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BOOK REVIEWS

THE FALLACY OF WILDLIFE CONSERVATION

By JOHN A. LIVINGSTON

Toronto: McClelland and Stewart. 1981. Pp. 117. \$14.95.

John Livingston's impassioned *The Fallacy of Wildlife Conservation* stands in relation to the cool and lucid analysis of philosopher John Passmore's *Man's Responsibility for Nature*, in roughly the same manner in which John Ruskin's *Unto This Last* (1862) stands to T. H. Huxley's *Man's Place In Nature*. Huxley and Passmore impress us by means of an appeal to our common sense, while Ruskin and Livingston scream at us that we are all in a state of intellectual and moral default. To decide which of these approaches is the more effective depends largely upon one's view of the end of literature: is it a call to action, or a disinterested investigation of the truth of things? Often, it is both. The relative success of an author may well hinge upon how firmly he keeps a foot on each of these tightropes. Mr. Livingston has written a book which attempts to incorporate the two polarities, but the reader will not always find it easy going. This can be attributed, in large measure, to the author being much more at home as a naturalist than as an historian of ideas.

Livingston is a man of considerable talent as a naturalist, a writer, and a producer for the media, but there are large areas of this book in which he fails to convince. Often what is asserted about general patterns of recent or ancient history, man-nature relationships, and the modern environment are no more than assertions, although they are treated almost at the level of self-evident fact. For example: Livingston seems to feel that there is something inherent in western civilization, largely theologically based or expressed, which has impelled modern man on a continuing course towards the domination of nature. It has become a familiar theme. There are many instances in the book however, where he seems to be pointing at a fundamental human flaw. Certainly many of his examples do not admit of any easy east-west or north-south splits in the history of the domination of nature. Suffice to say that the literature of debate on this topic is vast, controversial, and ongoing. These excursions into intellectual history seem to bring out the Ruskinian side of the author. A severe editing of the highly personal judgments, assertions, and asides would assist greatly in allowing the reader to focus on the precise arguments being made.

These are distracting features in a book which nevertheless deserves to be read, for it has a coherent viewpoint. The author's thesis is that the standard arguments for wildlife conservation and the practices which they spawn have largely failed. They have failed at the political

level because the same arguments were never perceived as being very convincing at the personal level, i.e. in the minds of those who first posited them as arguments. These all have at their core a highly utilitarian and man-centered viewpoint, rather than a wildlife-for-its-own-sake view. Livingston has covered the various kinds of arguments well, but it is not so clear that all of these traditional conservation positions are so utilitarian and man-centered as he would have us believe. But this, after all, is the point of his book.

In suggesting that all arguments of a logical, utilitarian, practical, long-term humanitarian, or scientifically-justifiable nature, are really something other than a satisfactory ground for a wildlife conservation rationale, Livingston has tossed out a rather large gauntlet. His position is that these arguments have not done the job, and that individual human beings need to readjust their own vision of their own place in nature and in particular, their relations with wildlife. The author has a suggestion. Livingston employs the term *compliance* to describe a fundamental quality inherent in the living world. Modern man utilizes it in his day to day relations with his fellow man, but is grossly lax in extending any kind of cooperative ethic to the non-human world. A shift in viewpoint would do much for the cause of wildlife conservation.

Illustrating his position are passages taken from personal reminiscence and these are often quite the best passages in the book, worthy of comparison with some of the writings of the late Loren Eisely. Here it is the naturalist speaking, telling us what he has seen and knows.

This is a deceptive book, and its title is possibly wrong, for it seems to promise more than is delivered. It will not be so evident to many readers that wildlife conservation, as practiced, has been fallacious. It may be that Mr. Livingston has merely argued, eloquently at times, for the incorporation of one more plank in the platform of conservation. Livingston may not be so far removed from certain traditions of the west as he thinks. St. Francis of Assisi would have read this book and approved.

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