DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

For Release MAY 5, 1957

ADDRESS BY ROSS L. LEFFLER, ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR FISH AND WILDLIFE, DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR, BEFORE THE SIERRA CLUB AT BERKELEY, CALIFORNIA, ON MAY 4, 1957

It is a privilege to meet with the group which has played such a prominent role in the preservation of one of our most important natural resources--wilderness. Wilderness is an essential element in the fabric of our national conservation effort. Wilderness is a basic resource of many component parts, each of which has contributed to development of our country and the American way of life. Wilderness, of course, means different things to different people. However, there is universal agreement that wilderness as such represents economic wealth, particularly in watershed protection, a phase of conservation which is becoming increasingly important as the population of this great country grows. And we have yet to understand the real recreational values of wilderness already set aside for public use and enjoyment. A fuller appreciation and understanding of these values will develop in the years ahead.

The United States Fish and Wildlife Service is interested in the preservation of wilderness primarily because of the opportunities represented for protection and propagation of wildlife resources. The present system of national wildlife refuges comprising more then 17,000,000 acres in the United Stated and Alaska includes many areas of a wilderness character which will be maintained as such to serve wildlife needs. The function of the refuges is, of course, the propagation and protection of wildlife, and this requires dealing with decimating forces of the environment, such as predation, starvation and disease.

It is the responsibility of management to see that a wildlife population does not decline due to an excess of such factors, or reach a saturation point where starvation and disease become dominant.

Man is one of the decimating factors which must be considered.

Present methods of travel have reduced the horizons of wilderness just as the airplane has reduced th depth of wilderness. Thus, in planning for the future, we must consider the comparative ease of access to wilderness areas and the great demands which will be made by a larger population having more leisure time at its disposal. The pressure on wildlife resources will increase proportionately. Thus, when viewed in these dimensions, there is an urgency to dedicate more lands to wildlife and other conservation needs, including the social aspect of wilderness preservation for public enjoyment.

The primary responsibility for protecting the migratory bird resource has been delegated to the Federal Government through international treaties and by congressional policy. The responsibility is being met through research, the annual waterfowl regulations and the development of a national system of refuges where ducks, geese and other migratory birds can be cared for. The present refuge system began in 1903 with the setting aside of a 15-acre island near Sebastian Inlet on

the east coast of Florida. This was for pelicans and other water birds. The refuge system developed slowly during the next 30 years principally because of a lack of funds for land acquisition. The Duck Stamp Act of 1934 provided a source of revenue, intended to foster the real growth of the refuge program. Much of the present refuge system, however, represents public lands reserved for some other primary purpose, such as flood control, irrigation or power production on which wildlife is given secondary consideration. Some public land has been reserved primarily for wildlife.

It is estimated that there should be not less than 12,000,000 acres of land in public ownership to meet the minimum requirements of migratory waterfowl. Of this amount, it is proposed that 7,000,000 acres be acquired by the Federal Government. Today, we are somewhat short of the halfway mark. Whether we achieve the goal depends upon our rate of progress in the decade ahead, as the opportunities for acquisition in critical areas are rapidly disappearing.

Meeting the needs of waterfowl and our other wildlife resources have been carefully weighed in developing a comprehensive plan of action. Throughout this program, which is now being completed, emphasis has been given to the need of setting aside wildlife monuments which will preserve representative cross sections of regional ecology important to the perpetuation of our native wildlife. The necessity of preserving wilderness areas for those species of wildlife dependent upon isolation and habitat undisturbed, except by the forces of nature, has been recognized. Thus, it is hoped to add to the present refuge system areas of wilderness significance such as Okefenokee Swamp in Georgia and portions of the Aleutian Islands in Alaska, which will play an important part in the conservation of human as well as wildlife values.

The need of an Arctic wildlife area has been stressed by the Sierra Club. The rapid settlement and development of Alaska in the post-war period is having a tremendous impact on Alaska's great fish and game resources. The forbidding Bering Sea Coast, once a natural sanctuary for the polar bear, is being invaded by airplane safaris, and the comparative security which the ice floes afford the great white bear is gone.

Our greatest concentration of primitive game and fish stocks are in Alaska. The role of wilderness preservation in safeguarding these resources now and for the future is recognized. Preliminary field studies indicate the northeast Brooks Range offers the best possibilities of providing suitable habitat for much of the Arctic wildlife, and consideration is being given to the classification of land for that purpose. The muskox, once present in the Brooks Range, could be reestablished in the proposed Arctic wildlife area from the growing herd on the Nunivak Island National Wildlife Refuge, about 25 miles off shore from the Kuskokwim Delta.

The importance of Alaska to the migratory bird resource of the Pacific Flyway is underscored by the existence of the primary nesting ground in the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta and the vital feeding and resting area at the tip of the Alaska Peninsula--Izembeck Bay.

There are, of course, many areas in the United States where the preservation of wilderness through public control would serve a multiple purpose. The offshore island and barrier beaches in great demand for resort development are a good example. The public lands on Horn Island off the coast of Mississippi are of great value for migratory birds, and are now being set aside for wildlife refuge purposes to protect this value.

The Key deer has become symbolic of a public consciousness that it would be ugly to destroy in its entirety the beauty of the forest, prairie and mangrove swamp which at one time occurred over a large acreage of the Florida Keys. The widespread interest in preserving a sample of the unique fauna and flora of this former wilderness led to the national movement to establish a refuge for the Key deer whose future depends upon setting aside a reasonable remnant of its essential habitat.

Failure to recognize the importance of wilderness to wildlife has caused extreme distress. The ivory-billed woodpecker, the California condor and the whooping crane are examples. Disregard and neglect of the whooping crane's needs has prompted a final desperate effort to perpetuate the species in captivity. We are now counting the eggs that may not hatch.

The need for more recreational space is fully recognized. This can be met in part by public ownership of the lands and waters necessary to support fish and game. We must act now to meet the demands of tomorrow. There must be a unity of purpose among the Federal agencies whose public works programs wield such great influence on the use of the land and water resources.

Much of the Federal and State effort in wildlife management is directed toward the manipulation of the habitat and environmental factors to increase the yield of game for public enjoyment and use. The art of game management, of which we have heard so much in the past quarter century, is an expression of our efforts and technical abilities to compensate in some degree for the loss of wild lands and the demand to provide reasonable opportunities for the enjoyment of wildlife resources by a rapidly expanding human population. Of course, with changes in land economy has come a realization that a well-integrated program of multiple-land use is beneficial to many species of wildlife.

Some species of our native wildlife have a narrow limit of tolerance to habitat changes and cannot survive the full impact of pressures exerted through extensive multiple-land use. The woodland caribou, the wolverine and the ivory-billed woodpecker are a few examples.

Notwithstanding progress in the development of game management techniques, maintaining the American heritage of public hunting and fishing will depend in a large measure on the action taken now to safeguard our remaining wilderness resources. As the late Aldo Leopold once pointed out, "The sportsman of the future will have to find satisfaction in enlarging himself rather than the bag limit." The opportunities for such self-enlargement will depend in part upon our following sound conservation principles in all our policies toward wilderness areas. By doing so, and by applying technical skills, we can produce an adequate annual crop of fish and game for public use and enjoyment.

x x x