

"A PLAN TO SAVE OUR DUCKS"

My message is directed to the people who are worried by the long continued decline in waterfowl population. The determination of policies pursued to end and reverse the decline have been in the hands of people who blame the loss of habitat for the continued decline. I do not agree with them.

As a student of this problem and as the younger brother of Aldo Leopold, I believe I am entitled to a hearing. I will quote Aldo Leopold's 'Game Management' and his biography 'Aldo Leopold, His Life and Mark' by Curt Meine, based on nearly four years of intensive work. The present status of Aldo is represented by an editorial in the book review section of the New York Times of February 28th, which I quote, "Aldo emerges as leader of this 20th century of American conservation! That's considerable praise." Curt Meine says that Aldo was an exceptionally good man, a devoted husband and father, a public spirited citizen, a conscientious official and generous teacher.

Clearly the loss of habitat has to some degree affected the population, but not enough to account for the heavy loss, especially in view of the great effort that has been made to build up habitat.

I believe that the reduction of waterfowl numbers has even exceeded the long term loss of nesting habitat. This premise is supported by reports of professional observers who have found no areas where nesters are in crowded numbers, but in the opposite situation of sparsely occupied areas.

On the 1946 opening day Aldo and Estell were at the shack. They saw only two ducks and heard only four shots. Reports from reliable sources describe a dismal situation as to ducks. The figures substantiate the worst fears of Albert Hochbaum and other waterfowl experts. The population was down and Ducks Unlimited's public relations department had plainly gone overboard in their optimistic assessments.

Going to D.U.'s constant plea for higher bag limits and longer seasons, Leopold harshly reviewed S. Kip Farrington's book "The Ducks Came Back; The Story of D.U. in the Journal of Wildlife Management." Farrington painted a glowing picture of the duck situation, down playing the effects of hunting, and heaping praise on D.U. At this time Aldo considered D.U. too important an undertaking to fall victim to extravagant claims and outmoded exaggerations. He dismissed the book as "a charming fantasy." Leopold had come near resigning, but he held off.

The duck season at Delta opened three weeks before Wisconsin. The result was an American invasion of Manitoba. Al Hochbaum, after interviewing many of the hunters and tallying their bags, said "Most of the men belonged to D.U. and most of them believed that their D.U. fees entitled them to do just about what they wanted with ducks. They actually believe they have paid for what they shoot and more."

This was Al Hochbaum's report to Aldo. He decried the trend toward over-shooting and made the blunt prediction, quote "In terms of history," he said, "this can't last long. The days of lush shooting on the prairie are numbered. If duck hunting, particularly of diving ducks, continues along the present plan, regardless of what we do to maintain land and marsh, breeding stock will continue to decline." No one denied the fact that ducks were down, nor that over shooting was the main reason.

Another tenet in D.U.'s plea for liberal hunting rules is based on their belief that waterfowl annually produce a huntable surplus of young which, if not taken by man, will fall prey to natural predators. Aldo in "Game Management" on Page 500 describes Saturation Point or Carrying Capacity as it applied to species living on a very limited range, never to a migrating species.

On July 8th Aldo wrote to M. W. Smith, President of D.U. "The present waterfowl crisis is too close to my heart, and I cannot support any organization that withholds the truth about it. This then is my withdrawal of my membership in and moral support of Ducks Unlimited." Leopold still had many good friends in D.U. and voiced support for its overall goals, but until he and his informants were proven wrong he refused to renew his membership. They never were, and he never did.

In Aldo's book on Game Management, he describes the theory of "factors" and its relation to populations of game. On Pages 38 through 39 he describes the essence of his thinking.

Population increase of many game species is controlled by what he calls "factors." A factor exerts pressure on a species that results in a downward effect on the existing numbers of that species. "A limiting factor" is one which must be removed first and is the one to which a given amount of pressure will pay the highest return under conditions as they exist.

He goes on to say that the successful practice of Game Management will be judged by ability to determine the actual Limiting Factor from among the number of factors. Then knowing when to drop the original limiting factor, which has been reduced to lesser importance, and to put effort on the control of the new limiting factor and so on down the line.

Law enforcement officers from some sections say we are experiencing heavy illegal hunting losses. Enforcement is difficult at best, but look at what a help it would be to those officers if any shotgun discharged in a marsh or on a lake was an illegal shot. A closed season would provide this situation.

Another loss, now legal is a byproduct of the operation of today's refuges. Waterfowl are concentrated in them, but unfortunately most refuges do not offer sufficient food, so hunger driven birds fly elsewhere to feed and when they do they have to run the gauntlet of commercial hunting blinds where many are killed and crippling losses are too high.

From the evidence as I interpret it, the present limiting factor is scarcity of live birds arriving in the nesting areas each season. An old proverb states "only living ducks can hatch and produce young ducks."

So where do we turn for a competent answer? Until someone comes along with a better answer, I will say that kill by mankind is the sensible solution.

Our F&WS has the power to determine season length, bag limit, and even closure. A very unpopular solution to those who are willing to take a chance on the eventual destruction of waterfowl in shootable numbers in the near future. Surely we have heard the old proverb about the man who killed the goose that layed the golden eggs and soon found himself with neither eggs nor goose to lay them.

Frederic Leopold