Pioneering Conservation in Alaska

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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 idiosyncracies, 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 com-
peting 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 threat-
ened, 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 destruc-
tion on the West. If properly regulated by government, forests, minerals, and
wild species populations and their numerous benefits could be harvested indef-
initely. 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 inhere in not in conquest and material
acquisition but in observation and contemplation. Humankind would be in-
tegral to, not owner of or mere actor upon, the pageant of wild life. Conquest
seemed unnecessary, self-destructive, immoral. Far less prevalent than the ex-
ploration and utilitarian notions, the preservation ideal nevertheless consti-
tuted a compelling force for those who experienced it. For more than a century
it strove tenaciously and won gathering success in creating a public constitu-
ency. 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, commercial-
ization 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.