Celebrate Conservation

2005 Soil and Water Stewardship Observance
Essay For Use With Church Leaders Guide
R. Neil Sampson

Celebrate

It is time to celebrate. For 50 years the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD) has helped the nation's pastors, teachers, and other educators to share the special meaning of soil and water stewardship with their audiences. Together we have reached millions of people with a message of hope, responsibility, and stewardship. And fruit has grown where those seeds were planted. Thanks to careful planning and conservation – and despite a burgeoning population – America still feeds her own people and many around the world.

Although we face troubled times, now more than ever it is a good time to recognize and recount our blessings, our accomplishments, and our continued commitment to stewardship. It is also time to celebrate the future. We will certainly face new challenges as guardians of America's natural resources, but opportunity follows challenge as surely as spring follows winter.

It is in that spirit that NACD, in 2005, calls upon all Americans to Celebrate Conservation. In our churches, let us pause in prayer to give thanks for the blessings we enjoy today. Let us thank those who have gone before, creating today's ability to enjoy the fruits of good stewardship. Let us share the basic themes of hope and responsibility that encourage us to maintain today's resources so that tomorrow's citizens might enjoy a fruitful life.

In our schools and homes, let us help young people learn of their conservation heritage, and how important it has been in shaping the world they see around them. And let us, in our ceremonies, reach out to all citizens, young and old, with a challenge for the future: that in the year 2055, Americans will observe 50 more years of healthy, fruitful, peaceful existence, in an environment featuring fertile and productive soils, clean water and air, and thriving grasslands, forests, and farms managed by responsible, free people.

> *Land is a very special kind of property. Ownership of land does not give an absolute right to use or abuse, nor is it devoid of social responsibilities. It is in fact a stewardship. It implies such land tenure and use as to enable the possessor to develop his personality, maintain a decent stand of living for his family and fulfill social obligations. At the same time, the land steward has a duty to enrich the soil he tills and to hand it down to future generations as a thanks offering to God, the Giver, and as a loving inheritance to his children's children.*
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> – The Rt. Rev. Msgr. L.G. Ligutti, Executive Director,
> National Catholic Rural Life Conference – 1955

We celebrate the achievements of the past while continuing to encourage and support today's stewards, and educate those who are to follow. It is the public's commitment to the conservation cause that drives the policies, programs, research, and development that will provide those future stewards with the support and tools they need to meet the demands of their time.

Celebrate Change

American society has changed in many ways over the last 50 years. Our population has grown and concentrated itself in urban and suburban areas on each coast. Technological advances – especially in communications – allow us to keep abreast of events around the world without leaving our homes. As our growing wants and needs have led us to use natural resources more intensively, we have developed new insights and understanding of the land and it's functioning.

Where once we were concerned largely with survival essentials, today we are more attentive to the maintenance of environmental quality. We hear fewer concerns about drought and famine, but more discussion of air and water quality, the protection of endangered species, or the possibilities of long-term climate change related to human activities.

That our concerns have changed so greatly is a sign of success. Our prosperity is due to many things, and contributions made by the soil and water conservation movement have played crucial roles. Creative investments in research and development by both private and public institutions have allowed America to produce enough food and fiber to meet the needs of its citizens as well as many around the world. The natural environment in which our people live is better as well. In spite of population growth and greatly increased economic activity, the nation's air and water are cleaner in many places, there are fewer toxic chemicals being released, and several species of wildlife once headed for extinction seem to once again be stable or thriving.

Throughout the ages, man has offered humble thanks to his Creator for the priceless gifts of soil, water and sunshine that make all things possible.

– Soil Stewardship Sunday Volume I, 1955 –

The language we use has changed as well. Terms like nonpoint source pollution, global positioning system (GPS), and sustainable agriculture that are common in today's resource discussions did not appear (or, in some cases, even exist) a mere 50 years ago. Our ability to make accurate maps and estimate regional crop conditions from space images, as well as guide precision farming machines by signals bounced off satellites, was the stuff of science fiction in 1955.

The soil conservation community has changed as well. When NACD assumed sponsorship of the Soil and Water Stewardship Observance in 1955, Soil Stewardship Sunday encouraged church leaders to devote one Sunday sermon to the topic of soil conservation, and provided samples that might be used. Most of the early study materials were excerpts from sermons or speeches given by leaders and teachers. Today, in a much busier and more organized liturgical schedule, the one-day Sunday observance has given way to a set of ideas and themes that can be used by any church leader – preacher, teacher, layperson – at any time in the year.

The organizations and agencies involved in the soil and water conservation movement in the United States (including NACD) have changed their names at least once, and rewritten their mission statements several times. Soil and water conservation programs in federal and state governments have responded to new technologies and societal demands. Many problems that once seemed intractable have been solved, often to be replaced by new and very different concerns.

But the basic stewardship theme has not changed in a half-century. We still hold to the belief that people have a responsibility to be good stewards of the earth and all its resources. We must find ways to satisfy people's wants and needs today, while protecting the natural resource base that will provide future generations with the means and options to meet their wants and needs. Good stewardship is tied in many ways to the teachings of all faith communities, and remains an appropriate topic that needs to be conveyed to the faithful of every generation.

Celebrate the Soil and its Productivity

In 1955, many rural preachers and teachers focused on people's dependence on fertile soils for food, shelter, and the other necessities of life. Dire predictions of potential shortages rang true with Americans who had not long before suffered through the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl years, when it became clear that America's bounty was indeed precious and finite. Even fresher were the memories of World War II and the rationing that accompanied it.

> *We have considered the earth not as an ally, but as an enemy; not as Mother Earth, but a stranger to be exploited; not as a breadbasket, but a hog-trough. The ancient pattern of land-use has been repeated over and over: Cut, burn, plant, destroy, move on. Even our own American pioneers repeated it.*
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> – Rev. C.W. Kessler, Cobbleskill Methodist Church, Cobbleskill, NY, 1955 –

In 2005, most people see much less of a direct connection between their personal well-being and the farmland of the nation. For one thing, most of them live farther away from the source of their food, and many have never seen a farm up close and personal. In 1955, some one-third of the nation's 165 million people lived in rural areas. Many were farmers, or worked very closely with those who farmed the land. A mainstay in improving stewardship was the promotion and adoption of improved farming methods so that crops and livestock could be grown and harvested without damaging the soil.

Today, the population has risen to 293 million people, and about 20 percent of Americans live in rural areas with only a small fraction of those people directly involved in farming. For many of them, as well as the other 235 million people who live in cities and suburbs, the daily food supply comes from the grocery store down the street. They purchase it with money their families have earned in pursuits that have little or nothing to do with agriculture and farming in most cases.

In that grocery store, it will be unusual if many of the food products were locally produced. Most of that food – even the milk, bread, fresh fruits, and vegetables – will have traveled great distances from the farm of their origin to reach the store shelf. A recent study by Iowa State University found that the average grape had traveled 2,143 miles to reach a Chicago grocery store. The average for asparagus was 1,674 miles, for apples, 1,555 miles, and for sweet corn, 813 miles. The message is that, for most of us, our daily bread is produced on lands, and in ways, that we will never actually see or experience for ourselves.

> *The full comprehension of our reliance on God's resources becomes increasingly difficult in an urban environment. "What do we have to do with the soil and the water?" we may complain. "We have our own jobs in commerce and industry, in teaching and healing. Surely that is enough. Let those who own the farms see to the care of the fields and forests. We have our own problems." The attitude is understandable. It is also erroneous.*
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> – Conservation: A Common Commitment, 1984 –

But even though the link between the soil and the food consumer is longer, is it any less direct? Are we any less dependent on the production of the good earth than our grandparents of 50 years ago? Not really. We may find it harder to understand and appreciate the linkage today, but it is still there. Instead of being dependent on the quality of the soil that our family tills, our food supply may depend on the quality of the land in many regions around the world. When the productivity of one area begins to falter, another may take its place, and our food supply, and its cost, may be unaffected.

But that raises a significant moral issue. Seeking out the lowest cost food supply may encourage bad production practices. It is cheaper to exploit the land that to protect it. Taking shortcuts in food production may lower costs, but at a high price to the land itself. The market, in its most basic form, does not recognize the difference between a bushel of corn grown with good soil conservation measures from one grown on an eroding field that is being ruined in the process. If that is the case, focusing on the lowest-cost food may contribute to the destruction of soil. Is that less of a problem because it is not visible in our daily travels? The answer, clearly, is that it is immoral to contribute to resource destruction anywhere in the world. When the world's resources are diminished, so are we all.

So for most citizens today, the manner in which personal stewardship can be expressed is not through improving their personal farming techniques, but in learning responsible consumer behavior. Few of us farm, but all of us eat. And when we purchase products that were responsibly produced, and promote public policies that encourage and reward responsible production everywhere in the world, we recognize that, even from afar, we are directly connected to the land and can encourage its sustainable productivity.

Celebrate Past Efforts

We are able to celebrate today because of the efforts of the people, ideas, and organizations that have brought us to where we are. At the heart of those achievements were many thousands of individuals, most of whom worked in relative anonymity, quietly going about their lives while making certain that the soil and water in their care received loving stewardship. Their achievements were not recorded in books, but were seen across the land, and many are still visible today.

It is in working together, however, that people make most of their significant contributions, and that is true in soil and water conservation. There were conservation pioneers on the American land from the colonial days of Washington and Jefferson. Many set good examples and some, like Thomas Jefferson, wrote learned papers to extend their influence. But until people began to work together, in government as well as private organizations, the impact was limited.

In the latter half of the 19th Century, the public became aware of resource waste and destruction. It was started by alarm over the rapid destruction of the nation’s vast forests. Starting on the eastern seaboard, and proceeding as settlers moved west, the forests of America were systematically cut down. Some of the land was converted to farms and villages, but much of it was simply left to recover the best it could. Piles of logging debris and slash set the stage for enormous wildfires, particularly across the Lake States. Although the historical records are incomplete, it was not uncommon for wildfire to burn 30 to 50 million acres in some years. By contrast, there have been several recent years where major wildfire activity has occurred, and billions of dollars have been spent in firefighting. In the worst of those recent years, 6 to 8 million acres have been affected. Damages have been significant, but pale in comparison with the situation prior to 1930.

The devastation and human impact of those early wildfires frightened America into action. In 1871, for example, a wildfire near Peshtigo, Wisconsin, burned thousands of acres and killed an estimated 1,500 people. Other fires that killed hundreds of people occurred regularly; often those reports did not include fatalities in remote farmhouses or Indian villages. There seemed to be no end to the carnage, and in addition to the human toll, the forests themselves were not recovering. It seemed to many that the situation would never be resolved, since landowners were unwilling to invest in planting and managing forests that were likely to be lost to fire before they could become established. In 1875, the first national citizen’s conservation organization – the American Forestry Association – was formed to provide an organized voice demanding federal action. Federal funds were dedicated to studying the problem, damage estimates began to emerge, and solutions began to be formulated.

One outcome was the creation of the Forest Service in 1905. Its existence encouraged young people to begin studying forestry, learning the new science and art of managing forests. Those professional foresters began working with private landowners to improve forestry techniques, and the new agency assumed the management of federal forests to provide a model of sustainable forestry. Federal support for state forestry programs was established, and states began to multiply the effectiveness of the new conservation work. In 2005, we celebrate the centennial of this world-renowned forestry organization, responsible for developing much of the knowledge and skill available to forest managers today.

In the 1920s, the soil and water conservation issue entered the national public consciousness. Led by pioneering soil scientist Hugh Hammond Bennett, the federal government began to do studies of soil erosion and express official concern over the degree of damage being suffered on America's farmlands. When the storms of the great Dust Bowl of the 1930s dumped Colorado dust on Washington, DC, Congress was again moved to action, creating a new federal soil conservation program, and a new agency, the Soil Conservation Service. Now known as the Natural Resources Conservation Service, this agency has been a world leader in the development of soil conservation techniques for the past 70 years.

In the early stages of the program, soil erosion was seen exclusively as an agricultural problem. Farmers plowing up and down hills created pathways for rainfall to turn into damaging runoff, and the result was often deep gullies and streams that ran red with mud whenever it rained. In the drier climates of the Great Plains, plowing fragile grassland soils opened them to the blasts of spring and summer winds, resulting in massive dust storms as the precious topsoil was stripped from the land. Fertile soils were so seriously damaged that it was feared they could never be reclaimed, and that the ability of America to feed itself was, in effect, being washed and blown away.

Bennett and his new agency took on the challenge with great energy, but it was quickly seen that federal agents, working alone, could never reach as many farms as necessary. In addition, it was clear that they could not be effective in convincing farmers to change their practices if they had to fight against rural political opposition to federal "meddling" as well as the entrenched habits of farmers. So they turned to local people for help.

In 1936, President Franklin Roosevelt sent a "model" state law to the nation's governors, encouraging them to create local, special-purpose units of government to direct the soil and water conservation efforts from a local perspective. Called by a variety of names such as "soil conservation districts" or "conservation districts" in state laws, these local agencies were managed by a group of 5 to 7 local residents who served as elected supervisors without pay. By 1946, 10 years later, legislation creating districts was in place in all the states and territories.

District formation proceeded rapidly, with some 1,800 districts operating in 1947, and around 3,000 since the 1960s, working in every state and territory. In their 70 years of operation, these districts have involved tens of thousands of volunteers, who gave not only their time to assure that the local districts were well run, but who served as conservation ambassadors in their community, promoting soil and water conservation, demonstrating new and innovative farming and conservation methods, and convincing neighbors to follow suit. Millions of hours of volunteer time (one estimate is some 45 million over the last 50 years!) have contributed to active conservation programs across America. In the process, the programs expanded to include conservation of all lands, rural and urban, with active, problem-solving approaches that touch on all parts of the American landscape.

Thus, today we celebrate the power of those many people who have come together through conservation districts to promote a powerful idea. When people become convinced of the rightness of the stewardship mission, and when they work together to educate and influence others, much good can emerge, and it has. The opportunity for people to serve as conservation leaders continues today, and into the future, open to anyone willing to serve.

If our institutions create a climate in which the vast majority of people exercise stewardship well and gladly, the relationship between humans and the natural world can be a more constructive, productive, fruitful one. People do not need to ravage the earth in order to meet their basic needs for survival and, in fact, they cannot do so – at least not for long. The United States, with its huge wealth, communications capacity, and technology, can be a beacon to the world, demonstrating how a free society can also be a responsible and enduring society.

– Partners in Stewardship , 1994 –

Celebrate Success

It is important, in terms of maintaining the hope for a sustainable future that is inherent in the stewardship message, to give concrete evidence that success is not just possible, but likely. That evidence is all around us, every day, for those who seek to celebrate it.

Most of the nation's critical food-producing croplands are being protected by conservation systems, resulting in the lowest level of soil erosion damage since official measurements have been done. That does not mean that croplands face no future threats. Increasing urban development still takes more than 1 million acres every year, and the land lost is often the most level, fertile, prime cropland. Irrigation water is a key element in producing almost one-half of the value of America's crops, and the competition for water from urban and industrial users continues to grow. Our food supply, though enormous, is not guaranteed, and continued attention to proper use and conservation of the Nation's croplands is an ongoing challenge.

The search for a sustainable food supply has challenged societies throughout human history. Hebrew scriptures tell of the Israelite people who sought the "land of milk and honey," (Ex. 3:8) and recognized the need to store up reserves during good harvests so that they could weather the years of drought and famine (Ex. 41). Today, while technologies allow far higher levels of food production, people may still find their food supply buffeted by weather, warfare, or unforeseen disasters. Conservation systems on farmland build resilience into a nation's food system, and today we can celebrate the fact that the United States has millions of acres that are better able to withstand stress because of the treatment they are receiving.

Science and technology continue to change the situation rapidly, as America's farmers continue to produce more and more on each acre. It took four acres of cropland for every living American in 1900, and three acres per person in 1950. By 2002, however, the United States harvested just a fraction over 1 crop acre per person. That one acre – about the size of a football field – provides not only an ample supply of commodities for one person's domestic food consumption with a surplus for export, but frees up other acres for non-agriculture use, including conservation, wildlife habitat, and environmental quality.

"Each owner's actions are important, not just because they affect that particular piece of land, but also because they affect neighboring land and the health of the larger ecosystems and watersheds in which they occur."

America's Private Land: A Geography of Hope
USDA-NRCS – 1996

Forests cover about 1/3 of the nation's land, and every forest inventory since 1952 has shown a slow but steady growth in forest area, as well as the amount of timber contained in those forests. These gains, realized in spite of a growing population that is supplied with all the wood and paper products it needs, has been the result of steady improvement in management techniques and forest conservation. Around 60 percent of America's forests belong to private landowners, who produce almost 90 percent of the annual timber harvests. That the nation's forests continue to improve, while producing those products, is a good indicator of today's stewardship of those lands, and gives us one more cause for celebration.

Water resources have improved as well. Lake Erie was given up for dead in the 1960s, and in 1975, fishermen caught a meager 113,000 walleyed pike from the waters of the entire lake. In 2003, over 1 million walleyes were caught in the lake's waters managed by Ohio – only a small portion of the total lake – and the future of Erie's wildlife resources looked far better. That didn't happen easily, or by accident. It was the result of far-reaching efforts to clean up city and industrial pollution, reduce soil erosion and chemical runoff from farms, and restore stream integrity in the region's watersheds. That job is far from done today, but there are major cooperative efforts underway that continue to make progress. Look around your community, and the chances are good that you will find waters that are much cleaner than they were 30 years ago. Another reason to celebrate.

At the beginning of the conservation movement, the main threat to wildlife was unlimited hunting. Any species that produced meat, fur, or feathers was at risk, and many were close to extinction. Of the large mammals, the threatened list included bison, elk, pronghorn, and even whitetail deer in many areas. The beaver was all but eliminated throughout much of its range by 1900 due to the value of its fur. Waterfowl were subject to market hunting pressures, and many songbirds were threatened due to the market value of their plumage. Today, all those species, and many more, have survived and most have seen significant population rebounds.

For those species that have recovered, the credit goes to enormous efforts by individuals, organizations, and governments. Sportsmen and conservationists raised the alarm, conservation organizations put pressure on political leaders, and governments passed laws and allocated funds to wildlife management programs. Responsible hunters and fishers obeyed those laws as a matter of good citizenship. Because of those efforts, we now count millions of waterfowl, antelope, elk, and turkeys, along with the recovery of several previously endangered species like the bald eagle, peregrine falcon, and brown pelican. The wildlife heritage we can pass on is far richer as a result.

Today, hunting pressures have been replaced by concerns about the loss of wildlife habitat. All creatures need a place to live, with food, water, shelter, places to raise young and escape from danger. As the human family grows larger, and spreads out over the land, those places for wildlife shrink and become fragmented. Some species (like rats and starlings) thrive, but at the price of becoming pests, while others (especially large predators that need large hunting areas) are threatened. We need to build on our success in wildlife conservation by turning our attention to growing habitat needs as people and wildlife seek to co-exist.

It was only in the mid-20th Century that humankind got its first view of the earth from outer space. In addition to changing people's perceptions of the world around them, that new technology has given us the "eyes" to see over much larger areas, and to track trends on the land much more accurately. Today's scientists know when and where the weather is adversely affecting crops and how extensively a remote wildfire may be affecting a wilderness. These are "firsts" that give us much better information, both to inform the public and to make wise land use decisions.

Scientific progress in recent years has also given us computerized models, based on detailed knowledge of how plants grow and respond to the competition of other plants around them. Those models can accurately predict how a forest will change in the future if it is treated in a certain way today. Other models, based on the known dynamics of flowing water and its relationship to soils and slopes, can illustrate the best way to restore a stream so that it will be self-maintaining in the future.

None of these modern technologies guarantee that future resource managers will find easy pathways toward sustainable management, or that they will make wise decisions. What they do provide, however, are greatly improved tools to be used in that quest.

Celebrate Challenge

Although it is important to review the history of stewardship and the progress made to date, it is also important to look ahead for the challenges that must be addressed in the future. We welcome this, for it is challenge that keeps people energized and involved. Because it is essential to continued innovation, growth and progress, we celebrate challenge.

Our soil and water provides the basic needs of daily life – the sustenance of our bodies, the natural beauty that uplifts our spirits, and the stability of the places where we live. In the face of uncertainty, those basic resources provide a foundation for our security and fortify our strength to prevail against those who would harm us.

"It is challenge that keeps people energized and involved."

One challenge for tomorrow's stewards is to find environmentally sustainable ways to feed and clothe the world's people as the era of cheap petroleum fuels comes to an end. Petroleum and its derivatives are basic to today's agricultural technology, and as they grow more expensive, using new and renewable forms of energy will become essential if we are to continue to enjoy a sustainable and plentiful source of food and fiber.

The challenge of feeding all the world's people requires that food not only be grown and distributed, but that people can obtain and afford it. Global food production has more than doubled in the last 50 years, but almost one billion people remain undernourished, according to recent reports. For those people, finding a way out of poverty is critical. For God's people, finding a way to assist in that struggle is a challenge that cannot be slighted.

A major challenge to address is the trend toward public under-investment in natural resource conservation. As the world's richest and most powerful nation, the United States is also home to the oldest and most successful conservation movement. Its successes, as briefly described above, are legion. But success can lead to complacency, and the conservation future is not secure unless we continue to effectively support it. In 1937, Congress dedicated almost half a billion dollars to the soil and water conservation programs aimed at helping private landowners with stewardship. A similar level of support today would be somewhere in the range of $5 billion. Instead, current budget proposals are in the $2 billion range, and there are many calls to cut them further. In the face of national security and terror concerns, domestic programs seem less important to many. But it should be clear that long-term security in any nation depends on the stewardship of essential land and water resources.

We also have a broader environmental concern for the world around us. Unless soil and water systems remain in working order, unless the environment itself is functional, unless the landscape retains the processes and structures that have marked its working order for millennia, few if any social or utilitarian goals can be realized or sustained.

The world is not an endless stockpile of resources to be exploited to meet humans' needs or desires. It is a living system that needs human care and stewardship, for reasons that include but transcend practical needs and extend into the realms of religion and philosophy. Our approach to dealing with the world around us must include not just what is necessary, but what is right, as well.

And what is right means we must think into the future, for that is where the judgment of our actions will occur, as future people deal with the legacy of stewardship we have extended to them.

And this may be the most important insight that we must relay to those who follow – there is no such thing as a "final condition" that will define their relationship to the natural world around them. They must constantly strive for new and better approaches to sustainable management. The situations may be more difficult, caused by more people and their demands if nothing else. But the challenges people will face are, compared to the scientific and institutional capacity they will enjoy, no more daunting than those that have been addressed for the past half-century. There is a need for persistence in the pursuit of good stewardship. At the same time, there is much cause for optimism as we celebrate our past, present, and future situations. Success will come to good stewards in the future, as it has to those in the past.

What we clearly pass on, as it has been handed down for generations, is the sacred responsibility that comes to us from the Biblical writers. Earth is the garden into which people were charged to "till it and keep it," (Gen 2:15 NRSV), for which we are asked to be the "faithful and prudent manager" (Luke 12:42 NRSV), in covenant with a God who has promised to refrain from destroying it and us in His wrath (Gen 9:8-17 NRSV). That covenant, stretching from ancient Israel into time everlasting, is for them tomorrow as it is for us today. How well future people respond to it, and how the history of humans and their environment across the next century is written, depends on the lessons we can pass on to today's children.

For today, we can encourage their efforts by celebrating conservation ideals, achievements, and opportunities in ways that reach as many people as possible. Incorporate a message of hope in that celebration – hope for the future of America, based on the freedoms we enjoy, and the responsibilities for effective stewardship that attend those freedoms. Celebrate conservation in America with joy, knowing that there are few places on earth today that have inherited such a marvelous resource legacy, or that have such a glorious opportunity to pass it on. And celebrate it with challenge, teaching others that the gains we savor have been hard-earned, and their maintenance and expansion in the future will continue to demand the attention, dedication, and effort of all God's people.

"In the final analysis, each of us must take some kind of active role in soil and water stewardship. That role will take many forms, but it must have the effect of building, restoring, and improving the world that we touch. For to the extent that each living person becomes a net contributor rather than a net consumer, a builder instead of a destroyer, the entire world is a world of hope."

– The Living Soil, 2004 –

For more information about conservation and Soil And Water Stewardship Week,
visit **stewardshipweek.com** or **nacdnet.org**