

George L. Knapp: The Other Side of Conservation (1910)

For some years past, the reading public has been treated to fervid and extended eulogies of a policy which the eulogists call the "conservation of our natural resources." In behalf of this so-called "conservation," the finest press bureau in the world has labored with zeal quite unhampered by any considerations of fact or logic; and has shown its understanding of practical psychology by appealing, not to popular reason, but to popular fears. We are told by this press bureau that our natural resources are being wasted in the most wanton and criminal style; wasted, apparently, for the sheer joy of wasting. We are told that our forests are being cut at a rate which will soon leave us a land without trees; and Nineveh, and Tyre, and any other place far enough away are cited to prove that a land without trees is foredoomed to be a land without civilization. We are told that our coal-mines would be exhausted within a century; that our iron ores are going to the blast-furnace at a rate which will send us back to the Stone Age within the lifetime of the men who read the fearsome prophecy. In short, we are assured that every resource capable of exhaustion is being exhausted; and that the resource which can not be exhausted is being monopolized...

I propose to speak for those exiles in sin who hold that a large part of the present "conservation" movement is unadulterated humbug. That the modern Jeremiahs are as sincere as was the older one, I do not question. But I count their prophecies to be baseless vaporings, and their vaunted remedy worse than the fancied disease. I am one who can see no warrant of law, of justice, nor of necessity for that wholesale reversal of our traditional policy which the advocates of "conservation" demand. I am one who does not shiver for the future at the sight of a load of coal, nor view the steel mill as the arch-robber of posterity. I am one who does not believe in a power trust, past, present, or to come; and who, if he were a capitalist seeking to form a trust, would ask nothing better than just the present conservation scheme to help him. I believe that a government bureau is the worst imaginable landlord; and that its essential nature is not changed by giving it a high-sounding name, and decking it with homage halos.

...There is just one heritage which I am anxious to transmit to my children and to their children's children—the heritage of personal liberty, of free individual action, of "leave it to live by no man's leave underneath the law." And I know of no way to secure that heritage save to sharply challenge and relentlessly fight every bureaucratic invasion of local and individual rights, no matter how friendly the mottoes on the invading banners.