

# Conservation, from Chaucer to Smokey the Bear

By Ben Gadd

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*First given in 1996 as part of a training week for Alberta Lands and Forest employees at the Forestry Technology School in Hinton, Alberta, and many times thereafter*

Imagine if you will a seminar for Alberta provincial-park employees. The first speaker steps up to the podium. There is nervous applause; the guy is a well-known environmentalist.

The speaker scans the class. “Good evening, everyone. A lot of you are park rangers here, right?” Heads are bobbing in agreement. “Okay, I’ve got a question for you. What does the word ‘conservation’ mean?”

Fellow in the front sticks up his hand. “‘Conservation’ means, uh ... well, it’s about using natural resources wisely, and stuff like that? Or, like, maybe using *less* of something?”

Short silence.

“Can anyone be more specific?”

Long silence.

“Perhaps we’d better head for the dictionary.”

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We do. Surprise! “To conserve” means “to preserve,” plain and simple. It’s French, of course, and it comes to us from the Latin “conservare,” meaning “to keep together.” No wishy-washiness about this; to conserve something is to *protect* it.

Here is the actual definition I found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the venerable “OED.” Quote: “To keep in safety, or from harm, decay or loss; now usually, to preserve in its existing state from destruction or change; to preserve unimpaired”—there’s a word right out of the National Parks Act—“to preserve or maintain in being or continuous existence, to keep alive or flourishing; to keep a

commandment or observe a custom;” and finally, “to make a substance into a *conserve*, meaning to preserve something with sugar.” (Maybe we should try that last one on the national parks.)

According to the OED, the first written use of “conserve” is found in the work of Geoffrey Chaucer, who wrote the famous *Canterbury Tales*. The following line appears in Chaucer’s *The House of Fame*, dating to about 1384:

“Euery [every] kyndely thyng [animal, wild or domestic] that is, Hath a kyndely stede [place, as in “homestead”], [and] ther [there] he May best in hyt [it] conserved be.”

What Chaucer was saying was that every creature has its own home, and in that place it is best conserved; that is, best preserved and protected. A modern rephrasing might be along the lines of “wildlife does best in its own habitat.”

In Middle English, “conserve” was used more commonly than “preserve.” But in the 18th century, “preserve” largely replaced “conserve.” In the 19th century, though, we got “conserve” back, along with the political term “conservative,” by which, according to the OED, “its sense is often coloured.” Indeed.

From “conserve” comes “conservation,” which the OED defines as “preservation from destructive influences, natural decay or waste; preservation of existing conditions, institutions, rights, peace, order, etc.” “Conservation” also means the “official charge and care of rivers, sewers, forests, etc.” Hmm— “rivers, sewers,” and “forests,” all in one phrase. How knowing those dictionary editors were.

Thinking about the word “conservation” takes me back to my youth in the dry, desert country of western Colorado, where our teachers taught us back in the 1950s that conservation was about stopping soil erosion. In the American southwest there was certainly a lot of soil erosion to stop. Cattle and sheep had overgrazed the place for a hundred years. All those hoofs had broken down the fragile crust of tiny fungi, lichens and mosses that once covered the sandy soil. Until about twenty

years ago, no one had realized that this stuff was actually alive. They thought it was some kind of mineral deposit. Lacking any apparent value, it was ignored.

Those ranchers ignored it at their peril. Loss of that organic crust was allowing rainwater and snowmelt to wash the soil away, sending the top layer of many a spread down the Colorado River. In elementary school we were shown Encyclopedia Britannica film strips—anyone remember “film strips”?—showing houses that had fallen into huge, scary-looking gullies. We were told that something had to be done right away, before the whole country was ruined, and that it was “up to all of us.” We looked uneasily at one another. I thought of a friend’s house, and the gully out back that was, in fact, growing larger and deeper all the time, getting closer and closer ...

We were taught that the way you “conserved” things was to throw hay bales and old tires into these gullies, and to build little catchment ponds along them, and to plant lines of trees here and there, and to plow *around* the hills instead of up and down them. In grade four I did a poster on this theme, showing a blighted farm on one side of a hill, where I painted the eroded land in ugly shades of purplish brown, and a happy, well-vegetated farm on the other side of the hill, where everything was lime green, even the tires, and fine. Concerning the root of the problem—too many cattle—we were asked, in passing, to tell our dads that there was an agricultural agent in the county who could “help out with any grazing problems we might have.” Fifty years later the western United States is still overrun with cows, and the gullies continue to grow. One day I’ll have to go back and check on my friend’s house. Could be the whole place has been gobbled up.

Then there was the thing about *forest fires*. Part of conservation was preventing forest fires. The films we saw in school were about letting the family campfire get out of control, or about Dad throwing a lighted cigarette out the car window, or about *kids playing with matches*, which nailed every nine-year-old in the classroom. We all played with matches, and we had all tried one of Dad’s cigarettes. The result, we learned to our horror, was enormous fiery holocausts, consuming Bambi and Thumper and all the good things in this world. Some of us began to cry.

Toward the end of one of these films, against a backdrop of flames, came the image of Smokey the Bear, shovel in hand. He poked his finger at us and said, in a deep, accusatory voice, “Only YOU can prevent forest fires!” That evening I had a nightmare about starting a forest fire by accident. I wet the bed.

Little did we know in the 1950s that when you prevent forest fires for a hundred years, you eventually get really big ones, like the one that burned so much of Yellowstone National Park in 1988. (That fire was started by lightning, not by smokers or careless campers or nine-year-olds being naughty.)

Nor could we have guessed that in the Yellowstone fire, out of a population of 90,000 elk living in the fire zone, only 345 would perish. Nor did we know that U.S. Forest Ranger Aldo Leopold, author of the *Sand County Almanac*, had been going around since the 1930s telling his fellow rangers and foresters in New Mexico that fire is a natural part of things, that fire and forests had lived together for a very long time, and that it was stupid to keep mindlessly putting forest fires out all the time. There was just something wrong, he thought, with letting the mountains get completely covered with trees when the slopes hadn’t ever, to his knowledge, been that way.

Leopold was right to question the wisdom of his bosses. They, like everyone else, were being had. Smokey, you see, was working for the logging companies. Those trees were being saved from fire in order to be clear-cut. To the ordinary citizen, the difference between a burned mountainside and a logged-off one is a matter of appearance, but to a lumber corporation the difference is a matter of money: millions of dollars in trees that could have been cut and sold.

Smokey would not have approved of the “prescribed burns” now being carried out in many North American national parks. In a prescribed burn—just what the doctor ordered!—you burn a few dozen hectares here, a few dozen there, in a controlled way. (“Controlled” you hope. In the last few years there have been some hugely incendiary surprises.) The idea of prescribed burning is to reestablish the natural, patchy, uneven-aged character of a forest that experiences occasional fires.

By the way, you can't mimic that with logging. Logging, even if followed by burning, isn't a natural process. Too many soil nutrients are removed along with the logs. And the ecological succession that follows is not normal.

After generations of fighting forest fires with everything they had, national-park employees now get to *start* fires. They do so with aircraft and jellied gasoline (otherwise known as napalm), and they do it just as gleefully as they once did when they were nine, out in back of the house with stolen matches. "Roger, helicopter, we have ignition in sector seven ..."

In the Alberta provincial forests, though, Smokey is still believed, and the fires keep getting bigger as the forest grows older and the gaps fill in. In the Rockies national parks we got started on prescribed burning 15 years ago, but the program has taken off slowly because the tourist industry objects to it. Burned mountainsides look ugly, not green like the color of money.

However, after what happened to Kelowna in the summer of 2003, a lot of chambers of commerce are reconsidering. The town of Jasper, where I live, could easily have gone up in flames. Jasper is surrounded by many square kilometres of well-aged lodgepole pine, all waiting for the Big One. As our part of that summer from hell, we got a Pretty Big One of 28,000 ha just two valleys east of us.<sup>1</sup>

Like forest fires, government policies shift easily. So do the meanings of words, which can tell us a lot about the changing times in which we live. The writer in me is sensitive to this. For example, I always wince when I hear the word "harvest" applied to the cutting of naturally occurring trees. You only *harvest* what you have *planted*, folks, and I know for a fact that the evergreens now getting "harvested" all over Alberta and British Columbia were not planted by the companies cutting them.

Until the 1970s most of us got the meaning right, using "cut" instead of the euphemistic "harvest." Nowadays, though, "harvest" is used even to describe

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<sup>1</sup> Jasper is a town in the middle of a national park. As such, it is an administrative nightmare for Parks Canada. This once prompted park-superintendent Rory Flanagan to tell me, after a particularly bad day with the local Chamber of Commerce, that "there was nothing about this goddam town that one good forest fire wouldn't cure." In 2003 he almost got his wish.

hunting. We don't hunt moose, or shoot them, or (heaven forbid) *kill* them. No, we "harvest" them. We just kind of go into the woods and *pick* them.

My advice: squint hard at any official who slips the word "harvest" into a discussion of anything other than wheat, pumpkins, etc.

Or consider the phrase "ecosystem management." Sounds good, eh? Industry thinks so, too. The logging companies tell us that clear-cutting is just a way of "managing the forest ecosystem." Of course, any ecologist worth his or her Ph.D. will tell you that managing an ecosystem is impossible, because we know so little about the maze of species interactions. When we try to manage an ecosystem, all we do is mess it up. So ecologists prefer the phrase "*ecosystem-based* management," which is quite a different breed of cat than "ecosystem management." In *ecosystem-based* management, you try to look after the land in a responsible way that sustains its ecosystems. You don't try to manage the ecosystems themselves.

Few industrialists support true ecosystem-based management, because practicing it rules out such things as clear-cut logging and coal mining. More to the point, the idea of ecosystem-based management is to do something right in this world, while "ecosystem management" is just a buzzword for continuing to do something wrong.

This sort of semantic sneak-attack has claimed the term "conservation." I had assumed until I looked it up that the word meant something along the lines of "the wise use of our natural resources," or some such industrial or agricultural derivation. That's why I was surprised to see "conservation" defined so rigorously as "preservation."

But let me come clean about something. That definition was from the 1933 edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary*. A more recent definition, which I found in *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, copyright 1961, repeats the preservation idea as definition 1— "deliberate, planned or thoughtful preserving, guarding or protecting"—but then adds, as definition 2, "care or keeping and supervision of something by a governmental authority or by a private association or business; planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation,

destruction or neglect” and, here it is, clearly stated in definition 2b: “the wise utilization of a natural product, especially by a manufacturer so as to prevent waste and to ensure future use of resources.” Aha! The multinationals seem to have got to Webster, too.

Historian Roderick Nash has written a brilliant book called *Wilderness and the American Mind*. In it he has documented how Gifford Pinchot (his family pronounces it “PINCH-o”) steered the U.S. toward the idea of conservation as *use* of something he called “natural resources.” Pinchot was an interesting character, part wilderness advocate and part wilderness-wrecker. He was a personal friend of Teddy Roosevelt’s and a progressive politician who served twice as the governor of Pennsylvania. In his job as the United States’ chief forester from 1898 to 1910, he helped to build America’s enormous system of national forests. But Pinchot was also in thick with lumber companies that wanted to cut trees in those forests. The rest of the resource-extraction industry was frequently at his door, too, and thanks to Pinchot, several generations of North Americans have grown up thinking of public land as a supply centre for wood, water and minerals.

The part of the dictionary definition about preventing “exploitation, destruction or neglect” seems particularly ironic. The natural resources that Pinchot and his corporate allies were so eager to “manage,” meaning eager to exploit for dollars, have certainly suffered destruction and neglect.

That, in turn, has led to a counterstrike on behalf of the land. An environmental-protection movement has grown up to defend what’s left of the natural world. That movement is now large and influential. Scientists such as Dr. E.O. Wilson of Harvard and our own Dr. David Suzuki keep warning us that we are all in deep doo-doo because we have wrecked so much of the planet. It’s like a frightening science-fiction story come true: “First the frogs died ...”

The frogs *are* dying, along with neotropical migrant birds, meaning warblers, thrushes and such, and lots of other species of living things—27,000 species a year disappearing, according to E.O. himself—which is about the same extinction rate as occurred 65 million years ago when a large object hit the earth and did in half the

globe's biota, including the dinosaurs.<sup>2</sup> Among land animals, few of the larger, weightier species survived. Humans are large, weighty land animals. Yikes!

All this gloom-and-doom is having a paradoxically positive effect on the dictionary. It's pushing the lexicological pendulum back the other way. In the current *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, which follows linguistic trends more closely than either its big brother the *International* or the OED, the first definition is "a careful preservation or protection of something; *esp* : planned management of a natural resource to prevent exploitation, destruction or neglect." That phrase "management of a natural resource" is loaded, but at least there's no mention of "wise utilization." And the current edition of the *Gage Canadian Dictionary* harks back to the old OED definition about preserving from harm or waste, nearly word-for-word.

In schools and universities, conservation is once again being linked to preservation and protection. Foresters are being taught that clear-cutting is not the only way to do logging. Farmers and ranchers are leaving some space on their land for frogs and warblers. Natural history, which used to generate little interest except among birdwatchers, is now the main item on sale at "nature stores" in the shopping malls.

Now, where do you suppose that the folks who buy CDs of bird sounds in those stores, and a lot of other people who just enjoy wildlife and wild places generally, like to go every chance they get?

To nationally and provincially protected areas, of course, and by that I mean mainly our national and provincial parks. We love these places. We pack them full every weekend. This is tough on the parks, but it brings much joy to local merchants, hoteliers, restaurateurs and other purveyors of holiday pleasures. Some of these folks are all too eager to assist us in wrecking our vacation paradises for profit.

I am privileged to *live* smack in the middle of one of the world's great protected areas, a World Heritage Site. As a naturalist and environmental watchdog

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<sup>2</sup> Well, not all the dinosaurs, as it turns out. Birds are dinosaurs that survived the asteroid.

for Jasper National Park I spend an inordinate amount of my time resisting an endless stream of commercial opportunists trying to mess the place up for money. That's because Jasper National Park is my backyard, and I take it personally. Ever since I've lived here, Parks Canada has been gradually turning the park over to the Chamber of Commerce. I can't stand that. I do what I can to stop it.

To the park wardens who also live in Jasper, and to the provincial-park rangers at that seminar I mentioned at the beginning of this talk, the parks in which they work are *their* backyards, and it's property over which they have some control.

To these people I offer the following. Dear wardens and rangers, forgive me for presuming to tell you what your job is, but I think you'll agree with me: it's to *conserve those parks*. You're supposed to protect them from abuses, which means enforcing the rules, controlling the hordes of weekend visitors, catching poachers and illegal campers—all the things you do day in and day out, in other words—despite the funding cutbacks, the loss of good staff to better-paying jobs, the politically driven decisions that make you so angry, the gut-level discomfort that comes from seeing your park surrounded by clear-cuts and cottages and coal mines, etc., etc.

What keeps a person going through all this? If nothing else, there's the grit-your-teeth sense of duty that springs from the sure, horrible knowledge of what will happen to your park if the public gets the feeling that *you don't care anymore*. We had a taste of that in the national parks during the summers of 2001 and 2002, during which the wardens were not allowed to enforce the law. Unbelievable but true. The reasons for it are murky beyond belief, but the damage has been documented.

It's this kind of stuff that afflicts humanity generally these days: stupid decisions with awful consequences. I have no idea how it's all going to turn out. As always, the future of the planet seems to be largely a matter of chance.

Well, I'm hoping that wilderness gets a lucky break. We all need drinkable water, breathable air and a climate more hospitable than that of Venus. The earth's remaining wildlands are doing their very best to provide these things. A lot of this

is public land, currently under government management, so civil servants have found themselves on the leading edge of the effort to save them.

It's lonely on the leading edge, but it's also a good place to be—good in the ethical sense. People who work in green places such as provincial and national parks, and people who defend those parks, know that practicing conservation is just plain *good*, and so does the public. The public believes what *we* have to say in our five-minute sound bites and our homespun newsletters, not what the logging companies have to say in their million-dollar ad campaigns. Corporations crave the wonderful old trees in the parks. They want the coal, the minerals, the oil and gas. They have tried hard to get them, and in a few places they have succeeded. But in other cases, when word of their attempts has reached the public they have backed away, embarrassed to be seen threatening all that *goodness*.

In comparison with the growing mess on their boundaries, the parks look good indeed. They still offer us weekends away from the unreal world of our cities—the real world is that of the wilderness, because our species grew up in it—and for that reason alone it's worthwhile to work in and for the parks, heart and soul.

Even *within* cities there are wild spots that have somehow escaped the bulldozers. These little islands of nature are priceless. They're near at hand for thousands of wilderness-starved urbanites who seek them out for what they offer: a chance to be outdoors in natural surroundings. Without that simple pleasure, something inside of us dies.

That's why protecting wild places, whether they're as small as a city block or as large as Jasper National Park, is such a vital job. If you're a park employee doing that, or anyone at all doing that, you're a conservationist. If you're doing it well, meaning that you're successfully holding out against a world dominated by next month's bottom line, you're a jolly *good* conservationist.

And so, with a tip of the hat to Geoffrey Chaucer, and with a squirt of pepper spray to Smokey the Bear, I wish you all the best.

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