

## FEATURE

AMERICA'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO PRIVATE CONSERVATION AND PRIVATE STEWARDSHIP GROWS OUT OF THE PENCHANT BY AMERICANS TO UNDERTAKE AND FORM VOLUNTARY ASSOCIATIONS. ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, IN HIS DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, SINGLED OUT THIS CHARACTERISTIC OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE AS ONE OF THE MOST STRIKING THINGS THAT SEPARATED THEM FROM THE PEOPLE OF THE OLD WORLD.

"IN NO COUNTRY IN THE WORLD HAS THE PRINCIPLE OF ASSOCIATION BEEN MORE SUCCESSFULLY USED OR APPLIED TO A GREATER MULTITUDE OF OBJECTS THAN IN AMERICA," OBSERVED DE TOCQUEVILLE. "AMERICANS OF ALL AGES, ALL CONDITIONS, AND ALL DISPOSITIONS CONSTANTLY FORM ASSOCIATIONS... TO GIVE ENTERTAINMENTS, TO FOUND SEMINARIES, TO BUILD INNS, TO CONSTRUCT CHURCHES, TO DIFFUSE BOOKS, TO SEND MISSIONARIES TO THE ANTIPODES; IN THIS MANNER THEY FOUND HOSPITALS, PRISONS AND SCHOOLS. IF IT IS PROPOSED TO INCULCATE SOME TRUTH OR TO FOSTER SOME FEELING BY THE ENCOURAGEMENT OF A GREAT EXAMPLE, THEY FORM A SOCIETY. WHEREVER AT THE HEAD OF SOME NEW UNDERTAKING YOU SEE THE GOVERNMENT IN FRANCE, OR A MAN OF RANK IN ENGLAND, IN THE UNITED STATES YOU WILL BE SURE TO FIND AN ASSOCIATION."

## THE INSIDER

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This analysis was based on de Tocqueville's observations of America in the 1830s, which of course predated the conservation crisis that Americans began to recognize in the 1880s. Americans naturally utilized a similar approach for the protection of wildlife and habitat that were vanishing. Sportsmen and women and outdoors advocates, who had seen firsthand the vast flocks and herds slowly diminish in numbers, created the first private, voluntary associations to attempt to stem and reverse the tide.

While many of these people and organizations lobbied for laws to protect wildlife and for changes in hunting seasons, methods, and bag limits, most of them engaged in private action long before government became aware of the problems, and certainly before public opinion made it politically feasible for government to act.

Efforts to protect songbirds and plume birds from slaughter for the millinery trade were

Audubon wardens to protect their sanctuaries.

Both before and after Audubon, groups of concerned citizens formed voluntary associations to preserve whatever environmental or wildlife amenities they valued. In the Dust Bowl years of the 1930s, Americans discovered that the government's encouragement of settlement of the Great Plains had destroyed the wetlands and prairie potholes that were nesting habitat for much of the nation's waterfowl. Soon sportsmen, hunters, biologists, and conservationists formed a number of organizations to respond to the crisis.

Surely the most important conservation association formed during the Dust Bowl period was Ducks Unlimited (DU). DU undertook private action to save the most important waterfowl nesting habitat, the pothole wetlands of the Canadian prairie

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# PRIVATE CONSERVATION: A TOCQUEVILLIAN TRADITION

*by R.J. Smith*

largely responsible for the creation of a series of Audubon societies from about 1885 on, which led to the creation of the National Association of Audubon Societies in 1905. Audubon immediately took action to educate the public on the need to stop the slaughter and acted to replace the traditional Christmas "side hunts" in which groups of men and boys went afield to see who could bag the largest numbers of birds and mammals. In its place they promoted the Christmas Bird Count, in which people went afield to count all the birds they could find within a prescribed area. These Christmas Counts provide the longest continuous database of bird populations in existence.

Audubon hired biologists to locate the last remaining nesting colonies of bird species especially subject to the gunners' efforts. They purchased many of these sites as private sanctuaries and still own them today. They hired private

provinces. And they did it the old-fashioned way. They raised money and leased the wetlands—paying farmers not to put waterfowl habitat to the plow.

Ducks Unlimited proved to be one of the most successful examples of private conservation anywhere, and it spawned fellow DUs in countries around the world. Saving wetlands for the selfish desire for more ducks for hunting is sometimes criticized as 'impure' but it also save those wetlands for hundreds of other species. If DU saves a marsh for duck habitat, that marsh is also saved for herons, rails, blackbirds and sparrows; for snakes, frogs, salamanders, scores of dragonflies, and hundreds of invertebrates. Thus, DU happily provides public environmental amenities at private expense.

DU even helped answer an old conundrum in economics—the free-rider problem. Private citizens, economists have argued, won't

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undertake expensive activities that provide benefits to the public at large if they cannot charge the public. But it turns out that under the driving force of voluntary associations and private conservation, the free-rider problem is far more of a problem for economists than for duck hunters. For the past six decades the nation's waterfowl hunters have been willing to raise tens of millions of dollars annually to save wetlands so that they would have a chance to see and perhaps shoot more ducks each fall. And it has been totally immaterial to DU's membership that millions of birdwatchers, naturalists, fisherman, photographers, and the general public have been able to benefit at no cost. It's simply one of the many benefits of living in a free society based upon private property, voluntary associations, and voluntary actions.

- **Robert J. Smith** is an Associated Scholar and Senior Environmental Scholar at the Competitive Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC. He also serves as senior scholar at CEI's Center for Private Conservation (CPC).

**The Center for Private Conservation**

The Center for Private Conservation (CPC) was created in 1995 to promote and acknowledge voluntary efforts to advance environmental objectives. The CPC has taken the important role of researching, analyzing and promoting the public benefits of private conservation and stewardship in the United States and around the world.

The activities of private individuals, associations and organizations to protect environmental values are as diverse as they are widespread. Ordinary people, young and old, driven by motives ranging from profit to a simple love of their natural heritage, are ensuring that nature is well protected at their own expense, and often, on their own land.

A vineyard owner transforms almost 100 acres of his land into wetlands for waterfowl and other species. Ranchers in Texas devote themselves to protecting rare game species. Oyster growers in Washington state fight for clean water to protect their oysters. A garden club works to preserve rare and endangered flowers. Private landowners around the world protect everything from small areas of city green to a wildlife reserve covering almost one million acres.

As impressive as these efforts are, they all too often receive scant attention. Few realize that private efforts are largely responsible for the magnificent return of the once endangered wood duck and the gradual recovery of the once-common American chestnut tree. Outdoor enthusiasts enjoy viewing the abundance of wildlife on wetlands, but are often unaware just how many wetlands have been created or protected by concerned private landowners or associations who share a love of the environment.

Tragically, the idea that government initiative, regulation, and ownership of land are the only options for environmental protection remains a common misconception. However, this view is beginning to change as the realization grows that regulatory approaches to conservation may not be the best option. And new approaches to environmental policy that complement, or even replace, the current regulatory solutions will depend on the creativity and ingenuity of private stewards.

**Recommended Resources**

**New Environmentalism**

<http://www.techcentralstation.com/Environment.asp>

**Square One**

<http://www.perc.org/sqone.htm>

Square One is a newsletter with stories about people getting on with the job of environmental protection, and doing it with as little rigmarole, red tape, and regulation as is humanly possible.

**American Fisheries Society**

<http://www.fisheries.org>

The mission of the American Fisheries Society is to improve the conservation and sustainability of fishery resources and aquatic ecosystems by advancing fisheries and aquatic science and promoting the development of fisheries professionals.