

The Green Legacy

Every year the bulldozers in this nation swallow up several hundred thousand acres of once-green countryside for new suburbs, new shopping centers and new highways. A 500-mile corridor along the East Coast from Portland, Me., to Alexandria, Va., has become an almost continuous strip of concrete roads and dense settlements. The potato fields and open meadows of Long Island are already a vanishing memory. So great are the purely financial rewards of this kind of urban expansion that even the sun-drenched Napa Valley where most of California's wines are now grown is seriously threatened. Vineyards are less profitable than subdivisions.

Since the population of the United States has grown since World War II by 40 million persons—almost the equivalent of the entire population of France—no one doubts the need for more housing and more urban facilities. But the very fact of relentless expansion makes doubly important the decision of President Johnson to take personal command of the struggle to save the remaining open spaces, the remaining sites for recreation and the remaining unspoiled rivers and virgin wilderness.

The State of the Union message reflected Mr. Johnson's understanding that the people of a highly urbanized nation especially need the solace that only natural beauty and open land can provide. If economic forces are going to be left entirely to themselves, such beauty and openness as remain will rapidly vanish.

The President proposes to build upon the remarkable conservation record of the last Congress, which passed the Wilderness Act and established the land and water conservation fund. He urges a "massive effort" over the next decade to establish more national parks, more national seashores and more protected scenic places. He has already intervened personally with the Commerce Department to see to it that the Bureau of Public Roads allots more Federal highway funds for the purpose of landscaping and beautifying the roads it helps to build.

John Adams, one of Mr. Johnson's earliest predecessors in the White House, used to go swimming in the Potomac River—now a foul-smelling open sewer too dangerous to enter. The President rightly summons the nation "to make the Potomac a model of beauty and recreation for the entire country."

It is not too late for Americans, in the President's words, "to save the countryside and establish . . . a green legacy for tomorrow"—if they but make the effort now. The White House Conference on Natural Beauty which he has promised to call can help point the way in this exciting endeavor.