

Conservation and the Under-Represented

By LOUIS C. CURTH

It has been said that “DEMOGRAPHY IS DESTINY”! If this is true, and I believe that it is, then the time has come for America’s environmental activists to expand the parameters of environmental conservation to a broader, more pragmatic concept of “Conservation and the Under-Represented.” We should be under no illusions. It will not be an easy task to convince our fellow Americans, or even many of our fellow conservationists that this broader agenda is necessary. Let me hasten to assure you that it is very necessary.

One can argue that conservationists are already working on behalf of the under-represented. Indeed, as the global human population has risen to the six billion mark over the last thirty years, conservationists have come to the defense of endangered animals and plants — our under-represented fellow inhabitants of our planet. With one voice, we have spoken out against the relentless destruction of critical habitat essential to their survival. With this precedent in mind, can we do less than turn our attention to another population which needs our help; especially since we will soon need their help in return? I am referring to the under-represented non-white human population of the United States. These are people who have come here in growing numbers in pursuit of the “American Dream,” and whose children will soon become a dominant force in our nation’s future.

America’s role as the world’s only superpower and leading economic engine, together with our democratic institutions and political stability, are powerful motivators to those who

must live in an increasingly overcrowded and unstable world. Who could blame these people for wanting to come to America and share in the cornucopia of consumer goods and the affluent lifestyle that have made the United States the envy of the world. Thanks to the miracle of modern communications, people everywhere can now see these possibilities. Is it any wonder that they yearn for the good life here that so much of white America already has and takes for granted?

Like many of our own ancestors who endured their own hardships to attain a new life here for themselves and their families, people today also take huge risks and endure great sacrifice to enter the United States both legally and illegally. One difference between past and present waves of immigrants lies in their racial composition. In the past, people coming to the USA as immigrants were largely white and European. Today immigrants are predominantly non-white with Asians and Hispanics making up dominant portions of new arrivals.

In addition to these trends in immigration, the racial composition of American residents is also being altered among populations which are under-represented in today’s society. As more affluent mostly white couples have fewer children, birth rates among non-white populations continue to be significantly higher. The findings of America’s recently completed “Census 2000” confirm these trends noting that while 28 percent of America’s adults are from non-white minorities, among children that figure rises to 40 percent.

The census also predicts with assurance that the non-white population of the United States will overtake the dominant white majority surpass-

ing them in numbers sometime around the middle of this century, and even sooner in some industrial states like New York.

With increasing regularity, the findings of America’s “Census 2000” have been making their way into the reports and editorials of the mainstream media, as well as the propaganda organs of racial fringe groups. Some members of the white population have received the census findings with fear, trepidation and open hostility. The majority of white Americans seem to be in a state of denial, or else they are just too preoccupied with the economy, sports and safe schools to notice.

The changing face of our nation is really just the latest manifestation of America’s melting pot which continues to attract people in search of a better life. Today’s white majority has little to fear from a gradual shift in status from their majority position. The wealth and power of whites in America will be perpetuated far into the future as long as equal opportunities continue to exist for non-white achievers to pursue their own version of the “American Dream.”

The challenge then, for today’s white majority is to welcome change, not obstruct it, and to utilize these years of transition which lie ahead in a positive way to help the under-represented. White people can and must make the initial overtures to overcome past prejudice. They must strive to reach out to non-whites to help them and welcome them in the spirit of friendship at all levels of social interaction. The coming decades must be utilized to build trust and cooperation among the races that can lead to meaningful partnerships based on shared interests.

Nowhere is the need for multi-racial cooperation more urgent than

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among conservationists and those concerned with the wild land environment and places like the Adirondack Park. Despite an impressive record of achievement over the last century, the strong public support gained among white voters for conservation issues has never crossed over to inspire non-white populations. Quite the contrary, private conservation organizations are more likely to be viewed with suspicion. Their image is one of rich white elitists who have little interest in mixing with non-whites or learning about their concerns. The Adirondack Park, for example, is perceived by many blacks as "a place where white people go." The huge buildup of prisons in the Adirondack region has reinforced this negative stereotype even more dramatically.

Environmental activists must reverse this mistrust of them by non-whites and enlist their support and growing political power for environmental causes based on mutually shared convictions. This will not be an easy task. It will require a commitment in time and effort to teach and to learn and to understand each other. Only then can a new paradigm for environmental activism based on racial inclusiveness emerge.

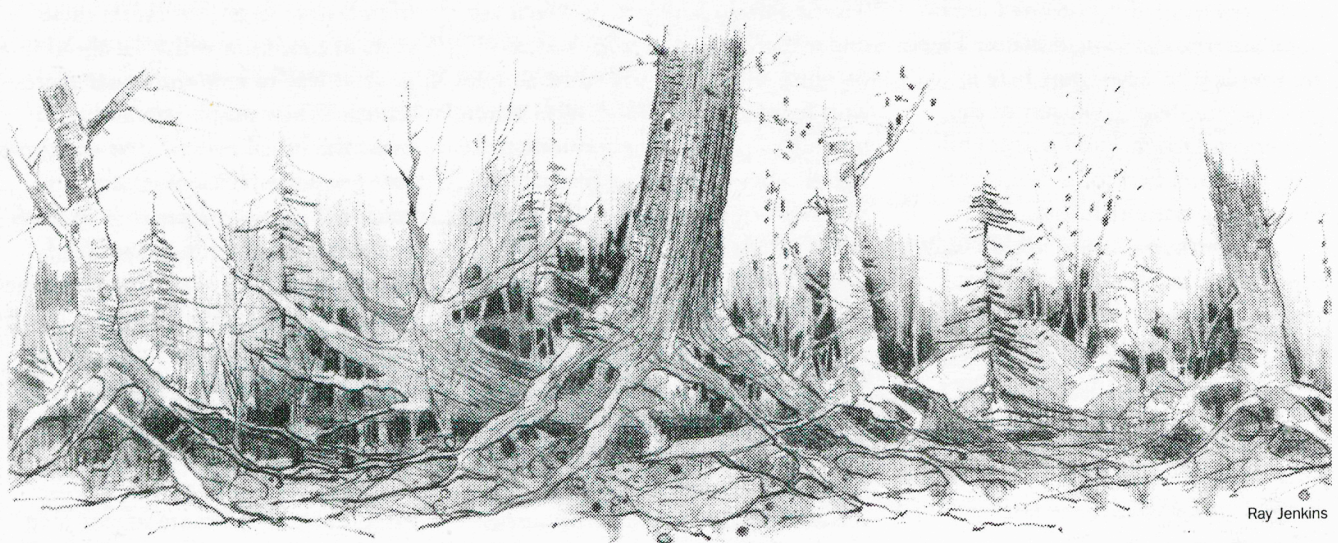
The onus for succeeding with this daunting task rests squarely upon the shoulders of each and every white

American who fancies him or herself to be sympathetic to environmental conservation. Shunning the under-represented or doing nothing pro-actively to help them appreciate the natural world we hold dear will insure that this effort to bridge the racial divide will not succeed. Failure will come with a very high price by putting in jeopardy the hard-fought victories conservationists have won over the last century. To put it another way, if we do not reach out to teach and to share our natural treasures, like the Adirondack Park, with the under-represented, our long range conservation agenda will be fatally compromised as demographics change the political landscape in the years ahead.

For those who would move toward a new model of inclusive environmental activism, I suggest to you that nothing will be as effective as sincerity on the part of whites to reach out and befriend under-represented non-whites. We must cultivate our capacity to have empathy for people who are different in order to understand them better and to treat them respectfully. If these concepts are too warm and fuzzy for some, our major political parties offer a more ruthless model for how to enlist the support of emerging non-white voting blocks. In the grim reality of political expediency it is the quid-pro-quo that proves most effec-

tive. In blunt terms, the party offers to share more political power and patronage with the under-represented populations who will pledge their support and votes to the party. It is harsh and cold, but quite an effective way to partner.

Whatever the approach, in the final analysis, conservation and the under-represented will be the greatest challenge of this century for all who care about conservation and about people. The predominantly white institutions which have traditionally been the great bulwark of conservation in America and the eloquent spokespersons who have rallied the nation to the noble cause of conservation must not shy away from this new challenge. Instead, conservationists must redirect their organizing talents toward new and unfamiliar places. There we must seek to enlist the support of our under-represented, non-white brothers and sisters to become our partners in a new broad-based environmental coalition. From the strength and zeal of many new activists and the voices of many new leaders, a new generation of conservationists will rise who can rally ALL of America's people and achieve victories undreamed of on behalf of our beleaguered environment. With your help, this can be America's destiny in the 21st Century.



Ray Jenkins