Pioneering Conservation in Alaska

Ross, Ken

Published by University Press of Colorado

Ross, Ken.
Pioneering Conservation in Alaska.
For 250 years Alaska lured fortune seekers and escapees from the boredom and social confines of modernizing society. A theater of quest to try the hardest of souls, it promised fabulous riches for the taking. Isolated, vast, open, endowed, and dramatically beautiful, it called out to the most primitive urges—greed, excitement, lust for power, freedom. Adventure awaited all who came; riches only a few. No matter, though; the illusions outweighed the reality. And pioneers pursued them in a state of near-religious fervor.

A few early visitors chose to settle in Alaska, especially after the gold rushes of the late 19th Century and the first two decades of the 20th Century. They wanted to be where they could control their own lives and their achievements could be clearly seen; where folks knew a person as an individual, tolerated idiosyncrasies, clearly defined manhood and womanhood, and valued honor; where all could tell right from wrong; where people trusted and helped one another; where one could recognize sources of danger and everyone took hardship for granted; where boredom would be rare, adventure common, rules and crowds few; where people and things were what they appeared to be—a realm
of wholesome earth, pure water, and bracing air. And a place where one could wrest a living from the land.

In the Alaskan experience of Europeans and Euro-Americans, three competing land ethics emerged. Combining desire for freedom and lust for wealth and power, one urged exploitation and conquest in the name of individual benefit and economic progress. Sweeping relentlessly through the territory, it devastated wildlife populations and Native cultures alike. Only physical barriers could contain it throughout most of its temporal and spatial reign. It threatened, and still threatens, to subdue one of the last great wild places on earth.

A competing idea, utilitarian conservation, sought to bring the free-booting ethic to bay. It envisioned moderate, measured use of natural resources for the long-term well-being of humans and the nation, in contrast to the short-term, self-centered quest for profit that had wreaked so much destruction on the West. If properly regulated by government, forests, minerals, and wild species populations and their numerous benefits could be harvested indefinitely. They would provide a foundation for a gradually modernizing, stable society.

A third contending view drew strength from the experiences of pre-statehood Alaska. In its most advanced form it nurtured a vision of Alaska as a realm of unspoiled Nature. In this conception, like that of its rivals, Nature symbolized freedom. But Nature meant more than freedom; it represented beauty, truth. One felt freedom in closeness to Nature and in the knowledge that Nature existed free. Power and personal gain inhered not in conquest and material acquisition but in observation and contemplation. Humankind would be integral to, not owner of or mere actor upon, the pageant of wild life. Conquest seemed unnecessary, self-destructive, immoral. Far less prevalent than the exploitation and utilitarian notions, the preservation ideal nevertheless constituted a compelling force for those who experienced it. For more than a century it strove tenaciously and won gathering success in creating a public constituency. The story of Alaska is in large part an ongoing struggle among the ethics of conquest, utilitarian conservation, and preservation. It continues unabated into the 21st Century.

Alaska enticed adventurers and exploiters from around the world as long ago as the mid-1700s. Conflicts over its resources informed signal events—the abandonment of Russian empire in North America, the sale of Alaska to the United States, the elections of at least three U.S. presidents, and appointments and removals of cabinet members. In the territorial era, as now, commercialization of natural resources ranked first among the motives. Euro-American visitors aggressively exploited resources in hopes of making fortunes that would allow them to return to the States and live in luxury. Most of the relatively few who stayed in Alaska endeavored to replicate the pattern of Western settlement.
by converting the wealth of natural resources into increasingly comfortable modern communities.

Yet pre-statehood Alaska contributed mightily to the growth of American environmentalism. It nurtured early leaders of the national environmental movement who shared, and acted upon, the public fascination concerning Alaska. Through their endeavors to conserve habitat and wildlife these leaders fostered values that evolved into principles of modern environmentalism. Ethics of natural resource use in Alaska evolved from untrammeled exploitation to utilitarian conservation and elements of species and ecosystem preservation. Wildlife management passed from private entrepreneurs into the hands of government professionals employing emerging biological sciences.

Some of the conservation pioneers, by their knowledge and standing, directly molded opinion in Alaska. Most augmented environmentalism in the States, in turn ultimately forcing a shift in Alaskan behavior. Alaska’s pre-statehood environmental record is a story of physical endeavor and political conflict in a vast and wild land. It is also a vital chapter in the evolution of American environmental values. This book, a companion volume to *Environmental Conflict in Alaska* (University Press of Colorado, 2000), traces the evolution of environmental values through the outstanding land and wildlife issues of pre-statehood Alaska and the leaders who shaped their outcomes. While values have advanced and conditions have changed, many of the issues remain in force to this day.