

INTERVIEW WITH MARTIN MURIE
BY ROGER KAYE DECEMBER 16, 2002

MR. KAYE: This is an interview with Martin Murie by Roger Kaye, December 16, 2002. Mr. Murie, thank you for being willing to talk to be about this. I asked you about your father, and the types of values and ideas that motivated him to work for the establishment of the Arctic Refuge.

MR. MURIE: Right. Well I up studying Biology and then Philosophy at Berkley and so on at the time of the struggle for the Arctic Refuge, so I don't have first hand contact. I wasn't really even on the edge of that struggle. But I would like to say that when my father was the Director of the Wilderness Society his great emphasis, and he told me this more that once, was to build a grassroots activism across the country in support of wilderness. His goal, concrete goal anyway, was not to talk wilderness and get other people talking about it, but use that as a tool to build membership. He refused to go to Washington you know. He wanted to stay out west on the ranch. That was part of that whole attitude that it takes masses of people to really make change. I think that was the basic attitude that he took with him to Alaska.

MR. KAYE: In his advocacy for Arctic Refuge, he emphasized, and I see repeated use of the phrase, 'intangible values'. In fact, he writes of saving the intangible values as embodied in this move to establish the Arctic Range. Do you have a sense of what he meant by intangible values?

MR. MURIE: Well, that's a hard one isn't it? Nowadays we are using the word 'spiritual' an awful lot. I think we are overusing the word. Intangible is more of a word, and I am just guessing now, you'll have to understand, that he didn't like to specific particularly what anybody would get from wilderness. He wanted to keep it open. So intangible is more of a vague kind of word.

MR. KAYE: He also used the word 'spiritual' quite a bit, too in his writings in relation to this place.

MR. MURIE: Of course, and I think that's a word that is very hard to pin down, you know. I can't specify just where it was, but he once said, "Why don't we defend wilderness simply because we like it?" See what I mean? He wasn't one for trying to formulate a rule like Aldo Leopold's Land Ethic, although he certainly agreed with that Land Ethic. In his own work he sort of shied away from getting too involved in the big Metaphysical defense. In my mind, he was a little more down to earth.

MR. KAYE: I know you told me once before that your father worked closely with quite a few people, and his ideas were, to some degree, a product of Leopold, Marshall,

Zahniser and other folks. Was Aldo Leopold, do you think a considerable influence on your father's thinking?

MR. MURIE: I am not equipped to say that one way or the other. But at that time there were a lot of people influencing each other. To chose one person as sort of the David Brower that everybody took the message from would, I think be false to history. Life is more complex. Rachel Carson later was a great influence on everybody. But they influenced each other. Rachel read people's work. They met each other and talked things over. A lot of that interaction is just lost to history. We don't know what all happened.

MR. KAYE: Your father uses the word 'wildness'. That seems to be the context of most of what he wrote, and certainly in relation to Arctic Refuge. In what sense was wildness so important to him?

MR. MURIE: Well, again, you're trying to pin me down to somebody else's ideas. I am not equipped to do that. It's like the word spiritual, or spiritualism. These are very complex words. It's very hard to speak for someone else about that.

MR. KAYE: Your father was widely known. In fact, reading in the articles written after his death the word humility kept reoccurring. Was that pretty much a characteristic of him, do you think?

MR. MURIE: Yes it was. There's no question about that. But he had, underneath it all a strong stubbornness you know. So you get a combination of genuine humility but there were certain lines he just wouldn't cross you know. He'd dig his heels in. He didn't mind going against the current.

MR. KAYE: Do you recall any of the things he said about the Refuge or the purpose of it, or what motivated him to work so hard for it?

MR. MURIE: I just refer you back to the fact that I just happened to not be with him or Mardie during that time. I can only talk about his general attitude towards wilderness all over the world. He had a great international view of it. He discovered a naturalist in the Soviet Union who was speaking up for the animals. He went to New Zealand and so on. He had a global view. And the Arctic was very close, and dear to both him and my mother. But they also just fought for wilderness everywhere, as much as they could.

MR. KAYE: It's interesting that you mention the global view. I see in many of his writings about this place, he refers to the 'planet Earth' like this place would help us understand the universal processes of the Earth. It seems like Arctic Refuge was perhaps symbolic of a much bigger concern that he had, a global, as you say, lesson or?

MR. MURIE: Well, I think environmentalist feel that way. Don't you? [They feel] that's it's a global problem and you just work on the parts that you know the most about and that are close to you. It's like my mother; she worked on trying to protect the Red Desert in Wyoming for example. I am sort of a second generation in that struggle. I don't know, it seemed to me that Leopold and others did have this global view.

MR. KAYE: After the Range was established there was a question of naming it. There was a proposal to name it after your father, and he strongly resisted that.

MR. MURIE: Oh, absolutely!

MR. KAYE: After his death, I saw a letter that your mother wrote resisting any effort to name it after him. Why did your father resist place names like that?

MR. MURIE: Both my father and his brother, my Uncle Adolph just couldn't stand that kind of thing. For example, Mount McKinley; here was a sacred mountain to the natives of Alaska and we come along and name it after a President. No, they were just absolutely against that sort of thing. I remember once when Zahniser and Olaus were talking. I was just a kid then and I was just a pitcher with big ears. But I remember clearly Zahniser sort of bringing up the idea that a certain mountain could be named after him if he gave his permission. I think the USGS as involved in that possibility. And Olaus said right away, "No, absolutely not Zonny, that's just out of the question!" I can't remember his arguments. It just was the vehemence with which he absolutely refused. It's also no secret that my family, when the Murie Center was established in Moose, Wyoming, we objected to the use of the name.

MR. KAYE: Oh really?

MR. MURIE: Oh yes.

MR. KAYE: And why was that?

MR. MURIE: Well, we didn't think that either Adolph or Olaus would like it. And we felt it was an intrusion into our own lives. I guess the rest of the family felt the same way that Olaus did, that naming that kind of thing after a particular person tends to lead to kind of idolatry. It's just not the right kind of thing to do. I could right you a whole book about it!

MR. KAYE: I wonder if a name is symbolic of something that he resisted then, perhaps humility or something?

MR. MURIE: Humility was at the basis of it, I am sure of that. The same with my Uncle. They were both very strong in that. They objected to the egotism of which some

people went into wilderness. They objected very strongly. They grew up in wild country and spent their lives in it. It wasn't just something for Adolph, you know. They lived it.

MR. KAYE: They obviously believed that one should bring a humble approach, and perhaps; I get the sense from your father's writings that wilderness was perhaps a lesson in restraint and humility. It symbolized a larger scale approach we should have towards nature. Is that correct, do you think?

MR. MURIE: Let's see, would you repeat that?

MR. KAYE: I was just wondering; wilderness seemed to be a symbol of humility and restraint towards the natural world. Maybe I am reading something in to your father's writings, but that's the sense that I get.

MR. MURIE: Well that is certainly your privilege. And it could be. Again, I just don't like to, right off the bat, try to read his mind on that. He had a kind of a very down to earth, close to experience view of wilderness. He didn't like to get involved in high philosophical doctrine. In all of his writing, he certainly thought it would be good for us in, as you say spiritual values. He used that word a lot. But he didn't get too specific about that, at least when he talked in my hearing. I am not acquainted with all of his writings.

MR. KAYE: Gee, these are some of the questions I wanted to ask you about. Is there anything you'd like add about his perspective of wilderness, or the Arctic Refuge, or the future he saw for it, for example?

MR. MURIE: No, I just would like to emphasize his feelings of humility, and his wanting a grass roots approach. In fact, he said once and you've probably read this somewhere, I can't remember where it was, that "This country will never be safe for wilderness until the American people want it". I think that is sort of near the bedrock of his political tactics anyway.

MR. KAYE: I guess in looking at his tactic for the Arctic Refuge it was not very aggressive compared to say, David Brower and his approach toward "dinosaur Olaus" [?]

MR. MURIE: That brings up another point. Do you know of John Waterman's work on Olaus' life in Alaska?

MR. KAYE: No.

MR. MURIE: Well, he has a contract with a publisher for not a biography of Olaus, but a study of his role in Alaska in saving the Arctic Refuge, the political aspects of it.

MR. KAYE: Oh yeah, that's right, he interviewed me about that this summer.

MR. MURIE: So you know about that?

MR. KAYE: Yeah, it isn't done yet. He's still working on it.

MR. MURIE: Well now, what's your project? Like this interview, what would you do with all of these interviews?

MR. KAYE:....the influence of say Seton on

MR. MURIE: Well, we all, at least two generations of people grew up on Seton. In just introducing people to the fun of being outdoors and playing Indians. I think he was a pivotal person in that particular generation. Then the Bureau of Biological Survey and all those people that got tied up with the Biological Survey and the Journal of Mammalogy this is part of the talking to each other that contributed to the cultural change that you are trying to trace down.

MR. KAYE: I read an article that your father published very early called *Boyhood Wilderness*. Do you remember that article about his boyhood on the Red River?

MR. MURIE: Yeah, he wrote more than once about that. I think, is the one that you have the Living Wilderness one?

MR. KAYE: Yeah.

MR. MURIE: I have that one.

MR. KAYE: He traces, and I think he mentions Seton, but also this sense of adventure like getting out of town and living like an Indian, or imagining he was.

MR. MURIE: That's right. But see, they got it from Seton. They had his books. Then when I was growing up, those books were in the library in Jackson Hole.

MR. KAYE: What other books do you think might have influenced your father? Did he mention any others that were important at that formative time?

MR. MURIE: I can't speak with great authority on that. I do know that Thoreau was in the library there when I was growing up. There was Thoreau and Emerson. My father didn't read nearly as much as my Uncle did. That was interesting. My Uncle, he's another person who is even more modest. He'd talk to a lot of people. People like that

probably had influence too. It's awful hard to trace it down. Both of those brothers influenced others and were influenced by others.

MR. KAYE: I look at the word 'evolution' as it reoccurs through your father's writings. Apparently, he was more interested in preserving natural processes than features or specific wildlife of places like the Arctic Refuge. Is that your sense?

MR. MURIE: I think he felt that if we lost fauna and flora that it would be a great blow to evolution. He had sort of a feeling that evolution was a very prized thing. It was a wonderful discovery. But again, he didn't want to get all metaphysical about it. He just liked it that's all. He thought that maybe it would lead somewhere.

MR. KAYE: In what sense do you mean?

MR. MURIE: I don't want to put words in his mouth. We did talk about it. Just after the War we traveled a little together. I was kind of upset, just coming back from Italy, and he tried to give me some feeling of optimism that no matter how bad things were, evolution was a part of the Earth's history and we were evolving towards something good. I did ask him, "Where are we going?" But he wouldn't answer that. He didn't want to ...these things are hard to put into words.

MR. KAYE: Yeah, it is. It interesting. I remember in one paper that was for The Journal of Wildlife Management or something his last sentence was, "Evolution is our employer." Implying I guess that the agencies should consider that instead of just wildlife and just features.

MR. MURIE: Yeah, I think you're right. And you could put a philosophical tag on it and say that he believed I teleology. [?] Philosophically, if you got down to a rigorous analysis, you'd probably have to say he was a teleologist, and that evolution was pointing somewhere. It was kind of a Brooksonian approach. But I don't know why it is, I hate to pin anybody down that way.

MR. KAYE: Oh yeah.

MR. MURIE: That's sort of the general area he was in. Most of the time he was just living life now, and wilderness was something to protect and fight for and enjoy without worrying about metaphysics.

MR. KAYE: Was he driven in that sense, to use his information to protect place?

MR. MURIE: I don't know about "driven". He had certain amount of field data that he that he certainly used. That's a kind of a double life that biologists lead. You get published in a journal, but you also use that data for whatever you're trying to do as an

environmentalist. He wasn't really a...just to watch him around the ranch there he certainly doesn't give the impression of a "driven" person. But he was always busy. He was always painting or drawing or writing or just walking around. He didn't sit around much.

MR. KAYE: It's interesting. He worked for the agency that I work for and he left. I guess circumstances were such that his work wasn't interpreted as he thought, perhaps, in terms of the role on predators.

MR. MURIE: Oh, well that was a long running battle that he and Adolph and others too fought inside the Bureau. But it wasn't until he was offered the Wilderness Society Directorship that he actually resigned. That's the way I remember it. But there was a tremendous history inside those Bureaus during those times. Leopold and other talking to each other, and as I say its just lost to history, but a lot of going on.

MR. KAYE: We tracked down a few records of what he wrote about it and he is very strong about his feelings about the role of predators and especially the Coyote.

MR. MURIE: That's right, and Adolph was in on that too you know. That's another bone in my craw that people talk about Olaus, and they forget about Adolph. They influenced each other. They worked together all of the time, supporting each other. Adolph was the Park Service Biologist and Olaus was the Survey Biologist. They both were in on all of these things.

MR. KAYE: Again Martin, I want to thank you for your time here.