
RANGE MANAGEMENT

Conservation of Soil and Soul

REV. ALANSON BROWN

Box 1013, Sonora, Texas

Conservation and proper management of our natural resources are basically a religious problem and this fact determines our technical, social, economic and political approach to a solution. This is my conviction and contention. The god or gods a man worships determines what he does with his natural resources and how he approaches life in its totality. This is the key to our problem as a nation and as individuals interested in and dedicated to the conservation and proper management of what God in His goodness has given us; whether it be farm land, range land, forested land or the minerals in and under the land. The worship of false, greedy gods results in the destruction of this resource while the worship of the one, true God of all Creation results in the conservation of His precious gift to us.

Lowdermilk (1953) asked Professor Gautier, an expert on North Africa, if the climate there had changed since Roman times in order to justify the desolation of the area. He answered, "We have no evidence to indicate that the climate has changed in an important degree since Roman times, but the people have changed." Lowdermilk concludes "that the decline of North Africa is due to a change in a people and more especially to a change in culture and methods of use of land that replaced a highly developed and intensive agriculture and that allowed erosion to waste away the land and to change the regime of waters." A change in culture means a

change in religion; therefore here is secular evidence that my conviction and contention is valid.

I will spell out my contention and conviction that conservation of natural resources is basically a religious problem with two points. The first is that the only worthy motive for conservation and proper management of our land resource is to glorify God. The second is that man's conservation of self (salvation), both individually and as a group, is dependent upon and tied in with conservation and proper management of land resource.

To substantiate my first point that the only worthy motive for conservation is the glorification of God I want to tell you about the early Christian Monastics and what they did for agriculture; for what we consider the great accomplishments of today in agriculture are merely the "fruits of the spirit" of humble men who served and glorified God with all their hearts, minds, souls, and bodies.

St. Benedict believed and taught that idleness is the enemy of the soul and prescribed manual labor as a part of the discipline of all monastic communities. To provide this need of the soul and to provide for their physical needs as well, the monks set to work on the land about them. They approached all Creation as the gift of God and treated it as such. It was approached in reverence, without fear, and with temperance and self-restraint in its use.

Just what did result from their efforts in the field of agriculture? In Northumberland (Great Britain) two thousand square miles of shady plains and barren sheaths were turned over to the church. All was developed into fat pasture and abundant harvest. The unproductive Fen district (swamps) of Southhampton was described in these words, "It is a counterfeit of Paradise, where the gentleness and purity of heaven appear to be reflected. * * * Not an inch of land as far as the eye can reach lies uncultivated. Here the soil is hidden by fruit trees, there by vines stretched upon the ground or trailed on trellises."

They taught that land should be fallowed after continuous cropping. They practiced crop rotation with clover as a soil building crop. They taught and practiced the value of drainage and irrigation. They pioneered in forest and water conservation.

Just what did they do in the field of proper management? They became proficient plant and animal breeders. They pioneered in fish hatcheries. They brought cheese making to Parma. Introduced the vineyard into Burgundy, the Rhine, Auvergne and England. They learned and practiced the art of budding, grafting and layering of tree crops. Monks of Mozat set out walnut trees that are still prevalent in Auvergne. The Cistercian monks practically single-handedly developed Eastern Germany from a wilderness. In fact and of greatest importance, the monasteries became the demonstration farms and experiment stations of the new age following the fall of Rome. They taught their lessons well because their message of conservation and sound management is written across the lands

of Europe and Britain. Their accomplishments in the field of agriculture were by-products of their primary desire to praise and serve their Lord!

Now to explain my conviction that man's conservation of self (salvation), both individually and as a group, is dependent upon and tied in with conservation of land resources. Range experts have found that it is fruitless to study the grasses of an area without considering all other biological and geographical factors at play. Grass then is only a segment of a total relation of plant, animal and physical environment. This analogy carries over into all Creation. Man dare not study the total Creation without considering himself a part of it. We are related directly to Creation, but in the Creation we were given the command to have dominion over it and subdue it. This lordship of Creation in no way divorces us from the natural world. We were made out of the stuff of the earth but the Almighty breathed the life of his likeness into us. Thus we are created in His image out of the stuff of nature. Man is the crown of all Creation and has been given a life-long lease on the rest of the created order. Therefore as lease-holders for God we have the responsibility for the care of this earth. What happens to the natural world affects man and what happens to man affects the natural world.

Thus in our religious striving for conservation of self or for what is commonly called "salvation" we dare not think that we are able to leave behind the natural world. Listen to the promise of God in the Book of Deuteronomy, "And if you will obey my commandments which I command you this day, to love the Lord your God, and to serve him with all your heart and with all your soul, he will give the rain

for your land in its season, the early rain and the later rain, that you may gather in your grain and your wine and your oil. And he will give grass in your fields for your cattle, and you shall eat and be full. Take heed lest your heart be deceived, and you turn aside and serve other gods and worship them, and the anger of the Lord be kindled against you, and he shut up the heavens, so that there be no rain, and the land yield no fruit, and you perish quickly off the good land which the Lord gives you." (Deut. 11:13-17) The kind of lease-holders we are and have been will be taken into account when we appear before our Maker. For in truth the land around us becomes and is the reflection of man's soul. Overgrazed pastures and gutted fields reflect greedy, grasping spirits who have forgotten whence they came and who breathed the fullness of life into them. They have abdicated their God-given lordship of nature and gone chasing after false gods. As God's men and God's people we are responsible to Him for what we do with the glorious creation He has given us.

St. Paul put it in better words when he writes to the Christians at Rome, "For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God; for the creation was subjected to futility, not of its own will but by the will of him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and obtain the glorious liberty of the children of God." (Romans 8:19-21) St. Paul is saying that the Creation is waiting for men to enter fully into and accept the salvation God has given us and that when man does this all Creation will be freed from death and decay. He even suggests that God made man lord of Creation so that

it might serve as a reflection of the sickness of man's soul.

You and I know what has been done by our government and certain inspired individuals in the field of agriculture, yet none of the plans offered have solved our basic problem—the loss of our land resources. The USDA has printed thousands of bulletins, the Extension Service has demonstrated, the Experiment Stations have experimented, and the Soil Conservation Service has "put it on the ground" but still we have not solved the problem.

The root of the problem is the sickness of man's soul and until that sickness is cured we can only treat the symptoms of his disease. The cure is for man and all men to acknowledge God as their Creator—the Source of all our Bounty. We are dependent on Him for all that we have and at the same time we are stewards of all that He has given us. Once we recognize the root of our problem and get on with the job of conservation of souls then we can get on with the job of saving our land resources.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BUTLER, DOM CUTHBERT. 1919. *Benedictine Monachism*. Longmans, Green & Co., London.
- GOODELL, HENRY H. 1901. *The influence of the Monks in agriculture*. In 49th Annual Report, Massachusetts State Board of Agriculture.
- HANNAH, IAN C. 1925. *Christian Monasticism*. Macmillan Co., N. Y.
- HOLY BIBLE. 1946. Thomas Nelson & Sons. Revised standard version.
- LOWDERMILK, W. C. 1953. *Conquest of land through 7,000 years*. U. S. Dept. Agr., Agr. Inform. Bull. 99.
- O'CONNOR, JOHN G. 1921. *Monasticism and civilization*. P. J. Kenedy & Sons, N. Y.
- SIMKHOVITCH, VALDIMIR G. 1921. *Toward the understanding of Jesus and other historical studies*. Macmillan Co., N. Y.
- THOMPSON, JAMES W. 1928. *Economic and social history of the Middle Ages*. D. Appleton-Century Co., N. Y.
- and EDGAR N. JOHNSON. 1937. *An introduction to Medieval Europe*. W. W. Norton & Co., N. Y.