consultations!

The Service is also charged with being too hasty in listing species, but the evidence suggests otherwise. In many, many cases, the populations of species at the time of listing are so depleted that the Service can be properly criticized for waiting too long to list the species, *not* for reacting too soon.

And the Service is frequently accused of engaging in unconstitutional taking of land, but in fact there has never been a single successful court case claiming an unconstitutional taking of land under the Endangered Species Act.

Simply stated, the Endangered Species Act does not have the stranglehold on the economy that opponents contend. In many respects, it is the broadest and most effective piece of environmental legislation ever enacted. Nevertheless, we are always looking for ways it can be improved.

The Administration has not yet reached a defined position on reauthorization, but we are generally seeking to simplify, speed up, and provide more consistency in its application.

Along with this, we would like to see more of a multi-species, ecosystem-management approach and more emphasis on recovery rather than mere survival of species.

We also would like to see more active prelisting conservation and recovery efforts for declining species with the goal of precluding the need for listings. Too often, the pattern has been to allow species to decline to near extinction before we begin the dialogue on their conservation. At that point, "dialogue" is a euphemism—as we have seen in the Pacific Northwest.

We wait until our options are very limited—when the balance has already been weighted against species recovery. It's kind of like running from train wreck to train wreck with an ambulance and a stretcher.

As part of reversing this trend, we want to increase the number of partnerships, especially with states and private landowners, to monitor and recover species without conflict.

In addition, we are hoping to improve our science by coordinating better with states to collect information on listings and monitoring of populations. The creation of the National Biological Survey also should

improve our science by putting all the research resources of the Interior Department under one roof.

In short, through partnerships and better science, we want to spend more of our resources in the field helping recover species and less time in the courtroom fighting over listings and consultations.

There is some good news in the short-term. As we've looked at each of these goals, we've discovered there is much we can do within the current structure of the Act to achieve them.

For example, there are tools provided in the Act to mitigate conflict and reduce economic impacts. For instance, habitat conservation plans agreed to by the Service and landowners allow economic development to continue while protecting endangered species. We have not take advantage of these plans as much as we should have in the past.

This is changing. In the past couple of years, we've worked with landowners, states, and other interests to develop habitat conservation plans for the spotted owl in California, the desert tortoise in Nevada, and the Red Hills salamander in Alabama.

Currently there are 17 habitat conservation plans in effect; 75 more are in the works. Each is a good example of how the Act can and should work to develop solutions to declining wildlife populations without conflict and without litigation.

The Service is thoroughly committed to this approach. In fact, we just hired a habitat conservation plan coordinator in our Northwest region.

Despite this progress, however, we could spend much of the next year on the defensive, trying to protect the basic integrity of the Act as we seek to improve it.

To be candid, the climate is not good right now; we are seeing a lot of distortions of the truth. For example, the Endangered Species Act is unfairly being blamed for destruction of many homes during the recent California fires. And we saw plenty of misinformation about supposed violation of property rights during the Congressional deliberations on the National Biological Survey.

This again underscores the need to get the message out to average Americans that, indeed, the survival of all manner of wildlife and its habitat is critical to our quality of life, to our economy, and ultimately to our survival.

One of the biggest myths foisted on people is the idea that economic development and conservation are incompatible, that is an either-or equation.

This may be true when you are on the brink of a crisis, and the only choices you have are short-term—such as stop all logging in an area or allow a species to go extinct.

But I firmly believe that if we plan for the long-term, both economic and wildlife interests can be served. If we had done long-term planning for the old-growth forests in the 1970s, for example, the spotted owl would still be an obscure bird rather than the staple of editorial cartoonists.

Ironically, in cases like the spotted owl where an economic use of a resource leads to a listing, it is very likely the economic use itself is not sustainable. Where logging is threatening species, it is probable that the timber industry is overcutting and will eventually liquidate the resource it depends on. The same is obviously true of water resources.

The economic and social displacements caused by unsustainable use of resources are always very costly, and in the long run, it can be proven that the best economic choice is the most environmental—the one with no endangered ecosystems. Not only can the economy and the environment coexist, but in any frame greater than the short-term, they are identical considerations. Lack of environmental planning and protection always cost more in the end. Unsustainable economic uses lead to resource depletion and ecosystem collapse. The only real conflict, therefore, is between short-term and long-term thinking. And the only real "either-or" equation is *either* we engage in long-term planning to protect the ecosystems in which we live *or* we will suffer along with them.

The recent tragedy of the Midwest flood proved this point all to well. The thoughtless destruction of wetlands over many years contributed significantly to the terrible devastation of the 1993 floods. I'm sure developers and agricultural interests made convincing arguments for draining those wetlands. I'm sure the goal was jobs and economic growth, and surely we did see jobs and economic growth as a result.

But these economic considerations and benefits came at a very heavy price, in both human and economic terms. People were emotionally devastated and their economic well-being threatened as the flood washed away their lives and billions of dollars in property and millions of tons of topsoil.

A fundamental lesson of the Midwest flood is that we will *always* pay a great economic cost for the lack of environmental forethought and ecosystem management.

The Service is now participating in an interagency task force with the Army Corps of Engineers, Environmental Protection Agency, and the Federal Emergency Management Agency on levee repair in the areas of the Mississippi River affected by the flood. We are working to convince many of

our fellow agencies that wetland reconstruction and other floodplain or watershed restoration techniques will provide long-term solutions to some flooding problems, with a better cost-benefit ratio than the traditional system of levees and drainage tiles. Hopefully, we will be able to convince the task force that nature's way of controlling floods makes more economic sense.

Before I conclude, I would like to say a few words about ecosystem management.

Ecosystem management is a concept that has received an increasing amount of attention in recent years but unfortunately not an equal amount of definition or application.

In many areas, we are still stuck in our old way of doing things—looking at our natural resources with a narrow focus, managing for single species rather than the broad array of species associated with a given area, and reacting to rather than preventing crisis.

The Fish and Wildlife Service is already looking at a proposed reorganization that would divide our Northeast region into nine watersheds. That would break down institutional barriers in the Service and allow biologists from different program areas such as refuges, fisheries, endangered species, and migratory bird management to work together in relationships that mirror the ecosystems on which they will now focus. If the concept is successfully adopted, it could be a model for our other regions.

We are also taking a hard look a the refuge system in the context of the planning process for the future. As you may know, the Service released a draft environmental impact statement earlier this year that outlines various alternatives for managing the system over the next decade. This document is called "Refuges 2003" and will be released in final form sometime next year.

While no final decisions have been made and we are still evaluating public comment, I will say that it is one of my goals to make the 495 national wildlife refuges anchor points for biodiversity in this country. Refuges will be managed increasingly from an ecosystem perspective, and decisions about the future of the system will be based heavily on their effects on biodiversity.

We are also planning to expand our educational outreach as part of our overall effort to teach America about wildlife—to make that connection between the heart and the mind.

I particularly would like to see more education and outreach geared to our fast-growing urban populations, especially the children. These are

the voters of tomorrow. To ensure their support for conservation, we need to reach and teach them today.

In closing, I believe we in the conservation community face both opportunity and peril, a time of hope and a time of warning. Those of us who have dedicated our lives to conservation are on the high ground. But whether we prevail in the struggle to save our fragile environment is an unanswered question. The outcome is in the hands of the American people.

We have their hearts. Now we must go out and win their minds.