'Saving it like saving spirit, soul'

Wilderness a 'sacred' place

EDITOR'S NOTE — Now in his 79th year, famed naturalist and writer Sigurd F. Olson has never lost his love for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, a love which a lifetime ago lured him into its interior as a professional wilderness guide. In the following, the third and concluding installment of an interview which took place at his Ely, Minn. home, Olson discusses the "intangible values" which lure people into the BWCA today.

Last of a series

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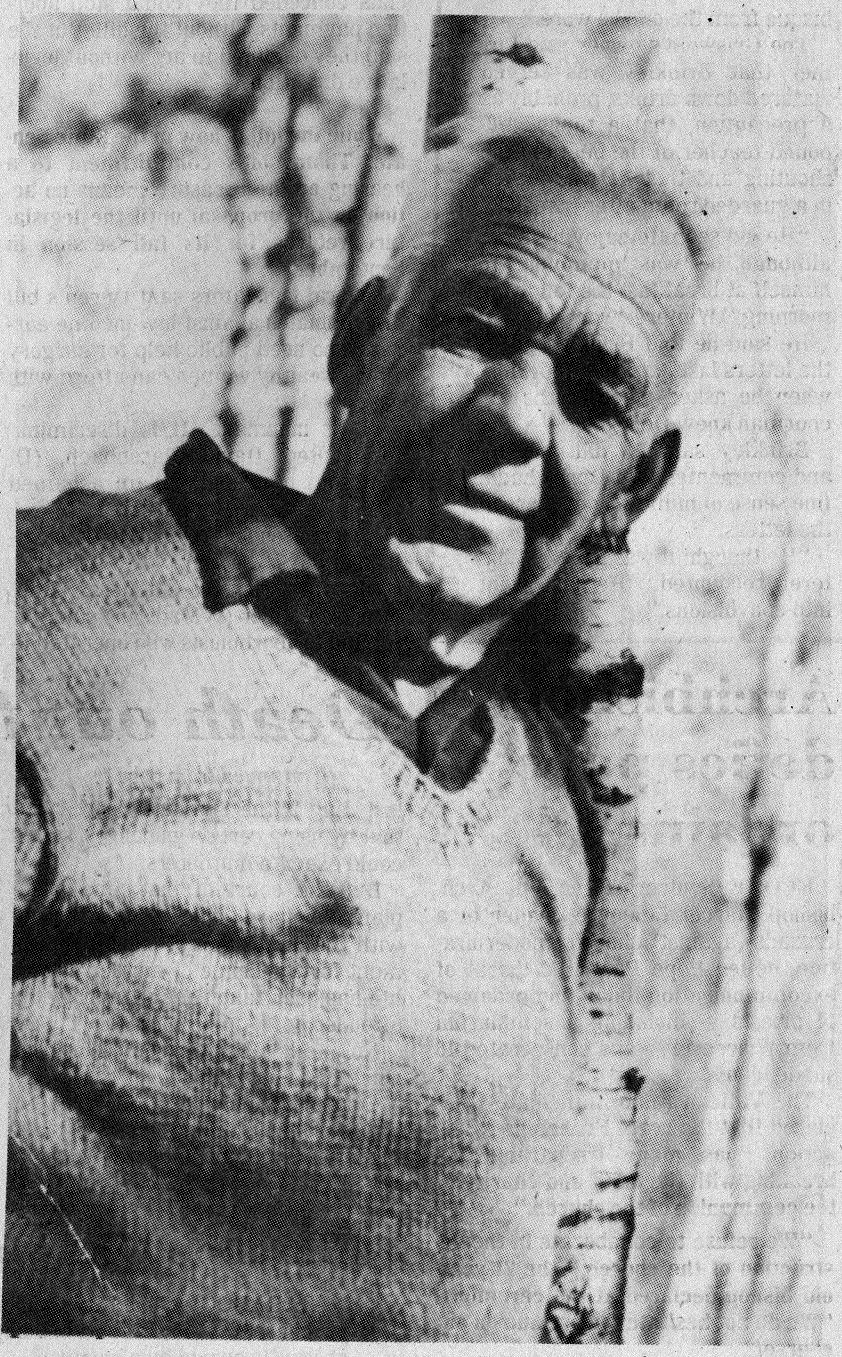

Sigurd F. Olson

Q: When you talk about going into the wilderness for intangible values, are you talking about spiritual values? Is the wilderness a spiritual experience for you?

A: It's true; I do have a deep feeling for wilderness values. I've always had the feeling. I think I was born with it. I didn't have to acquire it. Call it spiritual, if you will. Call it an understanding of intangible values. Call it harking back to the primeval pool of awareness which is within us all.

Whatever it is, it has dominated my whole life. It has made me do a great deal of writing, too, trying to tell how I feel about the greater value of wilderness.

I've always felt that **any** wilderness is unique.

I remember very well an experience in Paris. I was in a friend's apartment on the Left Bank of the Seine and, as usual, talking about wilderness. And my friend said:

"Do you see that vine coming up past my window? Well, I'll never know the wilderness that you've seen all over the world, but that vine is my wilderness. In that vine is all of nature, all of growth, all of God. **There** is my particular wilderness."

I've often thought of that. My friend understood.

The many young people who come through here have much the same feeling, but in a broader sense. They're going into the wilderness now trying to find something bigger than themselves. Something sacred, as opposed to secular. Something the Indians sensed long before we came here.

They had the sacred places where they didn't speak, just as we have it in our great cathedrals and in our places of worship.

They had it on the Kawashaway, the land they called "No Place Between." They had it on Darkey Lake. They had it on LaCroix. They tried to epitomize in such places that there were values which they felt deeply about. They tried to put those values into words long before there was such a thing as a written language. And the legends have come down.

In the caves of France and Spain — in the dark recesses of those caves — other early people painted pictures, sacred pictures, legends. They were all animists at heart. The **spirit** world was in everything.

So when people go into the wilderness today — where there's any left unravished by noise, by mechanical motors — they are looking for the same spiritual inspiration the early people found. And many of them today, more than ever before, **are** finding it again.

They find it in the sense of harmony and oneness with all living things. They find it in a feeling of communion and meditation. And, as I said in one of my books, one doesn't have to be a Buddhist to meditate, or get into any special position. Just looking at any **natural** thing is, in a sense, meditation. It is communion with God, or the Spirit.

So I think that's what people are looking for in the wilderness today, **spiritual values.** And they are almost impossible to define.

I've done a great deal of reading in Oriental religions. One of my friends was a practicing Buddhist and I have a Buddhist Bible in my library which I read occasionally. I asked my friend once to put into a single sentence what Buddhism means.

"Buddhism, to me," he said, "means gentility, peace, understanding and, above all, the sense of oneness — including the reverence that Albert Schweitzer talked about. And Lin Yutang. And Lao-Tse. And Confucius."

All of the Orient has this feeling. And it is **this** feeling that the Boundary Waters Canoe Area represents. We can get it; but not everybody can get it. Sometimes it takes time.

Q: I know what you're saying. And I've heard an awful lot of trout fishermen over the years try to express the same thing, but never so eloquently. They'll understand this, because you're talking their language. Now, what do you say to somebody who thinks this is all so much impractical, esoteric bull?

A: Well, let me say this. I remember one time, years ago, I guided a business magnate on a canoe trip back into the bush. It took him about four days to settle down to get calm, to notice sunsets and moonrises. And on the fifth day, I found him sitting on the ground, just watching a colony of ants. I asked him what he was doing, was he all right?

"I have **never** noticed ants before," he said. " Never before in my whole life. The enormous loads they carry. They all seem to know where they're going . . ."

The wilderness had opened his eyes to a whole new world that his frenetic, busy life back in town didn't give him a chance, an **opportunity** to think about.

I've noticed another thing out in the backcountry.

As men approached town after a long time in the bush, the civilization would reach out and take them, two or three days from town. They knew they were coming back to the old life and they were anxious to get back. But I could see the change.

Their minds were no longer concerned with sunsets and the calling of the loons or the hermit thrushes. Their minds were involved once again with the old lives they were going back to. But the interesting thing is that, even after they got back to their cities and their jobs, they never really forgot the impact of those days in the bush.

Sometimes I go to visit them, and they dig out the old maps and the pictures, and we'll spend an evening or two talking about fun we had and the joys they had known.

So they had absorbed some of the spiritual values; and once you absorb spiritual values, you don't lose them very easily.

Q: But that's the problem with saving wilderness, isn't it? Not everybody absorbs the spiritual values.

A: Of course, not everyone absorbs them. Some people go into the bush and come out, and they never get the spiritual at all.

I used to be amused when I'd come back in from a trip and usually the first questions from the people back in town were: **Well, how did you do? Did you catch any big ones?**

And I'd ask, "What big ones?"

They'd say: **Didn't you do any fishing?**

"Oh," I'd say. "We did fish a couple times."

Well, **they** would be greatly disappointed. They couldn't **imagine** going back into the bush without going in to fish. I always figured that, if they had gone back into the wilderness and stayed **long enough,** they might discover something different from fishing.

Intangible values, that's what we're talking about: Values that are are difficult to explain. You can't put a value on them.

Once in Germany, during World War II, along a stretch of the River Main — ruined buildings all around, the stench of death everywhere — I saw a flock of mallards come flying down the river as they had always done. That flock of mallards was an intangible value, and, all of a sudden, I was back in the North Country.

Intangible values? The whole business of Conservation and Preservation is based on those intangible values.

You must understand that, in saving the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, in saving **any** wilderness area, you are saving more than rocks and trees and mountains and lakes and rivers.

What you are really saving is the human spirit.

What you are really saving is the human soul.