

IN CELEBRATION OF BALD EAGLES

Just over two hundred years ago, the bald eagle was chosen as the national emblem for the fledgling United States. In recognition of that anniversary, President Reagan declared last year "The Year of the Eagle." Before that celebration fades from memory, let's underscore its importance by quickly reviewing what has happened to the bald eagle during the last two hundred years.

The decision reached by the founding fathers on June 20, 1782, was not without controversy and debate. Some early Americans thought the golden eagle was a better choice for our emblem; it was, they believed, a far nobler bird. But the majority rejected the golden because it could be found on other continents besides America.

So the bald eagle, being strictly North American, moved to the head of the list of candidates. All agreed it was a "fine looking" bird but one hardly worthy of the distinction. Its habit of feeding on carrion, its timid and cowardly behavior and its predatory attacks on the smaller and weaker osprey hardly inspired respect and certainly failed to exemplify the best in the American character.

Benjamin Franklin, whose own preference was for the wild turkey, said of the bald eagle: "For my part I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character; he does not get his living honestly... Besides, he is a rank coward..."

For the next one hundred and seventy years the bald eagle, the nation's symbol, soared over America and into a hail of bullets. Bald eagles fell to the American soil at the hands of taxidermists, farmers, hunters and fishermen.

In Alaska, where both bald eagles and salmon were plentiful, fishermen led the campaign against the bird. The salmon fisheries seemed to forget that eagles are too lazy to catch live fish when they can pick up dead ones, and that probably the bulk of their food consists of dead or dying salmon that have finished spawning.

In 1917, the territory of Alaska passed a bounty law on bald eagles. During the first ten years under this law, bounties were paid on forty-one thousand, eight hundred and twelve eagles. The fishing industry claimed the bald eagle had destroyed the salmon, when in fact this had come about through commercial overfishing.

Gradually the truths of natural history became more widely known. In 1940 a bill was passed giving bald eagles full protection throughout the United States. In 1952 the law was amended to include Alaska.

Direct and obvious confrontations between Americans and their national emblem seemed to abate with the protective legislation. However, a new series of subtle and destructive forces were at work. Pesticides such as DDT were building up in the environment and stunting the population growth of bald eagles, as well as other



birds. Nesting areas and wintering areas began to disappear as critical habitats were developed or logged.

With the advent of the Endangered Species Act, public educational programs and a concerned public, these calamities, too have been reduced.

The Two hundredth birthday celebration of the choice of the bald eagle as America's emblem is over, and the outlook appears brighter than since that choice was made. With understanding and respect we can ensure the bald eagle its rightful place in our future.

— Tupper Ansel Blake, from Sierra magazine

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