

Earliest Conservationists

The men who scanned the dismal history of wildlife destruction were the continent's first conservationists. They evolved the principle that the renewable natural resources of wildlife, forests, water and land should be protected and that their use should, in some degree, be regulated - if for no other reason, so that man might be saved from the results of his own folly. Land and water, with their plants and wildlife, were recognized by a few as resources that were not unlimited, and as elements that should be dealt with, not simply for the benefit and appetite of the current generation, but in a fashion that would preserve them also for future generations.

Unfortunately, public opinion was slow to recognize the basic importance of these principles. The doctrines of the laissez-faire economists, the desires of the promoters and industrialists of the day, and the tradition of a limitless continent and open frontier were too strong a combination. It was not until late in the last century that the people, and hence their governments, began to give even an element of acceptance to the conservation of renewable resources and, as a part of that idea, to the protection of wildlife.

Establishment of National Parks

This was given a practical demonstration in Canada by passage of the first provincial game acts and the establishment of national parks. The first such Canadian park, now Banff National Park, was established in the Rocky Mountains in 1887. The primary purpose of national parks was not to protect wildlife alone. Birds and animals were considered only as an important part of a natural heritage that should be preserved for people to enjoy and appreciate. However, in effect, national parks are preserves in which species native to those areas live a free and protected life.

Outside the national parks, wildlife, with one exception, had been considered the legislative responsibility of the provincial and territorial governments. They enact, administer and enforce the laws and regulations respecting hunting, trapping, and other activities that affect wild mammals.

The exception is the federal responsibility for migratory birds resulting from the Migratory Birds Treaty of 1916 between Canada and the United States. This Treaty recognized the value of wild birds as food and as eaters of insects harmful to agriculture, and was directed at providing more effective protection than was possible under unco-ordinated provincial and state laws or under the laws of either country alone.

The Migratory Birds Treaty listed those groups of birds that were to be protected by the two countries. Song birds, and others that helped the farmers by destroying harmful insects, were to be protected completely, and those that were game birds were safeguarded by hunting regulations revised each year.

