Pioneering Conservation in Alaska

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Evolution of Conservation Values

FROM THE SEA OTTER TO THE ARCTIC NATIONAL WILDLIFE RANGE, ALASKA SERVED as a testing ground for natural resource policy. Cumulatively, the contests registered an evolution of environmental values from all-out exploitation to utilitarian conservation and examples of preservation. They also shaped conservation values both in Alaska and on a national scale. The nation’s environmental agenda moved closer to appreciation of Nature and a more holistic approach in relating to it.

Alaska stands out among American states and territories as by far the most recent to go through the frontier experience. It retained territorial status for about 70 years beyond the “closing” of the frontier in the States, and settlers could homestead on federal land in Alaska for nearly 20 years after statehood. Remoteness, hardships, a low people-to-land ratio, and the myth of abundant natural resources tempted settlers and adventurers to energetically exploit the territory and obstruct conservation measures, especially those imposed from faraway Washington. Even the preservationist John Muir saw no danger of resource exhaustion. Conservation practices by Natives, to the extent that they
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existed, exerted almost no influence on the dominant Euro-American culture. Pre-statehood Alaska, especially in earlier years, exhibited an array of primitive environmental values.

VALUES IN ALASKA LAND AND WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT

Environmental values, or prescriptions governing the relations of humans to the natural environment, can be seen as ranging along scales of maturity or advancement. With respect to land and wildlife policy, four aspects are crucial: primary goals, management objectives, information-gathering methods, and decision-making power. By their nature and effects, these value-laden elements determine what happens in practice. They express and create environmental values.

Primary Goals

Primary goals are the fundamental purposes or outcomes we seek. What essentially do we want the human-nonhuman relationship to be? Options span a scale from (a) the absence of any environmental protection to (b) selective species protection to (c) ecosystem sustainability to (d) a holistic ideal of sustainable worldwide existence of humans and nonhumans. This scale parallels the spectrum ranging from uncontrolled exploitation to utilitarian conservation to preservation.

During the first half of the 1741–1867 Russian period, fur seekers pursued a goal of maximal and unrestricted acquisition of pelts, no matter what the impact on wildlife populations, ecosystems, or Native cultures. As of 1806 the Russian government made some headway in moving the goal forward to protection of selected species. After 1867 the basic goal of U.S. policy gradually changed from tolerance of unlimited exploitation to more farsighted purposes. In the whaling period and for most of their initial four decades of control, Americans vigorously engaged in poorly regulated and unsustainable taking of wildlife. No safeguards existed for the whales until after pelagic whaling had all but ceased in Alaska, and much the same applied to the sea otter, sea lion, and walrus. The federal government sought to conserve the fur seal as a valuable commercial resource. Prodded by nature societies and outdoor sporting clubs like Boone and Crockett and the Camp Fire Club, the government attempted to protect selected species through sea mammal treaties and the game laws of 1902–1925. Similarly, the Alaska Game Commission tried to conserve specific mammals and birds as a meat and fur supply for Alaskans. For the most part, large predators did not rank among the favored. Although hampered by the fishing industry’s influ-
ence in Congress, federal fisheries agents attempted to conserve salmon runs. On the whole, management of Alaskan wildlife made a successful transition to utilitarian conservation. Nearly all species recovered from the depredations of the whaling and Gold Rush eras, in part as a result of government efforts.

Land reserves in Alaska directly or indirectly advanced ecosystem sustainability. Utilitarian conservation of wildlife, scientific curiosities, and tourist attractions may have been the main motives, but the reserves incorporated elements of the preservation ethic. Rooseveltian conservation policies inhibited immediate exploitation of timber, coal, and oil. The Tongass and Chugach national forests incidentally and temporarily shielded extensive terrain from fragmentation and degradation. Land designations in the form of national parks and monuments explicitly recognized elements of ecosystem sustainability. Thanks in large part to the work of Bob Marshall and Olaus and Margaret Murie, the setting aside of the Arctic National Wildlife Range represented an open commitment to ecosystem preservation. But not until the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Alaska Lands Act of 1980 did national policy endorse the preservation principle on a grand scale.

Aboriginal Alaskans saw themselves as integral elements of a natural system, but few Alaska Natives incorporated traditional conservation practices into their 20th-Century lifestyles. Had they done so, they would have received little recognition prior to the emergence of modern environmentalism in the 1960s and 1970s. Muir, Marshall, and the Muries envisioned elements of a holistic relationship of humans to the nonhuman environment, well ahead of their time. But none of them systematically explicated their views of the proper role of humans. They wrote more for popular audiences than for academic publications. Moreover, they had urgent political work to do and might have weakened their influence by insisting, for example, that humans had no right to arbitrarily destroy ecosystems and their inhabitants. They generated more momentum toward their goals through less direct appeals and arguments for species or ecosystem sustainability.

Management Objectives

Resource management objectives are the shorter-term purposes of wildlife and land managers. They range from (a) unregulated, random exploitation to (b) sustainable consumptive use by humans (utilitarian conservation) to (c) nonconsumptive (scientific, recreational, aesthetic, spiritual) use by humans to (d) nonhuman (individual, species, or ecosystem) rights. Like the primary goals, they advance from (a) to (d) along the scale from exploitation to preservation.

Closely tied to the overarching goals, management objectives evolved similarly. Russia’s government shifted the aim of fur-seeking activity from uncon-
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trolled exploitation to utilitarianism or sustainable use of species. American administration featured weak efforts to realize sustainability, slowly improving in effectiveness over the near-century leading up to statehood. The reindeer experiment represented a rare, if doomed, attempt to incorporate the well-being of Natives into sustainable use objectives. Had it succeeded according to its broadest conception, however, it would have massively undermined ecosystem sustainability. Bob Marshall’s Arctic park proposal envisioned Alaska Natives and whites living at subsistence levels, a concept partly realized in the post-statehood period through subsistence land use policies.

Nature groups preferred utilitarian objectives to unregulated exploitation, and outdoor sporting groups, trappers, and guides backed regulation as necessary for a continuing game and fur supply. The Bureau of Biological Survey and the Alaska Game Commission concentrated on sustainable use of desirable (primarily ungulate and valuable furbearer) species, an objective that seemed to warrant predator control. As an official management objective, utilitarian sustainable use occupied a dominant position throughout the 20th Century.

Some policy went to the next step and sought nonconsumptive uses, most notably the aesthetic and spiritual valuation of the grizzly bear, Mt. McKinley Park, Katmai, Glacier Bay, and the Arctic Refuge. Scientific and recreational benefits also helped justify the parklands. Arguments based on spiritual values, however, did not generate strong responses from government and the public, at least not in Alaska. Yet their impact is difficult to measure. Muir, Marshall, and Olaus and Margaret Murie appeared to gain stature as they promulgated such views.

Much higher barriers confronted the notion that wild creatures should not be mere “resources” for use by humans but that they are worthy in and of themselves. This idea came naturally to pre-contact Alaska Natives. But to Euro-Americans it had intolerable implications. It implied that nonhumans held rights that would comprehensively restrict human behavior toward them. The idea would also challenge the comforting belief that humans are morally superior, the rightful owners of Earth. Despite these formidable obstacles, arguments in favor of nonhuman rights made some headway. Elliot and Hornaday won admiration in the press and public for their attacks on the injustice of the unnecessary killing of fur seals. Presumably their audiences valued the seals’ right to exist as a species. Many must have believed humans had no right to kill individual seals, especially for such trivial reasons as fashion. Even if they rejected the abstract principle of moral or legal rights for nonhumans, people’s visceral reaction to the clubbing of wide-eyed, innocent creatures implied a belief in a form of individual animal rights. But legal rights for wild as distinct from domestic animals had no standing in the society. And ecosystem rights as such lay even farther in the future.
Grant, Hornaday, Holzworth, White, and others successfully defended the grizzly bears’ right to exist. But wildlife advocates usually found it easier to employ utilitarian arguments. Valuing wildlife species as useful to humans, whether for skins or spiritual benefits, appealed to most people’s self-indulgence and achieved much the same result as would legal rights for species. Predators, however, presented a different problem in that they appeared to force a choice between species. Believing that wolves, for example, threatened the well-being or even the existence of desired species such as Dall sheep, most people wanted to control or exterminate the wolves. Yet true belief in species rights required that the wolf be defended. During Alaska’s territorial period, only a few naturalists and scientists dared to do so. When they did, their arguments usually rested not on species rights but on the need to complete ecosystems or to ensure the strength and health of prey populations.

Information-Gathering Methods

Information-gathering methods are the cognitive and affective processes that tell managers what is happening and what needs to be done. They range from (a) pre-scientific biases to (b) judgment based on field experience to (c) ecological science to (d) a holistic approach combining natural and social science, intuition, and aesthetic and spiritual perspectives. Generally, these too are correlates of the exploitation-preservation scale.

Human behavior is always linked, however consciously or rationally, to the apprehension of reality or “truth.” Means of truth-seeking both reflect and mold environmental values. In the absence of scientific information, people exploited resources according to tradition or narrow self-interest. Tradition in the form of some Native practices consciously or indirectly supported sustainable use. In the case of Athabaskan Indians at least, field observation attained the level of descriptive, if not ecological, science. Europeans and Euro-Americans lacked strong traditions that fostered conservation. Their self-centered behavior, based largely on fear and greed, quickly exhausted resources and impaired ecosystems. Before wildlife management as a science got under way in the mid-20th Century, governments had to rely on the common sense and integrity of field agents using primitive tools of observation and measurement. Fair-minded observers could often see a resource disappearing and realize that its absence might entail serious costs. Far short of creating an understanding of natural processes, field surveys nevertheless contributed building blocks for gradually improving science and for utilitarian conservation.

Russians valued science as a basis for resource management and employed the judgments of informed observers in conservation of the fur seal and sea otter. Under American rule, science usually took a back seat to greed in the case
of economically valuable resources (e.g., whales, walruses, sea otters, salmon, gold, oil, and many land mammals) and when the issue involved predators. International controversy brought science to the rescue of fur seals in the 1911 Fur Seal Treaty. Policy makers misapplied science in the introduction of some species, such as foxes on bird-nesting islands. They ventured into realms beyond their capacity to evaluate in their attempts to pastoralize northern Alaska and Eskimo culture through the importation of reindeer. During the early decades of the 20th Century the intuitive judgments of wardens and other agents, relying largely on anecdotal evidence, helped determine management policy. As in the case of predator control and bounties, they often reflected personal biases or served the immediate interests of settlers, hunters, or politicians.

Through the 1920s to the 1950s the Bureau of Biological Survey and the Fish and Wildlife Service increasingly hired university-trained agents, but most of them promoted the bureau’s high-priority agenda of predator control. Science in the form of species population surveys assisted the Alaska Game Commission in wildlife management, but it came too late and too little to reform predator control policy before statehood. Newly emerging ecological science helped the National Park Service retain its goal of ecosystem sustainability in Mt. McKinley Park and other units. Ecological science laid a foundation for improved salmon management. It took years or even decades to alter the practices of field managers, especially in such an emotionally loaded matter as wolf control. Moreover, the mechanistic orientation of ecological science hampered its ability to understand the complexity of ecosystems, the more so when taking human actions into account. A more complete understanding of the place of humans in the environment called for integrated application of natural sciences, social sciences, and humanities.

More holistic perspectives characterized the behavior of some pre-contact Alaska Natives, especially Athabaskans. Holism informed the writings of a few Euro-Americans including Muir, Marshall, and Adolph, Olaus, and Margaret Murie. All of these people incorporated intuition, aesthetics, and spiritual or psychological values in their philosophies, and Marshall applied elements of economics and sociology as well. To an extent, holism won tangible expression in the preservation of large tracts of land and in the eventual alteration of predator control policy. A more systematic integration of natural and social sciences emerged in cooperative Alaska wildlife management programs in the late 20th Century.

Decision-Making Power

Decision-making power is the matter of who decides what will be done. It is basic to all politics and social justice. Within the context of natural re-
source policy the options range from (a) anarchical scramble for resources to (b) government collusion with favored interest groups to (c) management by nonpolitical government resource experts to (d) shared stewardship through government and corporate accountability, public participation, and representation for nonhumans. These options also parallel and express the exploitation-preservation value spectrum.

Participation in decision making is important for at least two reasons. First, it determines which humans benefit from a resource, sometimes making the difference between life and death. Tight Russian control of access to birds, fish, and mammals helped keep Aleut and Koniag subjects in a state of subjugation intended to further Russia’s aims in North America. The relative freedom enjoyed by Americans, excepting the Aleuts, resulted in a lawless assault on wildlife that served short-term individual economic purposes. As public access to government and information widened and commercially valuable resources showed signs of depletion, government intervened. Enhanced government control spread the benefits to more people over a longer time span.

Press and public involvement are usually necessary to avoid the appropriation of publicly owned resources for the benefit of narrow interests, as demonstrated in the fights over the fur seals and the Alaska coal lands. Nature and sporting groups, sometimes backed by elements of the national press, protected Mt. McKinley, Katmai, and Glacier Bay from damage by miners and other resource extractors. Alaska newspapers and citizen groups, on the other hand, typically worked to make public resources available to exploitative interests. Alaska Natives, almost entirely excluded from natural resource decision making and without an influential mass media voice, received less than their fair share of benefits under the law until after statehood.

Power to make management decisions is also a key determinant in the fate of the resource. Open availability of resources leads to rapid depletion, and excessive collusion between government and consumptive interest groups can do the same. Control by government experts, in the North American context, normally means long-term conservation of valued resources. But this can cause excessive damage to elements not favored, such as predators, or otherwise disrupt ecosystems. Public involvement, if enlightened, can curb some of the environmental abuses by both government officials and corporations.

Russia’s authoritarian government never aspired to involve its general public in decision making, although it sought to control the fur trade for national economic benefit. Following a period of little or no regulation it appointed managers of the fur trade and discouraged uncoordinated profit seeking by individuals. Through the Russian-American Company, as much an arm of government as an interest group, it instituted utilitarian conservation rules. This approach worked best for fur seals because nearly all harvest occurred on land controlled
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by Russia. Sea otters, spending much of their time in far-flung international waters and pursued by men from several nations, needed more protection than the Russian government could provide. Much the same applied to whales.

The U.S. government found it considerably more difficult to manage the behavior of its fractious and aggressively acquisitive citizens and struggled for decades to incorporate management of wildlife by experts. It failed to protect the sea otters and right whales until they had all but disappeared. Favoritism toward interest groups, notably the Alaska Commercial Company, inevitably emerged during the post–Civil War era of capitalism. But the ensuing Progressive Era set the stage for a political-environmental contest that brought the fur seals and sea otters firmly under government control. The press and attentive public also received a share in the decision making on fur seal management, although the Aleuts had little say in the matter until after statehood.

For better or worse, nature and hunting groups in the States and hunters and trappers in Alaska enjoyed strong influence in wildlife management. In an age of inordinate corporate power, such elite bodies as the Boone and Crockett Club had the best chance of persuading the national government to adopt conservation measures. Fortunately for resource sustainability, the elite nature and hunting groups worked primarily for conservation rather than consumptive exploitation. They advocated management by government experts as an improvement over random exploitation and favoritism toward consumptive interests such as market hunters. The Alaska Game Commission incorporated public representation into its structure but disproportionately served the interests of white hunters, trappers, and guides.

Through such land reservations as the Tongass and Chugach national forests, Theodore Roosevelt managed to curb random and monopolistic exploitation of forests and coal. But in the case of gold mining and Kenai oil drilling in the 1950s, government seldom got beyond minimal oversight of rapacious treatment of the environment. In the case of Kenai oil, it displayed favoritism toward particular private interests.

Land designations, however, and to a lesser extent wildlife disputes, often involved the general public as meaningful participants in policy. Numerous groups had a voice in the formation of the McKinley and Glacier Bay parklands and the Arctic National Wildlife Range. Katmai’s designation flowed from extraordinary political access on the part of the National Geographic Society, but the society sought a benevolent public purpose.

Advances in education, travel, and communications technology increased public awareness and participation after World War II. By the 1970s, national legislation encouraged citizen involvement in many aspects of resource management through hearings, appeals, and lawsuits. Alaska Native user groups engaged in cooperative management of specific wildlife species, including whales,
polar bears, and geese. Environmental management in Alaska evolved toward shared stewardship.

Environmental goals, management objectives, research methods, and participation in policy evolved toward more enlightened treatment of Alaskan lands and wildlife over the two centuries before statehood (Table 18.1 attempts to quantify the environmental values manifested by the leaders and issues covered in this volume). Alaskan issues have contributed disproportionately to a national value shift. The territory’s remoteness encouraged excesses but also deterred human population growth and industrial development until more mature environmental values had evolved.

ALASKA’S IMPACT ON THE NATION

Pre-statehood Alaska disproportionately affected the evolution of American environmentalism, for several reasons. Most ecosystems in the States had been thoroughly disrupted by the eve of the 20th Century; Alaska’s had not. Federal ownership (Native claims aside) of nearly all the land, and a dearth of settlers, lent government officials and interested members of the public an opportunity to determine the disposal of a large and relatively unspoiled realm. Ensuing debates illuminated many aspects of environmental concern including resource management goals (as in land designations), objectives (as in game bag limits), research methods (as in McKinley Park wolf control), techniques (as in salmon production and predator control), and participants (as in coal and oil policy).

Alaska’s isolation and reputation for drama and grandeur, highly colored by the Gold Rush experience, attracted talented adventurers, hunters, scientists, and government officials. Many attained prominent positions in government and other realms of public affairs, advancing policy and public opinion up the scale of environmental responsibility. John Muir generated a wave of enthusiasm for the northern land and incorporated preservationist messages in his writing. His public stature enhanced his standing as an environmental thinker and activist, molding him into a prominent figure in the environmental movement. The Sierra Club he co-founded and led eventually became one of the most prominent environmental players nationwide and in Alaska. Henry W. Elliott, despite or because of his egotism and eccentricity, turned fur seal management into the first national and international debate on wildlife policy. Wealthy sport hunters such as Madison Grant and Charles Sheldon, initially devoted to conquest of wild beasts, went on to lead efforts to conserve them. For the many entranced by its wildlife and dismayed by what had happened in the States, Alaska tendered the possibility of large-scale species or ecosystem preservation.
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Table 18.1. Environmental Values Expressed by Alaskan Issues and Leaders, 1741–1960

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<th>Glacier Bay</th>
<th>National Park</th>
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<th>Alaska Wildlife Managers</th>
<th>Grizzly Bears</th>
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<th>Game Mammals</th>
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Note: Emphasis on value is graded from 0 to 5, the highest. Weights are author estimates.

The territory also interested the public because it presented a stage on which pioneer fantasies could still be played out. A surviving facsimile of the Wild West, Alaska seemed to offer a chance, vicariously or viscerally, to return to the past. Coming under American control as the frontier began to disappear in the West, it fell into place as an extension of the frontier, perpetuating the notion of continual American expansion. This idea encouraged Americans to believe that Alaska could be openly exploited and to go there and seek their fortunes at the expense of the environment.

Alaska entered the nation’s environmental agenda not long before the Progressive Era, a backlash stemming in part from the destruction of natural resources by powerful economic interests. Resistance to acquisition of Alaska coal lands by the Morgan-Guggenheim Syndicate produced a classic muckraking morality play casting conservationists as heroes. Several prominent New York Progressive leaders, including George Bird Grinnell, Madison Grant, and
Theodore Roosevelt, gave high priority to protection of resources in Alaska. Through the Boone and Crockett Club, New York Zoological Society, and related organizations, they functioned within a network of elites that made numerous and continuing contributions to safeguarding species and natural areas nationwide. Over time, their focus of concern moved from game species toward ecosystem sustainability and preservation.

Early cruise ship tours and the Harriman Expedition of 1899 illustrated Alaska’s attraction for the socially prominent, and the New York Times, probably the nation’s foremost newspaper, displayed an ongoing interest in Alaskan and natural resource issues. Grinnell, Grant, Charles Sheldon, William T. Hornaday, Charles H. Townsend, and, to some extent, Theodore Roosevelt operated out of New York. Bob Marshall, a firmly Progressive New Yorker, may have been responsible for protecting more wildland acreage than any other person save a few U.S. presidents. His achievements and legacy within the Wilderness Society strengthened the nation’s commitment to ecosystem sustainability. The New York and Washington elites, motivated in part by their fascination about Alaska, had an extraordinary impact on national policy toward its wildlife and wildlands.

The Progressive Era found expression in utilitarian conservation of wildlife. Theodore Roosevelt’s ideal of efficient government management of natural resources permeated agency perspectives. Adopting an aggressively managerial attitude, the Bureau of Biological Survey (BBS) vigorously strove for protection of game species and for reserves. But the managerial bent included an obsessive desire to control predators that lasted far longer than could be justified by evidence. BBS agent Olaus Murie and his brother Adolph in the National Park Service, informed by their Alaska experiences, resisted the policy. Their writings, and the McKinley Park wolf controversy, hastened the decline of predator control nationwide.

Land disposal decisions in the territorial period, notably reservation of the popular Glacier Bay and to a lesser extent Katmai and Mt. McKinley, strengthened national commitment to principles of ecosystem preservation by their example. Robert F. Griggs and William S. Cooper enlisted numerous groups in the States in the campaigns for Katmai and Glacier Bay national monuments. Designation of McKinley Park for mountain sheep, and such lands as the Kodiak brown bear and Kenai moose ranges facilitated by Ira Gabrielson, accomplished some of the same for species sustainability. The Arctic National Wildlife Range enhanced national interest in the nonconsumptive values of wilderness and lent force to the emerging environmental movement. Olaus Murie’s work in the Wilderness Society ultimately went far in shaping national wildland policy. He and his surviving wife, Margaret, grew into permanent symbols of Alaskan wilderness and the wisdom of cherishing it.
Lack of population density and resources of interest to mining and logging corporations made possible almost all of the major Alaska land preservation decisions. Yet regardless of the motives behind their selection, the national public valued their spectacular quality, which reinforced the prestige of the National Park and Fish and Wildlife services and the nation’s complex of wild parklands.

ENVIRONMENTALISM IN ALASKA

Evolution of environmental values among the Alaskan public lagged well behind that in the States. In the near-absence of opinion polls, uncertainty must exist regarding the balance of sentiments. Anecdotal evidence and the consistent behavior of the business community and territorial legislature suggest that all-out appropriation of resources reigned as the dominant goal. To the extent that Native conservation practices existed, Euro-Americans ignored them. Governors and legislators perpetually badgered the federal government for control of natural resources, not granted the territory in the 1912 act. They accepted the federal government’s utilitarian objective of sustainability of economically useful species such as salmon but resisted almost any moves toward nonconsumptive use goals (for such as the grizzly bear) and ecosystem sustainability through federal reserves. They did not encounter public participation by local environmental groups; virtually none existed in Alaska before statehood. They did not respond to scientific evidence questioning the viability of the bounty system and predator control in general. In sum, most pre-statehood Alaskans disdained almost every manifestation of advanced environmental thinking. The impetus for nearly all gains in environmental awareness and policy came from outside, or from federal agents and scholars in Alaska.

After statehood, stout resistance to environmental values persisted in the legislature and other elements of Alaskan society. Many business leaders, state politicians, and the congressional delegation perpetuated the frontier myths of unlimited natural resources and the need to reduce federal control. They brushed aside the fact that most of Alaska belonged to the nation, not to Alaskans for their consumptive use. On into the 21st Century they favored open exploitation of resources, tolerated some utilitarian conservation, and opposed nearly all forms of preservation. Environmental protection and environmentalists represented, to them, barriers to economic development. They persisted in imagining that the land held enough resources to permit them in ever-swelling numbers to fashion comfortable middle-class lifestyles in perpetuity. They ignored or denied the fact that the state’s economy rested on one or two nonrenewable natural resources and on subsidies, both controlled from the outside. Essentially residents of a welfare state, they preferred to fancy them-
Evolution of Conservation Values

selves as rugged individualists. They refused to make preparations for a time when resources or subsidies might disappear. In essence, they rejected economic and environmental sustainability.

But seeds of change, planted earlier, sprouted. Some federal officials of the territorial period joined the Alaska Department of Fish and Game or remained in federal agencies overseeing Alaskan sea mammals, migratory birds, or federal lands. Their ecologically oriented training affected wildlife and land management policy. Research broadened, and emphasis on bounties and predator control lessened. Rising income levels and improved access by air, sea, and highway brought multiplying numbers of visitors to Alaska. Tourism promoters including the state encouraged the “last frontier” image of a romantic, free, relatively unspoiled holdover from the past. The image glamorized consumptive exploitation and ignored conservation, at least until the advent of ecotourism later in the 20th Century. The new state drew increased attention from national media and environmental groups, creating pressure for greater environmental protection. The 1980 Alaska Lands Act demonstrated and reinforced national commitment to values of wilderness and ecosystem preservation, shared by a strong minority of Alaskans.

Initiated by the Alaska Conservation Society, an effective environmental community sprang up in Alaska, composed of long-time residents, outsiders who moved to the state, and branch offices of national environmental organizations. This coalition has significantly shaped state and national legislation, monitored compliance of companies and government agencies, and mounted numerous lawsuits in the service of environmental protection. The state legislature passed a fair amount of environmentally protective legislation until it turned strongly conservative in the mid-1990s. Post-statehood Alaskan resource disputes such as Tongass logging and the Exxon Valdez oil spill caught the interest of the American public and set precedents in national policy. As the repository of the nation’s greatest store of wildlands, the state assumed a rising position on the nation’s environmental agenda. By degrees, the management of both federal and state natural resources in Alaska moved haltingly in the direction of advanced environmental values. Alaskan environmental controversies continued to be a causal force in the evolution of American environmental values.

Maturation of the environmental movement in the last quarter of the 20th Century did not signal the adoption of the most advanced principles by a majority of the national public or even by most environmentalists. It did embody a shift in opinion, public discourse, and management policy toward more advanced, preservationist values. Ecosystem sustainability is replacing the focus on favored species, and nonconsumptive uses are superseding the notion that the purpose of wild creatures is to be killed, skinned, and eaten by humans.
Evolution of Conservation Values

Scholarly inquiry has proliferated, and numerous citizen groups regularly participate in policy making. Holistic perspectives have become part of the debate. Public opinion polls, legislation, media coverage, and other indicators leave no serious doubt that attitudes toward the environment have progressed both in the Lower 48 and in Alaska.

Nor can it necessarily be assumed that adoption of the most advanced (some would say extreme) environmental principles must be preferable to all competing values. Determination of what is best for a society or for Earth under given circumstances is a monumental undertaking, calling at minimum for generous applications of science and philosophy, tempered by discipline and compassion. Yet accumulating knowledge has moved thoughtful Alaskans, and the American body politic as a whole, several steps in the direction of environmentalism.