Eng 491B

"In Defense of the Wetland Sublime"

By
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The Marsh, April 21,

The monsoon-season arrived. The croak-fest of egrets had given way to the croaking chorus of bullfrogs, and the mud puddles to the spectacle of a marsh flooded to its edges, above which "a little piece of land rises." Off into the far wetlands, all the waders had winged, save for a solitary heron or egret, who on occasion returned to a favorite wading pool. I shuttered the windows I had kept open through the winter drought season in order to hear the dawn songs of the wetland prairie, the grass-crossing trumpet of the cranes, the low croaks of the egret, the aerial screech of the red-shouldered hawk, the high-pitched chirp of the cardinal, and the cicada-like buzz of the redwing blackbirds amidst the cattails—against the din of the marshland frogs, giving full throat to their forecast of rain. A song-punctuated silence three seasons long was in its death throes.

I'd filled four journals and nineteen photo albums with images of Marjorie's Marsh—evidence of its diverse beauty, rejuvenating effects, and continuing hold upon my soul. But this great gust of inspiration was now starting to expire, like a warm wind upon the expanse of the sea. I had written of its various inhabitants, flora as well as fauna, of its aquatic vegetation and its wetland waders. I had written of its seasonal fluctuations, had described it in all weathers, at all hours of the day and night, whether by a watery dawn or a bullfrog moon. I had pictured it from the perspective of different "blinds," whether side-lit or silhouetted. I had written of it as the subject of ancient myths and the victim of modern hydrology practices, from historical,

scientific, literary, and ecological perspectives. Finally, I had written of the marsh from a deeply personal perspective, often blurring the boundaries between self and nature, soul and wetland, perhaps from a hunger to see them again conjoined as they were once upon a time in a more Edenic moment. As I readied to leave, another question preoccupied my mind.

The Wetland Defense:

What then of the future of America's wetlands—are they destined to endure or doomed to dwell only in the memory of those who have known them? Will they be here fifty years hence for my children to know and touch? Will Marjorie's Marsh still be here even twenty years from now, when I can do naught but admire it from the comfortable depths of a wicker rocker? What are the implications for the human spirit should America's wetlands disappear—should the wetland prairie some day fall silent for the want of a sand-hill's trumpet? Do they face today a menace as grievous as the plume-hinting, egret-slaughtering binges of yesteryear, that drove its most exotic species to the brink of extinction? And if so, what form does this new menace take? Who will rise to the wetlands' defense today and tomorrow as Audubon did in that troubled yesterday? Is there reason to hope or cause for action?

I have titled this penultimate section, "The Wetland Defense," first and foremost because the wetlands are our first and ablest defense against the natural catastrophes that have historically been the bane of civilized existence in (or adjacent to) the wetlands: catastrophic fires and floods, emanating from lightning and hurricanes. The wetlands are humans' best friend for mitigating the catastrophic effects of these natural disasters. We drain them at our own peril: a lesson we have had to learn the hard way, and repeatedly, over the last quarter century, combating the catastrophic fires of a Florida heartland deprived of its more effective, fire-fighting feature: its

wetlands, drained to fulfill a Developer's wet-dream. A lesson we had to learn even more painfully in the catastrophic wake of Hurricane Katrina, when levees failed to do the work wetlands had done for millennia: safeguard the land from the catastrophic effects of hurricane-related flooding.

Because they serve our most fundamental interests for survival, it is in our interest to preserve and restore wetlands. Because wetlands protect us, we need to protect them. Our mutual survival is linked: we depend on them for our survival and they now depend on us for theirs.

If not as natural buffers against fire and flood, wetlands merit preservation and restoration in the name of bio-diversity, as the wild incubators of flora and fauna found nowhere else in America, as emblems of a wild fecundity whose diversity alone justifies its right to exist—if for no other reason than as an antidote to the dehumanizing excesses of civilization, as places whose Beauty might give wing to a soul too often grounded amidst the excesses of the Industrial Order. Economical, biological, and spiritual benefits, to say nothing of ethical warrants, are compelling imperatives for the preservation and restoration of wetlands. Our fate cannot be entirely divorced form its own, as much as we may like to think of civilization as somehow divorced from nature. Civilization degrades nature at its own peril—as the catastrophic effects of fire, flooding, and now global warming abundantly evidence.

The Problem:

> Campaigns to drain wetlands throughout the history of Florida followed European settlement. Between the 1950 and 1970, 24% of Florida's remaining marshes

> were drained . . . . In the last 50 years, more than 8 million acres of forest and wetland habitat . . . have been cleared to accommodate the expanding human population. In 1990, about 19 acres per hour of forest wetland . . . was being converted for urban uses. Because of this growth, Florida's ecosystems are now considered the most endangered in all 50 states.
>
> --Tim Rumage, Environmental Consultant

When I read these facts in the lobby of the Sarasota public library, where they were mounted in a narrative on a series of easels, as part of an environmental diorama authored by the Ringling School Design Center, I was grateful for the concise and compelling articulation of the problem. If a picture can be worth a thousand words, then similarly a single fact can often be worth a thousand images. I stood blinking in frightened disbelief at the facts: "8 million acres . . . 19 acres per hour . . . . " How could it be that Americans were willing to champion the cause of an Amazon rainforest thousands of miles away, yet turn a blind eye to native wetlands, many of which were at their back door? Especially if what we mean by "American" is deeply rooted, at least in part, in the landscape—of which the wetlands, by virtue of their unfettered expanses and exotic winged beauty, are every bit as romantic as their more famous counterparts of the West: Yosemite, Yellowstone, The Tetons, Zion, Bryce, Glacier National Park, et al. If wetlands die, something ineffably American dies as well.

The causes of wetland degradation merit closer scrutiny, if they are ever to be mitigated and their catastrophic effects reversed. Upon closer examination, we discover the usual suspects (and here, again, I am citing the library diorama of Tim Rumage and his Ringling associates):

- "Clogging due to proliferation of exotic plants, such as the water hyacinth;

- Ditching for mosquito control;
- Dumping of dredged material;
- Discharge of nutrients and active pollutants, from human activities;
- Siltation from forest clearing;
- Canalization, dredging, diversion, and dam construction;
- Removal of ground-water, followed by salt-water intrusion."

Though peaceful and mutually productive co-existence is possible between humans and wetlands, what seems incompatible is the co-existence of wetlands and urban/industrial practices that inevitably degrade the landscapes they "develop." Wetlands must be allowed to exist on their own terms, and human practices in wetlands must be compatible with those terms. They must be allowed to endure as sanctuaries of water and freedom, of wildlife and recreation, essential not only to the survival of humans by virtue of the fires they abate and the floods they avert, but by virtue of the healing and restorative effects they have on the human soul, seeking and needing refuge from the dehumanizing excesses of industrialization.

Nature preserves a critical dialectic with industrialization, without which there is nothing to check the totalizing, catastrophic, and self-destructive tendencies of industrialization. The wetlands, and all nature, act as a critical check, as a vital balance against the excesses of the industrial order, whose totalizing tendencies are incompatible not only with its own survival, but with the survival of nature and perhaps the species. If left unchecked, the industrial order would drain every wetland, dam every wild river, fell every tree in every forest to sate its lust for profits—this, history has compellingly shown. Fifty million buffalo and ten times that many passenger pigeons are the mute witnesses of history to the totalizing tendencies of industrialization.

Only the defenders of wetlands can stem this flood-tide of development--as the wetlands themselves check the flood-tide of a hurricane. It is for the common good that this be done. As Florida's foremost naturalist, Archie Carr, so eloquently asserts, "the saving of parts of the primeval earth has got to be done, and it has got to be done without trying to justify it on practical grounds" (231). Practical grounds alone, however, warrant the preservation and restoration of America's wetlands. Nevertheless, the beauty of those places and their restorative effects on the human soul, as I have tried to convey in this narrative, warrant their preservation and restoration on their own terms. We restore the wetlands to restore ourselves; we renew them to renew ourselves—we heal their wild waters so that their waters might heal us—so that our over-industrialized souls might be softened by the sight of a white wing over unfettered, floating grasses. Sans these wild wetland places, the human soul runs the risk of becoming a caged wing, hooded by industry, tethered to the industrial order, perhaps pecking itself for want of a chance to fly—no different than the crippled and caged sand-hills I saw in the Mote Marine Bird Rehabilitation Center. As Carr avers, "aquatic animal populations are among the great glories of Florida's marshes" (349). If their habitat perishes, they perish—and we have lost forever one of the "great glories" of American nature.

Pragmatic and aesthetic warrants argue for the preservation and restoration of American wetlands. As a source of tourist revenues and spiritual rejuvenation, the wetlands justify their preservation and restoration every bit as eloquently as the immortal shrines of the American West. Having lived in Yosemite, the Tetons, and Alaska, having been a frequent pilgrim of Yellowstone, Zion, Bryce, and The Grand Canyon, I can attest that the effect their beauty had on my soul was no more violent or transforming than the effect of this marsh and these wetlands. The great heron and the sand-hill crane are as emblematic of America as the grizzly and timber

wolf afforded sanctuary in the mountain west; the wetlands are as native to the American spirit as its mightiest western waterfalls and deepest painted canyons. A wetland prairie sans the trumpeting of a sand-hill crane would be as lamentable as a Yellowstone or Teton meadow sans the bugling of an elk. As Carr advocates, the wetlands are eminently "worth conserving for their own sake and for science," and although only a "small part of the loss is reversible," is it too much to envision an effort to "purchase and re-flood drained marshes" (362-63)?

Although compelling pragmatic reasons exist for the conservation and restoration of wetlands, in the final analysis no price can be placed on the beauty they possess, or on the restorative effects of this beauty on the human soul. Denying the human spirit the experience of this beauty would be like shuttering the door of every cathedral in America, denying the soul a source of ecstasy that is older, and no less redemptive, than that experienced in the embrace of Faith. What right has any man (or organization) to deny another this fundamental right to spiritual renewal in nature—especially if one's profits are purchased at the expense (or even the possibility) of the other's pleasure? As Carr avers, "species and landscapes must be kept because it pleases people to contemplate them" (231). The wetlands are an engine for the rejuvenation of the landscape, even as they are an emblem for the rejuvenation, if not the redemption, of the soul. We restore them in order to be restored by them—in a process of mutual rejuvenation.

Thankfully, this process of wetland conservation and restoration has more than just begun—though whether it can (or will) be sustained remains to be seen. The defense of the wetlands is being waged on many fronts, gathering momentum (and literally, gaining ground) in many contested landscapes. This process of wetland restoration is being led by a fresh wave of wetland defenders, whose ranks are on the rise, who realize the hour is at hand to champion the defense of places incapable of defending themselves.

The Solution:

On a range of fronts, struggles are being waged and measures taken on behalf of Florida's aquatic flora and fauna, and of the wetland habitat without which they will go the way of the gooney bird. Indeed, perhaps more than any state in America, Florida is the flash-point of the clash between the advocates of environmental restoration and the forces of industrialization and urbanization. On almost every front of the Florida eco-system, from its coral reefs to its piney woods, this battle is being waged—and nowhere more dramatically than in the hotly contested landscapes of its wetlands. In some instances, state and federal interests have become allies in the preservation and restoration of the wetlands; in others, they are adversaries. In some cases, they negotiate the conflicted terrain between environmental and industrial interests, or between lobbies that champion the cause of the environmentalist on one hand, and boaters, fisherman, and recreationists on the other.

Heartening, are the recent measures being taken to avert the catastrophic slide into extinction of wetland turtle species. As Judy Kean observes, The Center for Biological Diversity is petitioning states "with unrestricted harvests or rules it considers too loose . . . . This spring, South Carolina placed limits on turtle harvests" ("Sates Rethink Trapping"). Kean continues: "Wisconsin reached the same conclusion in 1998 . . . . Because of declining turtle populations, the state established a July-November turtle harvesting season and set a daily limit," in order to "'insure their long term sustainability,'" (Collins qtd. in Kean). Iowa now requires its harvesters to be "licensed" and to "report monthly the number of turtles they collect . . . . Only snappers, soft-shell and painted turtles can be caught . . . . More regulations likely will be needed."

Prompted by the actions of these states and by the catastrophic decline of the freshwater turtle population, Florida recently took action. As Kean notes, "a ban on commercial harvesting of Florida's freshwater turtles takes effect today," in response to the "exportation of up to 150,000 soft-shell turtles . . . from the state each year for the past five years," resulting in the destabilization of the population. As Kate Spinner writes in "A Bid to Ban Turtle Harvests,"

> State wildlife regulators agreed Wednesday to ban commercial harvests of all freshwater turtles, moving quickly to end a fishing frenzy over snapping turtles, cooters, and soft-shells that has threatened to drive some species to extinction. The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission tentatively approved the harvesting rules, with a final vote expected in June. The ban, addressing a spike in turtle sales to meet Asian demand, would take effect by August if adopted. "This is the most significant conservation measure we have passed during my time on the commission," said longtime commissioner Brian Yablonski. "Floridians will never know it, because we are averting a crisis.' (*Sarasota Herald Tribune*, 3B)

Under the rules of the ban, harvesters would be allowed "to take turtles from the wild, but only through a permit limiting the number harvested and the species." Borrowing a page from the commercial fishing industry, turtle farms will be increasingly relied upon to provide the supply of freshwater turtles to world and local markets: "a farm of 4000 breeding turtles can produce 130,000 harvestable turtles a year." This sensible solution comprises a win-win for the competing interests of commerce and conservation, benefiting Florida's freshwater turtles and the commercial harvesters alike. It is thanks to the unheralded efforts of such organizations as the International Union of Concerned Scientists, The Species Survival Commission, and the Turtle Conservation Fund, that these measures are finally being enacted.

Though these measures will undoubtedly have a positive, if not immediate impact on the population of Florida's freshwater turtles, one nevertheless gets the sense that in championing the cause of the freshwater turtle and the wetlands of which it is but one inhabitant, these organizations, and those who support their cause, are in a race against time. As Brian Walsh observes in "The New Age of Extinction," "conservationists quietly acknowledge that we've entered an age of triage, when we might have to decide which species can truly be saved" (*Time,* 48). As a consequence of "our growing numbers, our thirst for resources, and, most of all, climate change, [as much as] 20%-30% of all species" could disappear "before the end of the century" (46). The plight of the freshwater turtle is but a symptom of a much deeper crisis that threatens biodiversity worldwide. As Walsh asserts, "The International Union for Conservation of Nature found that nearly 1 in 4 mammals worldwide was at risk for extinction" (46).

These and other measures inspire legitimate hope for the freshwater turtle and the wetlands on which their survival depends. Their efforts replicate those of an earlier generation of eco-activists, led by the Audubon society, whose timely intervention rescued the egret, heron, spoonbill, crane, and otter from the brink of extinction, to which they were pushed by a European fetish for their feathers and fur, even as the buffalo was driven to near extinction by a collective craving for its tongue—in which the destruction of the whole was necessitated by a fetish for one of its parts: even as the rhinoceros and elephant today are being hunted into extinction by a craving for their horn and tusk respectively, evidencing yet again the totalizing impulses of a capitalistic profit motive which, if unchecked, preys on the object of its profit fetish, until it ceases to exist—until every last wolf or buffalo, every last tree or rhinoceros, every last whale or turtle has been harvested to sate its profit-driven desire.

Those fighting to stabilize the population of the freshwater turtle are not the only ones rising in defense of the wetlands, nor is theirs the only battle being waged. Building on this earlier tradition of eco-activism on behalf of the wetland waders, a new generation is rising to the defense of the wetland habitat itself. After a generation of stale-mated efforts between the opposed interests of the sugar industry and wetland conservationists, the long deadlock in the struggle to restore the greatest wetland on the planet, The Everglades, has finally been broken—thanks to the allied efforts of conservationists and politicians, of state and federal agencies working in concert with environmental organizations to broker a restoration plan with the sugar industry, whose pollutants and water diversion practices all but killed this vast ecosystem, which is the hydrological engine for the cyclical renewal of a vast portion of the state. As Paul Quinlan observes in "Consensus Declared in War Over Everglades Funding," "After eight years of wrangling, Florida and the Federal government have come to terms on how to split the multi-billion dollar cost of restoring the Everglades . . . . The consensus, which officials and environmentalists cheered as landmark, takes the form of eight agreements approved Thursday by the South Florida Water Management District, the agency charged with overseeing Everglades restoration . . . . " With these monies, the state will be able to proceed with its plan to do what Archie Carr long ago advocated: to buy back and re-flood wetlands drained by the sugar industry, to restore the flow of the "river of grass" from its central heartland to the Caribbean sea, thereby converting "thousands of acres of sugarcane fields to saw grass," as Kate Spinner notes in "Conflict in Sugar Land" (*Sarasota Herald Tribune*).

As part of this restoration plan, the state will purchase 180,000 acres from U.S. Sugar "to help restore historic water flows between Lake Okeechobee and the remaining everglades." This plan has been the "'missing link' in the fitful, multi-billion dollar everglades restoration saga."

As Spinner observes,

> The central element is simple: create a chain of reservoirs and marshes to reconnect the everglades with Lake Okeechobee and clean its polluted waters . . . . [The] plan, though costly, is widely viewed as the ultimate cure for the unique Everglades system, where an inch of elevation change means the difference between saw grasses, cypress swamps, and oak hammocks (*SHT,* 1A)

The Everglades restoration plan is significant because it attests to the efficacy of the most important means of sustaining bio-diversity: creating habitat "corridors," which not only give endangered species the habitat, but the gene pool, essential to their survival. What has worked for the timber wolves reintroduced into the mountain Northwest will work for the "river of grass," with a "chain of reservoirs" fulfilling the same role as a series of linked wilderness areas, stretching from Idaho to British Columbia, as so eloquently advocated by eco-activists like Rick Bass and others, the contemporary western counterparts to Florida's Archie Carr and Marjorie Stoneman Douglas.

Conservation acts as a fundamental and essential check on the excesses of development and industrialization, and thanks to this system of checks and balances we might in the future look forward to those "pleasant changes" that Carr observed in the Florida wetlands during his own lifetime, in which the "long legged wading birds . . . have returned as a regular feature of the landscape, [though] it took many years for them to recover from the plume hunting massacres that were finally stopped by the Audubon society wardens in the early 1900s" (237-38). Carr was one of the first to observe the swing of the pendulum from the degradation of Florida's ecosystems to their conservation and restoration: "Although original Florida is still undergoing degradation . . . the rate of loss is being overtaken by the growth of a system of ecological ethics"

(244). Carr's statement is significant, insofar as it underscores the relevance and inseparability of the ethical to the economic, scientific, and spiritual value of the wetlands. Conservation and restoration of the wetlands are, and always have been, an ethical imperative. We are all ethically accountable for the harm we inflict on others, whether as a consequence of the catastrophic effects of global warming on impoverished countries around the planet, for which we as the world's greatest carbon polluter bear a certain responsibility, or because of the carcinogenic effects of pesticides like DDT that we market worldwide. As Russell Mittermeier, president of Conservation International, asserts, "We live on a very special planet—the only planet that we know has life" (qtd in Walsh, 50). That life, which gives life to us all, comes with a moral obligation to be stewards of it, to protect and preserve it, in order to bequeath it to our children. In degrading or destroying it, we not only harm ourselves, but others—which is ethically untenable. The preservation of life is inherently moral—as the willful degradation or destruction of it for profit is immoral, to the extent it harms others.

Thanks to measures being taken on behalf of Florida's freshwater turtles and the wetlands, the dream of restoration may become a reality, sooner rather than later. In restoring these wetlands we insure the restoration of our own spirit, which is as dependent on these wild habitats as its native flora and fauna. In degrading these wetlands we impoverish not only nature, but the human condition—for the feelings they awaken and reawaken define what it is to be human: a sense of connectedness, wonder, and expansiveness of spirit.

Knowing the wetlands' future is less uncertain, I can leave with a reasonable expectation that should I return I will find them as they are, so that the cycle of restoration and redemption might commence anew. Then might Theodore Roethke's prayer in "The Far Field" be my own:

To sink down to the hips in a mossy quagmire;

Or, with skinny knees, to sit astride a wet log,

Believing:

I’ll return again;

as a snake or a raucous bird . . . .