Defender of the Voiceless: Wallace Stegner’s Conservation Legacy

BY ELIA T. BEN-ARI

Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste....

We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope.

So wrote Wallace Stegner on 3 December 1960 in a letter to David Pesonen, of the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission (ORRRC), which was reviewing the need for wilderness legislation by Congress. Stegner’s “Wilderness Letter,” which was included in the Commission’s 1962 report, helped lead to the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, which established a national wilderness preservation system.

Even before Stegner’s Wilderness Letter was published in the ORRRC report, conservationists began quoting from it—and they haven’t stopped since. Then-Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall abandoned his own prepared speech to read from the letter at a wilderness conference, and the letter was featured in the conference proceedings. The letter was also published in The Washington Post, and all or parts of it have since been reproduced on posters around the world. Its memorable final words, “the geography of hope,” were used by the Sierra Club as the title for a book of Eliot Porter photographs. (Stegner included the letter in his 1969 collection of essays, The Sound of Mountain Water.)

“Alltogether, this letter, the labor of an afternoon, has gone farther around the world than other writings on which I have spent years,” Stegner wrote 20 years later, in the December 1980 issue of The Living Wilderness magazine. The letter’s widespread popularity no doubt arose because, as the author himself wrote, it “struck a chord” with many people. And although Stegner took the letter’s success “as evidence not of special literary worth, but of an earnest, world-wide belief in the idea [the letter] expresses,” it is the letter’s style as much as its substance that accounts for its impact.

Indeed, both the style and substance of much of Stegner’s writing resonates with those who love the land and are concerned with conserving it. His writings are imbued with a reverence for the land and for nature, and they emphasize the importance of cooperation and community over rugged individualism in human interactions with the land, often portraying the tension between these opposing forces. Many of his works, both fiction and nonfiction, explore the myths and realities of the American West and the interconnectedness of its history, its culture, and its landscape.

Although literary critics have referred to Stegner as “the dean of American western writers,” he was, by many accounts, above all an American writer. “He [saw] the patterns of change in the West...as parts of the larger evolution of American values and the changes in the American landscape,” says conservation biologist and writer Curt Meine, editor of Wallace Stegner and the Continental Vision: Essays on Literature, History, and Landscape.

Part of what makes Stegner’s writing remarkable is its breadth. His works blend superb literary qualities with an impressive knowledge of diverse subjects gained through personal experience and extensive reading and research. Stegner is best known for his novels, including his last, Crossing to Safety (1987), and the Pulitzer Prize–winning Angle of Repose (1971). But he also wrote many nonfiction works, including biographies, histories, and numerous articles and essays about the environment, the landscape, history, writing, and geography.

The making of a conservationist

Environmentalism or conservation or preservation, or whatever it should be called, is not a fact, and never has been. It is a job. (Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs, p. 132)

Stegner, who died in 1993 at the age of 84, influenced the conservation movement in the United States not only through his writing but also by direct participation. He played a key role in some of the early organized conservation efforts in the United States and was an active member of several local and national environmental organizations.

Among the highlights of Stegner’s conservation career: The Sierra Club made him an honorary life member after he edited This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park and its Magic Rivers, a coffee-table book of photographs and essays that was conceived by Sierra Club executive director David Brower. The book, which was published in 1955, was sent to every member of Congress as part of a successful effort to block the construction of two huge dams on the Green River as it flows through Dinosaur National Monument. In 1961,