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## We're Winning

*Looking back at how much we've achieved over the past few decades, one of the nation's most seasoned and respected environmental writers explains why he's optimistic about our future—and the earth's.*

**By Ted Williams**

Audubon, November/December 2004



In the 1970s having wolves in Yellowstone National Park seemed like a dream. Today they're not only in the park, they're thriving.

**Five years ago** I got a phone call from a college student named Catherine Schmitt, asking how one made a living freelance writing about the environment. I told her that freelance writing is like farming: You can eventually make a living at it if you get up early and work late, but unless you write about sex, you need a part-time job at first.

Then early last spring Schmitt called again. To my astonishment, she'd done everything I'd told her to. She'd gotten a master's in ecology and environmental science. She was a salaried science writer for the Senator George J. Mitchell Center for Environmental and Watershed Research and the Maine Sea Grant at the University of Maine in Orono. And she was freelancing. She wanted to write about me for Northern Sky News. Clearly, she needed to be taken fishing.

So she met me at my camp in New Hampshire, and within minutes her subject changed to something more interesting. As we filled the cooler with perch and bluegills, we talked about changes I'd seen on the lake and our forested island, not all or even most of them bad. The fishing is better now than when I first wet a line here in the early 1950s. No longer am I sung to sleep by whippoorwills, but now we have loons and eagles. Tanagers and wood warblers are down, but ospreys and blue herons abound. There are more camps on the mainland but not on the island, now protected as a wildlife sanctuary. The lake is busier, but there's a citizens' association that kicks butt when someone abuses the watershed. Suddenly we have wildlife we never had when I was a child—pileated woodpeckers, wild turkeys, turkey vultures, moose, fishers, otters, eastern coyotes. Can it be that something is going right?

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As the conversation moved from lake and island to nation and world, I began comparing battles we're fighting now with those I'd faced when I became a full-time environmental activist and writer in 1970, six years before Schmitt was born. Gradually I was reminded about something environmentalists of all ages need to understand: We're winning. If George Bush has won a second term when you read this, that might not seem possible. But in the time scale I'm talking about, administrations start and end in minutes; they tell us nothing about our future or the earth's.

Schmitt says I'm "optimistic," and I guess I am, but I consider myself more realist than optimist. I write mostly about nasty, greedy, cowardly people and the insults to the earth they perpetrate and permit, so I'm hardly blind to our challenges. But ignoring victories is just as dangerous as being a Pollyanna; it's hard to motivate people if they don't know they can win.

Consider overpopulation. In 1970 it was clear we were going to crowd ourselves and wildlife off the planet. In 2004 it seems likely we won't. Because of long life expectancies (which negate the need for large families), the population of virtually all developed countries has peaked or is declining. A study by scientists at the respected International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis in Laxenburg, Austria, shows a high probability that developing nations will stop growing before the end of the 21st century, at which time world population will stabilize at about 9 billion. That's 3 billion more people than we have now and lots more stress on resources if we can't limit our consumption, but it's also the best news I've heard in my lifetime. After developing nations stabilize, it is reasonable to expect that the world's population will gradually decline.

"I can't help but feel that his optimism is partly for my sake," Schmitt wrote in her article. "I know how ripped open he feels when he flies over blasted mountains in West Virginia, watching the churned insides of the earth running brown and black onto the trout streams of the Appalachians." What I hadn't told her is that activists like her helped create that optimism and that because I spend so much time with them and have been involved in so many similar campaigns, I know mountain-range removal will be a thing of the past before she is my age.

**There are more** Catherine Schmitts all the time, and as they mature, they train recruits. They are smart, tough, tireless, and too young to have a sense of perspective. For example, they get discouraged because politicians and government bureaucrats resist removal of the Lower Snake River dams in Washington and Idaho. Well, in May 1980, when I wrote my first article for Audubon—"Two Days Under Lake Dickey"—politicians and governments were putting up dams; removing them was unthinkable. With photographer Jack Swedberg I canoed Maine's St. John River, where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers would shortly erect two monstrous monuments to pork barrel politics, one the size of the massive facility at Aswan, Egypt. Saving the wildest river in the East seemed a hopeless task. No one beat the U.S. Army. Too many jobs were at stake. It was a billion-dollar project. Yet somehow environmentalists prevailed, and the black age of dams died with the Dickey-Lincoln project. Now, instead of building dams, we're tearing them out. Not fast enough, I'll grant.

In 1971 the Corps of Engineers completed what it called "improvements" to Florida's Kissimmee River—that is, converting this winding, flower-shrouded waterway to a straight, shadeless gutter, excising its life and magic, even the magic of its name, which became "C-38." In the spring of 2001, when Audubon sent me to report on the restoration of the river and its wetlands, I met young environmentalists who were dispirited because only 22 of the river's 56 miles were being put back in the original channel.

So I told them how I felt in 1977 when Gray's Sporting Journal sent me to Arkansas to report on "the Big Ditch," the grandest river gutterization project the Corps had ever undertaken. Two hundred and thirty-two

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miles of the Cache River system were to be forced into a ripped ditch. Almost a quarter-million acres of swamps and bottomland hardwoods were to be drained and planted to surplus soybeans, thereby eliminating the continent's most important wintering area for mallards and one of its top breeding areas for wood ducks. With local environmental activists I inspected the seven miles of the project already completed, sinking to my knees in mud, climbing spoil banks where icebergs of wet dirt calved into a chocolate sea. With all the money and jobs at stake, with all the rich, powerful agribusiness moguls hissing into the ears of politicians, stopping the Corps seemed hopeless. But it wasn't. The demise of the Big Ditch forced the federal government permanently out of the business of gutterizing major rivers.

Today property rights zealots—funded by and fronting for the extractive industry—are making noise and getting listened to. Of the countless despicable people I've encountered in 34 years of environmental muckraking, they leave all others in the dust. But they are to the 21st century what mosquitoes are to spring. We didn't have them in the 1970s, because environmentalists lacked the political power to inconvenience industry.

If you doubt this, consider the kinds of environmental issues seriously debated back then. For instance, in the May 1974 *Massachusetts Wildlife*, I reported on a 400-foot-high dam planned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power and the Arizona Power Authority. It would have flooded "54 miles of gorge"—the gorge being the Grand Canyon. Now imagine how bureaucrats proposing such a project in 2004 would be doing after the Catherine Schmitts of America got finished with them.

Readers of the July 1975 *Audubon* were relieved to learn that the Energy Research and Development Authority, after spending \$750,000, had shelved its Pacer H-Bomb program, whereby two large hydrogen bombs would be detonated daily (730 per year) in a salt cavity filled with water—the better to produce steam for generating electricity—in Texas, Louisiana, or Mississippi.

In May 1971 *Audubon* readers were invited to send in for a pamphlet so that they might better oppose bounties (some on gray wolves) that were still being paid in 30 states. Even in the late 1980s, when I became an adviser to the Wolf Fund—the group that did more than any other private entity to get wolves back into Yellowstone National Park—wolf recovery seemed hopeless. According to Montana Congressman Ron Marlenee, wolves were "cockroaches in your attic." Wyoming Senator Alan Simpson announced that "wolves chase women in Russia." Montana Senator Conrad Burns assured the public that "there'll be a dead child within a year." Idaho Senator Steve Symms warned schoolchildren that wolves "pose a real danger to humans."

But one evening, late in the winter of 1995, I turned on the 11:00 p.m. news and saw a friend—a biologist, an environmental activist, an Earth Day product, and the director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Mollie Beattie was toting a caged wolf, making good on her promise to personally return the last missing ecological part to our dearest and oldest national park.

**I envy young environmentalists** of the 21st century, but I feel bad for them, too. They don't know what it feels like to win big against seemingly impossible odds. When I started out, America and the world were environmentally lawless. There was no Endangered Species Act, no Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species, no Clean Water Act, no Clean Air Act, no National Environmental Policy Act, no National Forest Management Act. In 1970 I remember standing on the steps of the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife field headquarters and arguing with a colleague, Joe, about the banning of DDT. "It will never happen," he told me. When DDT was banned two years later, he said, "It won't make any difference."

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For a while it didn't. The March 1976 Audubon reported "considerable gloomy speculation" about the plight of endangered bald eagles in the Lower 48—more birds dying than hatching, fewer than a thousand nesting pairs. Today there are an estimated 7,000 nesting pairs. The September 1975 Audubon reported that 300 brown pelicans transplanted from Florida to Louisiana—"the Pelican State"—had died from lethal doses of DDT and other chlorinated hydrocarbons. Today Louisiana has more than 13,000 nesting pairs. In 1972 I was assigned by the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife to write an article on the peregrine falcon in the East—a history piece, because the species had been extirpated from the region. By 1999 peregrines had fully recovered, and they were removed from the Endangered Species List.

The hopelessness I felt about DDT in 1970 was nothing compared with what Rachel Carson felt when she started her campaign against this World War II hero. Writing a book about DDT seemed impossible; she was a nature writer, not an investigative reporter. Barely had she taken pen to paper when she was assailed by arthritis, flu, intestinal virus, sinus infections, staph infections, ulcers, phlebitis, and breast cancer. She didn't get discouraged; she got mad. Her ulcers, she told her editor, "might have waited till the book was done." Radiation treatments were "a serious diversion of time." She found the phlebitis that prevented her from walking "quite trying" "not for herself but for "poor Roger," her adopted son.

When *Silent Spring* appeared in 1962, *Chemical World News* condemned it as "science fiction." *Time* magazine dismissed it as an "emotional and inaccurate outburst." *Reader's Digest* canceled a contract for a 20,000-word condensation and ran the *Time* piece instead. But only seven years later *Time* used a photo of Carson to illustrate its new Environment section. *Silent Spring* was not a prediction, as anti-environmentalists profess; it was a warning, full of hope. "No," Carson wrote her friend Lois Crisler, "I myself never thought the ugly facts would dominate. . . . The beauty of the living world I was trying to save has always been uppermost in my mind." If Rachel Carson could find hope in the face of what and who were closing in on her, no environmentalist has the right to feel discouraged in 2004.

**Today, as always, environmentalists** face challenges that only seem hopeless. Exaggerating those challenges, as they occasionally do, provides fodder to environmental exploiters, their hirelings, and parasites who, using a few truths to frame a house of lies, profess that the greens are making everything up as a funding gimmick. For example, a 39-year-old Dane—one Bjorn Lomborg—has scrambled to media prominence by indulging anti-environmentalists with their favorite fantasies. Last April *Time* even named him one of the world's 100 most influential people. In rambling harangues Lomborg attempts to debunk all claims of the environmental community, exaggerated or not. He purposefully confuses decades-old warnings of what might happen, such as *Silent Spring*, with predictions of apocalypse. Then he and his flock gleefully publish all the angry reactions, thereby attracting still more media attention.

One of Lomborg's favorite targets, Harvard University's Edward O. Wilson, is as full of hope as warnings. He sees humanity in a "bottleneck," but poised to break out. "There's every good hope that human population on the planet will peak, because fertility is dropping and the average number of children each woman has is dropping worldwide," he declares. (His big questions are when it will peak, and how the environment will be affected.) Wilson also cites major improvements in public attitudes, as illustrated, for instance, by the membership surge in the World Wildlife Fund during the 1980s, from 100,000 to one million.

To check on my own perspective, I interviewed leading environmental activists who have roughly the same number of years on me that I have on Catherine Schmitt. I started with my dear friend and mentor, Michael Frome—the environmental author and professor who in the early 1970s began the seemingly hopeless task of whipping me into shape as a writer. It took me 20 minutes to get him off the subject of the Bush

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administration and the timidity and torpor of academia. But finally he said: "For the long term I'm an optimist. I express my optimism by not giving up. I feel better for staying in there swinging; it keeps me young. And I do find young people who care."

Nathaniel Reed, the heroic assistant secretary for fish, wildlife, and parks under Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford, and a former Audubon board member, unloaded on the Bush administration, too. But when I urged him to step back and give me a then-and-now assessment, he said: "We've made enormous gains. I'm an optimist."

Audubon's former board chair Donal C. O'Brien Jr. worries about habitat for migratory birds, but said: "I'm basically optimistic because of enormous successes with species-specific conservation." Among his examples: the Atlantic salmon, restored throughout most of its range—that is, Canada. As American chair of the Atlantic Salmon Federation, O'Brien helped make that happen.

Tom Bell, biologist, environmental activist, and founder of High Country News, expressed grave concern about global warming but said: "I'm an optimist. When I started there was very little to go on. You just stuck your chin out and challenged these people. Enough of us did that, and Congress passed the laws."

Stewart Brandborg—one of the fathers of the Wilderness Act, past director of the Wilderness Society, and special assistant to the National Park Service director in the Jimmy Carter years—called himself a "worried optimist." He told me, "I believe good people will rise to the occasion."

"The environmental movement is doing fine," said Brock Evans, formerly of the Sierra Club and Audubon and now president of the Endangered Species Coalition. "I remember in the 1960s rivers were burning. There were no laws; there was only hope. Today we win most battles. I don't get scared anymore when I see another Republican assault on an environmental law. We've been there before; we saw it in 1995 when Gingrich came out with his Contract on America." Evans cited seemingly hopeless battles won at the 59th minute of the 11th hour—the California Desert Bill, saving Hell's Canyon from dams, establishing the wilderness areas in the Cascades, the Alaska Lands Act. "Our greatest victory was the ancient-forest wars from 1988 to 1994. We got allowable cut in the Northwest knocked down 95 percent. Politicians from both parties were opposing us. I kept an 1,800-page diary of it. Scary reading, but we did it. I'm optimistic because we win. We win so much, I've come to believe there's no such thing as miracles. We win by standing tall, by not quitting against seemingly hopeless odds, by endless pressure endlessly applied."

The war is longer than our lives and our children's lives, but it goes well. We haven't just established a beachhead; we've broken out of the hedgerows. There's fierce fighting ahead, and there won't be time to relax. But there will be time to learn from the past and catch our breath. Enjoy the beginning of the post-industrial revolution, the age of restoration. Be part of it.

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### Nature's Advocate

Besides *Audubon*, editor-at-large Ted Williams writes for such national publications as *Mother Jones*, *High Country News*, *National Wildlife*, *Sierra*, and *Fly Rod & Reel*, where he serves as conservation editor. But in 1980, when he wrote his first piece for *Audubon*, it was about the only magazine that agreed with his notion that advocacy journalism is a virtue and not a vice; that it's not just okay but essential to have an "agenda"; and that if you're an environmental writer and your agenda is not safeguarding fish, wildlife, and the environment, you're in the wrong business. "Everything I didn't need to know about journalism I learned in graduate school," says Williams. "My professors pounded home the message that allowing one's opinion to show in an article was as indecent as mooning the dean. Professional writers never pushed, prodded, or challenged their readers. They were 'objective,' in that they presented only 'facts.' They gave both sides of every story, never hinting—or even knowing—that one side might be wrong."

In the 1980s *Audubon*'s then-editor Les Line signed up Williams to write essays for a column called "Ecopinion." Because of the attention this received, Line assigned Williams the regular Incite column in 1988. "No, I didn't misspell *insight*," Line wrote in the 1991 *Audubon Nature Yearbook*. "Check for synonyms in your thesaurus, and you'll understand: words like *enliven*, *vivify*, *fuel*, *ignite*, *propel*, *exhort*, *goad*, *persuade*, *prod*. That's a good description of what Ted does on matters of concern—and contro-versy. That's why he inspires—incites—more letters to this editor than any other writer."

—David Seideman