

# ARE NATURALISTS NEGLECTING NATURE?

By PAUL E. GOFF

Mr. Goff, Chief Naturalist for Metropolitan Parks in Toledo, Ohio, warns against the over sophistication of nature interpretive centres.

**P**ARK visitors throughout the land are witnessing a variety of changes in park nature programs. Few, however, realize the true significance of such diversifications.

Audio-visual contrivances, extravagant displays and printed materials are rapidly replacing the personally guided nature walk. A naturalist supposedly reaches more people by creating displays in glass cases, erecting informative signs and working with artificial devices. If this trend continues, naturalists are going to lose everything that former naturalists and conservationists gained.

This alarming trend towards the artificial is not always the result of naturalists being too busy to have personal contact with the general public. There often are other underlying factors which

are as frustrating as the trend itself.

Sometimes a naturalist, either by his or his superiors' choice, works only with a select group of nature enthusiasts. Suppose he is with such a group on a nature trail; what can he do if he desires to impress them? Explaining that white oaks were once used in building ships or that certain plants have medicinal properties would be no great revelation to other naturalists. He, therefore, must find some other means of impressing or satisfying them. Frequently, a building full of gadgets serves the purpose. But what good does it do? Is this what the pioneers of conservation had in mind as they devoted their entire lives to preserving a few unique natural areas for future generations to enjoy?

A naturalist should be concern-

ed with helping others derive more enjoyment from the out-of-doors through a better understanding of nature. When this is done in the out-of-doors, the stimulation of all the human senses creates a feeling of appreciation. But, instead of trying to help others become more aware of nature's wonders, too many naturalists are more concerned with showing others the wonderful things they have done with nature. So, one finds a rattlesnake's rattle which wiggles and buzzes at the pressing of a button or some similar gimmick.

Some naturalists are not skilled at interpretation in the out-of-doors. They don't like being in a position where they have to look at nature as a whole, often having to say, "I don't know", to the public's many questions. It is easier for one to record what he

does know and forget or ignore anything else.

Naturalists want to satisfy their superiors. If they spend most of their time taking the public on nature walks, they have little visible evidence of their labours. Walks become replaced by gadgets, displays and other physical features. The public seldom realizes how much it is being cheated, but children sometimes indicate that they're not satisfied.

I have observed children in a nature museum where they were operating a device which changed slides with an accompanying taped commentary. They talked about the slides changing and tried to figure out how the apparatus functioned, but little was mentioned about the contents of the slides or the messages on the tape. Some groups would press the button to start the gadget and then run out of the building. Perhaps their actions had a significance. Was it any different for the machine to talk and show pictures to an empty room with no real audience than it was for the children to have no real person talking to them, with no real specimens, no tastes, no odours and no feelings?

Excessive use of gadgets is not the only change in park nature programs; there is also a trend towards the academics. This, too, is the result of underlying factors. Many of today's naturalists come from big cities and have had little chance to develop the feelings which come from repeated experiences in the out-of-doors. College doesn't always remedy this problem.

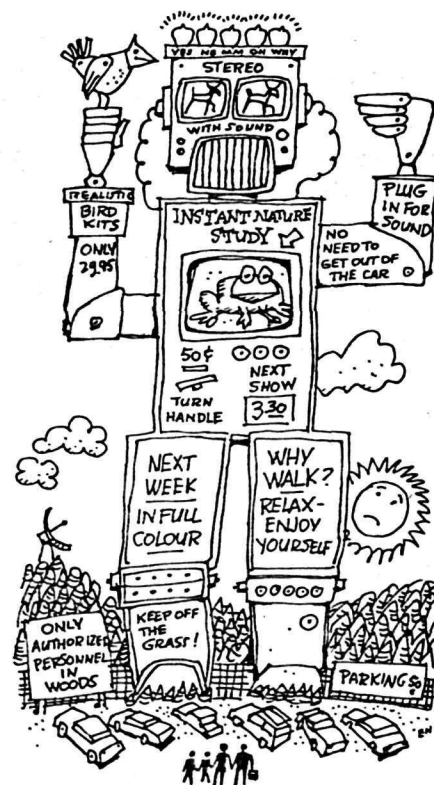
Most courses in the natural sciences are too specialized; i.e., they fail to show how the subject matter is interrelated with the entire realm of nature. Ecology is one of the few subjects which can generate a feeling for nature because it creates an awareness of interrelationships and stresses the complexity and harmony existing in a natural environment. All of this is enhanced by an instructor who prefers to teach in the out-of-doors. Other courses, however, offer little in the way of developing feelings.

Ornithology, herpetology, entomology and other courses consist primarily of identification, taxonomy and physiology. The field

trips are usually restrictive; i.e., a bird trip is for birds, only, and an insect trip is for insects, only. When students, who have been exposed only to this type of instruction, graduate and become hired as naturalists, they do what they can do best. They present courses on identification where they can know all the questions and answers ahead of time, just as it was in college. Conservation education, continuing adult education and similar terms are more impressive than nature study or a nature walk even though they might not offer half as much.

There's nothing wrong in teachers taking students into natural areas and presenting material academically, but professional interpretive naturalists should be concerned with transferring feelings instead of textbook information. Naturalists, who believe this way, are sometimes labelled purists. But, this isn't asking teachers to forget books; it isn't asking that golf courses be changed into forests. It's merely stating that naturalists have an obligation to live up to the standards prescribed by the dedicated pioneers of conservation.

There's a feeling that nothing can be of value unless it is experiencing constant change. This attitude doesn't belong in the field of nature interpretation. Nature has not changed appreciably except in areas where man has forced it to do so with bulldozers, mining and lumbering, pollution and cities of asphalt and concrete. Bees manufacture honey as they did centuries ago, insects still pollinate the flowers which become the fruits we eat and nature maintains beauty, harmony and order in the fields and woodlands which remain free of man's destructive activities. Naturalists should be ever mindful that fads brought about the extinction of the passenger pigeon, the near extinction of the American and snowy egrets and the introduction of the Dutch elm disease; these resulted from the popularity of pigeon pot pie, fancy plumes for women's hats and burls from European elms brought over to make fancy-grained salad bowls, respectively. Why should naturalists, of all people, try to gear programs to passing fancies?



If naturalists are going to employ gadgets in their interpretive programs, they should be placed within the cities. Today, with the phenomenal growth of metropolitan areas, there is a far greater need for taking some of the natural to the artificial than there is for bringing more of the artificial into the few remaining natural areas.

With lumbering companies, mining firms, grazing interests and various commercial enterprises threatening the few protected areas which become increasingly valuable and tempting as others are destroyed, naturalists should be the last to neglect their preservation. Naturalists in many instances have had little choice in such matters. Commercialization and the profit motive are difficult to fight, regardless of a naturalist's convictions. A nature walk involves much less expense than the construction of a visitors centre. The latter means buying concrete, lumber, glass, paint and numerous other construction materials. It also means the hiring of plumbers, electricians, carpenters and others. Then come illustration

boards, peg boards, glass cases, automatic devices and other display items.

Manufacturers and dealers begin to see a profit in "nature programs", and become sympathetic towards their continuation. Naturalists feel that such support is needed if their park areas are going to survive. But they overlook the fact that developments must be continued each year if various concerns are to continue enjoying the profits of such ventures. Finally, the areas become ruined and the program is labelled recreation or, sometimes, nature recreation.

A visitors' centre can be a great asset to a nature program; the same is true for message repeaters, slide changers, self-guiding trail brochures and many other forms of audio-visual aids. Too often, however, instead of complementing the basic interpretive program, they absorb all the naturalist's time and effort. When the naturalist is faced with competition for his time, the nature walks and other public requests for personally conducted programs become neglected. This is rationalized by stating that audio-visual aids are capable of handling more people. The fact that people are the best message repeaters is seldom given any consideration. People can operate without batteries or electrical outlets, they are mobile, relatively free from vandalism, nearly maintenance free, can answer questions, can transfer messages to other similar message repeaters and involve little expense!

What's so important about naturalists having personal contact with the public? Why should we be concerned whether nature activities are conducted in the out-of-doors or inside buildings?

The best example I can think of concerns a group of blind children I once took on a nature walk. All of their "seeing" involved feeling various specimens. At one point on the trail, I saw a raccoon sunning itself up in a tree. I told the group they would not be able to see it since it was out of their reach. One little girl remarked, "That's alright; it's nice to know that he's up there, anyway." This feeling of appreciation came from the odours, tastes, sounds and feelings experienced along the trail in the out-of-doors. When this group departed, they had developed feelings for the

woods and considered it a wonderful place which offered sensations never experienced within the city. This has been true, also with many other children's groups.

I could have taken all such groups into a building and permitted them to spend the time playing with electrical gadgets. This was as close as most of them had ever been to nature and they would have returned to the city thinking they had experienced all that nature had to offer. To me, this would have been a tragedy scarcely short of a crime. Just because the public might not be aware of the true experiences and feelings in nature, thus accepting programs which offer only a touch of nature, is no excuse for naturalists to neglect their duty in helping others derive all the enjoyment nature has to offer. Keeping the public occupied with activities or meaningless entertainment is not enough.

Public support is needed for the preservation of large areas. People are not going to be concerned about such areas if they do not have an appreciation for what they contain. If nature and conservation mean buildings containing displays and gadgets or textbook courses, large expanses of land will not be necessities. Many nature buildings and museums, as they exist today, could accomplish just as much within the confines of a large city. The same is true for classrooms.

People are already well satisfied with "plantings" of plastic flowers where real ones used to grow. Some even prefer green gravel instead of a grass lawn. These need no fertilizer, no insects or diseases bother them, they are more durable and they don't need to be trimmed or mowed! Horticultural fads, stressing only new varieties which man had created, helped bring this about. This should serve as a firm warning to all naturalists. Someday, nature will mean a large building of plastic wildflowers, trees, leaves, rubber frogs and a million other replicas of things people once enjoyed and appreciated in the out-of-doors. This can be prevented only if naturalists concentrate their efforts upon helping others become aware of nature in the out-of-doors and forget about trying to impress the public with gimmicks, gadgets and their own pet projects. ♣