

The Economy of Cranes: A Minder-of-Marshes Reflects on Sandhills and Whoopers

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A few weeks after moving into our wetland home south of Madison in the Spring of 1972, I heard a loud wild-sounding call reverberating across the marsh. It was strangely familiar! Not my extensive work in the field, but from a recording of bird calls I had played repeatedly for a decade and more earlier as together with my students I learned by ear the birds of the midwestern U.S. The call, while familiar, came from a bird I had never seen. Not that I had not tried to find it! In the 1960s when we lived in eastern Michigan, I learned of a pair of them in the Waterloo Recreation Area west of Detroit, but I was unsuccessful in finding them. And Wisconsin? I knew that back in the 1930s—five years before I was born—that there were only 25 breeding pairs in the state. And now, some 40 years later at our new Wisconsin home, I heard it's marvelous call! It was an extremely power clangor—one that seemed to take charge of the great marsh. And it was one my family and I would continue to enjoy as it increasingly enlivened our marsh as their population increased. The marvelous wildness of their call would accompany our lives for decades to come on the glacial drumlin that holds us above water at the edge of the marsh! And what was it? It was the Sandhill Crane!

The decade of our move to Wisconsin—the 1970s—was remarkable for its remarkable innovative environmental legislation put into place by the U.S. Congress. Through it, the cranes and every other creature in America had been aided—especially by the U. S. Endangered Species Act, passed by both houses of Congress with but one dissenting vote, and signed into law by President Nixon in 1973. Its passage was not bi-partisan; it was *non-partisan*. Everyone knew that the great legacy of plant and animal species should be conserved as the heritage of our and future generations. The “name of the game” back then was pulling together to protect the blessed heritage of living creatures we believed we held in trust. We passed the ESA—and so many other pieces of environmental legislation—because we knew it was the right thing to do. Political ideology did not matter. Neither did the way we earned our livelihoods or practiced our beliefs. Even as the Sandhills were not officially endangered, they benefitted through preservation of wetland habitats of other species that were endangered. Wonderfully, the ESA was responsible for pulling back the Bald Eagle—our national symbol—and scores of other species, back from extinction's brink.

People across the land were inspired by the ESA and highly successful work in applying it across America. In concord, in my own rural Town of Dunn we created the thousand-acre Waubesa Wetlands Scientific Reserve to save wetland and upland habitats vital to Sandhill Cranes and to seventy other species of nesting birds, and also to preserve the remarkable system of layered peats—down to depths of 95 feet—that underlie the waving fabric of vibrant life that make up its vital green and black “skin.” Our townspeople chose the Sandhill Crane as the avian symbol of the Town of Dunn to accompany our development of a land ethic for our town and codified this ethic into laws and ordinances. It was a work of love for the environment and its creatures that effectively gave cranes and the other abundant life status as valued “citizens” across our 34square mile landscape.

Our cranes increased and multiplied from a single pair in 1972 to currently 10 pairs, fulfilling Waubesa Marsh with fruitful abundance. So much was the scope of the “completion” of this wetland system and our home within it, that in 2010 a pair emerged one day in late summer to introduce their nearly full-grown chick to our natural lawn, and then returned day after day to feast on its rich bounty. Wonderful turf comprising some 70 species as it grades into the surround marshland furnishes supports their and other species’ abundant life. Fulfilled are my marsh and I—fulfilled by their fruitful presence!

The Endangered Species Act, passed by all of us to assure an abundant and fruitful life for us and the other creatures came under serious threat in the mid-1990s. The “playing field” of American decision-making and law-making began to change dramatically, increasingly threatening the life of creatures we were protecting as part and parcel of our own lives and landscapes. Certain special interests—interests that became relentless in furthering themselves even at the loss of plant and animal lineages—exerted a concerted effort to divide the “playing field” of Congress (as they called it) and the state legislatures also, polarizing our legislatures into “two sides”—much like in the competitive team sports of football and baseball. These special interests were even successful in producing an annual book for college and university students entitled, *Taking Sides*, that furthered this polarization on environmental issues where accord, rather than discord was vital to life. I, and many other Americans, were surprised by this dramatic change of the “playing field.” And we soon learned that as regards our national natural legacy, we were now supposed to be “for” or “against” saving species—even those whose long-standing lineages were heading toward termination. Some of these interests even proposed that people were the most endangered species, telling us that we should be “against” the Endangered Species Act.

For me, as for a predecessor mine at Wisconsin, Aldo Leopold, the biblical book of Ezekiel spoke some powerful and ageless wisdom to this situation. For Aldo, a key passage was Ezekiel 34:18: “Is it not enough for you to drink the clear water, do you have to muddy the rest with your feet?” And for me, was Ezekiel 33:1: a call to those who watch from the towers on the city wall to sound the alarm when trouble is coming.

In the midst of all this, on January 30, 1996, I was quoted by *The New York Times*, as proclaiming,

“The Endangered Species Act is OUR Noah’s Ark;
Congress and special interests are trying to sink it!”

This report on page 13 of *The New York Times*, served as a prelude to my appearance on Fox Morning News in D.C. with a live cougar—borrowed from the Columbus, Ohio Zoo—to enable me to make a dramatic debut in the national media. I sounded the alarm—modeling my approach after the biblical prophet Ezekiel! And while a crane would perhaps have been a better companion, that was out of the question. However, the Columbus Zoo had a cougar—a cougar that could travel! And so it was that a cougar represented the endangered Florida Panther, and by extension all the other endangered species of the nation.

On a pleasant winter morning in 1996 I stood with a Fox Morning News coffee cup in my hand,

with the cougar and its two trainers nearby, looking through a window into the news studio. When the cougar and I were called in, the anchorman allowed us—the cougar and I—to open hearts and homes across Washington, D.C. to the plight of endangered species and the Endangered Species Act. Within an hour or so following, the cougar and I were rising by elevator from an underground government garage into the office of U.S. Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt who was in the midst of a news conference on the Endangered Species Act. As I entered his office, he turned the conference over to me and the cougar, and asked me to repeat the story for the media. Not much more than an hour later, I and my feline companion arrived at another news conference of even grander scale, and—speaking to an array of about 16 microphones, scores of cameras, and batteries of TV videographers at a large hotel near the White House—I told the story of Noah and the Ark, emphasizing the tremendous cost in time, resources, and reputation by faithful Noah. I estimate that the result was that my NYT message got out, powerfully, to between 30 and 40 million people.

“Maverick” as the cougar was named, cooperated famously—awing the Fox anchor who was left nearly speechless “by all those muscles beneath its fur”; impressing reporters with its predatory rise from the Secretary’s commode to bat at a cloud of fur-enclosed microphones stretched above the cougar on telescoping poles; posing marvelously for that AP wire service photo; and turning its open mouth to my hand as I placed it on his head, licking it affectionately as I concluded with:

“The Endangered Species Act is saving remarkable creatures like these!”

A short few hours later, congressmen Young and Pombo fired off a news release, charging that I had unfairly “changed the playing field.” And my phone rang nearly non-stop at my university office for the next three months. No matter what a caller’s religion, non-religion, or belief about Noah, they all knew the story of faithful Noah was true; “Even if it never happened, it still is a true story” said one caller. And the prophet Ezekiel was right too!

Ye, I had changed the playing field, as charged by Young and Pombo. Thanks to the good people that had orchestrated all of this, I was changing the playing field—from *competitive* play to *cooperative* play, from *political* play to *ethical* play. A Mennonite couple studying at the university taught us something of these two different kinds of play, when following the annual community Thanksgiving dinner we host at our home, suggested that we play the game of *Monopoly*. But it was *Monopoly* with a twist. We would play the game *cooperatively*! They explained how we could play so that all players would win. While competitive play might be best—as for example in collegiate football—cooperative play might also be best—as for the “Endangered Species Game.” Both types of play have their place no doubt. But cooperative play applied to the “economy of cranes” is redeeming, wholesome, and worthy. It helps us understand something of the meaning of life!

The Economy of Cranes

A new chapter opening recently on the great marsh when five Whooping Cranes—not Sandhills but Whoopers!—stopped nearby on their springtime journey north—to my greatest-ever surprise and delight! Over a span of four days, here was another of the world’s total of 15 species of

crane in my own rural town! The Sandhill, the most common of all. The Whooper, the rarest of all! Three miles south of Waubesa Wetlands they foraged in and around a small marsh, refueling before completing their trip to Necedah National Wildlife Refuge a short distance north. Unknown to them, they were benefitted locally from our Dunn Land Ethic and from the Town of Dunn Land Stewardship Plan; and they were benefitted nationally from the remarkable Endangered Species Act adopted some 35 years earlier in our nation's environmental decade. The Sandhills did not like the incursion of Whoopers as they returned to lands and marshes they once shared. I and my fellow citizens of the Town of Dunn, however, were thrilled! Like many people across the country and around the world, I have been watching—both anxiously and joyously—the tremendous efforts are being made to re-establish the Whooping Crane in North America. Wonderfully, for me personally, two Whooping Cranes hatched and fledged in the wild in 2010 in northern Wisconsin. Flying with their parents, Whooper chick W1-10 was observed at Necedah and W3-10 in Wood County. They were two of seven hatched in the wild that year, the largest number in recent history in my home state. These fledgling flights are fruitful outcomes that represent the immense efforts, commitment, passion, and compassion of determined and dedicated people working across the continent and through the decades. Of these, Ron Sauey and George Archibald first come to my mind, who as students at Cornell University, decided to pursue a life of meaning and dedicated service. They created the International Crane Foundation (ICF) in 1972, beginning in the buildings of a horse farm owned by Ron's parents. Rented for a dollar a year, this farm near Baraboo, Wisconsin anchored their dream of rescuing the whole family of cranes—the Gruidae—with its 15 species around the world.

I met with Ron and George at a Baraboo coffee shop in those early years of the horse farm, to hear of their vocational vision and passion, even as I helped develop the field of wetland ecology by initiating an on-going course in Field Investigations in Wetland Ecology taught for 12 to 15 University of Wisconsin graduate students. Taught by the marsh and me from my home on Waubesa Marsh every autumn, scores of these students went on to become wetland scientists. Among these were several from Southeast Asia who would become crane and wetland conservationists for their home countries and the wider world. Early on, however, tragedy struck, as Ron suffered a fatal cerebral hemorrhage. But his and George's dream did not die. A new place was developed as a permanent home for ICF. The original farm now has a wonderfully rich restored prairie named after Ron. Says George, "It's a living reminder of a wonderful friend, the dream we shared, and of the fragile and glorious Earth that gives life and responds so beautifully to restoration." And a dream it was! A dream come true! This focus of Ron's short life and George's long career has really effected a positive and inspiring change in the world of conservation!

Endangered species work, of course, is not only about individual species, but also about their habitats. The 15 species of crane and the rest of the millions of species on earth do not exist or flourish by themselves. And this is where my graduate wetlands research class and my training wetlands research and conservation scientists come in. Cranes are wholly dependent upon available habitat—not only diverse wetland ecosystems and associated uplands, but also migration paths that cross many landscapes, land uses, and international political boundaries. They depend upon the land ethics and land use policies of the places they inhabit and navigate.

And they are supported by conservationists and scientists who work to interweave cranes, wetlands, ethics, and policy into integrative education and understanding they convey to the wider populace.

An important realization from such integrative understanding is that every species—every endangered species—depends upon myriad connections they must make and maintain with the rest of the world, with the biosphere. Cranes, as for all other species, live within “the economy of the biosphere.” The “economy of cranes” necessarily is a “subsidiary” of the biospheric economy. Although little recognized, the “economy of people”—the human economy—necessarily is also a “subsidiary” of the biospheric economy. We all share and contribute to the same economy.

North America’s Whooping Crane is still “at the brink” of extinction, even as it has been recovering. Thanks to the diligence and dedication of thousands of conservationists and American and Canadian citizens, including their support of local and national legislation to conserve cranes and their habitats, there is good reason to be hopeful about the Whoopers’ future. Their population in the wild increased from 15 known birds in 1940-1941 to about 400 in 2010. In addition 175 are kept in captivity to augment natural breeding with captive breeding. Their status has improved greatly, even as it remains precarious. The lessons learned from its being pushed to the edge by unregulated hunting, loss of wetlands, inattention, and neglect are important ones that need to be etched in our memories and policies and practices in our stewardship of land and life. The lessons learned from wetland ecosystems are also to be so remembered and etched, even as these increase as we come to understand the immensely-important hydrologic and biotic functions of wetland systems and landscapes. While Whoopers still are easy targets for the shotgun and rifle, we have come finally to recognize them not as targets but as living jewels in the landscape, deserving of every effort by human beings to be faithful stewards of this remarkable living gift of creation.

What is a crane? What is a crane, in its 15 remarkable specific representations? A crane is a symbol of fulfillment and “completion” of their wetland habitats. Most importantly, it is a symbol of fulfillment and “completion” of an economy in which people who share and adjoin their habitats and flight-ways, whose cultures are enriched and inspired by their stately beauty, and who are deeply committed to living rightly on earth. Fulfilled are we by the fruitful presence of cranes in our lives and landscapes.

This is an invited chapter for an upcoming book on wildlife conservation with publication planned for 2016.