

SPECIES REQUIEM DAY: A PROPOSAL

by Harold W. Wood, Jr.

Environmentalists have only a few special days on any official calendar to celebrate: Earth Day, Arbor Day, and in California, John Muir Day, and in Pennsylvania, Rachel Carson Day. (Solstices, Equinoxes and such may be recognized by many environmentalists, but have yet to achieve any official status.) There are local observances of All-Species Day around October 30 of each year, recently picked up by the National Audubon Society as an annual event.

Given the loss of biodiversity, I contend that environmentalists have more to be sorrowful for than to celebrate. In fact, it may be as important psychologically to observe and commemorate tragedy as it is to celebrate joyous occasions: witness the renewed importance in the press in recent years to public recognitions of Pearl Harbor Day and Holocaust Memorial Day.

Environmentalists need their own day to commiserate their love and loss. As Phyllis Windle has written in "The Ecology of Grief," *Orion* (Winter, 1994), "it is a psychological necessity to mourn in order to recover from grief. Just as funerals reinforce the awareness of loss, sanction remembering, enable feelings to be expressed, provide support, guide the needed reorganization of life and affirms its meaning, so the lovers of the land and life need to experience ritual and expressions of mourning. The need is vitally important as part of the grief work necessary to return to our task of protecting the Earth. It may also serve in itself as a tool to increase public awareness of the suffering and loss of endangered species and places."

Windle affirms that there are scientists among us who also think in terms of rituals, even funerals, for the species and places we are losing... Ecologists gathered on October 12, 1992, where Columbus may have landed in the Bahamas to conduct a funeral ceremony for the natural environment of the Western hemisphere.

As Windle states, "Environmental losses are intermittent, chronic, cumulative, and without obvious beginnings and endings." This makes it difficult to find dates on the calendar to serve as a focus for healthy expressions of mourning for loss of environmental values. Yet, there is at least one documented date for the death of a species, and I would propose that we take this date and create an international day of mourning in the form of a Species Requiem Day.

On September 1, 1914, the last known member of a once plentiful species died, thereby terminating the species forever. Caged at the Cincinnati zoo, this species was the last Passenger Pigeon, *Ectopistes migratorius*.

John Muir, who lived his life contemporary with the final years of this species thought this species was one of the most wonderful of all birds and described their former abundance in glowing terms:

"The beautiful wanderers flew like the winds in flocks of millions from climate to climate in accord with the weather, finding their food - acorns, beechnuts, pine-nuts, cranberries, strawberries, huckleberries, juniper berries, hack-berries, buckwheat, rice, wheat, oats, corn - in fields and forests thousands of miles apart. I have seen flocks streaming south in the fall so large that they were flowing over from horizon to horizon in an almost

continuous stream all day long, at the rate of forty or fifty miles an hour, like a mighty river in the sky, widening, contracting, descending like falls and cataracts, and rising suddenly here and there in huge ragged masses like high-splashing spray.”

Muir also described the exceptional beauty of individual birds of the species:

“The breast of the male is a fine rosy red, the lower part of the neck behind and along the sides changing from the red of the breast to gold, emerald-green, and rich crimson. The general color of the upper parts is grayish blue, the under parts white. The extreme length of the bird is about seventeen inches; the finely modeled slender tail about eight inches, and extent of wings twenty-four inches. The females are scarcely less beautiful.”

These Passenger Pigeons were bludgeoned to death by the millions and sold for a few pennies a pound. This, together with the destruction of their forest habitat, caused the extinction of this once-numerous species.

Thus, the anniversary date of September 1 is an appropriate time for mourning and penance, a day to remember the disgrace and shame the human species must feel, for having willfully, knowingly, and savagely wiped out another species. By expressing our sorrow for this species, we can re-affirm our commitment to protecting all endangered species and biodiversity.

Again, Windle is worth quoting to help us understand the importance of recognizing this Species Requiem Day: “Experts urge us to grieve not only for its benefits but also because failure to grieve can have such far-reaching consequences. Generally, problems originate in two ways. Mourning can become excessive and prolonged, leading to chronic grief from which recovery never seems to come. Alternatively, we can inhibit the process. Then it becomes distorted, and grief emerges in different forms. The results are not trivial. Unresolved grief is the underlying cause of problems for as many as twenty percent of the people treated at some substance abuse centers.”

We can no longer save the Passenger Pigeon, but there are thousands of other species which need our help. Windle says, “People emerge from grief with new insights about their relationship to the deceased and renewed energy for loving again. The purpose of this Requiem for a species would not be to commiserate in hopeless despair, but to re-charge our efforts to protect and restore life on Earth.”

Given what appears to be an increasing political momentum to gut state and national endangered species acts, a day of mourning for the loss of species seems to be particularly in order. I suggest the introduction of legislation at both the state and federal levels to establish this Species Requiem Day, and in the meanwhile, for environmentalists everywhere to begin recognizing it annually through a nation-wide Day of Mourning on Species Requiem Day, September 1.

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