

PERCIVAL P. BAXTER
A COMMENT

by
Edward O. Schriver

The paper effectively analyzes Governor Baxter's changes of mind over the years. Also clear is his search to find a rational understanding of the term "wilderness." In nearly all respects, the paper offers a sound understanding of the issues as they developed. If there is any criticism that might legitimately be made, it is that Baxter's role as a pioneer has been muted. Were one to place Baxter in the national and local context, one would observe that he was one of the leaders in promoting the wilderness idea.

Gifford Pinchot and John Muir were national figures whom Baxter surely must have known about, if only by their writings. Muir was a preservationist, whose ideas came through [or were similar to] Baxter's views on protecting the wilderness. But it was Pinchot whose ideas seem to coincide more fully with Baxter's opinions. Pinchot, the father of conservation, believed that land resources must be used by the present generation and used wisely by the many.

The parting of the ways between Pinchot and Muir occurred over the damming of Hetch Hetchy, a beautiful valley in Yosemite. Muir attacked with zeal those who would tamper with a creation of the gods; Pinchot saw the need to build a dam to provide water for San Francisco. Baxter's role in Maine stands out more clearly if it is seen against the backdrop of these and other national events.

Between 1931 and 1962, Baxter donated his parcels of land to the state for Baxter State Park. While this was going on, the nation was wrestling with the meaning of

wilderness, conservation, and the human relationship to the land. It was not until the 1940s that environmental awareness got a substantial boost and much needed publicity in the publication of such works as William Vogt's *Road to Survival*, Fairfield Osborn's *Our Plundered Planet*, and, *inter alia*, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Near the end of Baxter's life, other events and conditions were impelling Americans to think through their relationship with the land. Rachel Carson published her much attacked book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962. And, among other factors was the Wilderness Act of 1964 which indicated the nation was approaching, if not completely solving, the problems of the human/land relationship. Indicative of the distance the nation still had to travel was a provision in the act which allowed mining exploration in the lands designated as wilderness until 1989. By the end of Baxter's life, the nation had progressed to the point of obtaining the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970 from the Congress, which required environmental assessments of projects that would impact on the environment.

The above factors are only samples of the milieu in which Baxter lived and worked. His seemingly constant adjusting of his rulings on aircraft, snowmobiles, construction of new buildings in the park, roads, the cutting of Christmas trees, the presence of firearms in the park, and several other issues appear more understandable when seen against the background of evolving national attitudes and behavior toward the environment. His views on these matters, I suspect, were more in flux than flawed. In a very real sense, Baxter was one of the pioneers by national standards.

To this very day there is no unanimity on the meaning of wilderness or what constitutes the absolute limits of a wild state. Roderick Nash in his *Wilderness and the American Mind* points out that park lands may be viewed through

three sets of spectacles. Land in parks has a physical, a psychological, and a biological carrying capacity. In other words, wilderness is a concept with several sides. Wilderness, Nash concludes, is also a function of attitude and mind as well as of fact.

If we place Baxter into the national context, his achievement, despite his apparent waffling on park policy, is remarkable. And if we place him into the state context, his contribution is made that much more understandable.

Maine people have loved to fish, to hunt, and to use land resources for recreation, as well as for work, from the beginning. But an environmental consciousness of the dangers of this use has been slow in developing. In fact, James Wilson, whose Ph.D. dissertation at Syracuse University was entitled "The Politics of Pollution: The Case of Maine" (1963), asserts that Maine people have been apathetic about threats to their state's environment. Jerome Daviau, in his *Maine's Life Blood*, decried the destruction of fishing and hunting opportunities in the state.

Maine was certainly slow in learning to face the threats to its environment. State government and Maine people were more zealous about developing Maine than preserving it. In 1927, the Maine Development Commission was established to promote Maine agriculture, tourism and industry. By the 1940s the budget of the MDC was in the \$50,000 range. In 1941, the legislature established the Maine Sanitary Water Board, which eventually evolved into the Department of Environmental Protection we have had recently, with a funding level of \$400.00. Maine classified its water in the 1950s as well.

The populace of the state reacted most vigorously to environmental problems mostly in times of crisis: when the waters of the Androscoggin River smelled so foul as to

be unbearable and when paint peeled off houses in Lewiston. Manhole covers blowing off in Augusta also caused concern. But by the 1970s environmental consciousness was higher in the state; but in the years Baxter worked to build his park, the environmental temperature of the state was low.

Percival Proctor Baxter, though he wavered at times, was in a very real sense an environmental pioneer in the state. Even if one factors in his probable desire to leave a monument to himself, one finds his labors remarkable. His burning wish to leave a wilderness park for the people of Maine, bringing with it all the warts and human flaws Baxter may have had, was a noble work. Baxter was not 100 percent consistent; his flaws as a person were there. But compared to the climate of opinion in Maine during his lifetime, he was in the advance guard of the environmentally aware.

Years ago, Aldo Leopold recognized the type of conditions Baxter and others faced in their lifetimes:

The land is too complex for its inhabitants to understand; maybe too complex for any competitive economic system to develop successfully. For the white man to live in real harmony with it seems to require a degree of public regulation he will not tolerate, or a degree of public enlightenment he does not possess. But of course we must continue to live with it according to our lights.

Baxter's dream of a wilderness park will continue to exist as well as the repeated controversies about what he meant by wilderness; Maine people and the Baxter State Park Authority who are responsible for carrying out their trust must approach their task "according to their lights."

John Hakola's paper carefully and accurately presents Baxter's efforts. One hopes the people of Maine will appreciate it more by reading of the magnitude of their gift from Governor Baxter.