

A Conservationist Manifesto¹

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1. The work of conservation is inspired by wonder, gratitude, reason, and love. We need all of these emotions and faculties to do the work well. But the first impulse is love—love for wild and settled places, for animals and plants, for people living now and those yet to come, for the creations of human hands and minds.
2. In our time, the work of conservation is also inspired by a sense of loss. We feel keenly the spreading of deserts, clear-cutting of forests, extinction of species, poisoning of air and water and soil, disruption of climate, and the consequent suffering of countless people. We recognize that Earth's ability to support life is being degraded by a burgeoning human population, extravagant consumption, and reckless technology. The most reckless technology is the machinery of war, which drains away vast amounts of labor and resources, distracts nations from the needs of their citizens, and wreaks havoc on both land and people.
3. The scale of devastation caused by human activity is unprecedented, and it is accelerating, spurred on by a global system of nation-states battling for advantage, and by an economic system addicted to growth and waste. So the work of conservation becomes ever more urgent. To carry on in the midst of so much loss, we must have faith that people working together can reverse the destructive trends. We must believe that our species is capable of imagining and achieving fundamental changes in our way of life.
4. Even while we respond to emergencies—keeping oil rigs out of wildlife refuges, saving farms from bulldozers—we must also work for the long-term healing of land, people, and culture. Conservation means not only protecting the relatively unscathed natural areas that survive, but also mending, so far as possible, what has been damaged. We can't undo all of the damage. No amount of effort or money, for example, will restore the roughly fifty percent of the world's coral reefs that are now dying or

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dead because of pollution, dynamiting, and ocean warming. But we can replant forests and prairies, reflood wetlands, clean up rivers, transform brownfields into parks, return species to their native habitats, and leave the wildest of places alone to heal themselves.

5. The cost of such restoration is so great, and the results so uncertain, that we should make every effort to prevent the damage in the first place. Although skillful work may help, all healing ultimately depends on the self-renewing powers of nature. Our task is to understand and cooperate with those powers as fully as we can.
6. Conservation should aim to preserve the integrity and diversity of natural systems, from the local watershed to the biosphere, rather than to freeze any given landscape into some ideal condition. Nature is never fixed, but in constant flow. If we try to halt that flow, we may cause more harm than good, and we are certain to waste our energies. When we speak of ecological health, we do not refer to a static condition, but to a web of dynamic relationships. We ourselves are woven into that web, every cell in our bodies, every thought in our minds.
7. Lands, rivers, and oceans are healthy when they sustain the full range of ecological processes. Healthy wild land filters its own water and builds its own soil, as in ancient forests or unplowed prairies. Agricultural land is healthy when it is gaining rather than losing fertility, and when it leaves room for other species in woodlots and hedgerows. Whether wild or cultivated, healthy lands and seas are diverse, resilient, and beautiful.
8. Healthy villages and cities are also diverse, resilient, and beautiful. No human settlement can flourish apart from a flourishing landscape, nor can a family or an individual thrive in a ruined place. Likewise, no landscape can flourish so long as the inhabitants of that place lack the basics of a decent life—safe and adequate food and water, secure shelter, access to education and medical care, protection from violence, chances for useful work, and hope for the future.
9. Concern for ecological health and concern for social justice are therefore inseparable. Anyone who pits the good of land against the good of people, as if we could choose between them, is either ignorant or deceitful.
10. Justice and compassion require us to use the Earth's bounty sparingly and to share it out equitably. For citizens in the richest nations, this will mean living more simply, satisfying our needs rather than our wants. For

citizens in the poorest nations, this will mean satisfying basic needs in ways that are least harmful to the land. For all nations, this will mean slowing the growth in human population—an effort already underway with some success—and it will mean eventually reducing our numbers until we are once more in balance with Earth's carrying capacity.

11. A concern for justice also requires us to provide for everyone, regardless of location or income or race, the opportunity for contact with healthy land. All people deserve the chance to breathe clean air and drink clean water, to meet birds and butterflies, to walk among wildflowers, to glimpse the primal world of big trees and untamed rivers, rocky shores and starry nights.
12. Justice to other species requires us to preserve habitats where our fellow creatures may dwell. Through farming, fishing, hunting, and the harvesting of trees and other plants, we already use nearly half of Earth's biological production. We have no right to claim so much, let alone more. Simple gratitude to other species for the nourishment, instruction, companionship, and inspiration they have given us should be reason enough to fight for their survival. Concern for our own survival should lead us to protect the web of life by preserving a vast and robust range of habitats, from backyard gardens and schoolyard prairies to marine sanctuaries and deep wilderness.
13. Justice to future generations requires us to pass along the beauty and bounty of Earth undiminished. Our politics, economy, and media betray an almost infantile fixation on the present moment, seeking or selling instant gratification, oblivious to history. We need to develop a culture worthy of adults, one that recognizes our actions have consequences. If we take more than we need from the riches of the planet, if we drain aquifers, squander topsoil, or fish the seas bare, we are stealing from our children. If we fill dumps with toxic waste, fill barrels with radioactive debris, spew poisons into the atmosphere and oceans, we will leave our descendants a legacy of grief. Conservation aims to avoid causing harm to our children, or their children, or to any children ever.
14. Whatever else we teach our children, we owe them an ecological education. We need to give them time outdoors, where they can meet and savor the world that humans have not made—pill bugs on a sidewalk, a swarm of tadpoles in a puddle, a tree for climbing, a sky aflame with sunset, a kiss of wind. Such contact gives promise of a lifelong joy in the presence of nature.

By the time they finish school, children who have received an ecological education know in their bones that the wellbeing of people depends on the wellbeing of Earth, from the neighborhood to the watershed to the planet.

15. Whether children or adults, we take care of what we love. Our sense of moral obligation arises from a feeling of kinship. The illusion of separation—between human and non-human, rich and poor, black and white, native and stranger—is the source of our worst behavior. The awareness of kinship is the source of our best behavior.
16. Just as all people belong to the same family, regardless of the surface differences that seem to divide us, so all living things are interrelated. We depend on the integrity and services of Earth's natural systems, from enzymes in our bellies to currents in the oceans, from bees pollinating fruit trees to ozone blocking ultraviolet light.
17. The integrity we perceive in nature is our own birthright. We swim in the one and only stream of life. By recognizing that we are part of this vast, subtle, ancient order, we may be restored to wholeness. A sense of communion with other organisms, with the energies and patterns of nature, is instinctive in children, and it is available to every adult who has ever watched a bird or a cloud. A sense of solidarity not only with all things presently alive but also with generations past and to come, may free us from the confines of the private ego.
18. Recognizing that the land is a unified whole, and that human communities are inseparable from this unity, conservationists must work across the full spectrum of habitats, from inner city to wilderness. And we must engage every segment of the population in caring for our shared home, especially those people who, by reason of poverty or the circumstances of their upbringing, have not viewed conservation as a pressing concern. In other words, conservation must be thoroughly democratic.
19. Our present economy is driven by the pursuit of private advantage. The global market sums up billions of decisions made by individuals and businesses in their own self-interest, with little regard for the common good or for ecological consequences. Therefore, we cannot expect the marketplace to protect the quality of air and water, the welfare of communities, or the survival of species, including our own.

20. As a result of the triumph of the market, the human economy is disrupting the great economy of nature. The same corporations and individuals that profit from this disruption also perpetuate it, by controlling advertising, the news and entertainment media, and much of the political system.
21. Governments and businesses promote endless growth, which is a recipe for disaster on a crowded planet. Even the slowest growth, if it continues long enough, will exhaust Earth's resources. There is no such thing as "sustainable growth." There is only sustainable *use*.
22. In order to live, we must use the Earth—but we should not use it up. For the sake of our descendants, we must learn to grow food without depleting the soil, fish without exhausting the seas, draw energy from sunlight and wind and tides. We must conserve the minerals we mine and the products we manufacture, recycling them as thoroughly as a forest recycles twigs, leaves, fur, and bone.
23. Only by caring for particular places, in every watershed, can we take care of the planet. Every place needs people who will dig in, keep watch, explore the terrain, learn the animals and plants, and take responsibility for the welfare of their home ground. No matter what the legal protections on paper, no land can be safe from harm without people committed to care for it, year after year, generation after generation. All conservation, therefore, must aim at fostering an ethic of stewardship.
24. Many of the places we care for will be public—state and national forests, wildlife refuges, wilderness areas, parks. We hold these riches in common, as citizens, and we need to defend them against those who seek to plunder our public lands for the benefit of a few. In an era obsessed with private wealth, private rights, and private property, we need to reclaim a sense of our common wealth—the realm of shared gifts, resources, and skills.
25. Our common wealth includes the basic necessities of life, such as clean water. It also includes the basic grammar of life, the evolutionary information embodied in the human genome and in the genes of other species. We should modify that genetic inheritance only with the greatest care, after public deliberation, and never merely for the sake of financial profit or scientific curiosity. We should respect the genetic integrity of other species. We should guard the human genome against tampering and commercialization. These essentials of life belong to all people, and our rights in them need to be fully and forever protected.

26. Even as we defend our public lands, we must encourage good conservation practice on private land—farms, ranches, family forests, factory grounds, city lots, yards. How well these places are cared for will depend on the owners' vision and skill. While conservationists respect private property, we never forget that such property derives its protection from a framework of law, and derives its market value largely from what surrounds it. The public therefore has a legitimate interest in the condition and treatment of *all* land, including that held in private hands.
27. In the long term, we cannot protect land, either public or private, without reducing the demands we make on the earth. This means examining every aspect of our lives, from our houses and malls to the cars we drive and the food we eat, from our forms of entertainment to our fundamental values, considering in every domain how we might be more thrifty and responsible.
28. While changes in our private lives are essential, they are not sufficient. We must also insure that businesses, universities, foundations, and other institutions practice good stewardship and that governments protect the interests not merely of wealthy elites but of all people, indeed of all creatures. And we must resist the cult of violence that turns homes, workplaces, cities, and entire countries into battlefields. We must therefore engage in politics, supporting candidates and policies that are favorable to conservation and social justice and peace, opposing those that are indifferent or hostile to such causes, making our voices heard in the legislature and the marketplace.
29. If we are to succeed in reversing the current devastation, the attitudes and practices of conservation must become second nature to us, like comforting a hurt child, like planting seeds in the spring. So the aim of conservation must be more than protecting certain parcels of land, vital as that work is. The aim must be to create a culture informed by ecological understanding and compassion at all levels of society—in the minds and practices of individuals, in households, neighborhoods, factories, schools, urban planning offices, architectural and engineering firms, corporate board rooms, courthouses, legislatures, and the media.
30. In seeking a way of life that is durable, we have much to learn from those indigenous peoples who have lived in place for many generations without degrading their home. When such people are uprooted by enslavement, economic hardships, or war, they are torn away from the ground where

their stories make sense. We must help them stay on their native ground, help them preserve their languages and skills, for their experience can enrich our common fund of knowledge about living wisely on Earth.

31. We cannot all be native to the places where we live, yet we can all aspire to become true inhabitants. Becoming an inhabitant means paying close attention to one's home ground, learning its ways and its needs, and taking responsibility for its welfare.
32. Conservationists also have much to learn from people who still draw sustenance from the land—hunting, fishing, farming, ranching, gardening, logging. The most thoughtful of these people use the land respectfully, for they understand that Earth is the ultimate source of wealth.
33. If we are to foster a culture of conservation, we will need to draw on the wisdom and moral passion of religious communities. Until the past half-century, no religious tradition has had to confront the prospect of global devastation brought on by human actions, yet every tradition offers us guidance in honoring Creation. The world's religions call us away from a life of frenzied motion and consumption, teaching us to seek spiritual rather than material riches. They remind us to live with gratitude, respect, affection, and restraint.
34. If we are to foster a culture of conservation, we will also need to draw on the full spectrum of science, from astronomy to zoology. We need to know everything science can teach us about how natural systems function, and how damaged systems may be restored. We need to emulate scientists in working cooperatively across nationalities and generations, in adding to the common store of knowledge, in seeking the truth and speaking clearly.
35. Scientists, in turn, need to be guided in their research not merely by what is financially or professionally rewarding, but by what is ecologically and ethically sound—refraining, for example, from research that would turn our genetic inheritance into private property. Whether scientists or not, we should all be concerned with how science is conducted and how technology is applied, for we must all live with the results.
36. While there is much in the work of conservation that we can count—acres saved, whooping cranes hatched, oaks planted—there is much that cannot be measured in numbers. To convey the full impact of conservation, we need to tell stories, make photographs and paintings, share dances and songs. We need to listen to the people whose lives have been enlarged by

a community garden, by the glimpse of sandhill cranes flying overhead, by the spectacle of salmon returning to spawn in a free-flowing stream.

37. Every conservation project tells a story about our values, about our reasons for conserving land or buildings or skills. We should convey these stories as eloquently as we know how, in words and pictures, in ceremony and song. We draw strength from tales of good work already carried out, from the prospects for restoring landscapes and communities, from the human capacity for taking care, and from the healing energies in the universe.
38. Our largest stories are those of cosmology. Whatever tales we tell about the origin and flow of the universe, and about our place in the scheme of things, will shape our sense of how we should behave. If we imagine ourselves to be participants in a grand evolutionary story, recipients and bearers of cosmic gifts, we are more likely to feel the courage, reverence, and delight necessary for doing good work in conservation over the long haul.
39. Although conservation requires a long-term commitment and a large-scale vision, the work itself is local and intimate, rooting us in our own place, awakening us to our own time, moment by moment. It is joyful work, however hard it may be. In the face of loss, it is brave and hopeful work.
40. Conservation arises from the perennial human desire to dwell in harmony with our neighbors—those that creep and fly, those that swim and soar, those that sway on roots, as well as those that walk about on two legs. We seek to make a good and lasting home. We strive for a way of life that our descendants will look back on with gratitude, a way of life that is worthy of our magnificent planet.