In December, President-elect Bill Clinton named the Hon. Bruce Babbitt, J.D., former governor of Arizona, as his secretary of the interior. The HSUS was pleased to welcome Governor Babbitt, most recently president of the League of Conservation Voters, to our national conference, in Boulder, Colorado, in October.

In his keynote address, adapted here, Governor Babbitt discusses the environmental community’s new awareness of the goals it shares with the HSUS and others in animal protection.

I’d like to talk about biodiversity issues. Biodiversity, in my judgment, is really at the root of most things. I am sure we’ll get into the discussion about whether or not the human species has the self-control and the ability to live lightly on this planet with space for the rest of Creation. It’s deeply involved in the shape of our industrial society, population issues, the way we develop land, and ultimately it’s going to mean changes in the spirit and life-style of a lot of people.

Right now, today, there are in the United States two pieces of legislation of great importance that relate to the biodiversity issue, and I think we need to understand them. They’re not the ultimate answer, but they’re the entering wedge. They are already under fierce assault from the people who would say the role of the human species is not stewardship, it is the untrammeled right to destroy anything, anywhere, at any time. The debate is inevitably going to get very intense. We can’t take the gains for granted.

The first statute is the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The Uncompahgre Basin Act, passed in 1973, was an extraordinary achievement, probably the most revolutionary environmental law of this century. It explicitly says, when a species begins the downward slide toward extinction, the response will be a habitat-protection plan. It’s a criminal offense to take either that species or its habitat. It’s been a resounding success over the last twenty years. Of course, we ought to be dealing with these issues before a species reaches the emergency room and in a much more aggressive way.

The ESA has nonetheless been an extraordinary success. It has led to the revival of many species at the brink of extinction. One thinks of the bald eagle, the peregrine falcon, the American alligator, the black-footed ferret, and others (the successes are never advertised).

Governor Babbitt holds the undivided attention of the audience during his keynote speech at the HSUS national conference.

Biodiversity isn’t a chance of persuading people, civilizations, and countries to take biodiversity seriously unless they first understand, from the depths of the human spirit, the need to relate to Creation, to be sensitive to the realities of animal mistreatment, and to have a larger, holistic, spiritual view of what Creation is all about.

The environmental movement has been a good while coming. It began with my acquaintance with Jan Harkse, president of the Humane Society of United States. It was a journey of the humane and compassionate treatment of animals. In the course of this journey and in the ski slopes of New Mexico, on the slopes of Colorado, and in a variety of other places. In the course of this acquaintance, Jan drew me ever so thoughtfully into the issue of the neglected, mistreated and compassionate treatment of animals.

I grew up in a small western town where these weren’t exactly the issues of the day! I grew up in a rural tradition that was uniquely thoughtless in the way it treated animals and the extent to which the human spirit and human compassion is a factor in our relationship with the rest of Creation. I have now begun to understand—I’ve begun that pilgrimage. It is in that sense that I come here today, to see if I can explain why I think there is a great convergence taking place between the work of the Humane Society of the United States—and its traditional function of animal protection, widening and broadening to a larger view of Creation that says that cruelty to animals comes in many forms in traditional and in the thoughtless destruction of habitat, the extinction of species, the presence of man, and mankind’s expansion at the expense of Creation—and the environmental movement.

The environmental movement has gradually become aware of its concerns and come to understand that the task of preserving biodiversity is a large and daunting task. Ultimately there isn’t a chance of persuading people, civilizations, and countries to take biodiversity seriously unless they first understand, from the depths of the United States—its traditional function of animal protection, widening and broadening to a larger view of Creation that says that cruelty to animals comes in many forms in traditional and in the thoughtless destruction of habitat, the extinction of species, the presence of man, and mankind’s expansion at the expense of Creation—and the environmental movement.

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changed the definition of wetlands. I’ve eliminated fifty million acres, one half of the entire wetland base of the United States.

The extinction of a species is a permanent loss to the world. Everything we do affects everybody else. My work as a legislator, no one enforced it; nothing happened. Then, in the late ’80s, a young man named Sam LaBudde, who lived in San Francisco, at the instigation of the Earth Island Institute, bought a video camera and went to Environmental issues, and a spiritual issue. Such concepts are very strange in our culture, particularly in the western United States, but we have to have vision and the courage to continue expanding the concepts.

Currently, we react to the slaughter of elephants in Africa with a moral outrage, but we also live in a borderless, ecological world. We’re not going to be able to do it in the rest of the world, but I think we have the capacity to do it if we have a policy that’s not selective, not species-specific but rather one that says, ‘This is an insidious and moral outrage, and we’re going to be able to do it in the rest of the world unless we take the moral high ground at home.’

Although that bill was signed by the president, no one enforced it; nothing happened. In the past five years, Indonesia has exported more than 50,000 monkeys worldwide; the majority of them have come to the United States. There are currently five licensed primate exporters operating in Indonesia. Four are actively exporting at this time. Over the last two years, there has been a significant reduction in the numbers of animals being exported from Indonesia, but the vast majority of the exports are primate products of any nation that does not comply with these reasonable fishing standards.

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