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The Southwestern Conservation League

By C. M. BOTTS

THE purpose of this article will be to deal with the actual operation of the Southwestern Conservation League. Recently, Dr. J. D. Clark, secretary-treasurer of the League and one of its charter members, published a bulletin* dealing with the history, structure and essential objects of the organization. I do not wish to repeat information so adequately given by Dr. Clark. I shall assume, then, that the reader is either familiar with such facts about the League, or, if interested, can easily become so.

It is well to keep in mind that the objective of the organization, as stated in its constitution, "is to protect, preserve, restore and wisely utilize all those natural resources of the arid Southwest (particularly western Texas, New Mexico and Arizona), which do now and, if properly conserved, will in the future, make the Southwest a more desirable place in which to live, enjoy life and gain a livelihood." It is not expected that this end can be "gained at a single bound," nor do the members or officers of the League claim to have a panacea to cure the wounds, sores and diseases which Southwestern mankind has inflicted upon a long-suffering, patient Nature. We realize that we know very little, and that, to accomplish anything worth while, we must first understand our problem. We must get facts and more facts, and yet more facts.

From the data already available, it seems reasonable to conclude that the subject of conservation must be dealt with as a whole, rather than as a number of unrelated problems as has been largely the practice in the past. In fact this conclusion seems so elementary and inevitable that we wonder why we did not appreciate its soundness at the very beginning.

* University of New Mexico Bulletin, Conservation Series, vol. 1, no. 1, December 1, 1933.

To illustrate: Sportsmen have long been interested in the conservation of game. They have dealt with the problem largely as one wholly separate and apart from that of conserving other natural resources. The methods employed were at first chiefly of a prohibitory nature. Thus they advocated prohibiting hunting except in certain short, and then shorter, seasons. Later bag limits were imposed. The "prohibition" of predators was attempted. That not sufficing, affirmative measures were undertaken, such as artificial propagation for later release. These were all very well in their way, but however much shooting was prohibited, however meager the bag limit, however many predatory animals and birds were destroyed, and however much game was released, neither it nor the game normally present could survive unless there was food and cover. So sportsmen are coming to realize that, in order to conserve game, the habitat of the game must be conserved. But, while the necessary food and cover in most cases is vegetation in one form or another, that vegetation is dependent on the soil. So, in order to conserve this essential food and cover, conservation of the soil must be undertaken. Thus any program for the conservation of game must embrace conservation of soil and of plants. In short, any animal life conservation is dependent on vegetable and mineral conservation. The interrelationship of all things natural is so great that probably no one yet appreciates its full importance.

With this in mind, and having in mind also that groups and individuals directly affected must have valuable data and opinions, the League called a conference of representatives of various groups to consider its first major program—to devise and recommend such a plan of administering the public lands in the Southwest as will encourage their conservative and normal use.

To one who has given no consideration to the subject it may appear that the program selected could be of no

general interest; but a little thought makes it almost impossible to think of an individual in the Southwest who is not vitally interested, unconscious of his interest though he may be. Conservation of the public lands is a long step toward watershed conservation. The interest of the stockman is, of course, apparent. The hunter's interest is no less immediate, since the program necessarily must produce game food and cover. The fisherman has as great an interest, though he may not realize it until he finds his favorite stream ruined by silt washed down from denuded slopes. The farmer's irrigation reservoirs and ditches suffer in the same way, and will be benefitted by any program which will hold the soil where it belongs. The general public, though it may have none of these special interests, is in constant danger from floods unless the hillsides bear sufficient vegetation to hold back the rainfall until it can be absorbed by the soil. And so we might continue at length.

But to get back to our conference: It was attended by representative stockmen, sportsmen, and educators, appointed by their respective organizations. The only organization invited to participate in the conference that failed to send representatives was the Federation of Women's Clubs. In addition to the representatives of voluntary organizations, the conference was participated in by the New Mexico Commissioner of Public Lands, members of the faculty of the University of New Mexico, the President of the New Mexico Agricultural College, representatives from the United States Forest Service, the United States Biological Survey and by a special representative of the Secretary of the Interior.

This gave us a conference of various interests, viewpoints and opinions. The committee of the League undertook to act as a sort of co-ordinator of these divergent ideas, and the experience was most satisfactory, encouraging, and, I hope, indicative of results which we may expect to accomplish in the future. The group was sufficiently small

to enable us to get round the table, discuss our problems informally and speak our minds freely. It was apparent immediately that everyone there was in dead earnest. The spirit of co-operation was all that could be desired. The participants were well informed, and each was willing to look at the subject from the viewpoint of another. Though the interests were different, it was usually found that the end sought was the same. In my opinion, based very largely on the experience of this conference, more can be accomplished in this way and by one such meeting, than by most any large number of mass meetings of more or less uninformed people, listening to learned papers and less learned discussion. What the cause of conservation now most needs, after the accumulation of reliable data, is a co-ordination of the efforts of the various interests, and this the League appears to be in a position to provide.

The conference had no difficulty in reaching an agreement on the first essential step to be taken in working out the League's program. The conference dissolved with the best of feeling on the part of all participants, and with their assertion and assurance that the League has before it a wonderful opportunity for accomplishment. Great encouragement has come from the Secretary of the Interior and from his special representative at the conference.

This brings the high points in the operation of the League down to date. Interest is growing and new members are being added, though no membership drive has yet been put on. This, however, should not be taken as an indication that our organization will not welcome, as members, all who are interested in the great cause of conservation.

Let me conclude by quoting a paragraph from the Conservation Bulletin referred to earlier. The author of these remarks is Dean B. P. Fleming of the Engineering College, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts.

“Along the Rio Grande are native settlements, back of which on the neighboring mesa, old timers tell us they used to cut hay. These areas now afford only the meagre pasturage for the goats of these native settlements; and, some of these settlements themselves have been partially overwhelmed by arroyos, which it stands to reason were not active when the settlement was founded. No native New Mexican ever builds a house in the path of an arroyo . . . Until . . . the public generally comes to a full realization of the menace which erosion holds for the future of the Southwest it is not likely that much may be done. It is becoming more and more evident . . . that a permanent civilization in the river valleys of the Southwest must be founded upon control of the desert, just as methodically as we have attempted to control the torrential rivers. The sooner this is realized, the sooner will the Southwest have achieved a successful reclamation policy.”