

“The Need For Wilderness,” *Minus 31 and the Wind Blowing: 9 Reflections About Living On Land*, Alaska Pacific University Press, 1980

I grew up in Fairbanks. Two months after graduation from the University of Alaska, I married a government biologist and spent the following years with him in the field in all his studies. On expeditions in Alaska, Wyoming, and New Zealand we had three children along with us. In later years, when my husband was Director of the Wilderness Society, we had more expeditions, more travels, more work for the preservation of wilderness.

Now I have come back to my home country after an eight-year absence. My own bird's eye view (which may be altered in the weeks following up here this summer) is that Alaska is both physically and emotionally split by the Pipeline. But I don't want or intend to talk about the Pipeline. I'm sure Alyeska is building it swiftly, expeditiously, and with environmental concern. But what the Pipeline started, Alaska will have to deal with in 1990 with oil, fish, minerals, timber, recreation, and people competing for them. Perhaps, we may learn a bit about humanities—human, man—and whether man is human enough or deserves that term. And I hope very much that we shall have here at this forum not only words, but some definite suggestions for action.

For myself I should like to enter here a plea for the consideration of the non-humanities, nonhuman values, for the land itself, but also for man—part of man's need. I grew up in Fairbanks when James Wickersham was battling in Congress for a government railroad for Alaska. Wood was the only fuel. Hillsides were stripped of birch forest to feed the boilers at all the little placer mines. Every household burned ten cords of wood a winter. The water-man brought you two or four buckets of water each day. The nameless hero came in the night to remove the necessary from the privy in the woodshed. Nothing was easy, but everyone counted. Everyone was cared for—a bigger and beautiful library, and hospitals. There were dress up parties, home-grown concerts, and plays, and always dances. I don't think people dance enough any more. Dance all night. Go to the Model Cafe for breakfast. Go home. Change your clothes and go to work. There were quarrels, but always humor. And, we had the march scandal too. It was expected always—at least one. As a small child, I remember the whistles and the siren blowing and everyone rushing to First Avenue—an impromptu parade. Dear old Mr. Gobracht's German Band was marching and someone had found a coal scuttle and was waving it as he marched. Wickersham had won. Alaska was going to have a railroad. The coal mines could be opened. It was coal then. Now it is oil. But what a different accompaniment! Then the placer days were over and the great slump came during World War I. The railroad was not finished until 1922. Then came the second gold boom. This time it was the big companies from outside. And big dredges. Now, that boom is over. Now, it is oil. Joe Meeker in his *Comedy of Survival* says, speaking of a pioneering species in any environment, “These are highly generalized, flexible and adaptable creatures, capable of surviving despite the inhospitable nature of their environment. Pioneers must be aggressive, competitive and tough.” The early Alaskans were all these things. For surely Alaska resisted rape with everything she had. Biting cold, rampaging streams, heartbreaking muskeg swamps, formidable mountains, stormy seas, impenetrable forest, and *mosquitos!* Now man is above all that—he flies. No place is too remote. No place is

safe from man's touch. Joe Meeker also says, "with the machine empowered the garden is doomed." Man was little in those days. Now he is big with his bulldozer. But let's think for a moment about the Chief of Police of Fairbanks being interviewed in his office recently. He was calm and relaxed. He said, "Oh, it's just another boom. After a while it will go away."

This past winter I spent many hours reading the journals my husband has kept during all the years he worked in Alaska as a naturalist. And I should like to quote here from his journal written at Nenana, Alaska, September 5, 1925. You may remember, some of you, that Nenana was a boom town during the building of the railroad, and especially because of the great bridge they built across the Tanana there. The notes say: "I think of the old stampede days when steamers plied frantically up and down the Yukon, when hammer and saw made joyful sound of industry, and hope and enthusiasm filled the air. And now, these empty buildings, broken windows, and silence. I look out of my hotel window. The hill across the Tanana glows with gold and yellow and pale green of the birches. The red of the blueberry bushes in Autumn dress penetrating the dark spruce. It's pleasing, giving me a wholesome feeling. The old gold rush is gone—must always go. But this golden hill has always been there—it's still there. And autumn among the birches belongs to a stable civilization with homes and children, schools and swimming holes. Slower growth but more desirable for Alaska."

Will it "go away"? Or, are we already locked into a system which is voracious? Locked into opposing camps? Will we be so blind and helpless that we lose the most precious things, after all?

I quote here from an article by Jim Hunter: "So those facing North to the wilderness have two radically different visions on what to do with it. There are many who subscribe to development and growth as synonymous with national security and greatness; there are many others who view the preservation of Alaska as a turning point, as a welcome antivenin for an already poisoned earth. Perhaps the real enemy of the wilderness is an invalid American dream. Perhaps too late we're learning that a diet of metal and oil will kill us. Perhaps too late we will discover that the valid new frontiers exist in the spirit and in technology and that no matter where the new frontiers will be, human beings cannot do without wilderness. Alaska, the accidental purchase, has left this nation, with a storehouse of green wilderness—vitamin A-1.

"While irresponsible developers, and this does not mean all developers, push to get there first, to get rich first, they fail to realize the greatest resource Alaska has to offer a sick America is clean air and pure water and wild lands. And it is not just the developers. Because without a population which applauded them and purchased their products, they could not continue. The developer may be the hammerhead, but society is the handle and all the power coming down behind it. And as sure as society can smash the hammer down on Alaskan Wilderness, it can also throw the hammer away. And this time around will be the last time."

I don't need to tell you that much has happened in Alaska since I was up here in 1967. That summer I saw parts of Alaska I had never seen before because I was travelling with my friend, Mildred Capion, who was making a film, "Alaskan Summer". On our return that autumn, I spoke at a banquet in Seattle and I'm going to tell you a few of the things I said then, which was eight years ago now.

"I went back to Alaska this summer, travelled 10,000 miles with my friend in her Ford Travel Wagon. Ferried to Prince Rupert and Wrangell and it rained, to Petersburg and it rained, and to Juneau and it was lovely. Flew to Fairbanks for commencement at the University of Alaska, and back to Juneau and Glacier Bay for 5 great days; to Sitka and it was beautiful; and back on the ferry to Haines and 4 wonderful days, and on to the Interior to Anchorage and Homer; by ferry to Kodiak for 6 days, then to Kenai and the Moose Range and a canoe trip and a flight over the Kenai Mountains and to Palmer and the dairy farms; McKinley Park, and to Fairbanks and the Steese Highway to Circle, and to Valdez and by ferry to Cordova and the salmon canneries. Back over the highway to Tok and the Taylor Highway to Eagle on the Yukon and then to Dawson and Whitehorse and Carcross and the railroad to Skagway and return. And finally all the way home to Moose, Wyoming. We were not long on the ferry out of Prince Rupert before getting the feel of the new Alaska. There was a fascinating mixture of people on board. Going through Wrangell Narrows at dusk, very quiet, under a slow bell, everyone watching those close shores. A young man, a pile-driver operator in the timber industry, was talking quietly. He said, 'Never a dull moment in the new State of Alaska. If you keep your eyes and ears open for what's around you—and we don't have so much artificial amusements up here, so we keep our eyes and ears open for what's around us.' The new Alaskans. The young men all love the life. Some of the wives do, some don't. The young mechanic who towed us into Tok for repairs said that he loved hunting in the fall and snowshoeing in the winter, but his wife hates it. In Fairbanks a taxi driver told my friend, 'I came up here 12 years ago for two weeks. Never been back, no desire to go back.' At a cannery near Haines, a young fisherman was mending his nets, 'I wouldn't live anywhere else. Always something beautiful to look at. Wake up in the morning, look out the window, always something beautiful—nice to look at.' Why do they love it? The land itself most of all, I think. Even though some of them are busy altering it, busy killing the thing they love, making it like all the other states. But most of Alaska's new people do love it. Will there be enough who care? The struggle will be between these two—both new. One group thinking of a whole life, the other making money and getting out. As for the old timers, the Sourdoughs, they live in nostalgia and can they be blamed? There were, in spite of hardships, so many charming things in that old life—dog teams, stern-wheel steamers on the rivers, absolute freedom. If a prospector didn't make it in one creek there were plenty of other creeks to try. At Forty-Mile last summer we stopped to take movies at the road house where they were raising Siberian Huskies. One of the partners said, 'So where's there to go anymore? Up at Barrow they say there's only two dog teams left. Everybody's got those skidoos, and natural gas piped into their houses. So where's there to go anymore? Forty-Mile's the only place left, I guess. The people there don't *want* that new stuff.'

“What did my friend film? Glacier Bay, a threat of mining; Sitka, the pulp mill, a big freighter loading just as we pulled into the cove; at Haines another huge freighter loading logs, 4,500,000 board feet at a load. At Kodiak diversified fishing has arrived there. A huge new fish plant is being built. At Kenai, oil rigs in the forest and offshore. Much of this industry must be accepted. But, the overriding thought in my mind is, while all this is going on, what is being left for the one industry which can be most lucrative, non-destructive, self-perpetuating for all times, a commodity in short supply in other world markets? The industry of simply letting people come to see and enjoy Alaska. What is next for Alaska? What will be left of the distinctive Alaskan features which draw the tourist? We talked to many tourists this past summer, and what were they looking for? Size, vastness, magnificence, naturalness, informality of life, enthusiasm, happy people, and mountains and glaciers, waterfalls, great trees, whales, porpoises, birds, all the other wildlife, but also, a glimpse of the old Alaska and of the everyday life of its people. I saw tourists stopping at a garden in Fairbanks admiring the cabbages, the peas, and all the rest, and talking to the white-haired old-timer who was working in the garden. At Miller House on the Steese Highway we stopped in to see if they served breakfast. The old proprietor said: ‘No, we don’t do that anymore but come on in and set awhile and light your pipe and visit anyway.’ These are the things tourists will remember and take home with them. The life, the feelings of those who live in Alaska. There are some who want a martini and a thick steak every night. That is one kind of tourist. But there are others, and I think they’ll be more numerous, who are seeking, I believe, a picture of the past. They liked that Alaska 67 Exposition, not just because it was a picture of the past, but because that past had a virility, a ruggedness, an individual freedom that is fast disappearing, and for which they have a longing in the midst of our copy-cat, plastic civilization.

“Alaska has lots of problems. But I am hopeful she will solve some. And in my mind, the most important thing is saving the land itself. And the problems here are big business and big government. What is all the business for? Millions for a few?

“Again, here we have the new people and the old who want money, and the people who seek a whole life who feel what kind of life and future without the great big beautiful land itself, plus, the Sourdoughs that are appalled at the whole thing. I hope there will be an Alaska for the young mechanic at Tok, for the young student who wants to explore glaciers, for the Indian or Eskimo who still wants to live in his village, for the young University couple who merely want to live in a little house in the woods, and for the young fisherman who wants to keep on fishing in his own little boat and look out every morning at something nice.”

Well, eight years have gone by since I said all those words in Seattle.

What now? What are the forces working in Alaska? Big business, big labor, big government, state and federal bureaucrats held upright by pressure from all sides, and getting the slings and arrows from all sides; scientists, government and otherwise, who carry on their beloved research and wonder if anybody will listen to them; wonder if the forces will listen to them. Old Alaskans who are on the band-wagon of all the new business, old Alaskans who wish they had never heard the word *pipeline* and wonder

whether to go somewhere else; new Alaskans who want a good simple life, and are willing to work in the battle to save something of the real Alaska; and, perhaps most important of all, the Natives who are also divided between those who want to keep their own ways, their own village life, and those who want the Natives to be right in there with development, and dollars, and the “good things of life.”

What *are* the good things of life? And can all these forces (none of which are just going to “go away”) realize that they must talk, think, act, eat together? Who is right? No one completely, of course. But given all these forces, what philosophy will be followed for a lifestyle in 1990? How much of Alaska for change, for development, for profits, for jobs, for more population? How much for the land itself as it now is? With all its potential gifts of subsistence living, of scientific discoveries, of helpful recreation, of inspiration. On this point do we have to split and declare war? I plead for a plan under which there will always be room for a healthy economy, for a healthy population, with a great deal of Alaska left alone.

In Wyoming, I live on a former private in-holding in Grand Teton National Park, on the Snake River bottoms, in the woods at 6,400 feet altitude. Our place used to be a dude ranch and there are three houses on it. The wildlife is plentiful. I had a moose come along the road and say goodbye to me as I was leaving for the airport the other morning, and we’re all zealous to keep it that way. I counted 18 species of mammals on that 77 acres. Last fall a cat appeared, probably dropped off by some tourist going by. I called the Rangers. They came with live traps and lots of good fishy bait and the cat defeated all of us—and our efforts. And, somehow, that creature managed to survive our winter—six feet of snow on the level, blizzards, cold. In April, the snow still deep, the woman who lives in the middle house on the ranch came into her kitchen one evening at dusk, and there saw two dark blobs on the bird tray which is attached to the kitchen window. A mother porcupine and her baby had been around all winter and that was normal to see them there. But there was a third blob—yes, the cat! Up there on the bird tray eating with the porcupines! You wonder why I’m telling you this. Well, it occurred to me, if cats and porcupines can eat together and tolerate each other, shouldn’t conservationists and businessmen be able to do likewise? And, not only these two forces, but all the others?

I think we have not had the courage to be entirely frank with one another, and this is a point in history when we must be. And, we must talk together. I think my main theme is this, that perhaps man is going to be overwhelmed with his own cleverness. That he may even destroy himself with this same cleverness. And, I firmly believe that one of the very few hopes for man is the preservation of the wilderness we now have left and the greatest reservoir of that medicine for man lies here in Alaska. This sounds radical, I know. I don’t mean to be saying that all the modern inventions and discoveries and developments are bad for man. I remember the old days and I know they weren’t *always* the “good old days.” What I’m trying to say is that somewhere along the line we have lost control of the things we have created. We have learned to need all the comforts and refinements and things and gadgets which all the technology has presented to us. We are constantly being bombarded with beguiling messages about how much we need all these things. And, big corporations, big bureaucracies feed on themselves, become such entities in themselves,

so imbued with the great American dream that growth is a God and that bigger is better and that the thought of decreasing size or a steady State society is an anathema, that to me they have become terrifying. So I'm beginning to wonder where in all this complexity of things is there going to be a voice which says, "Look, where are we going? Hadn't we better stop and look ourselves over?" Perhaps the voices will come from many directions—from the Native villages, from the smaller communities, from the bureaucrats, from the legislators—who knows?

I recommend to your notice the articles by Doug McConnell and Stephen Reeve and by Larry Mayo in the Fall, 1974, issue of the *Alaska Conservation Review*. There are specific suggestions here for input from the public by use of the media into plans for the future of Alaska. I recommend Sam Wright's suggestions in his recent newsletter from Tasseraluk Institute that there be a state-wide education program on what Alaskans want for the future based on grassroots meetings, media presentation, and questionnaires. Does that sound too complicated?

To put it simply, we must all get into the act. If there were only some potent inspiration which would cause every Alaskan to sit down and write in a few words what he wants for his State for the future and send it in to some central clearing house, that would be an example of democracy in action, wouldn't it? And a storehouse of information for decision. If I were required to write such a page, I would first give homage to those Alaskans who are already leading a simple life with a minimum of things, self-sustaining, on renewable resources. And I would say, "For goodness sake, let them have control of their land and the chance to show the rest of us how it is done." We can agree that there is no turning the clock back. The people are here. The economy must remain. But, with some foresight, some scrutinizing of man's real needs, we could begin to have a plan for Alaska and it would begin with each town and each borough.

But underlying all the meetings and the talks and the plans it seems to me is the great doomthought: when all of Alaska's nonrenewable resources are dug out, piped away, cut down—what lifestyle then? And here I submit once more my theme that man, too clever, too far away from the earth, is not happy. I believe that man needs wilderness for five reasons: (1) wilderness preservation for space—elbow room for man—untouched by man; (2) for scientific research. For man's benefit, of course, but also for that of all other creatures—plant and animal. We so far know just enough to know that we haven't begun to know all. That there are all kinds of things to be discovered in the natural world which cannot be discovered anywhere else; (3) for water-shed protection. To keep man's busy, selfish world healthy; (4) for physical recreation of all kinds to keep man's selfish to unselfish body healthy; and (5) for what it gives man's spirit.

There is something elemental and unchangeable here I think. Perhaps there are men who feel no need for nature. They are fortunate in a way perhaps. But for those who somehow feel unnurtured, missing something, groping for something satisfying, surely there should still be a place, a big place—wilderness. Again, man for all his ego is not the only creation. Other species have some rights too. Wilderness itself, the basis of all our life, does it have a right to live on? Having furnished all the requisites of our proud

materialistic civilization, our neon-lit society, does it have a right to live on? Do we have enough reverence for life to concede to wilderness this right? I submit that when all the non-renewable resources are gone, Alaska could still have a resource which will support a healthy economy, and a happy life for her people for all time. And that this happy possibility for lifestyle 1990 depends on how much of unspoiled Alaska is saved now. I know it is very poor taste to quote from one's own books, but somehow I could not find any other way to say what I wanted to say at the end of this talk. So I do quote from the preface to *Two in the Far North*, which was published in 1962: "What, after all, are the most precious things in a life? We had a honeymoon in an age when the world was sweet and untrammelled and safe. Up there in the Koyukuk there were very few machines of any kind; but there was joy in companionship and in the simple things—like the crackle of a fire, having tea and bread while the rain pattered on the roof, a chance meeting with a friend on the dogteam trail ... Here in Alaska people still count, as much today as in the twenties. I would love to think the world will survive its obsession with machines to see a day when people respect one another all over the world. It seems as clear as a shaft of the Aurora that this is our only hope. My prayer is that Alaska will not lose the heart-nourishing friendliness of her youth—that her people will always care for one another, her towns remain friendly and not completely ruled by the dollar—and that her great wild places will remain great and wild and free, where wolf and caribou, wolverine and grizzly bear, and all the Arctic blossoms may live on in the delicate balance which supported them long before impetuous man appeared in the North. This is the great gift Alaska can give to the harassed world."