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A Tribute: Ansel Adams

Few individuals have matched Ansel Adams' profound and wide-reaching impact on the American public's attitude toward conservation. Through his writings and speeches, and most importantly through the testimony of his photographs, Adams promoted the preservation of "those qualities and benefits only the earth can provide for now and in the future."¹ His message reached millions of people, awakening them to the beauty of nature and impressing upon them the importance of protecting our few remaining areas of pristine wilderness.

Ecology Law Quarterly recently completed its first sequence of covers featuring Ansel Adams' photographs, chosen to represent the wide range of ecosystems found throughout the United States. In memory of Ansel Easton Adams, who passed away the evening of Easter Sunday, April 22, 1984; in thanks to the Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust for their permission to use his photographs for our cover; and in celebration of the publication of *Ansel Adams: An Autobiography*, the *Quarterly* offers this tribute to a true pioneer in the fields of conservation and photography.

In the *Autobiography*, Adams primarily recalls the people who affected his life, those with whom he had meaningful personal and professional relationships. It is apparent that these relationships were the most treasured memories Adams held, and their depiction serves as the backdrop for Adams' reflections on political and environmental philosophy as well as his occasional passages explaining the technical aspects of making and processing photographs.

Adams was the only son of Charles and Olive Adams, a well-to-do San Francisco couple, and was raised in a house among the sand dunes beyond the Golden Gate.² As a sickly, hyperactive, but unusually intelligent child, Adams was ill-suited to the institutional setting of the schoolroom. Recognizing this, his father removed him from formal schooling, and Adams continued his education at home under his father's guidance.³ When Charles Adams recognized that his son had considerable musical talent, he arranged for formal piano training. The young Adams developed into an accomplished pianist, with an unusually beautiful touch and sense of musical quality.⁴ It was through music that Adams

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1. A. ADAMS & M. ALINDER, ANSEL ADAMS: AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY 35 (1985) [hereinafter AUTOBIOGRAPHY].

2. *Id.* at 4-5.

3. *Id.* at 16-17.

4. *Id.* at 23-28.

first began to apprehend the potential for emotional expression through art—a potential he would later realize with photography. However, he did not pursue a musical career because he felt that he could achieve little notice as a concert pianist and that a piano career would be limited to the teaching and performing of a restricted repertoire.⁵

Adams gained an early appreciation for nature during his childhood among the dunes of the Golden Gate and through family outings to the mountains of Santa Cruz and the lush forests of Puget Sound.⁶ Of all his family excursions, a trip to Yosemite in the summer of 1916 had the most profound influence on the young Adams.

We finally emerged at Valley View—the splendor of Yosemite burst upon us and it *was* glorious. Little clouds were gathering in the sky above the granite cliffs, and the mists of Bridal Veil Fall shimmered in the sun One wonder after another descended upon us; I recall not only the colossal but the little things: the grasses and ferns, cool atriums of the forest. The river was mostly quiet and greenish-deep; Sentinel Fall and Yosemite Falls were booming in early summer flood, and many small shining cascades threaded the cliffs. There was light everywhere!⁷

His love affair with the Sierra, particularly the Yosemite Valley, would continue throughout Adams' life and serve as the foundation of his artistic and conservationist contributions.

Adams' interest in Yosemite compelled him to return to the Sierra high country at every opportunity. Having been given a Box Brownie camera during his first Yosemite visit, he developed a deep interest in the craft of photography.⁸ He began his education in the photographic process while working for a San Francisco photo-finisher and expanded on this technical training through frequent expeditions into the Sierra.⁹ In 1920, Adams had his first official contact with the Sierra Club when he was hired as custodian of the Club's Yosemite headquarters, a job he held for five years.¹⁰

The Sierra Club is the environmental organization with which Adams is most often popularly associated. The Sierra Club printed Adams' first published photograph in its *Bulletin* in 1922.¹¹ Following his first post as lodge custodian, Adams progressed to numerous other Club capacities, including manager of Club outings, official Club photographer, frequent author of articles for the *Bulletin*, and elected member of the

5. *Id.* at 24, 29.

6. *Id.* at 50.

7. *Id.* at 52-53.

8. *Id.* at 53.

9. *Id.* at 54-57, 60.

10. *Id.* at 57.

11. Telephone interview with Mary Alinder, Ansel Adams Publishing Rights Trust (Mar. 19, 1987); see SIERRA CLUB BULL., Jan. 1922, plates LXXV & XCI.

Board of Directors in 1934.¹² He considered his Board membership one of the most important activities of his life.¹³ Adams wrote of the Club's great political impact: "Its emphasis has changed from a direct American conservation outlook to an inclusive sweep of environmental problems. It is difficult to imagine what the conservation movement would have been without its presence. The good that it has done can never be fully measured."¹⁴

Adams served continuously on the Board until resigning in 1971, at the age of sixty-nine, to hand the reins to new blood in the Club membership with the skills to meet the diverse demands on the organization.¹⁵ Following his departure from the Sierra Club, Adams continued his conservation activism through, among other activities, membership in the Wilderness Society,¹⁶ service as vice president of the Big Sur Foundation,¹⁷ and close contacts with Interior Department and Park Service officials.¹⁸

Adams' strong interest in resource preservation is apparent throughout the *Autobiography*. He takes every opportunity to stress his dominant theme of environmental protection by lamenting the various instances, large and small, of resource depletion and disrespect for the "Natural Scene" that he noted throughout his career. The following specific examples discussed in the *Autobiography* indicate the wide range of Adams' environmental concerns: The "environmental disaster" of the Los Angeles Aqueduct and its effect on Mono Lake;¹⁹ the "unacceptable mining exploitation" of Death Valley and other fragile areas under the Mineral Rights Act of 1872;²⁰ the inability of wilderness area resources to support the demands of the growing number of people seeking a wilderness experience;²¹ the depletion of what were previously thought to be inexhaustible forest resources in the Santa Cruz Mountains;²² the drilling of expansion-bolt holes by rock climbers in the pristine flanks of El Capitan and Half Dome;²³ and the trend toward commercialization, most notably in the sale of curios, in the National Parks.²⁴

Although he was involved in conservation matters of a national scope, both on a personal level and as a member of national environmen-

12. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *supra* note 1, at 140-43, 146.

13. *Id.* at 146.

14. *Id.* at 156.

15. *Id.* at 154.

16. *Id.* at 156-57.

17. *Id.* at 354.

18. *Id. passim.*

19. *Id.* at 259.

20. *Id.* at 246.

21. *Id.* at 60.

22. *Id.* at 32.

23. *Id.* at 57.

24. *Id.* at 100-03.

tal organizations, Adams' most rewarding and effective advocacy was directed towards preserving specific wilderness regions in the western United States. In 1936, the Sierra Club chose Adams as its representative to a national and state parks conference in Washington that was to be attended by the Secretaries of the Interior and Agriculture.²⁵ The Club wanted Adams to lobby for the establishment of Kings Canyon National Park and felt that his photographs of the area would prove to the legislators the unique beauty of the area. The use of photographs as a lobbying tool had been effective earlier in the establishment of Yellowstone as the first national park and Yosemite as a state park.²⁶ Adams met with the heads of the National Park Service and Forest Service as well as key members of Congress, and his "unsophisticated presentation of photographs, coupled with appropriately righteous rhetoric, stirred considerable attention in Congress for [the] cause."²⁷ Adams' efforts prompted the energetic support of Secretary of the Interior Ickes and President Roosevelt, and several years later the Kings Canyon National Park bill was passed.²⁸

When the National Park Service proposed an improved safety route for the Tioga Road through the high country of Yosemite in 1958, Adams objected strenuously to the plan to dynamite a three-mile stretch through a beautiful, glacially polished granite dome in the Tenaya Lake area.²⁹ Considering this area "perhaps the finest landscape of its kind in the Sierra,"³⁰ Adams personally lobbied the Secretaries of the Interior and Commerce and the Director of the Park Service, among others, urging that "wilderness with a slick highway through it is no longer wild."³¹ Although his protest drew wide attention and heightened sensitivity to conservation values, Adams' efforts were too late to result in more than minor modifications. A mile-long stretch of road across the otherwise unbroken granite slope was constructed to Adams' bitter disappointment.³²

In the early 1960's, Adams led a fight against the proposed construction of a nuclear power plant on the Nipomo Dunes along the central California coast.³³ Adams and the Sierra Club proposed an alternate site at Diablo Canyon, which, while attractive in its own right, did not have the unique beauty of the Nipomo Dunes area. "The impairment of

25. *Id.* at 149.

26. *Id.*

27. *Id.*

28. Kings Canyon National Park Act of 1940, Pub. L. No. 76-424, 54 Stat. 41 (codified as amended at 16 U.S.C. § 80-80d-1 (1982 & Supp. III 1985)).

29. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *supra* note 1, at 154-55.

30. *Id.* at 155.

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 156.

33. *Id.* at 153.

the [Diablo] canyon," Adams wrote in the *Bulletin*, "must be balanced against the greater values in the Nipomo Dunes."³⁴ Adams acknowledged the monumental opposition to the choice of Diablo Canyon as the alternate plant site, fueled primarily by later questions concerning the plant's position on a previously unknown earthquake faultline, charges of inferior construction, and general opposition to the construction of nuclear power plants.³⁵ Nevertheless, the fact that the Pacific Gas and Electric Company consented to the substitution of the Diablo Canyon site indicates the influence Adams was able to wield as an advocate.³⁶

One of the conservation projects Adams viewed as his most important during his later years was the protection of the Big Sur coastline of California. Adams considered this ninety-mile stretch of coast, where "the Santa Lucia Mountains drop for thousands of feet to the sea, creating a complex of shore and surf that comprises an American treasure," the "most impressive landscape of its kind in the country."³⁷ He helped establish the Big Sur Foundation in 1977 to advocate limiting development that threatens the area's coastline.³⁸ Although regulatory agencies and individual interests had proved incapable of devising an effective development plan, Adams, working closely with Senator Alan Cranston and the Wilderness Society, was able to garner support for the introduction of legislation for a Big Sur Coast National Scenic Area.³⁹

Adams received numerous awards for his untiring and inspirational efforts on behalf of conservation causes. These awards included two that he treasured above the others: The Medal of Freedom, which was presented to him at a White House ceremony by President Carter in 1980;⁴⁰ and the first presentation of the Ansel Adams Conservation Award, which was established by the Wilderness Society in 1980 as its highest honor.⁴¹

One of the major tenets of Adams' conservation philosophy was the need for balance between preservation of pristine areas and controlled development to meet the demands of a growing population. Although Adams recognized that his own conclusions were frequently controversial, he argued that a balancing process would foster the protection of

34. Siri & Adams, *In Defense of a Victory: The Nipomo Dunes*, SIERRA CLUB BULL., Feb. 1967, at 4, 5.

35. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *supra* note 1, at 154.

36. *Id.* at 153.

37. *Id.* at 352.

38. *Id.* at 354.

39. *Id.* at 354-55; see H.R. REP. NO. 1240, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. (1980); *Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Parks, Recreation, and Renewable Resources of the Senate Committee on Energy and National Resources on S. 2551: A Bill to Establish the Big Sur Coast National Scenic Area in the State of California*, 96th Cong., 2d Sess. (1980).

40. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *supra* note 1, at 348.

41. *Id.* at 370-71.

truly important areas.⁴² This approach was manifest in many of his conservation projects. For example, he stressed the need to develop electrical power as well as the need to preserve valuable wilderness regions in his Diablo Canyon efforts,⁴³ and he advocated balancing the pressures in Alaska for carefully regulated development and resource utilization against those for preservation of the state's wildness and beauty.⁴⁴ Adams' support for the development of nuclear power sprang from the same principle: The present demand for, and wasteful use of, electric power and the finite limit of natural resources led him to favor "the lesser of two evils" and support nuclear power until fusion power could be fully developed.⁴⁵ Adams summed up his views on human interaction with the environment: "While I have been verbally aggressive about park and wilderness concepts and values, I have never been opposed to the presence of man in considered and appropriate relationship to the world."⁴⁶

"Possessions, both material and spiritual, are appreciated most when we find ourselves in peril of losing them."⁴⁷ Adams believed the most effective method of ensuring the preservation of the environment was to foster public awareness of the fragile and fleeting qualities of our natural possessions. "With the perspective of time," he wrote, "I feel that education of the public in the vast problems of the environment will have the most rewarding effects."⁴⁸

Adams' creative artistry had distinct parallels with his conservation goals. He became one of the pioneers of the "straight photography" movement, which stressed "simple and direct presentation through purely photographic methods"⁴⁹ and rebelled against the "pictorialist" school, whose photographs imitated other art forms and were mannered and artificially softened.⁵⁰ Adams' unique photographic style has often been described as manifesting a keen "awareness of light"⁵¹—an appreciation for and celebration of the "range of light" and its tonal qualities.⁵² Adams' approach to the spread of the conservation message was similar: With the simple and direct presentation of the grandeur of nature through his photographs, he attempted to foster the same awareness of and appreciation for the environment.

Adams' philosophy of art also mirrored his conservation values.

42. *Id.* at 153-54.

43. *Id.*

44. *Id.* at 288.

45. *Id.* at 350-51.

46. *Id.* at 357.

47. *Id.* at 290-91.

48. *Id.* at 154.

49. *Id.*

50. *Id.* at 110, 112-15.

51. Turnage, *Ansel Adams: The Role of the Artist in the Environmental Movement*, LIVING WILDERNESS, Mar. 1980, at 4, 6 (1980).

52. Cahn, *Ansel Adams, Environmentalist*, SIERRA, May-June 1979, at 31, 35 (1979).

Creative art, Adams felt, is both the taking and giving of beauty.⁵³ The true value of a work of art is its portrayal of an internal emotional experience of the artist:⁵⁴ "the artist and his art are only a part of the total human experience; the viewer in the world at large is the essential other part."⁵⁵ The creative perceptions of the audience are necessary to the creation of a work of art,⁵⁶ because "the successful expression and transmission of creative concepts depends on the sensitivity of the viewer."⁵⁷ Similarly, the beauty of nature is incomplete in the absence of a viewer with the perceptiveness and sensitivity to realize that nature, like art, is the "affirmation of life."⁵⁸

True to his goals, Adams' immense popularity as a creative photographer, in combination with his tireless activism in support of conservation and other environmental issues, allowed him to be instrumental in calling the attention of the world to "the tragic and wonderful realities of earth and men, and of all the interrelations of these."⁵⁹ "While only touching the fringes of environmental problems," Adams wrote with characteristic modesty, "I am happy to have been able to have had some small effect on the increasing awareness of the world situation through both my photographs and my vocal assertions."⁶⁰

Adams' writing style in the *Autobiography* is as emotionally evocative as his photographs. Each passage in the work is highlighted with vivid visual detail. He had a gift for portraying in words the depth of his feelings in a clear and unpretentious manner, allowing the reader to capture vicariously the warmth he found in a friendship or the grandeur he saw in a natural scene. For example, Adams described one of the Club outings:

At dusk we gathered at the rim of the world and watched the last fires of sun-flare on the summits, and the valleys fill with cool rivers of night. Stone and hoary trees and the bodies of our companions merged in translucent unity with the world of mountain and sky; our fire leaped and writhed into the night, and clouds of querulous sparks soared high among the stars. A spirit of unearthly beauty moved in the darkness and spoke in terms of song and the frail music of violins. You were aware of the almost mystic peace that came over us all; the faces of those about us reflected the experience of calm revelation. There was the face of the great scientist dreaming of a beauty beyond all formula—the face of the artist gazing with unseeing eyes into the abyss of stone, yet seeing an infinitude of things—the face of the man of affairs, quiet and eager, con-

53. AUTOBIOGRAPHY, *supra* note 1, at 37.

54. *Id.* at 78.

55. *Id.* at 137.

56. *Id.* at 338.

57. *Id.* at 147.

58. *Id.* at 137.

59. *Id.* at 37.

60. *Id.* at 381.

fronted with new and exquisite experience—the face of adolescence, hushed and surprised at this promise of the world's sharp beauty.⁶¹

The *Autobiography* is beautifully illustrated, with hundreds of excellent reproductions of Adams' prints thoughtfully integrated into the text. Adams' photographs of the "Natural Scene," primarily of the Sierra, the Pacific coast, and the American Southwest, are truly his finest legacy.

Robert Turnage wrote the following of Adams' impact on the American consciousness:

The broad philosophical effect on attitudes toward the natural world, while hard to quantify and isolate in terms of dates and numbers, is the most fundamental and important element of the environmental movement. It transcends any of the issues and events involved. It is the essence of Adams' greatness that he has so eloquently communicated a philosophical vision of the land and our relationship to it. That vision, and its eloquence, are what make Ansel Adams one of the truly significant figures in environmental history.⁶²

We are fortunate to have had in Ansel Adams a figure to whom his own words may be applied: "And I did meet with people in the mountains who matched their power and their dignity, not because they could conquer the peaks, but because they seemed to understand and become part of the mystery."⁶³

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61. *Id.* at 144.

62. Turnage, *supra* note 51, at 13.

63. *AUTOBIOGRAPHY*, *supra* note 1, at 139.