

This is the American Earth

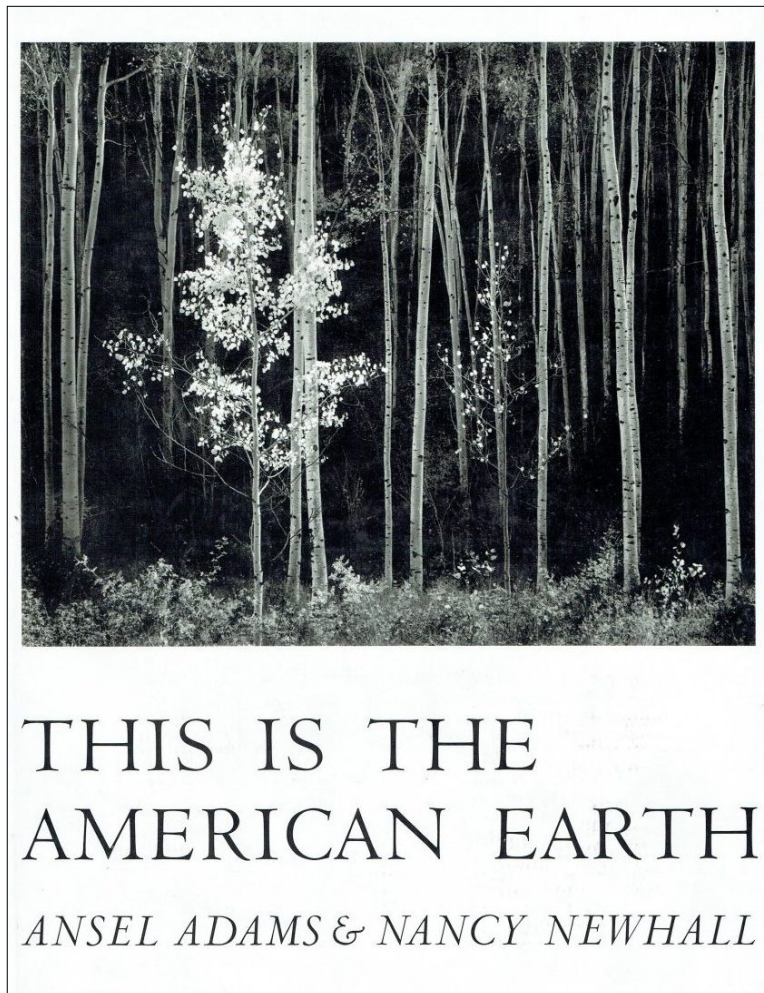
by Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall

The First of the Celebrated “Exhibit Format” Books

About the original 1955 exhibit and 1960 book

by Harold W. Wood, Jr., December, 2024.

Excerpts and Further Reading



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- [This is the American Earth: An Exhibition and Book by Ansel Adams, Nancy Newhall, and the Sierra Club \(Master’s Thesis for Ryerson University\)](#), by Josephine Minhinnett, 2014.

Introduction and Analysis

by Harold W. Wood, Jr.

In 1955, the Sierra Club mounted an exhibit entitled *This Is the American Earth* at the LeConte Memorial Lodge (now the Yosemite Conservation Heritage Center) in Yosemite Valley that represented a watershed in the annals of conservation advocacy. Producing *This Is the American Earth*, would consume their energies of Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall (and many others, including David Brower as editor and the numerous contributing photographers) for a period of six years from 1954 to 1960.



The exhibit and the book of the same name, published five years later, were instrumental in spawning the modern “environmental movement.” Originally created by photographer Ansel Adams and photographic historian and writer Nancy Newhall, *This is the American Earth* led to the Club's highly successful and award-winning "Exhibit Format" book series.

"*This Is the American Earth* is one of the great statements in the history of conservation," proclaimed U.S. Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas.

This Is The American Earth offered text by Nancy Newhall and photographs by Ansel Adams joined by several of his photographer friends such as Ray Atkeson, Werner Bischoff, Wynn Bullock, Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Garnett, Philip Hyde, Pirkle Jones, Eliot Porter, Edward Weston, Minor White, Cedric Wright and others. Notably, Adams, for being the “featured” photographer, cedes a lot of space to other artists in order to flesh out the argument for conservation. The images not only include the splendor of nature, but also demonstrate the different ways we use and experience the land in ways that are not always pretty. All in black and white, the book has both literary and visual eloquence unparalleled in any phonebook of the time.

Accompanying the images is a luminous text in blank verse by Nancy Newhall. Reprinted in rich duotones from new prints supplied by the Ansel Adams Trust, the pictures exhibit the stark contrast between those spaces forever altered by the forces of development and those left unscarred by human presence. As Nancy Newhall explores the intricate threads that unite the earth as an ever-shifting whole, and Adams exults in Yosemite's rocky peaks, and Porter reveres a single tern in flight, William Garnett despairs at waves of smog and frantic mazes of tract housing that forsake all of nature's singularity. The images, so bold in their divergence, are an eloquent call for the preservation of wilderness. *This Is The American Earth* compels us to ask

Here is the complete text of the exhibition flyer of 1955 which accompanied the original exhibit in Yosemite at the LeConte Memorial Lodge. We find its message rings even more true, 60 years later:

This is the American Earth - 1955

An exhibit on the theme of conservation, produced under the auspices of the California Academy of Sciences and the Sierra Club, exhibited at the LeConte Memorial Lodge, Yosemite Valley, summer of 1955.

The purpose of this exhibit *This is the American Earth* is not only to present the natural scene in terms of National Parks and wilderness areas, but also to give perspective to the whole vast pattern of conservation. We hope this will aid in a more specific appreciation of parks and wilderness and encourage constructive action in their behalf. The exhibit suggests the enormous inspirational potential of the natural scene, and pleads for wise forest protection and use, for the cautious building of dams, for understanding of management of the soil, and for the protection of wildlife. It strives for continuation of the wilderness mood, the spiritual experience of young and old in the presence of nature.

A great obligation of our age is to protect and wisely use our natural resources. Both the material and intangible resources of our land are constantly threatened by men who would exploit them for short-term gain. Much of the tangible wealth of the earth - the timber, grass, oil, minerals, and watershed - is gone. And the intangible wealth of nature - as expressed through the National Parks and Monuments and the great scenic areas - is continuously imperiled. The vigilance of individuals and organizations dedicated to an ordered progress of civilization, in our time and in the time of our descendents, has done much to curb the destructive influences. It is a continuing vigil.

SEQUENCE OF THE EXHIBIT We suggest -

1. Start at the left-hand inner panel (No. 1) and follow through the six inner panels.
2. Go to the outer (west) panel and follow 7, 8, and 9.
3. Cross to the separate east panel (Redman's Sierra Nevada) then to Whiteman's Sierra Nevada.
4. Return to the east side of the room and take up the outer panels, 12, 13, and 14.

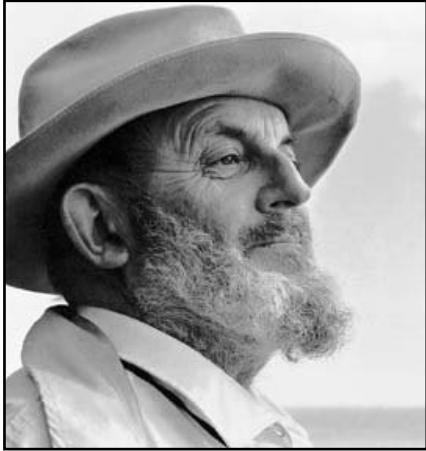
The custodian is prepared to give information on the Sierra Club, on the National Parks, and on Yosemite Valley.

Organizations such as the Sierra Club and its associated groups throughout the country continue to serve the cause of conservation and give their support to the ideals and efforts of the National Park Service toward the protection of our fast-dwindling wilderness areas. Your support of their program is invited.

The Sierra Club * 1050 Mills Tower * San Francisco 4

This exhibit was made possible by the generosity of Walter A. Starr. It was conceived by Nancy Newhall, writer, and Ansel Adams, photographer, with the collaboration of Frann Spencer Reynolds, artist, and Richard Reynolds, geographer, and Eldridge T. Spencer, architect, and Samuel Provenzano, artist. Acknowledgement is gratefully due to many individuals, organizations, and government bureaus who generously gave time, knowledge and illustrations to this project.

what is the value of solitude, the cost of freedom, the legacy of our ingenuity—and the peril of our unwavering march from nature.



Ansel Adams Portrait
by Nancy Newhall

When brainstorming the purpose of the original exhibition with his wife Virginia Adams and Nancy Newhall, Ansel Adams said, “What about a show on the whole of conservation?... Clear up the confusion in people’s minds, show them the issues at stake, and the dangers... Show the importance of the spiritual values as well as the material ones by making the most beautiful exhibition yet... A lot of people think Conservationists are a bunch of long-haired cranks and wild-eyed mystics. It’s about time they were given a chance to understand the broad principles and the full scope for which we’re fighting...” (later quoted in *Modern Photography Magazine*).

According to Leland Hyde, Ansel Adams raised the money to mount the exhibition himself. Nancy Newhall reviewed thousands of photographs, designed the overall concept and layout of the show and wrote the text. This was not a simple task - Newhall’s text is nothing less than a short notably poetic summation of the history of human civilization as revealed by ruins and human despoiling of the Earth.



Ansel Adams, Sierra Nevada from Lone Pine

1992 Exhibition and Book Revival

In 1992, *This is the American Earth* had a revival in the form of a major traveling exhibition and a new edition of the book.

The new exhibit based on the original premiered in San Francisco at the Ansel Adams Center, and was on display there between September – November 1992. It traveled thereafter around the world to: Washington, D. C., American Museum of Natural History, December 1992 – January 1993; Tokyo, Japan, Laforet Museum Espace, February 1993; Nagoya, Japan, Parco Co., Ltd, March 1993; Hiroshima, Japan, Izumi Wizwonderland, March – April 1993; Osaka, Japan, Nankai Electric Railway Co., Ltd., April – May 1993. The final location of this exhibit was displayed in Yosemite National Park at the National Park Service’s Yosemite Museum, between May – September 1993.

Beaumont Newhall and Christi Newhall’s new introduction to the Sierra Club Centennial edition in 1992 described how the printing and organization of the original show came together:

Six photographers made their own prints [including Philip Hyde] for the show, and Ansel Adams, with the help of his assistant Pirkle Jones, made the rest from the photographer’s own negatives. These images were attached to fourteen panels, each seven by four feet. Some of the photographs were mounted with spacers, making them stand out from the panels, and giving a certain visual liveliness to the show. Also displayed were natural objects and geological specimens such as butterflies, mushrooms coral, crystals, and shells, as well as small Egyptian and Greek artifacts. These objects added color, variety, a sense of life, and a sense of immediacy... Labels made from Nancy Newhall’s text were placed together with the photographs where they seemed appropriate, giving the exhibition an even broader scope. Immediately, the show received an overwhelming enthusiastic response.

Nancy Newhall completely revised the text as the exhibition became a book, “to reflect new thinking and expansion of the original ideas.” Beaumont and Christi Newhall’s 1992 introduction explained:

The exhibit had focused on conservation and the “national park idea.” The theme of the book is avowedly ecological and environmental. It embraces an understanding of the interrelation of all resources including man, and the need for reverence and preservation of these resources. The impassioned, poetic text also deals with the tragic effects of man’s greed and ignorance throughout history upon this planet. The book was an instant success. It was chosen as one of the forty-six “Notable Books” of 1960 by the nation’s librarians, and was selected Best Book of the Year by the American Institute of Graphic

Arts. It was reviewed in newspapers and periodicals throughout the country, often accompanied by photographs from the book and large sections of the text.

Nancy Newhall's Literacy of Words

Nancy's inspiring free verse cannot help but elicit awe for its insights, enriched by the benefit of time so many decades later. She wrote, "The wilderness holds answers to questions man has not yet learned to ask." In our current age of video-intensive communication and social media, it is uncanny how prescient she was: "Perhaps the old literacy of words is dying and a new literacy of images is being born. Perhaps the printed page will disappear and even our records be kept in images and sounds." Nevertheless, her text challenged people to think more carefully about the future, about what we may be losing by paving over everything:



To an age darkening with fear -

What is the price of exaltation?

What is the value of solitude?

- of peace, of light, of silence?

What is the worth of experience that widens and enlightens our horizons?

* * *

Tenderly now let all men turn to the earth -

- this earth shadowed by clouds, bright with waters, green in its seasons

- this earth for which no telescope nor spectroscope as yet reveals a parallel.

Half of dry land is too steep and high for life.

On the other half, fertile soil lies light and thin.

How shall we learn, not to die, but to LIVE?

* * *

OF ALL RESOURCES, THE MOST CRUCIAL IS MAN'S SPIRIT.

What gives mercy to his heart?

And widens, deepens, heightens his horizons?

What frees his courage?

What gives him the shock and resonance of beauty?

What ignited in him the daring concept that passes all boundaries to kindle and illumine men everywhere?

The National Parks and Monuments were founded to hold pristine for us FOREVER the awe, wonder and delight our fathers felt on first beholding the greatest splendors of the American earth.

While the art work was readily acclaimed by all, the accompanying text by Newhall may have been too ahead of its time. Edward S. Deevey (a zoologist from Yale University) reviewing after publication in 1960 in *Science* magazine, complained that “the message is grafted on in the form of text by Nancy Newhall...what comes through to me is not Conservation, but Conservationism. By this I mean a tendency to effusive overstatement that make some conservationists sound like member of a cult... Fortunately, any purchaser who can get past the book’s repellent title will probably not even notice the text, and the pictures are magnificent.” (Deevey, *Science*, 9 Dec 1960).

With the lapse of time, the ruin of so much of the natural environment of our “American Earth” reveals that Newhall’s message was not at all an “overstatement,” and that the so-called “Conservationism” Deevey criticized is something we wish we had embraced long ago. If we are to adopt any “ism” it needs to be one that is as expansive as all of Nature and the Universe itself. It is the wonders of the natural world that Newhall points us to, saying that is essential to man’s spirit.

Reading the text today, we can see how prescient Newhall was, and can appreciate how the message was, not strident, but expressed poetically and spiritually. The result of the combination of magnificent photos and prophetic text means the work is nothing short of a masterpiece and a hallmark for the environmental movement that is still highly relevant.

San Francisco Bay Area blogger Nick Vossbrink, writing in 2017, put it well: “Its warning and advocacy are as important and relevant as ever. Our history of ruins. Our history of despoiling. The idea that we only know what we’re losing now that it’s almost gone. The call to action. Part of it feels as inspiring as it must’ve felt in 1960. The idea that we can do something. The idea that we were smart enough to create National Parks. That we can obviously do more... Adams

and Newhall have given us a book which will remind us of what could've been had we been less selfish and afraid.”



William Garnett - Housing Developments, Los Angeles.jpg

The Book's Modern History

The book has been reprinted several times in the subsequent decades. Below You may read an excerpt from the foreword by David Brower below. There is also a summary of *The Making of This Is The American Earth* by Landscape Photographer Blogger. (PDF)

In recognition of the historical importance of *This Is the American Earth*, the Sierra Club reissued the book and re-created the exhibition as part of the organization's 100th anniversary celebration in 1992. The new exhibit opened at the Ansel Adams Center in San Francisco, and was subsequently shown at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City, and on tour in Japan. Then, during the summer of 1993, the Sierra Club hosted the *This is the American Earth* exhibit once again in Yosemite, this time at the Yosemite Museum next to the Visitor Center.

The exhibition and book comprises more than fifty stunning black and white photography, half by Ansel Adams and half by artists such as Werner Bischof, Margaret Bourke-White, William Garnett, Eliot Porter and Edward Weston. The photographs were drawn from public and private collections throughout the country. These magnificent photographs are accompanied by a poetic narrative text by Nancy Newhall, who made the selection of images included in the original book and exhibition.



Grass and Burned Stump,
Photograph by Ansel Adams -
National Museum of American
History - Sierra Nevada,
California (negative c.1936,
print 1968) - Used under
educational fair use
[https://americanhistory.si.edu/
collections/search/object/
nmah_906031](https://americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_906031)

The text and photographs explore the country's awakening to trends of environmental protection after the westward expansion of the mid-19th century, the establishment of National Parks to preserve wilderness areas and the need for a more global response to environmental protection in the wake of widespread urban and industrial development in the mid-20th century.

Notably, not all the photos depict beautiful natural scenery. Numerous photos depict such things as urban sprawl, abject poverty, historical ruins, destructive mining and overgrazing, and gritty urban scenes.

Despite being written more than sixty years ago, Newhall's compelling text remains a major document of environmental writing, one that speaks strongly to our contemporary world even in the twenty-first century.

This is the American Earth was the first of the iconic “Exhibit Format” books. The new Exhibit Format Series published by the Sierra Club books helped to give the cause of conservation national recognition, while advancing the art of fine art nature photography and helping to establish landscape photography as a popular and persuasive art form.

This series were seminal as the first so-called “coffee table books,” described by John McPhee as “Big, four-pound, creamily beautiful, living-room furniture books that argued the cause of conservation in terms, photographically, of exquisite details from the natural world and, textually, of essences of writers like Thoreau and Muir.”

The oversize photography books in the Exhibit Format Series spearheaded conservation campaigns to create Redwood National Park, North Cascades National Park, to save the Grand Canyon from two dams, to expand Canyonlands and many others causes. Photographer Ansel Adams, Museum Curator, Writer and Art Critic Nancy Newhall and Sierra Club Executive Director David Brower invented the Sierra Club Books Exhibit Format Series.

Noteworthy in the series are the fifth book in the series and the first color book, *In Wildness Is the Preservation of the World*, Photographs by Eliot Porter and text by Henry David Thoreau

(1962), *The Place No One Knew: Glen Canyon on the Colorado*, Photographs by Eliot Porter (1963), *The Last Redwoods: Photographs and Story of a Vanishing Scenic Resource*, Photographs by Philip Hyde and François Leydet (1964), *Gentle Wilderness: The Sierra Nevada*, Photographs by Richard Kauffman and excerpts from the writings of John Muir (1964), and *Not Man Apart: Photographs of the Big Sur Coast*, with text by Pantheist poet Robinson Jeffers (1965). The series moved, somewhat controversially, into International topics with the publication of *Everest the West Ridge* (1965) and notably, 1967's *Baja California and The Geography of Hope*, Photographs by Eliot Porter and text by Pantheist writer Joseph Wood Krutch. After the publication by the Sierra Club of *Galápagos: The Flow of Wilderness* in 1968, these “coffee table advocacy” books moved along with David Brower from the Sierra Club to Friends of the Earth. Additional titles dealt with topics like wildlife as well as landscapes. Kenneth Brower, David Brower's son, and photographer Bill Curtsinger created the 10th and last book in the “Earth's Wild Places” Series, *Wake of the Whale* in 1979.

Collectively, these books, and the many imitators that were to come, were foundational in helping to establish the modern environmental movement. When we start to stray from our commitment to the Earth, *This is the American Earth* helps to remind us those important foundations.



Ansel Adams, Lake Tenaya

High praise for

THIS IS THE AMERICAN EARTH

*Were all learning lost, all music stilled,
Man, if these resources still remained to him,
could again hear singing in himself
and rebuild anew the habitations of his thought.*

by Justice William O. Douglas:

This Is The American Earth is one of the great statements in the history of conservation.

The soul of a man, given time, can put some revealing marks upon his face. The soul of a people invariably makes an indelible imprint on their land.

The White Man's time on this continent has been short, his tenancy brief. But he has often despoiled the land- despoiled it so grievously that opinion mounted to preserve some of the earth essentially as God created it.

The earth efforts to preserve our waters, wildlife, and wilderness seemed to lack urgency. Why strain to save a thing that will never be in short supply? The wilderness, some said, is so limitless that no one need worry about it. Fortunately others did not share this illusion, and as a result a major conservation movement was born.

We are today face to face with our last chance to preserve the tiny islands of wilderness that are left. The opposition now comes from another quarter. There is little left that is unmarked and unspoiled; yet those who think only in dollar terms or those who want to go everywhere by automobile say that even the remaining fragments should be opened to roads and development. There must be permission, they argue, to commit the last wilderness to whatever use can be demonstrated to be economically feasible.

There is sadness and tragedy ahead if we take that course. First, we should not forget that the remnant of original America that now remains is also a large part of all the wilderness that remains anywhere on earth. What we possess is a unique treasure for people everywhere.

Second, we should remember that wilderness is more than interesting vacation land. It represents spiritual and aesthetic values measurable by the songs of birds, by an abundance of wildlife, by sunsets, and by the music of the conifers. We may well discover in the wilderness, and in our attitude toward it, many of the essentials for survival itself.

I need not elaborate on this theme, since *This Is The American Earth*, through the artistry of Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, eloquently develops it. I hope millions read this volume. We have only a little time in which to prevent our remaining natural heritage from being fed into the hungry maw of the industrial machine.

Some of the unmarked face of America's wilderness must be left as a refuge for man - as a place where he can escape the roar of machines and once more get on understanding terms with the universe.

FOREWORD

by David Brower

A mile of mountain wall spills out of the Wyoming sky beyond a wide meadow, a meadow edged with wonder this morning when a small boy's excited cry moose! woke us and we watched a mother and calf leisurely browse their way downstream, ford, and then disappear into the tangle of cottonwood, aspen, fireweed, and lodgepole. They were not exactly a graceful pair, for nature had something else in mind than mere grace of line when the moose was designed. But they graced the place where we saw chem and added to it a new dimension of wildness and of space. A moose needs a lot of wild space and here she found it, in a place that is just about as much the way it was when trappers first saw it as a place could be and still be part of a national park a million people each year.

It was three years ago that the boy saw his first moose here. Now his age had doubled without a moose's having recrossed his ken; yet he knew exactly, without hesitating a moment, what the cow and calf were, and with no rack of antlers to guide him. The image fixed well, as wild images do, on that perfectly sensitized but almost totally unexposed film of his mind. The same thing would happen to any other small boy, given the chance, and the composite image of a thousand such experiences would enrich his living in the civilized world so thinly separated from the wildness the boy was designed to live with.

But where will the chance to know wildness be, when this boy is himself a father, when a generation from now he is seeking out a place in which to expose his own six-year-old to wonder? How much of the magic of this, the American earth, will have been dozed and paved into oblivion by the great feats of engineering that seem to come so much more readily to hand than the knack of saving something for what it is?

Man's marks are still few here, but they are being made faster and faster. The cabin hewed with patient care has mellowed and the road to it has not burgeoned beyond the two tracks that led there when it was new. The stream has claimed the bridge that once crossed it; twenty-year-old pines grow on one of the approaches and beavers have built and used and abandoned a lodge on the other. The power line is hardly more permanent than the rail fence that fell and now moulders in the meadow. The highway is so far away that the drone of cars can hardly be heard above the stream music. Silence closes in soon after the sightseeing planes pass by the front of the great range.

But each year these silences are briefer. The throng that comes grows larger, need more, and forest and meadow make way to accommodate them. Wider highways speed people

through faster and crowd out the places where the cow had dropped her calf for all the generations since the ice retreated, and where the trumpeter swan could inform her cygnets of those few things the evolutionary force had not already told them. Here where the blue vault arches over the wildest and least limited open space and beauty, even here man's numbers are taming and limiting with greater and greater speed, heedless of the little losses which add up to deprivation. Again and again the challenge to explore has been met, handled, and relished by one generation - and precluded to any other. Although Thomas Jefferson argued that no one generation has a right to encroach upon another generation's freedom, the future's right to know the freedom of wilderness is going fast. And it need not go at all. A tragic loss could be prevented if only there could be broader understanding of this: that the resources of the earth do not exist just to be spent for the comfort, pleasure, or convenience of the generation or two who first learn how to spend them; that some of the resources exist for saving, and what diminishes them diminishes all mankind; that one of these is wilderness, wherein the flow of life, in its myriad forms, has gone on since the beginning of life, essentially uninterrupted by man and his technology; that this, wilderness, is worth saving for what it can mean to itself as part of the conservation ethic; that the saving is imperative to civilization and all mankind, whether or not all men yet know it.

Ansel Adams probably knew this in his marrow when he first began to capture the image of wilderness with his camera. Wilderness, let's say, responded unstintingly to this understanding; if a cloud were needed for a given composition, or a highlight or a lowlight, wilderness would provide it, in exactly the right place, to reveal not only breadth and width, but depth and feel too. The symbiosis went uninterrupted for some twenty-five years and led to this book's conception. The book was assisted when the National Park Service expressed a wish that something functional be done with the little building the Sierra Club had in Yosemite Valley as a memorial to Joseph LeConte, a pioneer conservationist. Ansel Adams suggested an exhibit of photographs and text that would combine to explain what national parks were really all about.

He was offered substantial help by Walter Starr and the California Academy of Sciences and asked Nancy Newhall to lend, "just for a week or two" he thought, her skill with exhibits and text so apparent in her work with the Museum of Modern Art and in her books. She felt an immediate need to bolster her understanding of the conservation force and its origin. One good reference led to another, each revealing still more about that force--and about still more references--until the text could give the exhibit such scope that both artists knew that a book must emerge too. But first Nancy Newhall would go back still further into the collection of great photographs and the record of important ideas, then come back through them, selecting, compressing, arranging, and restating, last achieving a stirring counterpoint of images, on film and in word, that can reveal in the

whole what all the parts could only suggest. The exhibit itself, although it has turned out to be only a prelude, enjoyed a world-wide audience through the offices of the Smithsonian Institution and the United States Information Agency. New philanthropy helped transform the exhibit into the present book - the combined generosity of Max McGraw and the McGraw Foundation and of the late Marion Randall Parsons, who throughout her life was deeply interested in what the Sierra Club published. This is the American Earth epitomizes what the Sierra Club, since its founding in 1892 by John Muir, has been seeking on behalf of the nation's scenic resources and needs to pursue harder in the time to come. The book is by far the most important work the club has published and the debt is enormous to Ansel Adams for his inspiration of the book, his photographs, and his guidance, and to Nancy Newhall for the organization of the book and the power of its text. It is a stirring book. It needs to be stirring, stirring of love for the earth, of a suspicion that what man is capable of doing to the earth is not always what he ought to do, of a renewed hope for the wide spacious freedom that can remain in the midst of the American earth, at least spacious enough, in the uncounted years, for a moose to drop her calf and coax it far down along the stream to browse and splash and play and lead a small boy to wonder.

DAVID BROWER

Executive Director, Sierra Club

Lupine Meadows, the Tetons,

August 23, 1959