

A True Believer

I spent the first part of my career with the Fish and Wildlife Service as an endangered species biologist in California. I was responsible for several of California's reptiles and amphibians, some of which, like the San Francisco garter snake, are our Nation's most endangered species. There were many nights when I could not sleep. I would lay in the dark knowing that there was always more work than I could ever do and that, if I failed at my job, these unique creatures might become extinct on my watch. It was a burdensome responsibility. I have always believed that all creatures, no matter how ugly, unlikable, or small, have a reason for being on this planet. We may not always know what it is, but they each have a role to play and sometimes those roles are pivotal.

Eight years ago, I accepted a job with the Service's Environmental Contaminants program (EC). I was relieved to move on and let the next generation of young wildlife biologists take on the high-stress, high-stakes



endangered species work. What I did not expect was, in some ways, my job in the contaminants program would be even more daunting. At least in endangered species,

we were only responsible for the survival of a limited number of creatures. In contaminants, we are addressing the health and safety of every living thing.

One of the first things I did when I joined the EC program was to read *Silent Spring*. I had heard of the work and knew that it was an inspiration to many of our EC biologists, and I wanted a better understanding of their issues and motivations. I was not prepared for what I read. Her work was moving and her argument sound. It was easy to see why her work had been the catalyst for the environmental movement. She had an ability to explain such a complicated subject in a manner that could be understood by all and to impress upon the reader the need for action. After reading it, I felt I had to do something, just as

readers of the book had felt decades before, when it was first released. And now, I am doing something. I am part of the living legacy of *Silent Spring*, the EC program.

Since I joined EC, I have become a true believer in the importance of this program. In fact, there is nothing more important. It doesn't matter how many acres you protect or restore, how many species you list as endangered or threatened, or fish or wildlife you breed in captivity and release into the wild, if these creatures don't have a clean water, land, and air, there continued existence, and ours, is questionable. I don't know if I can ever leave the under-funded, under-appreciated, contaminants program. I have developed a love of its people and an understanding and respect for everything they do. I am truly proud to be in their midst and I only hope that what I do for the program and, thus, for every living thing, makes some small difference. □

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Heroes Among Us



Every organization needs heroes, those who inspire, those who lead, and those who energize. We are fortunate to have a host of true conservation heroes in

our past, people who became dirty, wet and tired working afield. Rachel Carson was one of those—she was one of us.

When thinking back on the trials and accomplishments of conservation icons like Carson, J. Clark Salyer and Aldo Leopold, I am left with a question which, for me, has great relevance. Who will be our next conservation hero?

In my mind's eye everything earlier than 1960 is sepia-toned, yet I know the threats and frustrations in motion during the '30s, '40s and '50s were just as real as the minefield we know as "conservation" today.

In an era when prairie sod succumbed to mechanized agriculture and a nation's desire to feed the world, far-sighted conservation pioneers like Salyer laid the cornerstones of wetland protection

and staked a rock-solid claim for wildlife and future generations of Americans. Similarly, Carson would, through her writings, awaken the conscience of an entire nation and forever change the way we interact with our environment.

Leopold was my guy. I realize now a borrowed copy of *A Sand County Almanac* in 1974 provided the context for the rest of my life; to be spent developing a curiosity for and an appreciation of all things wild. That I could actually fashion a career along these lines remains a source of deep satisfaction.

But I often wonder who will be the next Aldo Leopold or Rachel Carson? Is that person walking among us today? Is it someone working in the Director's corridor in Main Interior? A project leader on some remote patch of endangered habitat? A bureaucrat slashing away at processes larded with red tape?

Conservation heroes are in short supply today. I have concluded there will never be another Aldo Leopold, perhaps because his work, like Carson's, gave us the tools we sorely needed at those junctures in time and enabled us to overcome our chronic (and at times willful) ignorance of

true wildlife conservation and environmental protection. Since then, we have made much progress. But then again, perhaps our current organization, mired in a devilish battle between politics and biology, is simply incapable of producing and nurturing such heroes.

Today, I draw inspiration and encouragement from the small incremental gains we recognize as progress. A snip of red tape here, a new collaboration there—nothing really earth-shaking, but progress nonetheless. When times are really tough I'll pull out a copy of the Keystone Conference speech delivered by former Service Director and current grand old gentleman Lynn Greenwalt. Not familiar with his tenure as Director, I can judge him now only on his wry wit, obvious passion for the resource and his fervent exhortations to continue to fight the good fight with all due speed.

It was, and is, just what I needed to hear. Perhaps there are heroes walking among us still. □

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