

Sigurd F. Olson
Narrator

Carl Schmidt
Interviewer

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Listening Point Burntside Lake, Ely, Minnesota

Sigurd F. Olson - **SO**
Carl Schmidt - **CS**

CS: [unclear] have no value if they can't be shown in terms of a dollar bill, and that's what the general public wants to see in answer to that. These answers tend to be hard to get at, don't they?

SO: Yes, these answers are hard to come by, because the values that wilderness hold are not measured by ordinary standards, certainly not the monetary. These answers are in the realm of the intangibles or the imponderables, whatever you want to call them, values that affect the emotions and the contentment and happiness of people. These values have always been there in the wilderness and they always will be, but to try to put a price tag on them is very difficult. You can't put a price tag on sounds, on beauty, on sunrises and moonrises, clear waters, the rapids of rivers, birdsongs anymore than you can put a price tag on an heirloom. There are certain things that cannot be bought. The values of wilderness are in that category.

CS: Have you always appreciated these things, not to the extent you do now, but did you always have these values or did you sudden awakening to them?

SO: I think I've always had them. As I look back over my boyhood, I always enjoyed getting into the woods, into the swamps, along the waterways wherever they might happen to be. True, at that tender age, I did not know what it was all about, but I believe that the feeling was there.

I think that same feeling is present in all children up to a certain point. All children have awareness and they have wonder in their eyes until the influences of civilization begin to smother them. As the child matures and grows into his adolescence, one of the great tragedies is that they lose the power of wonder and awe of the natural world. But I think inherently, it's there in all of us. It may be smothered. It may be covered up. We may think we're too blasé and urbanized and citified to pay attention to these things, but the inherent [unclear] are still there, predominantly so in children.

In my own case, I think I nourished these inner feelings of wonder and awareness until they came into full flower, you might say, in my adulthood. I think I'm very fortunate to have been able to hold on to these things in spite of what the world tries to do. But it's something that everyone can hold onto. These things need nourishing. They need development. They are part of a [unclear]

consciousness, you might say. My work has been largely through the interpretation of the natural scenes that show these intangible values, which I think are inherent in all of us.

CS: As you think back to some of your early experiences with wilderness, give me a couple examples of things that hold in your memory.

SO: I'll never forget when I caught my first brook trout. I don't know how old I was...probably seven or eight. This was in Wisconsin. A friend of mine took me to a little creek, not over five feet across, flowing through a marsh. We had grasshoppers for bait. I'll never forget, when I dropped my line over the grass down into the water and felt the strike of the trout and, then, hauled it out, the pure joy that was mine, not only at the beauty of the freshly-caught brook trout—there's probably nothing more beautiful in this world to me than that—but also the fact that I actually caught a trout under natural conditions. That moment is just as vivid to me today as when it happened.

I remember another time, which I described in one of the books—I think it was *Listening Point*—I was [unclear] and I hiked into the headwaters of a little stream that nobody knew. There was a rock beside the pool, and I lay on rock looking down, and I could see a whole school of [unclear] down there. It didn't have a lot of them. I tossed a pinecone onto the surface and a trout just rose [unclear] pool and practically floated. It was too early then to recognize what it meant, but, now, as I look back on it, I'm sure if I had been a little older and a little more perceptive, I would have said to myself, "This is part of primitive America." This is what we sing when we say, "Thy rock and rills, Thy woods and templed hills" [*My Country 'Tis of Thee*]. Here is the beauty of the land when white men first discovered it. This is the true wilderness and that is the sort of thing which has haunted me all my life and, perhaps, led me to the good fortune of trying to preserve some of these places for our future generations.

There were many, many other instances. I remember as a very small child, probably not over four years old, walking through a woods in the fall with my mother and noticing for the first time colored leaves on the ground and colored leaves drifting down from the maples and the aspen and the birch and the oaks. That made an impact on me. Those impacts have been added to, of course, infinitely. The same thrill is there today, probably colored even more deeply by my reading and my own experience and my own thinking and meditation on them. So all these early responses to wilderness are something very precious in anyone's growing up.

CS: What do you think a wilderness experience does to one's senses?

SO: A wilderness experience has a terrific impact on humans in the sense that it's sort of coming home. The wilderness experience, wilderness is a [unclear]. All of our past history is tied up with wilderness. I think even today among those who are [unclear] removed from it, it has an impact. I always think of the historian [G. M.] Trevelyan when he said, "We're children of the earth, and removed from her, our spirits wither." Nothing truer was ever said than that. We are children of the earth. Our roots go way down into the wilderness. Our subconscious is full of wilderness experience. If you're to believe the authorities on the human mind, man lives probably in the upper fifth of his consciousness. The basic four fifths hold the history of the race and all past experience.

So when I say, "coming home," I believe that. A man comes home to this great basic experience of wilderness. If he stays in the wilderness a while, he feels as though this is a normal sort of a thing and the city life that he came from is the abnormal. I used to say, when I first began my guiding up in this country, that it took about two or three days to get in the groove, in the groove of the whole experience where all of these things seem to be natural things to do. Once you're in the groove, you develop sort of an awareness and at-homeness. You lose whatever fear you might have had. Everything seems perfectly natural. Then, it's just as much a shock to get out of that groove, to get back to civilization when the time to make the break has come.

Probably the greatest impact of wilderness is when seeing terrain, country, mountains, lakes, forests, rivers, whatever they may be, unchanged for the first time. There's been so much change. There's been so much remodeling of our environment that to actually find country where the old beauty has not been disturbed gives a person a terrific lift of spirit. I think [unclear] people who traveled to the national parks last year. Very few of them got off on the trails and walked. Most of them caught their wilderness from overlooks when they could look across from their automobiles into wild country. But, that too, is wilderness experience. Those people looking at wild country from an overlook in a national park or a national forest, they somehow sense distance, space, solitude, the old primeval. The impact was there. They may not realize it at the time, but a long time afterwards, perhaps, they remembered what it was.

I think of an old adage in the far north where they say it's easier to take a man out of the bush than to take the bush out of a man. Well, I think that's true. The bush is in us, all of us, and it's pretty hard to eliminate. Once [unclear] have a taste of wilderness, they don't let go of it either very quickly. It's in there and to lose it or to erase it from their consciousness is a very difficult thing to do, because it has become part of the old basic consciousness that all of us have.

CS: You speak of overlooks... What about small things? What about the minute things?

SO: [pause] The little things are oftentimes not seen. They, in their way, are just as miraculous as mountain ranges and peaks. Flowers on the forest floor. Insects. Birds. Other animals. Mosses. These are part of the great ecological complex of our environment. People are fortunate if they have learned to look at their feet, to look close. It doesn't have to be a two-thousand-year-old sequoia. It can be a little old perennial flower like the linea, not over two inches high, in itself just as beautiful and just as miraculous as the great trees.

That brings up a point which I think is very important and that is the importance of recognizing everything around you. You don't have to travel far to find these things. If you've got eyes to see and ears to hear, you can find this experience almost anywhere you look. There are large wilderness areas. There are small wilderness areas. There are tiny little pockets where things haven't been disturbed and those little pockets hold the values of wilderness just as the large ones do.

I spoke of a little pocket on Michigan Boulevard [Chicago, Illinois], oh, a hundred feet off the roaring traffic where you could climb down an embankment and sit on the lakeshore and look out

and look over Lake Michigan. For some reason, you can't hear the roar of traffic or if you do hear it, it sounds like the wind. In that tiny little pocket, it's a wilderness again.

Everywhere people live, you can find places like this. The great tragedy of our modern age is what we can do with our enormous machines to destroy such places. I hope the time will come when there's a definite effort to preserve all little places of natural beauty wherever they might be, close to the cities as well as far away, because, if we don't preserve them, the human race will have lost one of its great basic assets.

CS: [unclear] can get callused to the urban man, particularly, [unclear] knocks it out, essentially.

SO: I believe that when urban man after a long period of time is subjected to sights and sounds and smells that are entirely foreign to his background, that while he thinks he's adapting himself to all of these influences, actually, he is becoming callused to the influences around him. The violent noise will certainly dulls his finer auditory susceptibilities. Violent sights will do the same thing. Always bear in mind that man's background is a background of natural things. The solitude of the wilderness, the sounds of the wilderness, the sights, all of these together, over many centuries, have built up a certain type of sensibility. These can be [unclear]. These can be subdued. These can be almost entirely forgotten if man is suddenly subjected to influences absolutely unlike his background. It might be said that man will in time become adjusted to these things, but I believe that the adjustment simply means a callusing of his finer sensibilities. He will no longer be able to hear birdsongs. He will no longer be able to interpret the sound of wind in the trees or the chuckle of running water or waves. All of this subdued background will become foreign to him and he'll only be able to hear these louder sensibilities. It's exactly as though a man was subject to gunfire at close range, becoming so accustomed to the rattle of musketry and the bang of explosives, that, actually, it becomes impossible for a long time to, again, become as sensitive as he once was. There is a chance of never regaining the sensitivity that a man once had.

CS: When he does get back into wild places and spends a couple of days loosening up those ears and eyes again, or he gets new eyes and ears, or rather, perhaps, it's as if he reacquires his old eyes and ears.

SO: I think reacquires his old eyes and ears is a better explanation.

CS: I guess I hadn't asked the question [unclear].

SO: When man gets back into the wilds or into a natural environment, after a time, his sensibilities again become attuned and he's able to hear and see things and smell things that, presumably, were lost during the time he was in the cities. This may take some days or weeks or months, all depending on the conditions of his urban environment. But unless his sensibilities are entirely [unclear], which is rather impossible to conceive of, it will all come back to him, but it takes a period of slow adjustment, gradual absorption, gradually getting acquainted again with the things that he once used to know.

CS: What about multiple use as a concept? Is it a good one?

SO: Multiple use is a good concept, but there's been a great deal of misunderstanding regarding multiple use. The general concept of multiple use, that the land should be used for all purposes, is good. But the difficulty has been that people feel that all uses should be on every acre. When you look at a national forest or a national park, the entire area, all the different uses in the area together compose a multiple-use program. It does not mean necessarily that everything should apply to every single part of this area.

Perhaps, the easiest way to explain it would be to look at a house. A house is a structure with many uses. All the uses of the house together make up what is known as multiple use. You have the kitchen where the food is prepared. You have a bathroom for certain purposes. You have a dining room where people eat. You have a living room where you listen to music and where you have your books. You may have an office where your papers are kept and where you write your letters. You have bedrooms where you sleep. If the concept of multiple use is that all uses should be in every room, then you would cook in the bathroom. You would have your record player in there and your books. You would eat in your bedroom. You would do all of the things in every room that together comprise multiple use. All of the uses together make a harmonious, well-balanced, adjusted complex. But the fallacy of the idea the idea that multiple use must be in every single place, that all uses must be in every single place, is epitomized by what would happen in a house suppose you're trying to develop all uses in every particular room.

CS: You had something to say in *Listening Point*, in passing, about the fragility of wilderness. Will you relate that idea and does it relate in your mind to stewardship of land and to the way people treat the land and the water when they get into these natural places?

SO: Wilderness is fragile. All of the components of wilderness represent millennia of careful adjustment, integration, correlation. If you disturb one part of it, then you disturb another. As someone once said, "If you destroy a flower, you may disturb some star." The whole concept of ecological correlation and adaptation applies to wilderness. It's impossible to go into wilderness and manipulate it or change it according to what we think is the proper way to handle it. Wilderness being fragile will not stand up to human manipulation. A true wilderness must exist as it always has: without human interference.

Of course, we must remember that the wilderness areas that we have set aside and are trying to protect are actually ecological islands surrounded by vast areas which man has managed and changed, areas which inevitably influence and infiltrate the sphere of wilderness. So it may be necessary along the fringes of wilderness to carry on some manipulations from the standpoint of protection, but the heart of a wilderness should never be disturbed. It must be allowed to go on. Trees must die and decay and new trees come in. Other influences must be allowed to play their part; otherwise, wilderness has changed and is a man-made operated affair rather than a natural sequence of events.

CS: This unchanged wilderness, is this of any value to the man who never goes there?

SO: I believe that wilderness plays a part even for those who don't go there. I can illustrate this best by a story.

Stephen Leacock, the great humorist at the University of Toronto, gave a speech one night in which he lauded his homeland of merry England. A heckler rose in the back of the room and said, "Doctor Leacock, if you like England so much, why do you live here? Why don't you go back to England?" Doctor Leacock rose and said, "My friend, I'm going to answer you. Just north of Toronto, I have a little cabin. I go there over a weekend. There are no phones there. No interference. To the north of me is a thousand miles of bush. I'm not a ranger or a bushman or a voyageur. I've never in a canoe in my life. But I like the feeling of all that open space around me to the north. It gives me an expansiveness of soul that I can't get in England just knowing it's there."

So I feel that even though people don't penetrate the wilderness, the knowledge that there is wild country somewhere that they could go into if they wished or just the very realization that all of the earth has not been changed and exploited, gives everyone a certain extensiveness of soul. So answering your question specifically, I would say that the very existence of wilderness gives a richness and a color and a breadth and expansiveness of soul to all people whether they've penetrated it physically or not.

CS: What is unique about the quality of water as opposed to other things one finds in the wild?

SO: Water has a peculiar quality. The quality is a result of millennia of living close to it. Water has always been attractive to man whether it's the seacoast, lakes, rivers, streams, or pools. Somehow, I think, perhaps, water reflects the inner moods of man. When the Psalmist said, "He leadeth me beside the still waters. He anointeth my soul," he was speaking of a common human need, a need based on many centuries of close association with water.

In my own case, I'm, perhaps, somewhat biased, because I've spent most of my life on the water or near the water, especially on the long canoe trips I've taken. I know there's no peace, no quietude, no sense of solitude and communion quite as complete as when you're traveling down a waterway in a canoe, as when you're following the shores at dusk and listening to the sounds of birds going to sleep, or the loon calls, or the sound of wind in the trees.

I think this feeling for water is common among all people wherever they are, whatever their background may have been. I think this is the reason behind the movement to preserve some of our wild rivers, because people feel that, somehow, there must be waterways preserved where man can go and nourish his soul. If they are taken from him and all the waters become artificial ponds or developments of some kind or other, he will lose and the whole human race will lose a certain source of comfort, contentment, and quiet spiritual rejuvenation.

CS: Does one have to be able to name everything, every bird, every tree? Is that necessary [unclear]?

SO: No, I don't think it's necessary. I often think, when that question comes up what Henry David

Thoreau said. He said, "If you would know the ferns, forget your botany." Well, a great many botanists would challenge that—and I challenge it, too, in a sense being an ecologist. But the fact remains that you can become so involved in taxonomy and classification and all the details regarding living things that they actually take over the primal awe and wonder which you would have at seeing a flower for the first time. I think knowing all the names of things helps to appreciate, perhaps, but there's always the danger of making that a fetish and forgetting the beauty of form and the beauty of color and the setting. I would say a happy medium is a good thing, but, for heaven's sake, don't get the idea that you *must* know the names in order to enjoy anything. Even if you don't know the common name, give it a name of your own. That's more important to you, perhaps, than any name that could be given by someone else.

CS: The canoe and rivers are particularly fond places in your thoughts?

SO: That's true. I've been very fond of canoes all my life. Ever since I was a boy, I've paddled a canoe. When I first came up here, I served as a guide in Minnesota and Ontario waters and quite a ways north traveling many, many thousands of miles. Since those early days, I've been on expeditions into the far north following rivers to the Hudson Bay and to the Arctic Coast and to the Mackenzie [River]. The old love of the canoe is still with me. I will never lose it, because to me there's quite no joy as great as being able to paddle a good canoe, preferably close to shore and watch things on the bank, listen to the birdsongs. The feeling that you have of the canoe being part of you, responding to your slightest whim and wish is part of it. You lose that feeling when you put a motor on a canoe. The silence is disturbed. Your own power of control is gone.

When you mention rivers, I think of the rivers I've known...running the rapids, wading in them, [unclear]. Sometimes, running down a rapids is much like [unclear] on a ski hill. You have the same, almost, sense of flight, the same freedom of movement and control.

So rivers have meant a great deal to me over my life and while I've used all sorts of transportation, I always come back to a canoe if I really want to feel at home.

CS: A healthy river can't end at its shores, can it?

SO: No, a healthy river has got to include the shoreline, because the shorelines are as much a part of the character of that river as the water is itself. In any plan to set aside a certain number of wild, natural rivers in the United States, the plans call for a shoreline [unclear]. It may vary in width, depending on the terrain, but it must be sufficiently wide to protect the vegetation along the riverbank and its wildlife and, also, control the sources of pollution. A river without its vegetation is just like a river without its water. They're inseparable. One depends on the other. If you cut the vegetation away from the tiny stream, the stream may dry up. But leave the vegetation there and nourish it as part of the natural scene, the river will [unclear] clear and [unclear] forever. Part of the great trouble on this continent today is destroying the cover that protected the watersheds of rivers, cutting off the trees, plowing up the grass and plains areas, all of which speed the runoff of waters to the sea and leave the streams dry.

CS: A river is more than sight, too, isn't it, as is all wilderness?

SO: Oh, yes. A wilderness, a river is far more than what you can see. As an example, you must remember what rivers have meant as far as history is concerned. The rivers were the first highways of America. In my lifetime, I followed the routes of the Voyageurs, the early fur traders, up and down the rivers of this continent. Whenever you look at a river, remember here's where men traveled first. Here, also, is where men exploited the waters first. Towns were built along rivers, because they were on arteries of travel. So the rivers have become harnessed, probably more swiftly and controlled and [unclear] faster than almost any other feature of our environment. That's why it's important to establish a national wild river system, so that future generations can still see what a wild river is like. If we don't, sooner or later, we'll harness every bit of wild water there is left. With the coming in of atomic power, there seems to be less and less reason for putting up great concrete dams across the rivers. In fact, I think the day is going to come when the concrete dams, which we've spent billions of dollars upon across America, will be looked upon as [unclear] as the pyramids of Egypt, and future generations may wonder why we built those things.

CS: When you think of the rivers you know now, [unclear], are there distinctive ones from the other two in terms of sounds?

SO: The other two...?

CS: I'm thinking of the particular stretches of river [unclear] here.

SO: Oh, yes. Yes, indeed. To an old river traveler like myself, the sound of rapids is one thing that stays with me all the time. I think of the Drum Rapids up on the Churchill River [Saskatchewan, Canada]. It was named Drum by the Indians, because there's a regular beat, and miles before you hit those rapids, you can hear that rhythmic almost drum-like beat. If you camp away from it, even though you can't see it, that drumbeat is in your consciousness all night long. When you finally meet in the morning and realize you've got to run these rapids, the rapids have had their impact on your consciousness all night long and made you either apprehensive or rather careful of what you're going to do.

Then there are the rivers with the constant chuckling. I think of the Namekogan down in Wisconsin [Cable to Danbury, Wisconsin]. It's a rather quiet river, no horrendous rapids, nothing big, but the constant aliveness and movement and the constant sound of water running over stones. The movement of water is music, in a sense, no matter where it may be. The crash of waves against a rocky shore, that's music, too. Those are kinds of music which are always identified with waterways.

Then, there are the bird sounds. I think of the loons out at my point and how they tune up every evening at dusk. They're part of the wilderness. And the whitethroats on the little streams

CS: When you come out of the city to go to the wilderness, the sounds of the city stick in your ear. If it is true that sound imposes on you a rhythm, it's equally true, I suppose, that the sounds of the wilderness stick in your ear as you go away from them again. These are the natural sounds we talked

about earlier. The city, as you say, provides the unnatural sounds. You spoke earlier of four fifths of man's mind being [unclear] now. Is it possible to disregard that four fifths?

SO: And just put up with city sounds and take them for granted? I think it's possible all right, but I don't know whether it's good for one to have to put up with it all the time.

I returned from Washington [D.C.] not too long ago. We were on a street near the Department of the Interior, a street where some construction was going on...two large office buildings. The jackhammer was pounding on both buildings. The trucks were rolling up the inclines with loads of dirt. The steam shovels and the bulldozers were busily scurrying around pushing the dirt into the mouths of the shovels. There was a bottleneck as far as traffic was concerned, and the roar of automobiles and the honking of horns and the yelling of taxicab drivers made a terrific catenation of sound. I stood there and just listened for a little while, knowing I would soon escape it, but wondering how these people who had to live with it all the time could put up with it day after day, month after month, and year after year.

I thought to myself then that our minds, our sensibilities, our ears attuned to the wilderness background, of which we are a part, cannot help but suffer some abrasion, some change as a result of the constant beating of the sound upon the eardrums. Not only that, but you're getting [unclear] you get on the buses and soft, beautiful music is piped in your ears whether you want it or not. It almost [unclear] planned organizational program to not only fill our ears with mechanical sounds of construction but to fill our ears with beautiful music. I love beautiful music, but I like my music when I want it and I don't like other people to have to pick for me the kind of music I must listen to.

CS: Excuse me. Would you go back and give that to me as a complete statement as if I hadn't asked you a question? I think we're almost through. City sounds...tolerating, putting up with them.

SO: I think city sounds can be tolerated. We're very adaptive and we can learn to live with the sounds of traffic and jet engines and the clamoring of jackhammers putting up new buildings, and the general noises of cities. There's a constant reverberation of sound which hits our ears and our minds as long as we're in the cities. But I've sometimes wondered if this is good for us as people, whether we don't lose something...in the delicacy of perception, perhaps. We must never forget that for unaccounted centuries, the quiet of the wilderness was part of our lives. We're attuned physiologically and psychologically to that type of environment. To be suddenly removed from the old silence, the old quiet and, literally, hurled into a world of jet engines and jackhammers and automobile horns, the sounds of traffic, and all the multiplicity of other sounds in cities, I think must do something to our consciousness. I can't say exactly what, but it's inconceivable that people, while they might think they're getting used to it, don't suffer some nervous strain, some mental strain. It's too early to say yet what is going to happen to our nervous systems, but I'm confident that nervous systems that have been attuned to quiet when, suddenly, completely become a part of a violent, mechanical concentration of sound something is bound to happen. I hope the day will never come when we become so accustomed to city sounds that we never long for the other. I don't think it will, because adaptations take a long, long time. But I think it's one of the things that people look for when they go into wilderness is to escape mechanical sounds and try and recapture the silence that

our race used to know. So silence is one of the attributes of wilderness which is precious, which is worth trying to preserve.

[break in the interview]

SO: The Wild Rivers Program, we hope, will preserve some of the still untamed and unharnessed rivers. Some six hundred of them have been surveyed. This was finally broken down to sixty-odd, and, then, down to twelve. The qualities of rivers which were included in the twelve were size, accessibility, and [unclear] the stream itself and its vegetation along the banks. It's difficult to compare one river with another, for all rivers have their own particular personalities. But rivers have always intrigued mankind. I suppose this is partly true because man often lived beside rivers.