

To my ESTELLA

Foreword to Sand County Almanac

THERE are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot.

Like winds and sunsets, wild things were taken for granted until progress began to do away with them. Now we face the question whether a still higher 'standard of living' is worth its cost in things natural, wild, and free. For us of the minority, the opportunity to see geese is more important than television, and the chance to find a pasque-flower is a right as inalienable as free speech.

These wild things, I admit, had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast, and until science disclosed the drama of where they come from and how they live. The whole conflict thus boils down to a question of degree. We of the minority see a law of diminishing returns in progress; our opponents do not.

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One must make shift with things as they are. These essays are my shifts. They are grouped in three parts:

Part I tells what my family sees and does at its week-end refuge from too much modernity: 'the shack.' On this sand farm in Wisconsin, first worn out and then abandoned by

our bigger-and-better society, we try to rebuild, with shovel and axe, what we are losing elsewhere. It is here that we seek—and still find—our meat from God.

These shack sketches are arranged seasonally as a 'Sand County Almanac.'

Part II, 'Sketches Here and There,' recounts some of the episodes in my life that taught me, gradually and sometimes painfully, that the company is out of step. These episodes, scattered over the continent and through forty years of time, present a fair sample of the issues that bear the collective label: conservation.

Part III, 'The Upshot,' sets forth, in more logical terms, some of the ideas whereby we dissenters rationalize our dissent. Only the very sympathetic reader will wish to wrestle with the philosophical questions of Part III. I suppose it may be said that these essays tell the company how it may get back in step.

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Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamitic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

That land is a community is the basic concept of ecology, but that land is to be loved and respected is an extension of ethics. That land yields a cultural harvest is a fact long known, but latterly often forgotten.

These essays attempt to weld these three concepts.

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Such a view of land and people is, of course, subject to the blurs and distortions of personal experience and personal bias. But wherever the truth may lie, this much is crystal-clear: our bigger-and-better society is now like a hypochondriac, so obsessed with its own economic health as to have lost the capacity to remain healthy. The whole world is so greedy for more bathtubs that it has lost the stability necessary to build them, or even to turn off the tap. Nothing could be more salutary at this stage than a little healthy contempt for a plethora of material blessings.

Perhaps such a shift of values can be achieved by reappraising things unnatural, tame, and confined in terms of things natural, wild, and free.

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Madison, Wisconsin  
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