

THE IMPORTANCE OF PRESERVING NATURAL AREAS

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The growing interest in setting aside and preserving natural areas of vegetation is one of the most encouraging signs of the times. This can be justified on many grounds, not the least of these being the esthetic desire to preserve as much of the rich natural beauty of the land as possible. Unfortunately this motive has only limited appeal to many citizens, particularly those who pride themselves on being practical. So it seems necessary to point out that the esthetic intangible motive is only one of many justifications.

All science grows by measurement and comparison, and for this purpose standards are necessary. The physicist has his standards of comparison for mass, volume, velocity and other attributes. The biologist is faced with the no less serious problem of establishing a standard by which he can measure the capacity of an environment to produce and sustain life. In spite of all our progress, there is no better integration of the forces of the environment than the natural vegetation and animal life produced in a given area. To deprive the biologist of this important norm will seriously cripple him in his essential studies.

In the second place, natural areas represent islands of constructive process in the midst of a landscape which has been subjected to terrific change and pressure from human activity. In such areas the formation and stabilization of soil, regulation of the water cycle and the efficient fixation of energy and organic material go on without interruption.

It is my considered judgment that a far larger proportion of what is now agricultural land could profitably be left in its characteristic natural vegetation. In such an event, of course, it would be necessary to harvest the increment from much of it. But it is equally important to have many of these areas left untouched so that natural processes and values can be conserved and observed. The setting apart of Mettler's Woods is a notable public service and not the least encouraging aspect of it is that responsible leadership in American labor has seen fit to underwrite generously the acquisition of this area.