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Giving Voice to the Wild The Rhetorical Legacy of Sigurd Olson and *The Singing Wilderness*

Brant Short

Introduction

Social movements have many rhetorical requirements, including the need for advocates who can articulate a vision that defines the movement's ideology, charts a course of action, and inspires the faithful to continue their commitment to the cause. Sometimes these visions emerge in the form of speeches ("I Have a Dream"), manifestos (The Port Huron Statement), books (*The Feminist Mystique*), or even novels (*Uncle Tom's Cabin*). In the contemporary American environmental movement many notable advocates have advanced the cause of environmentalism, including Aldo Leopold, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, Terry Tempest Williams, and Annie Dillard. While these individuals certainly contributed to the environmentalist vision, few also became recognized movement leaders, assuming national standing as organizational representatives. Social movements, by their very nature as "uninstitutionalized collectivities," require eloquent and pragmatic advocates. "The survival and effectiveness of any movement," contend Herbert Simons and Elizabeth Mechling, "are dependent upon adherence to its program, loyalty to its leadership, a collective willingness and capacity to work, energy mobilization, and member satisfaction" (1981, p. 422). As a result, understanding the environmental movement as a political and cultural requires discussion of the movement's rhetorical leadership.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the decades in which conservation was transformed into environmentalism, one person combined the roles of movement visionary and national leader. Sigurd Olson served as one of the nation's leading public advocates for preservation of America's wild lands and wild creatures in these important decades. He wrote best-selling books promoting environmental values for a public audience often ignorant and/or indifferent to the conservation movement and its specific goals. He gave speeches to many groups, offered legislative testimony to a variety of powerful audiences and worked closely with political leaders including Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. He served as a national leader for several major conservation groups and received honors from other groups for his leadership and advocacy. Olson gave a voice to the wild that paved the way for other advocates, for landmark legislation, and ultimately in helping the environmental crusade move into the mainstream of American public life. While many individuals shaped the popular environmental movement in the United States, Olson played a pivotal role in helping Americans reconsider their view of wilderness, nature, and humanity through his numerous essays, books, and speeches. In this study I will examine Olson's first and most notable work, *The Singing Wilderness*, published in 1956. This book became a standard

work of the period, it established Olson as a national leader among American conservationists, and most significantly, it served as a rhetorical blueprint for others who were greatly inspired by Olson's personal quest to understand the natural world on its own terms.

In this essay, I will describe Olson's status among scholars and provide a biographical overview of significant events in his life. Next I will analyze *The Singing Wilderness* as a rhetorical text which established Olson's reputations among American conservationists. Finally I will discuss Olson's contributions to the emerging environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s. I believe that Sigurd Olson is a major prophet of the environmentalist crusade and that *The Singing Wilderness* must be remembered by scholars who seek a complete rhetorical history of the American environmental movement.

Sigurd Olson's Life and Legacy

Scholars from many disciplines agree that Olson was a major figure in the emerging environmental movement. Philosopher J. Baird Callicott concluded that Olson, along with Bob Marshall, were the "wilderness-movement giants in the first half of the twentieth century" (2000, p. 27). Historian Roderick Nash labeled Olson as one of the "new leaders" of the conservation movement after John Muir's death, listing Olson, Aldo Leopold, Robert Marshall, Howard Zahniser and David Brower as the movement's next generation of leaders (1982, p. 200). Noting the "considerable popularity" of Olson's books, Nash concluded that Olson's work "helped create a climate of opinion in which Secretary of Agriculture Orville L. Freeman could issue a directive to National Forest offices on January 12, 1965, giving unprecedented protection to its wilderness qualities" (1982, p. 209). In a critique of pressures to commercialize the national park experience in the United States, environmental journalist Michael Frome praised Olson's leadership in opposing snowmobiling in national parks, calling him a "master outdoorsman and inspirational writer about the north woods" (1992, p. 199). In his historical account of the American environmental movement, Philip Shabecoff pointed to the Wilderness Society of the 1950s and 1960s and its "core of talented, inspired and now storied conservationists," which included Olson, Zahniser, Olaus Murie, and several others, as major leaders in the effort to pass the Wilderness Act (1992, p. 88). Historian Mark Harvey cites Olson's leadership in the Wilderness Society as vital when some members urged Howard Zahniser to abandon pursuit of legislation creating a national wilderness system (2005, pp. 214-215). In a literary criticism of Olson's various books, Sanford Marovitz wrote that Olson had earned a reputation as "one of the most dedicated outdoorsmen, outspoken environmentalists, and prolific nature writers of this century" (1992, p. 107). Finally, Interior Secretary Udall, in his popular historical account of American conservation, *The Quiet Crisis*, concluded that the Wilderness Act of 1964 received approval with the hard work of Wilderness Society Executive Howard Zahniser and "Sigurd Olson, whose pro-wilderness books and essays served as background music for a steady flow of articles How-

ard composed to bring the wilderness gospel into the mainstream of American thought” (1988, p. 218).

After his death in 1982, Olson’s stature seemed to dim, losing appeal as others took up the cause for wilderness preservation. Several of his books went out of print and few environmentalists quoted him in their own speeches, essays and books. At the end of the twentieth century, however, a renewed interest in Olson emerged. As Olson’s 100th birthday neared in 1999, a biography of his life was published, all of his books were reprinted in a new series with widespread accessibility, and articles praising his life appeared in selected publications. For example, ecologist Ted Gostomski, wrote that Olson was recognized as a “voice of nature” to many people during his life. “His work is as important today as it was during his lifetime,” concluded Gostomski (1999, n.p.). In a review of Olson’s environmental leadership, the President of the National Wildlife Federation, Mark Van Putten, called Olson “one of the past century’s greatest conservationists. His writings and the example of his life will continue to inspire and guide this century’s conservation leaders” (quoted in Darland, 2000, n. p.).

Born in Chicago, Olson moved to rural Wisconsin as youth, and spent his early days in small towns throughout the state. His father was a minister in the Swedish American Baptist church and the family moved often. As a child Olson spent a lot time alone in the woods exploring and developing a passion for wilderness. “The Song of the North still fills me with the same gladness as when I first heard it,” wrote Olson in his autobiography. “I seemed drawn in its general direction as naturally as migrating bird is by unseen lines of force, or a salmon by some invisible power toward the stream where it was spawned. Within me was a constant longing, and when I listened to this song, I understood” (Olson, 1969, p. 61). Olson’s father was a stern figure who told his two sons that there were only three appropriate choices for a career, “the ministry, teaching or farming, and all others were unessential.” His father believed that his sons had to find a life “dedicated to the welfare of mankind or tilling the soil, never in mundane pursuits having to do with material things” (Olson, 1969, p. 63). Olson knew teaching was the only choice of the three that fit his values and dreams.

Olson attended Northland College and later transferred to the University of Wisconsin where he received his bachelor's degree. He taught high school biology and geology in northern Minnesota and later attended University of Illinois where he earned master's degree in ecology, writing his thesis on timber wolves and coyotes. His promise as a researcher was so great that Aldo Leopold recruited him to the doctoral program in ecology at the University of Wisconsin. Confronted with great personal dilemma of whether to pursue a scholarly life or begin teaching, Olson was clearly torn, accepting Leopold’s offer and then withdrawing at the last minute He became a junior college teacher and later dean in Ely, Minnesota, where he stayed until 1947 when he resigned to write and work in conservation organizations.

Olson wanted to write about nature, but not from a scholarly vantage. He had been writing since his early 20s, but had years of limited success. He did not like writing adventure essays (even though he published a number of newspaper columns on hunting and fishing trips) and was a flop at fiction. Besides writing

and teaching, he also was an outdoor guide in the 1920s and 1930s, supplementing his teaching salary by summer guiding into the Boundary Waters area of Minnesota and Canada. In the late 1940s and early 1950s he assumed leadership positions in the Izzak Walton League and the National Parks Association and in the 1960s he became President of the Wilderness Society. An active lobbyist and tireless public speaker on behalf of wilderness, Olson served as President of the National Parks Association "during three landmark events in conservation history" (Backes, 1997, p. 259). First, he was instrumental in the conservation movement's effort to save Dinosaur National Monument in 1956. Second, he helped conservation groups lobby for a massive funding increase for the National Park Service in the Mission 66 program. Third, he was a leader in promoting federal legislation to create a national wilderness preservation system, resulting in the Wilderness Act of 1964. In addition to these efforts, at the age of 74, he chaired a national commission to develop a master plan for Yellowstone National Park.

In 1956, after years of writing with limited success, Olson published his first book, *The Singing Wilderness*, a series of essays about his interaction with nature. He discussed his book idea with Howard Zahniser, executive secretary of the Wilderness Society, who was enthusiastic about the project and recommended that Olson contact Rachel Carson's literary agent, Marie Rodell. Olson wrote to Rodell, who agreed to represent Olson and sold several of the essays to popular magazines such as *Sports Illustrated*. The book was submitted to at least three publishers, finally receiving a contract from Alfred Knopf. It was a best-seller, making the *New York Times* best-seller list and ultimately selling over 70,000 copies. Backes describes the positive response the book generated (1997, pp. 254-258) and concludes that the book's message "cemented the Wilderness Society's decision to add Olson to its governing council in 1956" (1997, p. 255). The book's publication culminated Olson's quest to find an appropriate audience for his description of wilderness and nature. His biographer writes:

For thirty years Sigurd Olson had been obsessed with writing, had felt it was his ordained mission in life, that success was his destiny. The odds often had seemed insurmountable: the kind of writing he was best at and loved most editors said had not market. . . . Somehow, despite the many rejections, despite the self-torture—despite the genuinely long odds of succeeding as a writer of essays—he had held fast to his dream, and had triumphed. (Backes, 1997, pp. 257-258)

Olson's book was not an overt work of advocacy. It did not promote any specific legislation, it was not historically situated in its content, and it rarely moved beyond Olson's personal experiences in the wild. Its autobiographical nature, however, marked Olson's belief that his personal stories could indeed change the world, albeit one reader at a time. Fans included Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas who hiked the paths near the Potomac River with Olson to publicize threats to American rivers (Graham, 1980, p. 65) and Interior Secre-

tary Udall who called Olson, “One of the most inspired, and inspiring of America’s conservation leaders” (Huyck, 1965, 46).

Leaders have varied and specific duties in promoting their movement’s agenda, including the following three roles: organizers, decision-makers and symbols (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 2007, pp. 114–119). Olson performed all three roles in the 1950s and 1960s as a leader in both the Wilderness Society and the National Parks and Conservation Association. But to emerge as a movement leader and gain legitimacy across various movement organizations, an individual must possess at least two of the following three rhetorical attributes: charisma, prophecy, and pragmatism (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 2007, pp.119-125). As such, classical models of rhetoric, which focus upon argument, evidence and rational discourse, fail to explain fully the process in which a movement leader emerges, gains legitimacy and ultimately shapes the movement’s rhetorical and political goals. An alternative means of understanding the emergence of social movement leaders, which allows scholars to assess the function of charisma, prophecy and pragmatism, demands a theory that allows the critic to assess the rhetorical qualities of personal narratives and autobiography, a staple of environmental discourse.

The Rhetorical Message of *The Singing Wilderness*

Michael Osborn contends contemporary rhetoric “seems dominated by strategic pictures, verbal or nonverbal visualizations that linger in the collective memory of audiences as representative of their subjects when rhetoric has been successful” (1986, p. 79). Using this observation as a challenge to conventional scholarship, Osborn offers a new vantage to examine discourse, a theory he calls rhetorical depiction. Rhetorical depiction does not “arise from any single technique or moment in discourse,” writes Osborn. Instead depiction is controlled by the “cumulative impact” of a series of messages. Depiction might gain its currency by contrasting “visual or sensual opposites” or it might emerge from a “radical metaphor” that visualizes a “remarkable tenor-vehicle relationship.” Indeed, Osborn believes that rhetorical depiction may “be considered a master-term of modern rhetoric—a significant, recurring form of address” (1986, p. 80). In discussing the rhetorical dimensions of depiction, Osborn identifies five functions that depiction may serve in public communication.

I believe evaluating the rhetorical qualities of *The Singing Wilderness* can better be examined from Osborn’s model of depiction rather than using a classical model of discourse. Although Olson clearly hoped to inspire, motivate, and even persuade his readers, his style is personal, not public, emotional, not logical, and timeless, not situated. Indeed Olson claimed that he wrote the book to help others learn how to understand the wilderness. When his agent expressed concern that the book was too lyrical and needed more wilderness adventures to attract readers, Olson objected, claiming that there were already many outdoor adventure books on the market. “It was not my wish to do another,” he wrote to Rodell. “The value of my book as I see it in my interpretation of the wilderness, its meaning, and my reactions to it. . . . You may not agree with me at all but I feel very strongly about this” (quoted in Backes, 1997, p. 242).

Olson's approach, using short, descriptive essays that detail simple wilderness experiences, at first glance appears to center upon Olson and his life in the North Woods. Only by a reading the complete text does one sense a larger and more vital message than autobiography. Rhetorical depiction offers an appropriate means of understanding the immediate and lasting rhetorical qualities of *The Singing Wilderness* and in turn helps explain Olson's legacy as a voice of inspiration for readers attracted to the nascent environmental crusade.

The first and (according to Osborn) the most important function of depiction is **presentation**. Osborn identifies two kinds of rhetorical presentations. The first, repetitive, utilizes symbolic representations already shared by a given group. These symbols may be called icons, god or devil terms, ideographs, or cultural archetypes. The power of such symbols is that they have been so embedded in a culture that they are typically accepted without questioning their persuasive qualities. On the other hand, innovative presentations provide new perspectives by finding tensions and incongruities within established cultural symbols. A powerful example of rhetorical presentation is found in Olson's essay, "Easter on the Prairie." It fulfills the functions of both the repetitive and innovative symbols to convey Olson's larger message of how humans should define and commune with nature.

The essay begins with Olson emerging from the "rocks and forests of the still-frozen north to the prairies of the west" (1956, p. 60). Olson described the sensations he felt as he moved from forest to prairie. He thought of the first settlers of North America and how they must have felt moving from the great forests to the prairies. He listened to meadow larks and their "unbroken symphony of sound." This sound, Olson continued, "was the theme song of the prairie, this the song when the herds of buffalo ranged the west, when the Indians rode them down from the horizons" (1956, p. 61). He continued by describing the beautiful sounds of other birds, the mourning doves and the kinglets. Moving to a beautiful lake, Olson saw a flock of herring gulls in flight and then a pair of mallards emerged from their nest. After nine paragraphs of repetitive presentation, describing in intimate detail the wonders of wildlife and nature, Olson turned to the theme of the essay: "A church bell ringing from the crossroads at the other end of the field, and then I remembered it was Easter morning" (1956, p. 62).

At this point the essay changes direction, moving away from a person immersed in nature to a person drawn from the secular to the sacred. Seeing the "white church" in the distance, Olson "looked down at my wet and muddy boots, at my worn jacket. Perhaps they would not mind" (1956, p. 62). At this point the essay becomes an innovative presentation. Looking at the parishioners dressed in their finest, Olson recalled, "I felt out of place in my outdoor clothes. Like the kinglets, I was a stranger, a migrant going through" (1956, p. 63). As he entered the church, Olson was struck by the "cleanest, most scrubbed little church I had ever seen." Indeed, he found the interior of the church as "lovely as the pool with the gulls, the mallards, and the sandpipers, the lushness of the fields. Here was no musty unused building, open once a week or a month. This was part of the out-of-doors" (1956, p. 63). Olson identified a powerful juxtapo-

sition that allowed himself to experience two worlds simultaneously: the natural world dear to his heart and the spiritual world constructed and shared by humans:

The little groups were quiet now—no whispering or frivolity in the house of God. Then through the open windows I heard again the chorus of larks and from some where near by the deep, liquid undertones of the mourning doves. There was a breeze and the smell of a thousand miles of prairie came through the windows, fused with the sweetness of the lilies, the sharp pungence of the geraniums. (1956, p. 63)

And then Olson experienced a fusion between the “somber melody of an ancient hymn” and the music of the meadow larks and the mourning doves. The minister’s words “rolled on and on, and then I heard the larks once more and know that what he said reflected somehow the beauty and the peace of Easter on the prairie.” As the service ended and the congregation moved to leave, Olson witnessed the dual meaning of Easter that gives his readers a powerful rhetorical presentation:

This morning it was the real prairie as it had been a hundred, a thousand years ago, the prairie of the wagon trains, virgin, lush, and beautiful. This morning it was Easter with the promise of resurrection and hope. (1956, p. 65)

In this essay, rhetorical depiction works by merging a spiritual experience in the wilderness (innovative presentation) with a constructed spiritual experience with other people (repetitive presentation). The meaning is clear for Olson’s readers. One may bring a lifetime of theory, philosophy, ideology and theology to the wilderness, but only when a person experiences these presentations together will a complete understanding of the need for wilderness will emerge.

A second function of rhetorical depiction is **intensification** of feeling. Osborn believes that depictions are “lenses that can color what we see and make our reactions smolder.” By giving form to a subject, depiction allows the audience to transfer feeling to the subject of the discourse. Most importantly, depiction can intensify feeling by “reducing vast numbers of a subject to a few synecdochal instances” (1986, 86). In many ways every essay in *The Singing Wilderness* intensifies feelings by discussing simple topics that become representative of a larger and deeper rhetorical message. Olson’s essay entitled “Campfires” illustrates the rhetorical power of intensification. He opens by claiming that a campfire transforms those who experience it in the wild. “Strange stirrings take place within him, and a light comes into his eyes which was not there before” (1956, p. 106). A campfire takes humans back to their ancient past, when fire provided safety, shelter, and warmth, but it also helps us see the future as well: “Around a fire men feel that the whole world is their campsite and all men partners of the trail.”

Olson's imagery fosters intensification around the simple act of building a campfire while in the wilderness. He observed that the building of the fire has "ritualistic significance" in which every act of preparation is "vital and satisfying to civilized man." The campfire is the climax to the adventures of each day in the wilderness and is "as important to a complete experience as the final curtain to a play." Olson described in intimate detail the importance of finding the right spot for the fire, of everyone pitching in to find kindling and wood. He wrote:

As the fire burns, see how it is tended and groomed and fondled, how little chips are added as they fall away from the larger sticks, how every man polices the fringe before him, and treat the blaze as the living thing it is. (1956, p. 108)

For Olson, each campfire he saw reminded him of all his previous experiences in the wilderness. "My campfires," he observed, "seem like glowing beads in a long chain of experience." As he watched the fire begin and then burst into flame, he recaptured "the scenes themselves, pick them out of the almost forgotten limbo of the past and make them live on." After recalling several memorable campfires from his past, Olson concluded the essay by returning to the powerful emotion of human friendship symbolized in the fire:

There have been countless campfires, each one different, but some so blended into their backgrounds that it is hard for them to emerge. But I have found that when I catch even a glimmer of their almost forgotten light in the eyes of some friend who has shared them with me, they begin to flame once more. Those old fires have strange and wonderful powers. Even their memories make life the adventure it was meant to be. (1956, p.111)

The third function of rhetorical depiction is **identification**, the ability of images to create a "sense of closeness or oneness that can develop among those who participate in social communication." Osborn believes the very act of sharing symbols "must be a profoundly satisfying experience, a terminal as well as instrumental function of depiction" (1956, p. 89). I believe that two essays in *The Singing Wilderness* promote a strong sense of identification between Olson and his reader. Both deal with Olson's relationships with other people and the invaluable lessons that he learned about nature, love and memory.

In the first essay, "Grandmother's Trout," Olson recalled one of his first experiences as a boy fishing for brook trout. Although Olson's grandmother "had never been trout fishing in her life," she treated his outdoor adventures as the most important part of his early life. "She shared every joy that was mine, and I loved her for it as only a small boy can who has found perfect companionship," recalled Olson. "From her, I know, I inherited my feeling and love for the wild places of this earth" (1956, p.67). In the rest of the essay Olson detailed the experience of going to the woods by himself and the difficulties encountered as he fishes. Although he lost the "big one" in the creek, he had seven small trout to

take home to his grandmother. The boy ran home shouting for his grandmother to look in his creel. She admired the catch and helped him take the fish and lay on a white platter. In this essay the boy tells his adventure and his grandmother listens. Olson recalled:

She clucks in wonderment and shakes her head in sheer admiration, goes over the entire stream with me pool by pool, rapids by rapids, listens to the birds, sees the flowers, hears the running of the water. How excited she is when I tell her of the big one underneath the stump, and how she suffers with me from the loss!

Olson cleaned the fish outside in a pump and his grandmother prepared her frying pan for dinner. Then under the light of a kitchen lamp, “we sit down to a feast of trout and milk and fresh bread, an eighty year-old lady and a boy of twelve, and talk of robins and spring and the eternal joy of fishing” (1956, p. 72).

Another essay, “Birthday on the Manitou,” also exemplifies Olson’s use of rhetorical identification. In this essay, Olson described going to a favorite fishing spot and suddenly realizing that he is not alone. Acknowledging his selfishness, Olson felt that his private place had been intruded upon. Because of the difficult journey to find this special spot, Olson thought of it as his own: “It was not mine any more than anyone else’s, but I had always felt a certain ownership there based on the fact that I had earned the right to enjoy it” (1956, p. 48). When he finally discovered the intruder, Olson noticed he was a small, spare man. “His legs were braced and he made each cast as if afraid the force of it might throw him off balance. He was old, I could see that, far too old to be fighting the fast treacherous waters and slippery boulders of the Manitou.” Watching the man, Olson’s resentment faded, “I knew that, whatever the reason for his coming in, it must have been very important.” Finally Olson engaged the elderly angler in conversation. The man announced that today was his birthday. “Eighty years old, and this little trip is a sort of celebration. Used to make it every year in the old days, but now it’s been a long time since I came in” (1956, p. 50). The man continued, “Had to see the old river once more, take a crack at the old pool.” As Olson talked of his fishing experiences, he noticed the old man drifting away in memory:

His face was alight wiTh his memories, and his blue eyes looked past me down the river, took in the pool, the riffles below, and a whole series of little pools for a mile downstream. I followed his gaze and for a moment it seemed as though I had never seen the Manitou before. . . . Then while I watched, the vision seemed to fade and I saw again the poplar-covered banks, the bright sunlight on the water, and the old man dozing quietly before me.

The old man said, “I’ve a feeling there’s another big one waiting in that pool. Better work in there, son, and take him.” But Olson realized that he was

the intruder and said he needed to leave to find his partner downstream. “Happy birthday,” Olson shouted. “He waved his rod in salute, and I left him there casting quietly, hiked clear around the pool so I wouldn’t spoil his chances with the big one at the far end” (1956, pp. 52-53).

In these two essays, Olson crafted a powerful sense of identification with his readers by using his relationships with other people to explain the meaning of wilderness for him. As a boy, he learned that his grandmother’s love was expressed through her enthusiasm for his fishing adventure. As a man he witnessed the power of a familiar fishing hole to bring back memories and give renewed life, even though fleeting. These two chapters link Olson with his readers as they recall similar experiences as children with special adults in their life or as adults who must acknowledge that aging is a part of all lives. In each case, a wilderness experience becomes a catalyst for understanding one’s relationship with other humans. In this way, identification with other people is enhanced by the renewal of physical and mental energy that comes by leaving modern society for even a few or weeks.

The fourth function of rhetorical depiction is implementation. This rhetorical function is “instrumental, depiction’s time of action.” Osborn contends that while intensification and identification may transform our emotions and beliefs toward a subject, we still seek a means of action. “What we are,” concludes Osborn, “determines what we can do, or at least what we shall attempt” (1986, p. 92). None of the essays in *The Singing Wilderness* detail a political agenda that tells readers how to save the wilderness through collective action. In many ways such an essay would have been antithetical to Olson’s intent to present an inspiring message. But one essay is striking in suggesting that when an individual experiences the natural world from a different paradigm, others should follow suit. The essay that provides this sense of implementation and in turn epitomizes Olson’s ability to weave various strands of conservation together is entitled “Timber Wolves,” which also serves as the final chapter in the book. In this essay, Olson described a late night encounter, with the temperature 20 below, with two wolves. “When I heard the full-throated bawling howl, I should have had chills racing up and down my spine,” wrote Olson. “Instead, I was thrilled to know that the big grays might have picked up my trail and week following me down the glistening frozen highway of the river.”

Olson recalled the cultural fear of wolves that migrated from the Old World to North America and the continued in formal attempts to destroy the predators forever. At the same time, Olson described his satisfaction in knowing that while modern society sought to destroy all wolves, the creatures still existed in the wild. He then recalled a walk earlier in the day and his discovery of a wolf kill on a frozen lake:

That kill was part of the age-old cycle of dependency between the wolves and the deer. The predators, by the elimination of the old, the weak, and diseased, improved the character of the herd. . . . The deer provided food when there was no other source, when the heavy snows hid small rodents,

the fish and snakes, grubs and berries and birds that gave the wolves sustenance during all other seasons of the year. There on the ice was evidence of the completed cycle, and, though all kills are gruesome things, I was glad to see it, for it meant a wilderness in balance, a primitive country that as yet had not been tamed. (1956, p. 242)

Later that night Olson went for a walk and suddenly encountered two large wolves. After catching his scent, they stopped at about 50 feet away and stared at Olson, attempting to discern his potential threat. The wolves bolted leaving Olson to contemplate his experience. He wondered if people would ever overcome their fears of wolves and understand the place of the wolf in the natural world. Saddened by the “constant war of extermination” waged against wolves in North America, Olson concluded, “Practically gone from the United States, wolves are now common only in the Quetico-Superior country, in Canada, and in Alaska, and I knew the day might come when, because of man’s ignorance, the great grays would be gone even from there” (1956, p. 244). He concluded by challenging his readers, who likely had never considered wolves and their ecological and social significance, to broaden their view of how humans should manage wildlife:

We still do not realize that today we can enjoy the wilderness without fear, still do not appreciate the part that predators play in the balanced ecology of any natural community. We seem to prefer herds of semi-domesticated deer and elk and moose, swarms of small game with their natural alertness gone. It is as though we were interested in conserving only a meat supply and nothing of the semblance of the wild. (1956, p. 244)

The final function of rhetorical depiction is reaffirmation. Osborn believes that this function attempts to reaffirm one’s identity, “often in ceremonies during which heroes, martyrs, villains, and the role of the people are recalled in common appreciation” (1986, p. 95) Although many of the essays in the book illustrate the power of symbolic images to reaffirm one’s identity, a striking example of this function appears in “Dark House,” an essay describing a day of fishing in an ice house on a frozen lake. Olson’s son Bob was home and wanted to go ice fishing with his dad: “He wanted time to think long thoughts and hear the whispering of the snow outside the thin tarpaper walls.” Thus, on a January morning with temperatures 20 below, Olson and his son trekked to the family ice house to share an experience they had many times earlier in their life. Olson described the work necessary to get to the ice house and prepare for fishing. As they started fishing and prepared coffee, the bond between son and father returned:

After an hour of tension we began to relax, talked quietly about many things. A fish house is a fine place for visiting—not for argument or weighty ideas, but rather for small talk, local politics, and gossip, things we had seen

coming in, ideas that required no effort, short simple thoughts that came as easily as breathing. (1956, p. 212)

As the two continued to fish, “there was nothing more to say and we lapsed into quiet.” Two hours went by and the two anglers seemed to become part of the world below as they watched for fish. After catching two fish, the two men closed up the ice house and returned home, content to have one fish for dinner and another to share with friends. These were not trophy fish to be mounted on the wall of the angler’s den; instead, the two fish symbolize a natural encounter in which a father and a son found sustenance, both physical and psychological, in their journey to the lake.

In this essay, Olson reaffirms the wilderness as a place to think in solitude and share the experience with another. Although the reader does not know the entire story of father and son, it seems that a child left home and returned as an adult, seeking a place to reaffirm one’s place in the world and with a parent. The “tension” dissipates after an hour, a tension not defined, but easy to sense. The reaffirmation that guides this story comes in the interconnection of the two elements of the narrative: human intrusion into a wild place that is cold and desolate and the bond that exists between father and son. In this way the rhetorical depiction is a reaffirmation of the larger point of Olson’s discourse, in nature a person comes to understand oneself and his/her loved ones.

The Singing Wilderness affirms Osborn’s claim that rhetorical depiction typically “does not arise from any single technique or moment in discourse. More often, it is a controlled gestalt, a cumulative impact.” In this manner, the rhetorician carefully constructs a rhetorical depiction, “citing evidence that lends substance and authenticity to an image, using stylistic techniques that provide its sense of living presence” (Osborn, 1986, p. 80). The images presented in the book come together, presenting a unified vision of how humans should encounter nature, wildlife and wilderness. Olson’s apparently simple tales of wilderness experience, structured in the format of the four seasons, encouraged readers outside the formal conservation movement of the 1950s to enlarge their perspective and in turn embrace an environmental ethic much larger and more complex than wise-use of natural resources. In this vision, readers learn that humans must return to a past time in which they could listen to nature and in turn understand their proper place within it.

Rhetorical depiction may be of value to others who study the sacred texts of the contemporary environmental movement. Many works in the canon, including Edward Abbey’s *Desert Solitaire*, Annie Dillard’s *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, and Terry Tempest Williams’ *Refuge*, appear to be straight-forward tales of autobiography, placing readers within the personal narratives of the author. But these books also exemplify how one person’s autobiography becomes a rhetorical statement for others in the movement. As a result Osborn’s theory of rhetorical depiction and its emphasis upon the cumulative impact of a text offers rhetorical critics an insightful means of assessing autobiography and social movement ideology.

A typical response to Olson's writings comes from James Mathewson. Encountering Olson's books for the first time at a friend's cabin in northern Minnesota, Mathewson recalls that although the books were new to him, they were also as "familiar as the moon." The essays "spoke of a kinship with the earth and its creatures that affirmed what I was feeling so deeply at the time." Since that exposure, concludes Mathewson, "I've been an Olson disciple—a literal follower of his teaching. . . . I've come to cherish beauty of the natural world and share the love for its varied seasons as though his writings were the expressions of my own heart." Like many of Olson's readers, Mathewson believes that his life was changed significantly by the author's books: "Without his writings, I'd never have ventured into the border country, nor been quite so receptive to the mysticism of the wild. Thanks to Olson, my hero for all seasons. I look forward to a lifetime of those experience" (1997, 26).

Sigurd Olson's Environmental Legacy

How may one describe Sigurd Olson's legacy for American environmentalism? From a rhetorical perspective, Olson wrote and spoke on behalf of nature in a new way. Like Aldo Leopold, he wrote about wilderness by combining humanistic and scientific views of nature within an eloquent discourse. Like Rachel Carson, he wrote for a widespread audience, achieving fame and respect from reviewers and the general public. But unlike Leopold and Carson, Olson used his public platform to speak in favor of wilderness preservation and to take his agenda to the Congress through active participation in national environmental organizations. In contrast, Leopold died in 1948 before *A Sand County Almanac* emerged as a central text among environmentalists and Carson, who was gravely ill as *Silent Spring* gained stature, gave very few public speeches in her life and lacked comfort in public situations.

Without question the publication of *The Singing Wilderness* enlarged Olson's role within the national conservation community and gave him the standing to display the three required attributes that create social movement leadership: charisma, prophecy, and pragmatism (Stewart, Smith and Denton, 2007, pp. 119–125). The book demonstrated Olson's prophetic voice in calling for a wilderness ethic that looked beyond the traditional goals of the conservation movement. His vision of wilderness preservation, of sustainable practices and of urgency to act engaged many readers who lacked his broad focus. In contrast, Olson was a pragmatist who worked in a political arena, understood the need for science and public support, and believed that each battle was never fully won or fully lost. Finally, his charisma as a person emerged when readers sought him for advice and direction. Backes notes that most biographers avoid using the word "charisma" in their work for it is overused and may reveal a positive bias in the work. "But in Olson's case," he concludes, "the word seems to apply. There was something in his bearing—a combination of gracefulness, poise, confidence, and an engaging voice—that had a strong effect on people" (Backes, 1997, p. 315). With a national audience gained by *The Singing Wilderness* and growing respect among the leadership in America's conservation community, Olson emerged as a leading figure in the movement's transformational decades.

Between 1956 and 1982, Olson wrote nine books, some very similar to his first book, others quite different in scope and content. The theme that guided Olson's public discourse focused upon the spiritual and intangible qualities of wilderness. Rejecting the concept of preserving certain areas as "wilderness museums," Olson seemed prophetic in his belief that conservation had to stand for more than safeguarding beautiful places for continued human enjoyment. In a speech delivered in 1958, Olson explained his philosophy:

I have decided finally that the preservation of natural areas is more than rocks and trees and lakes and wildlife. It has a far more fundamental significance than any physical attribute any area might have. It is concerned with broad social values that have to do with human happiness, deep human needs, nostalgia, values that may be a counter-action to the type of world we live in. (1958, n.p.)

Sigurd Olson was a pivotal figure in this transformation because of what he wrote and who he was. In other words, Olson was an important symbol as a person. I believe that in pre-World War II America, three disparate groups were at the core of the American conservation movement. Although membership certainly overlapped, three quite different groups of people were drawn to the organized movement in the 1930s and 1940s. First, there were the popular conservationists, individuals who embraced John Muir's belief that preservation of the wilderness was for the good of the human soul. Often portrayed as the "bird watchers" who embraced wilderness as a tonic for civilization, these conservationists adopted a "Spiritual" view of nature. Second, were the outdoor recreationists, the hunters and anglers who saw conservation as the primary means of protecting America's tradition of outdoor sports. This group held a "Material" view of nature, seeing its values in terms of how humans could use it for their immediate gains. Third were the ecologists, the academically-trained biologists who wanted to understand how human intervention affected the natural world. This group adopted a "Scientific" view of nature.

As Olson grew in stature as a spokesperson for wilderness, first in Minnesota and later nationally, it became clear that he embraced *all three traditions* and each helped form his view of wilderness. He believed in the spiritual benefits of wilderness, emerging initially from his upbringing as a Baptist, and later encompassing philosophers and theologians from other traditions. Comfortable discussing God and quoting scripture in his writings and speeches, Olson rejected a fundamentalist view of Christianity. Moreover, he was an avid hunter and angler his entire life. He did not write about hunting in his later years, although his biographer says that Olson hunted most of his life. He wrote of fishing many times, emphasizing the idea to take only that which was needed. In Olson's world view fishing was an act of nature, of being part of the life cycle. Finally, he was an ecologist who taught natural science for nearly three decades. His master's thesis has been recognized as one of the first efforts to create a theory of ecology and impressed Aldo Leopold who attempted to recruit Olson

as a Ph.D. student. Olson often mentioned Leopold's land ethic and ecological conscience in his speeches and essays in the 1950s, helping to promote a new means of understanding the natural world for the average American. After he left academics, Olson served as Chief Ecologist for the Izzak Walton League and regularly participated in national meetings of ecologists.

By holding active membership in all three groups (preservationists, recreationists, ecologists) Olson had legitimacy in calling for a transcendent theory of conservation, a theory that embraced all perspectives and articulated a unified call to action. Olson challenged his readers and listeners to participate fully in the wilderness experience, from personal encounters to political activism. Embedded within his call for action was a strong sense of optimism. Backes observes that Olson's first book compared favorably with *A Sand County Almanac*, but that there were clear differences as well, especially in the tone of the books. "Where Leopold invokes the God of power and wrath, preaching proper ethical behavior toward the land and prophesying doom if society disobeys," writes Backes, "Olson invites his readers to experience the God of love, as made manifest in nature (1997, p. 248).

What then is Olson's legacy for students of the American environmental movement? In my view, three lessons emerge from a study of Sigurd Olson's leadership and advocacy. First, to appreciate and understand the land-human aesthetic, people must experience the wilderness first-hand. Hiking, hunting, skiing, camping, any pursuit that joins people to nature is necessary. Second, the need to embrace the wilderness runs through all people, not just those who find it engaging. This need is primal and it is buried deep within the human psyche. Even when people lack the ability to describe this need, it is a part of all of us. Third, advocacy and eloquence have the power to change the world. How humans define and manage their wilderness depends in large measure on successful advocacy. Arguments and appeals can save a swamp, prevent motorized boats in canoe areas, or preserve wilderness for perpetuity. Olson never gave up on an issue and understood the need to bring others to his views, whether through books, speeches, meetings, or other forms of discourse.

Sigurd Olson changed a part of his world through his rhetoric; he lacked the traditional paths to power, such as wealth, social status, or political office. Among environmentalists of his era, his contributions were immense, as illustrated by the recognition he received from his peers: "Olson is the only person to have received the highest honors of four leading citizen organizations that focus on the public lands: the Izzak Walton League, the National Wildlife Federation, the Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society" (Backes, 1997, 316). More remarkable, however, is that Olson served as a movement leader and movement visionary at the same time. In addition to his awards for service to conservation groups, Olson also received the John Burroughs Medal, "the highest honor in nature writing." Of the 60 medal winners since 1926, very few served in national leadership roles. Olson's accomplishment is "extraordinary" in the eyes of his biographer, who concludes "that it is extremely difficult to achieve national recognition as nature writer while also leading national conservation groups" (Backes, 1997, p. 316).

Ultimately, Olson's strength came from eloquence and passion on behalf of his cause. In examining the power of rhetorical depiction to redefine cultural norms and values, James Andrews concludes that rhetorical depiction "may well hold the key to understanding the ways in which potent ideological conceptions insinuate themselves into a national psyche" (2000, p. 55). In this manner, Olson challenged the prevailing view of conservation as too limited and asked his readers to broaden both their actions and their attitudes when considering the nation's wilderness. This eloquence, first finding a large public audience in *The Singing Wilderness*, became the core of Olson's wilderness rhetoric that seemed omnipresent in the environmental debates of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Former Minnesota governor Elmer Anderson remembered Olson this way: "Sig conveyed a religious fervor and a depth of conviction that no one else I know succeeded in generating. Others could win adherence; he produced disciples" (quoted in Backes, 1997, p. 315). Through his writings, speeches, and leadership, Sigurd Olson helped redefine environmentalism in the United States. Olson's legacy may be best summed up by his son Robert, speaking at Northland College in 1999: "He felt a profound duty to bring his vision to the attention of others and translate it into law and practice. . . . Knowing how time erodes the details of life, we can be confident in saying that if Sigurd Olson is remembered for a thousand years, it will be as a defender and definer of wilderness, or, as one writer wished to put it, as the 'Evangelist of the Wilderness'" (1999, n.p.).

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