

## Remarks

Honorable William G. Milliken

At

**Wetlands 2006: Applying Scientific, Legal, and Management Tools  
to the Great Lakes and Beyond**

**Traverse City, Michigan  
(Grand Traverse Resort)**

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Thank you for the opportunity to close your conference today with a few thoughts about wetland resources and the importance of conservation generally. I commend those of you who organized and attended this gathering with the intent of spreading knowledge and understanding of the value of wetlands and of the most effective techniques in protecting them.

As you well know, Americans have not always appreciated wetland resources. Describing American attitudes of the mid-1900s, environmental historian Ann Vilesis put it well in her book *Discovering the Unknown Landscape*:

“Rather than recognize that excess water in swamps *supplied* bounteous riparian forests, vast flocks of waterfowl, and other natural riches, legislators along with most citizens, thought that surplus water prevented lands from being even more abundant. Rather than understand swamps as topographic features inherently wet for reasons of geology, geography and climate, legislators regarded swamps as afflicted and agriculturally barren lands in urgent need of human ingenuity.”

In Michigan, as in other places, misunderstanding and destruction of wetlands were the norm in public policy and private land management well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

State and federal estimates of the percentage of Michigan's wetlands lost to drainage and development by the 1990s range between 28 and 50%.

But things were changing when I became governor of Michigan in 1969. Citizens had awakened to the importance of protecting our natural environment – for the sake of humans as well as other living creatures. As I said in my first special message to the Michigan Legislature:

“The preservation of our environment is the critical issue of the Seventies. Unless we move without delay to halt the destruction of our land, our water, and our air, our own children may see the last traces of earth's beauty crushed beneath the weight of man's waste and ruin. We are already the most affluent nation on earth, but we have paid too high a price. We have paid for this affluence with the beauty of our landscape, the purity of our air and the cleanliness of our water.”

My comments didn't *anticipate* public sentiment – they *reflected* such sentiments. A critical mass of Michiganians recognized that the 18% of the world's surface freshwater in the Great Lakes, our state's 3,288 miles of Great Lakes shoreline, our 36 million acres of landscape and our wetlands were too valuable to sacrifice in the name of development.

Thanks to the support of millions of citizens, the 1970s were a decade of environmental accomplishment. Voters approved a beverage container deposit, I directed a sharp limitation in detergent phosphorus to clean up our rivers and lakes, and the legislature, with my support, approved the Michigan Environmental Protection Act, the Great Lakes Shorelands Act, and in 1979, our nationally significant Wetland Protection Act. I am proud to be able to say that this statute, which I signed into law enthusiastically,

remains a monument to the concern of Michigan's public about the environment – and it remains one of the strongest state wetland conservation laws in the nation.

Of course, a great deal has changed since 1979. Two things in particular:

- **We understand the significance of wetlands better than we did in 1979.**

We knew then that they provide valuable habitat, flood control and water quality benefits, but the science showing how critical wetlands are to all aquatic resources from headwaters to the Great Lakes and oceans is much stronger now. Wetlands provide billions of dollars of benefits to Americans for free. Even from a purely economic standpoint, it is folly to ignore the long-term protection of our most valuable resources, our waters, in exchange for short-term gain.

- **The public is not as strongly coalesced around environmental protection as it was in 1979.** While survey after survey shows strong majorities of Americans support clean air, water, and land, priority public attention has shifted to other concerns. This makes it more difficult for scientists, agency staff, local governments and others to do the hard work of protecting wetlands. It also increases the importance of strong leadership – of public officials strongly championing conservation and wetlands protection and rallying a concerned public to the cause.

One of the ways in which leaders can be helpful is in articulating new ways of assuring our natural legacy is passed on to future generations. I hope elected officials at all levels will explain to the public why we must increase our investment in water resources. Water is our future – not only in Michigan and the Great Lakes but also across

the nation and around the world. But we are not increasing our public investment in water.

On a state and national scale, there is a movement away from providing for general funding of wetland and aquatic resource programs with tax dollars. Instead, we rely more and more on funding from permit fees – in effect, from those seeking to alter or destroy wetlands. This approach cannot long prevail without serious damage to wetlands specifically and water resources generally.

I call upon our leaders to support a reasonable public investment in the protection of our most treasured resource – water – from the open waters of our Great Lakes up to the headwaters of our streams, and the vital wetland systems that support them. The creation of an adequate Michigan and U.S. Water Resource Fund, with support from the general public rather than from a particular class of people who seek wetlands or other permits, is a prudent investment in our future.

When I supported Michigan's wetland protection law in the 1970s, I had no way of knowing how important that law and others like it would be. Those of you in this room who have been enforcing wetland laws and encouraging wetland conservation and restoration should take pride in the millions of acres of wetlands you have protected since then. I am glad that this work has been so fruitful.

But today we face a new challenge. Members of the public, of the business community, and some courts question whether natural resource management is a true priority in our complex world. We must – and I believe we shall – demonstrate to a new generation that the protection and wise management of our natural resources is not a frill, but a necessity – something we must do for our own health and economic well-being.

And let us not forget the other benefits of conservation. As I have said many times in recent years:

The truth is that the quality of human life in Michigan depends on nature. The natural beauty of our state is much more than a source of pleasure and recreation. It shapes our values, molds our attitudes, and feeds our spirit...In Michigan, our soul is not to be found in steel and concrete, or sprawling new housing developments or strip malls. Rather it is found in the soft petals of a trillium, the gentle whisper of a headwater stream, the vista of a Great Lakes shoreline, and the wonder in children's eyes upon seeing their first bald eagle. It is that soul that we must preserve.

Thank you very much, and good luck in doing your important job.