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Proper ethics, education vital parts of conservation



"In the end, when all the accounting is done, conservation will boil down to a decision of ethics."

— Edward O. Wilson

Former Wisconsin Sen. Gaylord Nelson once said the most serious environmental crisis facing us is a lack of a conservation ethics in our culture.

"If we were guided by a conservative ethic, we would never have done all of the foolish things we've done," he said. "We wouldn't have ruined the Everglades.... We wouldn't have drained and continue to drain half the wetlands of America. We wouldn't be polluting the ocean estuaries ... we wouldn't be eroding our soil base which sustains us. Raising a generation with a conservation ethic is the most important thing that we, in my judgment, can do."

Our ethics determine how we use our natural resources. They determine whether we practice catch-and-release fishing by gently releasing our catch into the water, or by violently throwing it across the water. Our ethics determine whether we recycle or simply throw everything into the trash because it's easier.

A lack of education usually is at the root of poor ethics. There is an urgent need for people to educate themselves about environmental problems and how their actions affect the environment.

Environment education can resolve the ethical crisis that Nelson spoke about. Unfortunately, our society typically tries to solve ethics cri-

ses with legislation instead of education. Laws do not make ethics. If they did, there would be no fraud, theft or murders today.

"None of us wishes to be unethical. We see ourselves as good people with good intentions. None of us, including exploiters, sees ourselves as harming the outdoors," says Joe Barnes, president of the Missouri chapter of the Izaak Walton League.

"The key to the establishment of outdoor ethics is education. When we take our children and other young people fishing or hunting, or hiking or camping, it is not enough to expose them to the essential skills.... We also have a responsibility to impart a proper and well-informed understanding of the impact of their behaviors in the outdoors."

Barnes notes that the definition of good ethics changes as we gain knowledge about our impact on the environment. "If I were to educate youth based on what I was taught as a child, I would poorly serve their needs. If I were to behave in the outdoors by what I learned as a child, today I would be practicing poor outdoor ethics."

Experiencing nature and being outdoors teach us the value of nature and how our actions affect the environment. Unfortunately, many children and young adults do not experience nature directly. Instead, they "experience" nature through television.

"Have you seen the Sony TV ad

where the family runs up to the television set at the edge of the Grand Canyon and ignores the real thing for the vicarious electronic experience?" writes Bob Lindholm, a well-known Missouri conservationist and photographer, in a recent article on outdoor ethics. "This ad points to the problem that we may become so involved in the vicarious existence of an electronic world which debases the natural world, that we, like the family on the rim of the canyon do not realize the greater value of the real thing, and therefore won't work to protect it."

"Those who live on a vicarious life vis-a-vis the wild lands do not realize what is happening to them. And there are those in our world who know this, and are working to exploit natural resources that are needed for challenge and the human spirit in the name of unreasonable profit.... This way, they hope their kids won't ever be aware of what is being destroyed, and so won't miss them."

We must all become educated about the environmental consequences of our actions. And we must know firsthand the many values of nature.

Our ethics will determine whether we choose to save the earth and its creatures or waste it away.

The Izaak Walton League of America has an outdoor ethics program designed for outdoor recreationists. For more information, write the Greater Ozarks Chapter — IWLA, PO Box 494, Moberly, Mo., 65270-0494.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.