

“Eleanor and the Environment”

Good morning. It is a pleasure to speak to you today on a topic that not many have ever tackled. A topic that I wasn't sure even existed. But with a little research and peeling back the layers of Eleanor Roosevelt, we reveal a side and passion that not many have ever seen. We all know of Eleanor Roosevelt and her passions. We know of her commitment to civil rights, children's rights, women's rights, and humanitarian concerns, but not often is mentioned of Eleanor's love and compassion for the environment, nature, and the conservation of natural resources. When you use “Conservation” and “Roosevelt” in the same sentence you would most likely be talking about Franklin. He was a champion for the environment and used many methods and programs, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps, Tennessee Valley Authority, and others to promote conservation and the environment. But Eleanor had her own feelings about conservation and the environment. Not only was she concerned about the environmental impacts, but, more importantly, was hopeful that cooperation in our schools and public education would make aware the problems that existed, and also what we must do to fix them. She said, “conservation of land and conservation of people frequently go

hand in hand". She spelled out a lot of these feelings through her "My Day" columns.

Eleanor's My Day columns spanned the years between 1936 and 1962 running in syndication in newspapers around the country 6 days a week. These columns which in today's terms could be referred to as Eleanor's blog, gave her thoughts on a number of current events, issues, and challenges from the Great Depression and World War II eras.

In searching through these columns, we discover that Eleanor had a keen interest on what is going on in the natural world around us. I'll share some of Eleanor's feelings, thoughts, and insight on these topics by reading passages from a few of Eleanor's "My Day" columns.

October 22, 1955:

Eleanor talks about the upcoming 50th anniversary of the first conference of state governors ever held in the United States discussing how the public should become informed and involved in the conservation efforts. She writes:

"If this commemoration of the 50th year could draw attention to the very same things President Theodore Roosevelt drew attention to 50 years ago it would help us all enormously in preserving our natural resources and developing them to the maximum good for the people of our country. We can learn

much in our own country that will be useful in helping other nations of the world.

Surely, if President Theodore Roosevelt thought it essential with the advice and guidance of Gifford Pinchot, who was our foremost conservationist at that time, it must be doubly important today to study every means in the area of cooperation. States should cooperate with one another and with the Federal government. Our schools should cooperate by education of our children in the value of our natural resources and in ways and means to preserve them and not to exploit them.

Also in every possible way the greatest number of people that can be reached should be reached with the story of how soil erosion and wasteful use of water may eventually mean the deterioration of the whole continent.

Of late years it has seemed to me that the general public has become apathetic about conservation in general. They want to use our national parks as playgrounds but they think they can be kept up without any worry on our part as to whether an appropriation is passed that is adequate to keep them up”.

August 11, 1952:

“Of special interest to me is an international venture called "The International Union for the Protection of Nature." It is

actually a U.N. program through its connection with UNESCO, and appeals to me particularly because it can develop the interest of the farmer and nature lover throughout the world to joint cooperation. It is composed of "governments, international organizations and organizations within nations all concerned with the conservation of renewable natural resources."

My husband was enormously interested in awakening our people to the conservation of our own natural resources. We know today, however, that it is not enough to preserve our own resources. We are all dependent on each other, and the waste of natural resources anywhere is important to all of us. In many areas of the world very little has been done to bring the people to an understanding of how important it is to preserve wildlife, to guard the top soil of a nation, as well as its waters and forests. This requires legislation and, very often, the education of children and adults in appreciation of their natural environment so that they will not endanger by their actions the preservation of their natural resources.

It frequently means we must enter into international agreements. I think this organization should get the support of farm and forestry organizations in our country, as well as all the other organizations that touch on conservation, since what we do alone is not sufficient to protect us".

Started in 1948, The International Union for the Protection of Nature, still active and currently called The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), is an international organization working in the field of nature conservation and sustainable use of natural resources. It is involved in data gathering and analysis, research, field projects, advocacy, lobbying and education. IUCN's mission is to "influence, encourage and assist societies throughout the world to conserve nature and to ensure that any use of natural resources is equitable and ecologically sustainable."

She infers that conservation of natural resources starts at home, but often spreads across borders because of international concerns that affect the environment.

April 16, 1953:

"Ever since the days when my uncle, Theodore Roosevelt, was President I have been hearing about the need for the conservation of our natural resources. I have been impressed by the importance of the government owning a sufficient amount of these resources to conserve them for the people as a whole to profit from them.

At the present time, however, there seems to be a trend toward wrecking our Federal policy of conservation.

Personally, I believe conservation of all natural resources is somewhat like foreign policy. It cuts across party lines; it is of

interest to the people as a whole, regardless of politics. Therefore, I want to bring to the attention of the people certain things that seem to me a dangerous trend today. We see in the papers the announcement that the time has come to return all forest preserves and national parks to the states, and that might subsequently mean, in part at least, to private ownership. Our forests in strategic areas should be controlled by the Federal government, for water supplies, for one thing, are affected by forests. The land owned by the government can be systematically forested and replanted and we are then sure of a continual flow of timber. This we can never be sure of in areas under private ownership, and even certain states have not shown too much concern about conservation of their forests or of wildlife”.

November 15, 1947:

“In the West, there is ever-increasing pressure brought by livestock interests to take over land now administered under our conservation policy. Specifically, there is an attempt to abolish the Jackson Hole National Monument, which is the scenic wildlife area near Grand Teton National Park in Wyoming. The aim is first to turn such lands over to the states, and then pressure would be brought upon the states to turn them over to the stock men. The attack is made on national forests, national parks and monuments and grazing lands. If

successful, it would set back our whole conservation gains made in the past decade.

These attacks on conservation are very shortsighted. The very interests who believe they would gain would lose in the end. But conservation is no different from any other situation in which personal interests are involved. As individuals, we are so apt to see only the immediate results and not to realize what will happen to us in the long run”.

This column illustrates Eleanors thoughts on looking not only to what is happening now, but also to see what environmental impacts todays actions would have in the future. This was very forward thinking at the time.

These are just a few of the thousands of “My Day” columns. Eleanor Roosevelt was a prolific activist championing the causes that sometimes seemed too few others were interested in. But as we delve deeper into who Eleanor Roosevelt was, we start to see a deeper appreciation in the world around her. Not just the people or the places, but the ecological issues, environmental concerns, and natural features that make up the world, as well as what we, as humans can learn from nature. A passage from August of 1939 gives us this insight. “Our purple loosestrife is almost gone, but is fading very beautifully, giving the green grass across our little pond a lovely rosy tinge. We humans should take lessons from nature and fade as gracefully.

Perhaps we cling too much to the years of full bloom. If you fade gracefully, you may be just as attractive. Our loosestrife certainly is". It is fascinating for me to discover this "new" side of Mrs. Roosevelt. It's a side of Eleanor Roosevelt that you, being here to participate in this conference, can appreciate more than most. She said, "the measures taken for conservation in the early days now become more urgent and more comprehensive, since we are no longer a pioneer country but one which must conserve and rebuild its natural resources". I hope that we all can continue to be the voice for Eleanor Roosevelt, and carry forth her environmental messages and hopes as we head towards the future. From Eleanor Roosevelt and her April 26, 1945 "My Day" column, "Perhaps nature is our best assurance of immortality".



