

Remarks on Signing the Annual Report of the Council on Environmental Quality

July 11, 1984

Thank you all. We did pick a warm day for this, didn't we? Alan Hill and William Mills and Jacqueline Schafer, and friends of America's natural heritage, thank you for coming here today.

It's most fitting that we sign the 14th annual report of the Council on Environmental Quality on Theodore Roosevelt Island.

One of ours -- [referring to the noise made by an airplane taking off from Washington National Airport]? [Laughter]

This 88-acre preserve is a living memorial to a unique leader of this nation, a man with great personal strengths of vision and energy and conviction, who rallied the American people to the protection and preservation of its natural resources.

When Teddy Roosevelt became President, our land, forests, and wildlife had been exploited for more than a hundred years. Some four-fifths of our prime forests had been leveled. Untold acres of rich farmland had been washed away and lost in river mudflats. Wilderness areas were unprotected; wildlife had been destroyed in appalling numbers; and some native wildlife species had been totally destroyed. But the consequences of these lost resources had not yet dawned on the public conscience. Well, President Teddy Roosevelt fired the imagination of the American people, shook our nation from its lethargy, and began to rescue the public domain.

The U.S. Forest Service was created; more than 243 million acres were reserved for conservation; 55 bird and game refuges and 5 national parks were established. The Inland Waterways Commission was created to redeem water power for public use. The Antiquities Act authorized preservation of cultural and historical landmarks for the benefit of future generations.

President Roosevelt reached the American conscience, and conservation and environmental protection became an inseparable part of the American creed. He told us, ``The nation behaves well if it treats the natural resources as assets which it must turn over to the next generation increased and not impaired in value."''

Well, these words must remain an inspiration to all of us, an obligation to everyone charged with the stewardship of our natural resources. The challenges we face today are both numerous and complex.

As you know, during the sixties and seventies many beneficial advances in science, technology, and economic development produced new and unwelcome threats to our environment and the quality of life. And once again, America's conscience was deeply touched. A new and vigorous environmental movement burst forth across

our country. The American people joined together in a great national effort to protect the promise of our future by conserving the rich beauty and bounty of our heritage. As a result, our air and water quality is far better today than it's been in many years. We've reclaimed rivers and wilderness areas that were gravely threatened.

We can all be proud of the advances that have been made during this rebirth of the environmental movement. As the 14th annual report on the Council on Environmental Quality makes clear, we're making solid progress protecting and improving the quality of America's air, land, and water resources.

Now, some are ignoring the progress that we've made in just the last few years in this. But it has continued, and it has been made. By almost any measure, the air is cleaner now than it was when the Clean Air Act was passed 14 years ago. And we achieved this success despite a 60-percent increase in coal-fired electric generating capacity and a 40-percent increase in the number of miles traveled by cars and trucks.

We've also seen improvement in the quality of surface water all across the country. And sometimes it still gets noisy out here -- [referring to the noise from another airplane taking off from the airport].

The number of people that are served by wastewater treatment systems has nearly doubled just since 1970. And salmon, trout, and other species of fish are returning to rivers where they hadn't been seen for generations. Just down the river from here, around Haines Point, there used to be signs that warned potential swimmers and boaters of the dangers of the polluted waters of the Potomac. Well, today pollution warning signs are gone, and the fish have returned. And this grand old river is making a long overdue comeback.

But we have much work yet to do. Even as many environmental problems have been brought under control, new ones have been detected. And all the while the growth and shifts of population, economic expansion, and the development of new industries will intensify the competing demands on our national resources.

If we've learned any lessons during the past few decades, perhaps the most important is that preservation of our environment is not a partisan challenge; it's common sense. Our physical health, our social happiness, and our economic well-being will be sustained only by all of us working in partnership as thoughtful, effective stewards of our natural resources.

We must and will be sensitive to the delicate balance of our ecosystems, the preservation of endangered species, and the protection of our wilderness lands. We must and will be aware of the need for conservation, conscious of the irreversible harm we can do to our natural heritage, and determined to avoid the waste of our resources and the destruction of the ecological systems on which these precious resources are based.

We must and will be responsible to future generations, but at the same time let us remember that quality of life means more than protection and preservation. As Teddy Roosevelt put it, ``Conservation means development as much as it does protection." Quality of life also means a good job, a decent place to live, accommodation for a growing population, and the continued economic and technological development essential to our standard of living, which is the envy of the whole world.

We can best serve the interests of the American people and generations yet to come by seeking to harmonize competing interests and to reconcile legitimate social goals. And in doing these things, we'll be a trusted friend to both the environment and to the people.

And now I'm going to move over to that table and sign the 14th annual environmental report. But before I do, I want to thank Alan Hill, the Chairman of the Council on Environmental Quality, and all the other people who took part in preparing this environmental report. Your good efforts, together with a national spirit of cooperation, will help us move forward toward the goals that we all want -- the preservation of America's natural beauty, the protection and conservation of her natural resources, and a future that is economically prosperous, environmentally safe, and scenically beautiful.

So, thank you, and God bless you all.

Note: The President spoke at 1:40 p.m. on Theodore Roosevelt Island.