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The Trouble with Wilderness

or,

Getting Back to the Wrong Nature

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THE TIME HAS COME TO RETHINK WILDERNESS.

This will seem a heretical claim to many environmentalists, since the idea of wilderness has for decades been a fundamental tenet—indeed, a passion—of the environmental movement, especially in the United States. For many Americans wilderness stands as the last remaining place where civilization, that all too human disease, has not fully infected the earth. It is an island in the polluted sea of urban-industrial modernity, the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness. Seen in this way, wilderness presents itself as the best antidote to our human selves, a refuge we must somehow recover if we hope to save the planet. As Henry David Thoreau once famously declared, “In Wildness is the preservation of the World.”

But is it? The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation—indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we

suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem.

To assert the unnaturalness of so natural a place will no doubt seem absurd or even perverse to many readers, so let me hasten to add that the nonhuman world we encounter in wilderness is far from being merely our own invention. I celebrate with others who love wilderness the beauty and power of the things it contains. Each of us who has spent time there can conjure images and sensations that seem all the more hauntingly real for having engraved themselves so indelibly on our memories. Such memories may be uniquely our own, but they are also familiar enough to be instantly recognizable to others. Remember this? The torrents of mist shoot out from the base of a great waterfall in the depths of a Sierra canyon, the tiny droplets cooling your face as you listen to the roar of the water and gaze up toward the sky through a rainbow that hovers just out of reach. Remember this too: looking out across a desert canyon in the evening air, the only sound a lone raven calling in the distance, the rock walls dropping away into a chasm so deep that its bottom all but vanishes as you squint into the amber light of the setting sun. And this: the moment beside the trail as you sit on a sandstone ledge, your boots damp with the morning dew while you take in the rich smell of the pines, and the small red fox—or maybe for you it was a raccoon or a coyote or a deer—that suddenly ambles across your path, stopping for a long moment to gaze in your direction with cautious indifference before continuing on its way. Remember the feelings of such moments, and you will know as well as I do that you were in the presence of something irreducibly nonhuman, something profoundly Other than yourself. Wilderness is made of that too.

And yet: what brought each of us to the places where such memories became possible is entirely a cultural invention. Go back 250 years in American and European history, and you do not find nearly so many people wandering around remote corners of the planet looking for what today we would call “the wilderness experience.” As late as the eighteenth century, the most common usage of the word “wilderness” in the English language referred to landscapes that generally carried adjectives far different from the ones they attract today. To be a wilderness then was to be “deserted,” “savage,” “desolate,” “barren”—in short, a “waste,” the word's nearest synonym. Its connotations were anything but positive, and the emotion one was most likely to feel in its presence was “bewilderment” or terror.³

Many of the word's strongest associations then were biblical, for it is used over and over again in the King James Version to refer to places on the margins of civilization where it is all too easy to lose oneself in moral confusion and despair. The wilderness was where Moses had wandered with his people for forty years, and where they had nearly abandoned their God to worship a golden idol.⁴ “For Pharaoh will say of the Children of Israel,” we read in Exodus, “They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in.”⁴ The wilderness was where Christ had struggled with the devil and endured his temptations: “And immediately the Spirit driveth him into the wilderness. And he was there in the wilderness for forty days tempted of Satan; and was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered unto him.”⁵ The “delicious Paradise” of John Milton's Eden was surrounded by “a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides / Access denied” to all who sought entry.⁶ When Adam and Eve were driven from that

garden, the world they entered was a wilderness that only their labor and pain could redeem. Wilderness, in short, was a place to which one came only against one's will, and always in fear and trembling. Whatever value it might have arose solely from the possibility that it might be “reclaimed” and turned toward human ends—planted as a garden, say, or a city upon a hill.⁷ In its raw state, it had little or nothing to offer civilized men and women.

But by the end of the nineteenth century, all this had changed. The wastelands that had once seemed worthless had for some people come to seem almost beyond price. That Thoreau in 1862 could declare wildness to be the preservation of the world suggests the sea change that was going on. Wilderness had once been the antithesis of all that was orderly and good—it had been the darkness, one might say, on the far side of the garden wall—and yet now it was frequently likened to Eden itself. When John Muir arrived in the Sierra Nevada in 1869, he would declare, “No description of Heaven that I have ever heard or read of seems half so fine.”⁸ He was hardly alone in expressing such emotions. One by one, various corners of the American map came to be designated as sites whose wild beauty was so spectacular that a growing number of citizens had to visit and see them for themselves. Niagara Falls was the first to undergo this transformation, but it was soon followed by the Catskills, the Adirondacks, Yosemite, Yellowstone, and others. Yosemite was deeded by the U.S. government to the state of California in 1864 as the nation's first wildland park, and Yellowstone became the first true national park in 1872.⁹

By the first decade of the twentieth century, in the single most famous episode in American conservation history, a national debate had exploded over whether the city of San Francisco should be permitted to augment its water supply by damming the Tuolumne River in Hetch Hetchy valley, well within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park. The dam was eventually built, but what today seems no less significant is that so many people fought to prevent its completion. Even as the fight was being lost, Hetch Hetchy became the battle cry of an emerging movement to preserve wilderness. Fifty years earlier, such opposition would have been unthinkable. Few would have questioned the merits of “reclaiming” a wasteland like this in order to put it to human use. Now the defenders of Hetch Hetchy attracted widespread national attention by portraying such an act not as improvement or progress but as desecration and vandalism. Lest one doubt that the old biblical metaphors had been turned completely on their heads, listen to John Muir attack the dam's defenders. “Their arguments,” he wrote, “are curiously like those of the devil, devised for the destruction of the first garden—so much of the very best Eden fruit going to waste; so much of the best Tuolumne water and Tuolumne scenery going to waste.”¹⁰ For Muir and the growing number of Americans who shared his views, Satan's home had become God's own temple.

The sources of this rather astonishing transformation were many, but for the purposes of this essay they can be gathered under two broad headings: the sublime and the frontier. Of the two, the sublime is the older and more pervasive cultural construct, being one of the most important expressions of that broad transatlantic move-

ment we today label as romanticism; the frontier is more peculiarly American, though it too had its European antecedents and parallels. The two converged to remake wilderness in their own image, freighting it with moral values and cultural symbols that it carries to this day. Indeed, it is not too much to say that the modern environmental movement is itself a grandchild of romanticism and post-frontier ideology, which is why it is no accident that so much environmentalist discourse takes its bearings from the wilderness these intellectual movements helped create. Although wilderness may today seem to be just one environmental concern among many, it in fact serves as the foundation for a long list of other such concerns that on their face seem quite remote from it. That is why its influence is so pervasive and, potentially, so insidious.

To gain such remarkable influence, the concept of wilderness had to become loaded with some of the deepest core values of the culture that created and idealized it: it had to become sacred. This possibility had been present in wilderness even in the days when it had been a place of spiritual danger and moral temptation. If Satan was there, then so was Christ, who had found angels as well as wild beasts during His sojourn in the desert. In the wilderness the boundaries between human and nonhuman, between natural and supernatural, had always seemed less certain than elsewhere. This was why the early Christian saints and mystics had often emulated Christ's desert retreat as they sought to experience for themselves the visions and spiritual testing He had endured. One might meet devils and run the risk of losing one's soul in such a place, but one might also meet God. For some that possibility was worth almost any price.

By the eighteenth century this sense of the wilderness as a landscape where the supernatural lay just beneath the surface was expressed in the doctrine of the *sublime*, a word whose modern usage has been so watered down by commercial hype and tourist advertising that it retains only a dim echo of its former power.¹¹ In the theories of Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, William Gilpin, and others, sublime landscapes were those rare places on earth where one had more chance than elsewhere to glimpse the face of God.¹² Romantics had a clear notion of where one could be most sure of having this experience. Although God might, of course, choose to show Himself anywhere, He would most often be found in those vast, powerful landscapes where one could not help feeling insignificant and being reminded of one's own mortality. Where were these sublime places? The eighteenth century catalog of their locations feels very familiar, for we still see and value landscapes as it taught us to do. God was on the mountaintop, in the chasm, in the waterfall, in the thundercloud, in the rainbow, in the sunset. One has only to think of the sites that Americans chose for their first national parks—Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, Rainier, Zion—to realize that virtually all of them fit one or more of these categories. Less sublime landscapes simply did not appear worthy of such protection; not until the 1940s, for instance, would the first swamp be honored, in Everglades National Park, and to this day there is no national park in the grasslands.¹³

Among the best proofs that one had entered a sublime landscape was the emotion it evoked. For the early romantic writers and artists who first began to celebrate it, the sublime was far from being a pleasurable experience. The classic description is that of William Wordsworth as he recounted climbing the Alps and crossing the Simplon

Pass in his autobiographical poem *The Prelude*. There, surrounded by crags and waterfalls, the poet felt himself literally to be in the presence of the divine—and experienced an emotion remarkably close to terror:

The immeasurable height
Of woods decaying, never to be decayed,
The stationary blasts of waterfalls,
And in the narrow rent at every turn
Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn,
The torrents shooting from the clear blue sky,
The rocks that muttered close upon our ears,
Black drizzling crags that spake by the way-side
As if a voice were in them, the sick sight
And giddy prospect of the raving stream,
The unfettered clouds and region of the Heavens,
Tumult and peace, the darkness and the light—
Were all like workings of one mind, the features
Of the same face, blossoms upon one tree;
Characters of the great Apocalypse,
The types and symbols of Eternity,
Of first, and last, and midst, and without end.¹⁴

This was no casual stroll in the mountains, no simple sojourn in the gentle lap of nonhuman nature. What Wordsworth described was nothing less than a religious experience, akin to that of the Old Testament prophets as they conversed with their wrathful God. The symbols he detected in this wilderness landscape were more supernatural than natural, and they inspired more awe and dismay than joy or pleasure. No mere mortal was meant to linger long in such a place, so it was with considerable relief that Wordsworth and his companion made their way back down from the peaks to the sheltering valleys.

Lest you suspect that this view of the sublime was limited to timid Europeans who lacked the American know-how for feeling at home in the wilderness, remember Henry David Thoreau's 1846 climb of Mount Katahdin, in Maine. Although Thoreau is regarded by many today as one of the great American celebrators of wilderness, his emotions about Katahdin were no less ambivalent than Wordsworth's about the Alps.

It was vast, Titanic; and such as man never inhabits. Some part of the beholder, even some vital part, seems to escape through the loose grating of his ribs as he ascends. He is more lone than you can imagine.... Vast, Titanic, inhuman Nature has got him at disadvantage, caught him alone, and pilfers him of some of his divine faculty. She does not smile on him as in the plains. She seems to say sternly, why came ye here before your time? This ground is not prepared for you. Is it not enough that I smile in the valleys? I have never made this soil for thy feet, this air for thy breathing, these rocks for thy neighbors. I cannot pity nor fondle thee here, but forever relentlessly drive thee hence to where I am kind. Why seek me where I have not called thee, and then complain because you find me but a stepmother?¹⁵

This is surely not the way a modern backpacker or nature lover would describe Maine's most famous mountain, but that is because Thoreau's description owes as much to Wordsworth and other romantic contemporaries as to the rocks and clouds of Katahdin itself. His words took the physical mountain on which he stood and transmuted it into an icon of the sublime: a symbol of God's presence on earth. The power and the glory of that icon were such that only a prophet might gaze on it for long. In effect, romantics like Thoreau joined Moses and the children of Israel in Exodus when "they looked toward the wilderness, and behold, the glory of the Lord appeared in the cloud."¹⁶

But even as it came to embody the awesome power of the sublime, wilderness was also being tamed—not just by those who were building settlements in its midst but also by those who most celebrated its inhuman beauty. By the second half of the nineteenth century, the terrible awe that Wordsworth and Thoreau regarded as the appropriately pious stance to adopt in the presence of their mountaintop God was giving way to a much more comfortable, almost sentimental demeanor. As more and more tourists sought out the wilderness as a spectacle to be looked at and enjoyed for its great beauty, the sublime in effect became domesticated. The wilderness was still sacred, but the religious sentiments it evoked were more those of a pleasant parish church than those of a grand cathedral or a harsh desert retreat. The writer who best captures this late romantic sense of a domesticated sublime is undoubtedly John Muir, whose descriptions of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada reflect none of the anxiety or terror one finds in earlier writers. Here he is, for instance, sketching on North Dome in Yosemite Valley:

No pain here, no dull empty hours, no fear of the past, no fear of the future. These blessed mountains are so compactly filled with God's beauty, no petty personal hope or experience has room to be. Drinking this champagne water is pure pleasure, so is breathing the living air, and every movement of limbs is pleasure, while the body seems to feel beauty when exposed to it as it feels the campfire or sunshine, entering not by the eyes alone, but equally through all one's flesh like radiant heat, making a passionate ecstatic pleasure glow not explainable.

The emotions Muir describes in Yosemite could hardly be more different from Thoreau's on Katahdin or Wordsworth's on the Simplon Pass. Yet all three men are participating in the same cultural tradition and contributing to the same myth: the mountain as cathedral. The three may differ in the way they choose to express their piety—Wordsworth favoring an awe-filled bewilderment, Thoreau a stern loneliness, Muir a welcome ecstasy—but they agree completely about the church in which they prefer to worship. Muir's closing words on North Dome diverge from his older contemporaries only in mood, not in their ultimate content:

Perched like a fly on this Yosemite dome, I gaze and sketch and bask, oftentimes settling down into dumb admiration without definite hope of ever learning much, yet with the longing, unresting effort that lies at the door of hope, humbly prostrate before the vast display of God's power, and eager to offer self-denial and renunciation with eternal toil to learn any lesson in the divine manuscript.¹⁷

Muir's "divine manuscript" and Wordsworth's "Characters of the great Apocalypse" were in fact pages from the same holy book. The sublime wilderness had ceased to be a place of satanic temptation and become instead a sacred temple, much as it continues to be for those who love it today.

But the romantic sublime was not the only cultural movement that helped transform wilderness into a sacred American icon during the nineteenth century. No less important was the powerful romantic attraction of primitivism, dating back at least to Rousseau—the belief that the best antidote to the ills of an overly refined and civilized modern world was a return to simpler, more primitive living. In the United States, this was embodied most strikingly in the national myth of the frontier. The historian Frederick Jackson Turner wrote in 1893 the classic academic statement of this myth, but it had been part of American cultural traditions for well over a century. As Turner described the process, easterners and European immigrants, in moving to the wild unsettled lands of the frontier, shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their primitive racial energies, reinvented direct democratic institutions, and thereby reinfused themselves with a vigor, an independence, and a creativity that were the source of American democracy and national character. Seen in this way, wild country became a place not just of religious redemption but of national renewal, the quintessential location for experiencing what it meant to be an American.

One of Turner's most provocative claims was that by the 1890s the frontier was passing away. Never again would "such gifts of free land offer themselves" to the American people. "The frontier has gone," he declared, "and with its going has closed the first period of American history."¹⁸ Built into the frontier myth from its very beginning was the notion that this crucible of American identity was temporary and would pass away. Those who have celebrated the frontier have almost always looked backward as they did so, mourning an older, simpler, truer world that is about to disappear forever. That world and all of its attractions, Turner said, depended on free land—on wilderness. Thus, in the myth of the vanishing frontier lay the seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future. It is no accident that the movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas began to gain real momentum at precisely the time that laments about the passing frontier reached their peak. To protect wilderness was in a very real sense to protect the nation's most sacred myth of origin.

Among the core elements of the frontier myth was the powerful sense among certain groups of Americans that wilderness was the last bastion of rugged individualism. Turner tended to stress communitarian themes when writing frontier history, asserting that Americans in primitive conditions had been forced to band together with their neighbors to form communities and democratic institutions. For other writers, however, frontier democracy for communities was less compelling than frontier freedom for individuals.¹⁹ By fleeing to the outer margins of settled land and society—so the story ran—an individual could escape the confining strictures of civilized life. The mood among writers who celebrated frontier individualism was almost always nostalgic; they lamented not just a lost way of life but the passing of the heroic men

who had embodied that life. Thus Owen Wister in the introduction to his classic 1902 novel *The Virginian* could write of "a vanished world" in which "the horseman, the cow-puncher, the last romantic figure upon our soil" rode only "in his historic yesterday" and would "never come again." For Wister, the cowboy was a man who gave his word and kept it ("Wall Street would have found him behind the times"), who did not talk lewdly to women ("Newport would have thought him old-fashioned"), who worked and played hard, and whose "ungoverned hours did not unman him."²⁰ Theodore Roosevelt wrote with much the same nostalgic fervor about the "fine, manly qualities" of the "wild rough-rider of the plains." No one could be more heroically masculine; thought Roosevelt, or more at home in the western wilderness:

There he passes his days, there he does his life-work, there, when he meets death, he faces it as he has faced many other evils, with quiet, uncomplaining fortitude. Brave, hospitable, hardy, and adventurous, he is the grim pioneer of our race; he prepares the way for the civilization from before whose face he must himself disappear. Hard and dangerous though his existence is, it has yet a wild attraction that strongly draws to it his bold, free spirit.²¹

This nostalgia for a passing frontier way of life inevitably implied ambivalence, if not downright hostility, toward modernity and all that it represented. If one saw the wild lands of the frontier as freer, truer, and more natural than other, more modern places, then one was also inclined to see the cities and factories of urban-industrial civilization as confining, false, and artificial. Owen Wister looked at the post-frontier "transition" that had followed "the horseman of the plains," and did not like what he saw: "a shapeless state, a condition of men and manners as unlovely as is that moment in the year when winter is gone and spring not come, and the face of Nature is ugly."²² In the eyes of writers who shared Wister's distaste for modernity, civilization contaminated its inhabitants and absorbed them into the faceless, collective, contemptible life of the crowd. For all of its troubles and dangers, and despite the fact that it must pass away, the frontier had been a better place. If civilization was to be redeemed, it would be by men like the Virginian who could retain their frontier virtues even as they made the transition to post-frontier life.

The mythic frontier individualist was almost always masculine in gender: here, in the wilderness, a man could be a real man, the rugged individual he was meant to be before civilization sapped his energy and threatened his masculinity. Wister's contemptuous remarks about Wall Street and Newport suggest what he and many others of his generation believed—that the comforts and seductions of civilized life were especially insidious for men, who all too easily became emasculated by the feminizing tendencies of civilization. More often than not, men who felt this way came, like Wister and Roosevelt, from elite class backgrounds. The curious result was that frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism. The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects. If the frontier was passing, then men who had the means to do so should preserve for themselves some remnant of its wild landscape so that they might enjoy the regeneration and renewal that came from sleeping under the stars, participating in blood sports,

and living off the land. The frontier might be gone, but the frontier experience could still be had if only wilderness were preserved.

Thus the decades following the Civil War saw more and more of the nation's wealthiest citizens seeking out wilderness for themselves. The elite passion for wild land took many forms: enormous estates in the Adirondacks and elsewhere (disingenuously called "camps" despite their many servants and amenities), cattle ranches for would-be rough riders on the Great Plains, guided big-game hunting trips in the Rockies, and luxurious resort hotels wherever railroads pushed their way into sublime landscapes. Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them, wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer, hiring guides and other backcountry residents who could serve as romantic surrogates for the rough riders and hunters of the frontier if one was willing to overlook their new status as employees and servants of the rich.

In just this way, wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, standing for the wild freedom of America's past and seeming to represent a highly attractive natural alternative to the ugly artificiality of modern civilization. The irony, of course, was that in the process wilderness came to reflect the very civilization its devotees sought to escape. Ever since the nineteenth century, celebrating wilderness has been an activity mainly for well-to-do city folks. Country people generally know far too much about working the land to regard unworked land as their ideal. In contrast, elite urban tourists and wealthy sportsmen projected their leisure-time frontier fantasies onto the American landscape and so created wilderness in their own image.

There were other ironies as well. The movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations. The myth of the wilderness as "virgin," uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation.²³ Among the things that most marked the new national parks as reflecting a post-frontier consciousness was the relative absence of human violence within their boundaries. The actual frontier had often been a place of conflict, in which invaders and invaded fought for control of land and resources. Once set aside within the fixed and carefully policed boundaries of the modern bureaucratic state, the wilderness lost its savage image and became safe: a place more of reverie than of revulsion or fear. Meanwhile, its original inhabitants were kept out by dint of force, their earlier uses of the land redefined as inappropriate or even illegal. To this day, for instance, the Blackfeet continue to be accused of "poaching" on the lands of Glacier National Park that originally belonged to them and that were ceded by treaty only with the proviso that they be permitted to hunt there.²⁴

The removal of Indians to create an "uninhabited wilderness"—uninhabited as never before in the human history of the place—reminds us just how invented, just

how constructed, the American wilderness really is. To return to my opening argument: there is nothing natural about the concept of wilderness. It is entirely a creation of the culture that holds it dear, a product of the very history it seeks to deny. Indeed, one of the most striking proofs of the cultural invention of wilderness is its thoroughgoing erasure of the history from which it sprang. In virtually all of its manifestations, wilderness represents a flight from history. Seen as the original garden, it is a place outside of time, from which human beings had to be ejected before the fallen world of history could properly begin. Seen as the frontier, it is a savage world at the dawn of civilization, whose transformation represents the very beginning of the national historical epic. Seen as the bold landscape of frontier heroism, it is the place of youth and childhood, into which men escape by abandoning their pasts and entering a world of freedom where the constraints of civilization fade into memory. Seen as the sacred sublime, it is the home of a God who transcends history by standing as the One who remains untouched and unchanged by time's arrow. No matter what the angle from which we regard it, wilderness offers us the illusion that we can escape the cares and troubles of the world in which our past has ensnared us.²⁵

This escape from history is one reason why the language we use to talk about wilderness is often permeated with spiritual and religious values that reflect human ideals far more than the material world of physical nature. Wilderness fulfills the old romantic project of secularizing Judeo-Christian values so as to make a new cathedral not in some petty human building but in God's own creation, Nature itself. Many environmentalists who reject traditional notions of the Godhead and who regard themselves as agnostics or even atheists nonetheless express feelings tantamount to religious awe when in the presence of wilderness—a fact that testifies to the success of the romantic project. Those who have no difficulty seeing God as the expression of our human dreams and desires nonetheless have trouble recognizing that in a secular age Nature can offer precisely the same sort of mirror.

Thus it is that wilderness serves as the unexamined foundation on which so many of the quasi-religious values of modern environmentalism rest. The critique of modernity that is one of environmentalism's most important contributions to the moral and political discourse of our time more often than not appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to wilderness as the standard against which to measure the failings of our human world. Wilderness is the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influences of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are—or ought to be.

But the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject. The flight from history that is very nearly the core of wilderness represents the false hope of an escape from responsibility, the illusion that we can somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the tabula rasa that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world. The dream of an unworked natural landscape is very much the fantasy of people who have never themselves had to work the land to make a living—urban folk for whom food comes from

a supermarket or a restaurant instead of a field, and for whom the wooden houses in which they live and work apparently have no meaningful connection to the forests in which trees grow and die. Only people whose relation to the land was already alienated could hold up wilderness as a model for human life in nature, for the romantic ideology of wilderness leaves precisely nowhere for human beings actually to make their living from the land.

This, then, is the central paradox: wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents its fall. The place where we are is the place where nature is not. If this is so—if by definition wilderness leaves no place for human beings, save perhaps as contemplative sojourners enjoying their leisurely reverie in God's natural cathedral—then also by definition it can offer no solution to the environmental and other problems that confront us. To the extent that we celebrate wilderness as the measure with which we judge civilization, we reproduce the dualism that sets humanity and nature at opposite poles. We thereby leave ourselves little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually look like.

Worse: to the extent that we live in an urban-industrial civilization but at the same time pretend to ourselves that our *real* home is in the wilderness, to just that extent we give ourselves permission to evade responsibility for the lives we actually lead. We inhabit civilization while holding some part of ourselves—what we imagine to be the most precious part—aloof from its entanglements. We work our nine-to-five jobs in its institutions, we eat its food, we drive its cars (not least to reach the wilderness), we benefit from the intricate and all too invisible networks with which it shelters us, all the while pretending that these things are not an essential part of who we are. By imagining that our true home is in the wilderness, we forgive ourselves the homes we actually inhabit. In its flight from history, in its siren song of escape, in its reproduction of the dangerous dualism that sets human beings outside of nature—in all of these ways, wilderness poses a serious threat to responsible environmentalism at the end of the twentieth century.

By now I hope it is clear that my criticism in this essay is not directed at wild nature per se, or even at efforts to set aside large tracts of wild land, but rather at the specific habits of thinking that flow from this complex cultural construction called wilderness. It is not the things we label as wilderness that are the problem—for nonhuman nature and large tracts of the natural world *do* deserve protection—but rather what we ourselves mean when we use the label. Lest one doubt how pervasive these habits of thought actually are in contemporary environmentalism, let me list some of the places where wilderness serves as the ideological underpinning for environmental concerns that might otherwise seem quite remote from it. Defenders of biological diversity, for instance, although sometimes appealing to more utilitarian concerns, often point to “untouched” ecosystems as the best and richest repositories of the undiscovered species we must certainly try to protect. Although at first blush an apparently more “scientific” concept than wilderness, biological diversity in fact invokes many of the same sacred values, which is why organizations like the Nature Conservancy have been so quick to employ it as an alternative to the seemingly fuzziest and

more problematic concept of wilderness. There is a paradox here, of course. To the extent that biological diversity (indeed, even wilderness itself) is likely to survive in the future only by the most vigilant and self-conscious management of the ecosystems that sustain it, the ideology of wilderness is potentially in direct conflict with the very thing it encourages us to protect.²⁶

The most striking instances of this have revolved around "endangered species," which serve as vulnerable symbols of biological diversity while at the same time standing as surrogates for wilderness itself. The terms of the Endangered Species Act in the United States have often meant that those hoping to defend pristine wilderness have had to rely on a single endangered species like the spotted owl to gain legal standing for their case—thereby making the full power of the sacred land inhere in a single numinous organism whose habitat then becomes the object of intense debate about appropriate management and use.²⁷ The ease with which anti-environmental forces like the wise-use movement have attacked such single-species preservation efforts suggests the vulnerability of strategies like these.

Perhaps partly because our own conflicts over such places and organisms have become so messy, the convergence of wilderness values with concerns about biological diversity and endangered species has helped produce a deep fascination for remote ecosystems, where it is easier to imagine that nature might somehow be "left alone" to flourish by its own pristine devices. The classic example is the tropical rain forest, which since the 1970s has become the most powerful modern icon of unfallen, sacred land—a veritable Garden of Eden—for many Americans and Europeans. And yet protecting the rain forest in the eyes of First World environmentalists all too often means protecting it from the people who live there. Those who seek to preserve such "wilderness" from the activities of native peoples run the risk of reproducing the same tragedy—being forceably removed from an ancient home—that befell American Indians. Third World countries face massive environmental problems and deep social conflicts, but these are not likely to be solved by a cultural myth that encourages us to "preserve" peopleless landscapes that have not existed in such places for millennia. At its worst, as environmentalists are beginning to realize, exporting American notions of wilderness in this way can become an unthinking and self-defeating form of cultural imperialism.²⁸

Perhaps the most suggestive example of the way that wilderness thinking can underpin other environmental concerns has emerged in the recent debate about "global change." In 1989 the journalist Bill McKibben published a book entitled *The End of Nature*, in which he argued that the prospect of global climate change as a result of unintentional human manipulation of the atmosphere means that nature as we once knew it no longer exists.²⁹ Whereas earlier generations inhabited a natural world that remained more or less unaffected by their actions, our own generation is uniquely different. We and our children will henceforth live in a biosphere completely altered by our own activity, a planet in which the human and the natural can no longer be distinguished, because the one has overwhelmed the other. In McKibben's view, nature has died, and we are responsible for killing it. "The planet," he declares, "is utterly different now."³⁰

But such a perspective is possible only if we accept the wilderness premise that nature, to be natural, must also be pristine—remote from humanity and untouched by our common past. In fact, everything we know about environmental history suggests that people have been manipulating the natural world on various scales for as long as we have a record of their passing. Moreover, we have unassailable evidence that many of the environmental changes we now face also occurred quite apart from human intervention at one time or another in the earth's past.³¹ The point is not that our current problems are trivial, or that our devastating effects on the earth's ecosystems should be accepted as inevitable or "natural." It is rather that we seem unlikely to make much progress in solving these problems if we hold up to ourselves as the mirror of nature a wilderness we ourselves cannot inhabit.

To do so is merely to take to a logical extreme the paradox that was built into wilderness from the beginning: if nature dies because we enter it, then the only way to save nature is to kill ourselves. The absurdity of this proposition flows from the underlying dualism it expresses. Not only does it ascribe greater power to humanity that we in fact possess—physical and biological nature will surely survive in some form or another long after we ourselves have gone the way of all flesh—but in the end it offers us little more than a self-defeating counsel of despair. The tautology gives us no way out: if wild nature is the only thing worth saving, and if our mere presence destroys it, then the sole solution to our own unnaturalness, the only way to protect sacred wilderness from profane humanity, would seem to be suicide. It is not a proposition that seems likely to produce very positive or practical results.

And yet radical environmentalists and deep ecologists all too frequently come close to accepting this premise as a first principle. When they express, for instance, the popular notion that our environmental problems began with the invention of agriculture, they push the human fall from natural grace so far back into the past that all of civilized history becomes a tale of ecological declension. Earth First! founder Dave Foreman captures the familiar parable succinctly when he writes,

Before agriculture was midwived in the Middle East, humans were in the wilderness. We had no concept of "wilderness" because everything was wilderness and we were a part of it. But with irrigation ditches, crop surpluses, and permanent villages, we became *apart* from the natural world.... Between the wilderness that created us and the civilization created by us grew an ever-widening rift.³²

In this view the farm becomes the first and most important battlefield in the long war against wild nature, and all else follows in its wake. From such a starting place, it is hard not to reach the conclusion that the only way human beings can hope to live naturally on earth is to follow the hunter-gatherers back into a wilderness Eden and abandon virtually everything that civilization has given us. It may indeed turn out that civilization will end in ecological collapse or nuclear disaster, whereupon one might expect to find any human survivors returning to a way of life closer to that celebrated by Foreman and his followers. For most of us, though, such a debacle would be cause for regret, a sign that humanity had failed to fulfill its own promise and failed to honor its own highest values—including those of the deep ecologists.

In offering wilderness as the ultimate hunter-gatherer alternative to civilization, Foreman reproduces an extreme but still easily recognizable version of the myth of frontier primitivism. When he writes of his fellow Earth Firsters that "we believe we must return to being animal, to glorying in our sweat, hormones, tears, and blood" and that "we struggle against the modern compulsion to become dull, passionless androids," he is following in the footsteps of Owen Wister.³³ Although his arguments give primacy to defending biodiversity and the autonomy of wild nature, his prose becomes most passionate when he speaks of preserving "the wilderness experience." His own ideal "Big Outside" bears an uncanny resemblance to that of the frontier myth: wide open spaces and virgin land with no trails, no signs, no facilities, no maps, no guides, no rescues, no modern equipment. Tellingly, it is a land where hardy travelers can support themselves by hunting with "primitive weapons (bow and arrow, atlatl, knife, sharp rock)."³⁴ Foreman claims that "the primary value of wilderness is not as a proving ground for young Huck Finns and Annie Oakleys," but his heart is with Huck and Annie all the same. He admits that "preserving a quality wilderness experience for the human visitor, letting her or him flex Paleolithic muscles or seek visions, remains a tremendously important secondary purpose."³⁵ Just so does Teddy Roosevelt's rough rider live on in the greener garb of a new age.

However much one may be attracted to such a vision, it entails problematic consequences. For one, it makes wilderness the locus for an epic struggle between malign civilization and benign nature, compared with which all other social, political, and moral concerns seem trivial. Foreman writes, "The preservation of wildness and native diversity is *the* most important issue. Issues directly affecting only humans pale in comparison."³⁶ Presumably so do any environmental problems whose victims are mainly people, for such problems usually surface in landscapes that have already "fallen" and are no longer wild. This would seem to exclude from the radical environmentalist agenda problems of occupational health and safety in industrial settings, problems of toxic waste exposure on "unnatural" urban and agricultural sites, problems of poor children poisoned by lead exposure in the inner city, problems of famine and poverty and human suffering in the "overpopulated" places of the earth—problems, in short, of environmental justice. If we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate.

It is no accident that these supposedly inconsequential environmental problems affect mainly poor people, for the long affiliation between wilderness and wealth means that the only poor people who count when wilderness is *the* issue are hunter-gatherers, who presumably do not consider themselves to be poor in the first place. The dualism at the heart of wilderness encourages its advocates to conceive of its protection as a crude conflict between the "human" and the "nonhuman"—or, more often, between those who value the nonhuman and those who do not. This in turn tempts one to ignore crucial differences *among* humans and the complex cultural and historical reasons why different peoples may feel very differently about the meaning of wilderness.

Why, for instance, is the "wilderness experience" so often conceived as a form of recreation best enjoyed by those whose class privileges give them the time and resources to leave their jobs behind and "get away from it all"? Why does the protection of wilderness so often seem to pit urban recreationists against rural people who actually earn their living from the land (excepting those who sell goods and services to the tourists themselves)? Why in the debates about pristine natural areas are "primitive" peoples idealized, even sentimentalized, until the moment they do something unprimitive, modern, and unnatural, and thereby fall from environmental grace? What are the consequences of a wilderness ideology that devalues productive labor and the very concrete knowledge that comes from working the land with one's own hands?³⁷ All of these questions imply conflicts among different groups of people, conflicts that are obscured behind the deceptive clarity of "human" vs. "nonhuman." If in answering these knotty questions we resort to so simplistic an opposition, we are almost certain to ignore the very subtleties and complexities we need to understand.

But the most troubling cultural baggage that accompanies the celebration of wilderness has less to do with remote rain forests and peoples than with the ways we think about ourselves—we American environmentalists who quite rightly worry about the future of the earth and the threats we pose to the natural world. Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about *using* nature as about *not* using it. The wilderness dualism tends to cast any use as *ab-use*, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship. My own belief is that only by exploring this middle ground will we learn ways of imagining a better world for all of us: humans and nonhumans, rich people and poor, women and men, First Worlders and Third Worlders, white folks and people of color, consumers and producers—a world better for humanity in all of its diversity and for all the rest of nature too. The middle ground is where we actually live. It is where we—all of us, in our different places and ways—make our homes.

That is why, when I think of the times I myself have come closest to experiencing what I might call the sacred in nature, I often find myself remembering wild places much closer to home. I think, for instance, of a small pond near my house where water bubbles up from limestone springs to feed a series of pools that rarely freeze in winter and so play home to waterfowl that stay here for the protective warmth even on the coldest of winter days, gliding silently through streaming mists as the snow falls from gray February skies. I think of a November evening long ago when I found myself on a Wisconsin hilltop in rain and dense fog, only to have the setting sun break through the clouds to cast an otherworldly golden light on the misty farms and woodlands below, a scene so unexpected and joyous that I lingered past dusk so as not to miss any part of the gift that had come my way. And I think perhaps most especially of the blown-out, bankrupt farm in the sand country of central Wisconsin where Aldo Leopold and his family tried one of the first American experiments in ecological restoration, turning ravaged and infertile soil into carefully tended ground where the

human and the nonhuman could exist side by side in relative harmony. What I celebrate about such places is not *just* their wildness, though that certainly is among their most important qualities; what I celebrate even more is that they remind us of the wildness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around us if only we have eyes to see it.

Indeed, my principal objection to wilderness is that it may teach us to be dismissive or even contemptuous of such humble places and experiences. Without our quite realizing it, wilderness tends to privilege some parts of nature at the expense of others. Most of us, I suspect, still follow the conventions of the romantic sublime in finding the mountaintop more glorious than the plains, the ancient forest nobler than the grasslands, the mighty canyon more inspiring than the humble marsh. Even John Muir, in arguing against those who sought to dam his beloved Hetch Hetchy valley in the Sierra Nevada, argued for alternative dam sites in the gentler valleys of the foothills—a preference that had nothing to do with nature and everything with the cultural traditions of the sublime.³⁸ Just as problematically, our frontier traditions have encouraged Americans to define “true” wilderness as requiring very large tracts of roadless land—what Dave Foreman calls “The Big Outside.” Leaving aside the legitimate empirical question in conservation biology of how large a tract of land must be before a given species can reproduce on it, the emphasis on big wilderness reflects a romantic frontier belief that one hasn’t really gotten away from civilization unless one can go for days at a time without encountering another human being. By teaching us to fetishize sublime places and wide open country, these peculiarly American ways of thinking about wilderness encourage us to adopt too high a standard for what counts as “natural.” If it isn’t hundreds of square miles big, if it doesn’t give us God’s-eye views or grand vistas, if it doesn’t permit us the illusion that we are alone on the planet, then it really isn’t natural. It’s too small, too plain, or too crowded to be *authentically wild*.

In critiquing wilderness as I have done in this essay, I’m forced to confront my own deep ambivalence about its meaning for modern environmentalism. On the one hand, one of my own most important environmental ethics is that people should always be conscious that they are part of the natural world, inextricably tied to the ecological systems that sustain their lives. Any way of looking at nature that encourages us to believe we are separate from nature—as wilderness tends to do—is likely to reinforce environmentally irresponsible behavior. On the other hand, I also think it no less crucial for us to recognize and honor nonhuman nature as a world we did not create, a world with its own independent, nonhuman reasons for being as it is. The autonomy of nonhuman nature seems to me an indispensable corrective to human arrogance. Any way of looking at nature that helps us remember—as wilderness also tends to do—that the interests of people are not necessarily identical to those of every other creature or of the earth itself is likely to foster *responsible* behavior. To the extent that wilderness has served as an important vehicle for articulating deep moral values regarding our obligations and responsibilities to the nonhuman world, I would not want to jettison the contributions it has made to our culture’s ways of thinking about nature.

If the core problem of wilderness is that it distances us too much from the very things it teaches us to value, then the question we must ask is what it can tell us about *home*, the place where we actually live. How can we take the positive values we associate with wilderness and bring them closer to home? I think the answer to this question will come by broadening our sense of the otherness that wilderness seeks to define and protect. In reminding us of the world we did not make, wilderness can teach profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself. Feelings like these argue for the importance of self-awareness and self-criticism as we exercise our own ability to transform the world around us, helping us set responsible limits to human mastery—which without such limits too easily becomes human hubris. Wilderness is the place where, symbolically at least, we try to withhold our power to dominate.

Wallace Stegner once wrote of

the special human mark, the special record of human passage, that distinguishes man from all other species. It is rare enough among men, impossible to any other form of life. *It is simply the deliberate and chosen refusal to make any marks at all.... We are the most dangerous species of life on the planet, and every other species, even the earth itself, has cause to fear our power to exterminate. But we are also the only species which, when it chooses to do so, will go to great effort to save what it might destroy.*³⁹

The myth of wilderness, which Stegner knowingly reproduces in these remarks, is that we can somehow leave nature untouched by our passage. By now it should be clear that this for the most part is an illusion. But Stegner’s deeper message then becomes all the more compelling. If living in history means that we cannot help leaving marks on a fallen world, then the dilemma we face is to decide what kinds of marks we wish to leave. It is just here that our cultural traditions of wilderness remain so important. In the broadest sense, wilderness teaches us to ask whether the Other must always bend to our will, and, if not, under what circumstances it should be allowed to flourish without our intervention. This is surely a question worth asking about everything we do, and not just about the natural world.

When we visit a wilderness area, we find ourselves surrounded by plants and animals and physical landscapes whose otherness compels our attention. In forcing us to acknowledge that they are not of our making, that they have little or no need of our continued existence, they recall for us a creation far greater than our own. In the wilderness, we need no reminder that a tree has its own reasons for being, quite apart from us. The same is less true in the gardens we plant and tend ourselves: there it is far easier to forget the otherness of the tree.⁴⁰ Indeed, one could almost measure wilderness by the extent to which our recognition of its otherness requires a conscious, willed act on our part. The romantic legacy means that wilderness is more a state of mind than a fact of nature, and the state of mind that today most defines wilderness is *wonder*. The striking power of the wild is that wonder in the face of it requires no act of will, but forces itself upon us—as an expression of the nonhuman world experienced through the lens of our cultural history—as proof that ours is not the only presence in the universe.

Wilderness gets us into trouble only if we imagine that this experience of wonder and otherness is limited to the remote corners of the planet, or that it somehow depends on pristine landscapes we ourselves do not inhabit. Nothing could be more misleading. The tree in the garden is in reality no less other, no less worthy of our wonder and respect, than the tree in an ancient forest that has never known an ax or a saw—even though the tree in the forest reflects a more intricate web of ecological relationships. The tree in the garden could easily have sprung from the same seed as the tree in the forest, and we can claim only its location and perhaps its form as our own. Both trees stand apart from us; both share our common world. The special power of the tree in the wilderness is to remind us of this fact. It can teach us to recognize the wildness we did not see in the tree we planted in our own backyard. By seeing the otherness in that which is most unfamiliar, we can learn to see it too in that which at first seemed merely ordinary. If wilderness can do this—if it can help us perceive and respect a nature we had forgotten to recognize as natural—then it will become part of the solution to our environmental dilemmas rather than part of the problem.

This will only happen, however, if we abandon the dualism that sees the tree in the garden as artificial—completely fallen and unnatural—and the tree in the wilderness as natural—completely pristine and wild. Both trees in some ultimate sense are wild; both in a practical sense now depend on our management and care. We are responsible for both, even though we can claim credit for neither. Our challenge is to stop thinking of such things according to set of bipolar moral scales in which the human and the nonhuman, the unnatural and the natural, the fallen and the unfallen, serve as our conceptual map for understanding and valuing the world. Instead, we need to embrace the full continuum of a natural landscape that is also cultural, in which the city, the suburb, the pastoral, and the wild each has its proper place, which we permit ourselves to celebrate without needlessly denigrating the others. We need to honor the Other within and the Other next door as much as we do the exotic Other that lives far away—a lesson that applies as much to people as it does to (other) natural things. In particular, we need to discover a common middle ground in which all of these things, from the city to the wilderness, can somehow be encompassed in the word “home.” Home, after all, is the place where finally we make our living. It is the place for which we take responsibility, the place we try to sustain so we can pass on what is best in it (and in ourselves) to our children.⁴

The task of making a home in nature is what Wendell Berry has called “the forever unfinished lifework of our species.” “The only thing we have to preserve nature with,” he writes, “is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity.”⁵ Calling a place home inevitably means that we will use the nature we find in it, for there can be no escape from manipulating and working and even killing some parts of nature to make our home. But if we acknowledge the autonomy and otherness of the things and creatures around us—an autonomy our culture has taught us to label with the word “wild”—then we will at least think carefully about the uses to which we put them, and even ask if we should use them at all. Just so can we still join Thoreau in declaring that “in Wildness is the preservation of the World,” for wildness (as opposed to wilderness) can be found anywhere: in the seemingly tame fields and

woodlots of Massachusetts, in the cracks of a Manhattan sidewalk, even in the cells of our own bodies. As Gary Snyder has wisely said, “A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one’s own consciousness. The planet is a wild place and always will be.”⁶ To think ourselves capable of causing “the end of nature” is an act of great hubris, for it means forgetting the wildness that dwells everywhere within and around us.

Learning to honor the wild—learning to remember and acknowledge the autonomy of the other—means striving for critical self-consciousness in all of our actions. It means the deep reflection and respect must accompany each act of use, and means too that we must always consider the possibility of non-use. It means looking at the part of nature we intend to turn toward our own ends and asking whether we can use it again and again and again—sustainably—without its being diminished in the process. It means never imagining that we can flee into a mythical wilderness to escape history and the obligation to take responsibility for our own actions that history inescapably entails. Most of all, it means practicing remembrance and gratitude, for thanksgiving is the simplest and most basic of ways for us to recollect the nature, the culture, and the history that have come together to make the world as we know it. If wildness can stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here, if it can start being as humane as it is natural, then perhaps we can get on with the unending task of struggling to live rightly in the world—not just in the garden, not just in the wilderness, but in the home that encompasses them both.

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Notes

1. Henry David Thoreau, “Walking,” *The Works of Thoreau*, ed. Henry S. Canby (Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin, 1937), p. 672.
2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “wilderness”; see also Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 3rd ed. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Univ. Press, 1982), pp. 1-22; and Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Univ. Press, 1991).
3. Exodus 32:1-35, KJV.
4. Exodus 14:3, KJV.
5. Mark 1:12-13, KJV; see also Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13.
6. John Milton, “Paradise Lost,” *John Milton: Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Merritt Y. Hughes (New York: Odyssey Press, 1957), pp. 280-81, lines 131-42.

7. I have discussed this theme at length in "Landscapes of Abundance and Scarcity," in Clyde Milner et al., eds., *Oxford History of the American West* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 603-37. The classic work on the Puritan "city on a hill" in colonial New England is Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Univ. Press, 1956).
8. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra* (1911), reprinted in *John Muir: The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books* (London, England: Diadem; Seattle, Washington: Mountaineers, 1992), p. 211.
9. Alfred Runte, *National Parks: The American Experience*, 2nd ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1987).
10. John Muir, *The Yosemite* (1912), reprinted in *John Muir: Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, p. 715.
11. Scholarly work on the sublime is extensive. Among the most important studies are Samuel Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1935); Basil Willey, *The Eighteenth-Century Background: Studies on the Idea of Nature in the Thought of the Period* (London, England: Chatto and Windus, 1949); Marjorie Hope Nicolson, *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory: The Development of the Aesthetics of the Infinite* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell Univ. Press, 1959); Thomas Weiskel, *The Romantic Sublime: Studies in the Structure and Psychology of Transcendence* (Baltimore, Maryland: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976); Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980).
12. The classic works are Immanuel Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764), trans. John T. Goldthwait (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1960); Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (1958; Notre Dame, Indiana: Univ. of Notre Dame Press, 1968); William Gilpin, *Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (London, England, 1803).
13. See Ann Vileisis, "From Wastelands to Wetlands" (unpublished senior essay, Yale Univ., 1989); Runte, *National Parks*.
14. William Wordsworth, "The Prelude," bk. 6, in Thomas Hutchinson, ed., *The Poetical Works of Wordsworth* (London, England: Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), p. 536.
15. Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (1864), in *Henry David Thoreau* (New York: Library of America, 1985), pp. 640-41.
16. Exodus 16:10, KJV.
17. John Muir, *My First Summer in the Sierra*, p. 238. Part of the difference between these descriptions may reflect the landscapes the three authors were describing. In his essay, "Reinventing Common Nature: Yosemite and Mount Rushmore—A Meandering Tale of a Double Nature," Kenneth Olwig notes that early American travelers experienced Yosemite as much through the aesthetic tropes of the pastoral as through those of the sublime. The ease with which Muir celebrated the gentle divinity of the Sierra Nevada had much to do with the pastoral qualities of the landscape he described. See Olwig, "Reinventing Common Nature: Yosemite and Mount Rushmore—A Meandering Tale of a Double Nature," *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1995), pp. 379-408.
18. Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Henry Holt, 1920), pp. 37-38.
19. Richard Slotkin has made this observation the linchpin of his comparison between Turner and Theodore Roosevelt. See Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992), pp. 29-62.
20. Owen Wister, *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), pp. viii-ix.
21. Theodore Roosevelt, *Ranch Life and the Hunting Trail* (1888; New York: Century, 1899), p. 100.
22. Wister, *Virginian*, p. x.
23. On the many problems with this view, see William M. Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992): 369-85.
24. Louis Warren, "The Hunter's Game: Poachers, Conservationists, and Twentieth-Century America" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1994).
25. Wilderness also lies at the foundation of the Clementsian ecological concept of the climax. See Michael Barbour, "Ecological Fragmentation in the Fifties" in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 233-55, and William Cronon, "Introduction: In Search of Nature," in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 23-56.
26. On the many paradoxes of having to manage wilderness in order to maintain the appearance of an unmanaged landscape, see John C. Hendee et al., *Wilderness Management*, USDA Forest Service Miscellaneous Publication No. 1365 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978).
27. See James Proctor, "Whose Nature?: The Contested Moral Terrain of Ancient Forests," in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 269-97.
28. See Candace Slater, "Amazonia as Edenic Narrative," in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 114-31. This argument has been powerfully made by Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 71-83.
29. Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York: Random House, 1989).
30. McKibben, *The End of Nature*, p. 49.
31. Even comparable extinction rates have occurred before, though we surely would not want to emulate the Cretaceous-Tertiary boundary extinctions as a model for responsible manipulation of the biosphere!
32. Dave Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991), p. 69 (italics in original). For a sampling of other writings by followers of deep ecology and/or Earth First!, see Michael Tobias, ed., *Deep Ecology* (San Diego, California: Avant Books, 1984); Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1985); Michael Tobias, *After Eden: History, Ecology, and Conscience* (San Diego, California: Avant Books, 1985); Dave Foreman and Bill Haywood, eds., *Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkey Wrenching*, 2nd ed. (Tucson, Arizona: Ned Ludd Books, 1987); Bill Devall, *Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practicing Deep Ecology* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1988); Steve Chase, ed., *Defending the Earth: A Dialogue between Murray Bookchin & Dave Foreman* (Boston, Massachusetts: South End Press, 1991); John Davis, ed., *The Earth First! Reader: Ten Years of Radical Environmentalism* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1991); Bill Devall, *Living Richly in an Age of Limits: Using Deep Ecology for an Abundant Life* (Salt Lake City, Utah: Gibbs Smith, 1993); Michael E. Zimmerman et al., eds., *Environmental Philosophy: From Animal Rights to Radical Ecology* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1993). A useful survey of the different factions of radical environmentalism can be found in Carolyn Merchant, *Radical Ecology: The Search for a Livable World* (New York: Routledge, 1992). For a very

- interesting critique of this literature (first published in the anarchist newspaper *Fifth Estate*), see George Bradford, *How Deep is Deep Ecology?* (Ojai, California: Times Change Press, 1989).
33. Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, p. 34.
 34. Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, p. 65. See also Dave Foreman and Howie Wolke, *The Big Outside: A Descriptive Inventory of the Big Wilderness Areas of the U.S.* (Tucson, Arizona: Ned Ludd Books, 1989).
 35. Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, p. 63.
 36. Foreman, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*, p. 27.
 37. See Richard White, "Are You an Environmentalist or Do You Work for a Living?: Work and Nature," in Cronon, *Uncommon Ground*, pp. 171-85. Compare its analysis of environmental knowledge through work with Jennifer Price's analysis of environmental knowledge through consumption. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that the wilderness experience is essentially consumerist in its impulses.
 38. Compare with Muir, *Yosemite*, in *John Muir: Eight Wilderness Discovery Books*, p. 714.
 39. Wallace Stegner, ed., *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country and Its Magic Rivers* (New York: Knopf, 1955), p. 17 (italics in original).
 40. Katherine Hayles helped me see the importance of this argument.
 41. Analogous arguments can be found in John Brinckerhoff Jackson, "Beyond Wilderness," *A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 71-91, and in the wonderful collection of essays by Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1991).
 42. Wendell Berry, *Home Economics* (San Francisco, California: North Point, 1987), pp. 138, 143.
 43. Gary Snyder, quoted in *New York Times*, "Week in Review," 18 September 1994, p. 6.

Comment

The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness

Samuel P. Hays

Bill Cronon's "trouble with wilderness" is ostensibly an assessment of the role the wilderness idea plays for environmentalists in the United States. But his "trouble" is far less with that wilderness idea and more with his own. He is wrestling with a wilderness idea that is confined to a few writers rather than with wilderness devotees who actually do it. Hence his account is well off the mark.

For this rejoinder, I draw on two sources of evidence, quite different from Cronon's. First is my own experience in the eastern wilderness movement running through the decade of the 1970s. I was one of a considerable number of easterners who thought that there was wilderness in the East. We studied USGS topographic maps; identified large, roadless sections; scouted them out; drew up proposals for their protection as wilderness areas; and presented the plans to our congressional delegations. Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Roderick Nash were never mentioned. We had no thought of preserving "virgin" forest, since almost all of it was cut-over. It was the Forest Service who argued that none of it was wilderness because it wasn't "pristine." We retorted that it wasn't how it came to be that was important but what it looked like now, and we quoted that provision of the 1964 act that spoke of wilderness as a place where "human intrusion is relatively unnoticeable." What's more, we thought of it all as part of our own "backyard," not as something far away and remote.

At about the same time I decided to find out about the wilderness movement in the country as a whole, joined several dozen organizations (western as well as eastern) to obtain their newsletters and documents, and proceeded to build an archive of wilderness activity. I found out that it wasn't much different "out there." People became interested in large roadless areas they knew about; they wrote about their "backyard;" they didn't try to persuade others to read "major thinkers" to get their support but, just like we did, to expose them to it through slide shows and directly by taking them there. The dynamics of human engagement with wilderness was the same: people living in an urbanized society who felt that wilderness areas would enhance the quality of their life while enjoying modern material standards of urban living. As I observe it, the dynamics of Bureau of Land Management wilderness, today's political "hot spot," are much the same.

This is perhaps enough to make the reader understand why I view Bill Cronon's problem as that he hasn't looked much at the wilderness movement. He has read a few writers who have much to say about wilderness philosophy, but he has not followed those active in the fray and the more day-to-day and down-to-earth ideas and actions wilderness advocates carried out. Most of those advocates have long been "going forward" to the "right nature"; Cronon just has not noticed.

To make several arguments in rebuttal to Cronon about the values involved in wilderness action:

First, most wilderness engagement does not look toward some remote area, but toward the area of one's personal experience—my backyard. People near the candidate areas undertook wilderness action, saying simply, "we have some, too, right here." This created tension between old and new advocates. The Sierra Club, for example, tried to keep Oregon wilderness confined to the Cascades. But others argued that the Coast Range and eastern Oregon had some lively candidates. They were brought together by the Oregon Natural Resources Council that outmaneuvered the Sierra Club with its more restricted view.

Second, wilderness advocates did not point toward a "more natural" past for the temporal significance of what they were doing; instead they pointed to the future. What appealed to people most was they hoped to save something they valued for those who would come later. When economists got to work to try to identify the values people placed on wilderness through contingent valuation, the idea of "return" was not among them. Instead, people spoke of "bequest value." Wilderness advocates only thought of going forward to the world of their grandchildren.

Third, the main human engagement with wilderness has long been outdoor recreation, not the romanticizing of nature, and still is. Wide-ranging outdoor recreation interest grew rapidly after World War II. Wilderness guidebooks included information about distances and landmarks along the way, not about stages of forest biological change. Most units in the wilderness system were "rocks and ice" above the tree line rather than forested areas. If I am not mistaken the French Pete area in the Oregon Cascades was the first fully forested watershed to be designated wilderness, and thus the first area to have a biological content that was taken seriously. Because we had no rocks and ice, easterners helped to bring "biological nature" into the wilderness movement and even urged the Sierra Club to adopt that view of the wilderness.

Fourth, wilderness proposals are usually thought of not in terms of perpetuating some "original" or "pristine" condition but as efforts to "save" wilderness areas from development. "Land saving" is the watchword of almost all "nature" programs. We enjoy wilderness today because our forebears bypassed it as "The Lands that Nobody Wanted." We now turn the past action of neglect into the present and deliberate action of "saving" for the future. The experience of rapid destruction of nature and restricting development now and in the future define the world of wilderness action.

Fifth, wilderness was not thought of as an attempt to create a role for humans amid nature, but to create a role for nature amid humans. Most wilderness advocates were urbanized people who thought of wilderness as part of an urbanized society. The great majority of wilderness advocates enjoyed modern amenities of life and thought

of wilderness as another such. Keep the cities and their benefits, yes, but let's add some nature to all that in order to enhance the "good life."

Cronon's wilderness is a world of abstracted ideas, real enough to those who participate in it, but divorced from the values and ideas inherent in wilderness action. The evidence for such values is abundant but it takes a bit of work to get it, far more time and effort than that required by the more attractive task of emphasizing ideas of "major thinkers" whose writings libraries have close at hand.

Human attempts to bring nature into their urbanized environment have been many and far-reaching: the conservation commissions of New England, dating from the mid-1960s; federal urban open space programs of the same era; land conservancies and land trusts, now numbering more than 1,000; wild and scenic rivers and trails programs, augmented today with the ever popular rails-to-trails; wetlands; new tropical breeding bird habitats and the currently popular "Partners in Flight;" natural area programs in almost every state; nongame programs; endangered species habitats; "Watchable Wildlife Programs;" biodiversity reserves; eastern "old growth;" state and local land-buying referenda that have increased state park acreage since 1970 by 16 percent. In all of these Cronon's wilderness idea has played a mighty limited role. However, all of these programs have one theme in common: make sure that nature will play an ever greater role in a society where urbanization is proceeding at a rapid pace.

Cronon succumbs to the temptation to bring in peripheral issues that are useful in advancing the polemical argument, but they actually distort history. One is the notion that wilderness is an "elitist" playground. Participation in wilderness recreation is actually middle class. Users are primarily local and daytime, and in terms of occupation and income are a cross-section of the area population. Cronon also seeks to enhance his argument by absorbing into it both biodiversity and endangered species issues. However, the recreation content of wilderness and the ecological content of biodiversity differ markedly, come from different sources, have different meanings, and it has been a bit of a wrench for the first to accept the second. Further, while some endangered species require large, intact forest habitats, most do not; they include suburban and rural habitats, streams and riparian areas, highway berms, barrens, wetlands, small woodlands, and a host of areas hardly associated with wilderness.

Cronon argues that the wilderness idea diverts environmentalists from the real world of environmental affairs; he appeals to the environmental justice movement's political ideology to make the case for neglect. But the blinders in this case belong to Cronon. Almost every sector of the diverse environmental community thinks that it is "neglected"; this leads to a wide range of intra-environmental disputes. Cronon's "right nature" groups are well divorced as a whole from those groups preoccupied with urban pollution issues. By the same token, groups preoccupied with pollution issues are divorced from groups engaging in "land saving." Both groups ignore issues of population and limits. It is one thing to use the accompanying polemics to organize history; it is another to examine these intra-environmental relationships as a subject for historical analysis. Despite divergence the organizations act as if they are part of the same piece and their activities, even land saving and opposition to hazardous waste siting, frequently cross the boundaries of specialization and dispute.

Cronon's essay reflects the temptation for historians to draw into their historical analyses both personal moral struggles and the ideology of contemporary debate. This tendency is more than risky. Transfer of the accompanying polemics into environmental history not only invites bad history but also the risk that it will obscure the abundant opportunities ahead in pursuing the field of environmental history.

With a degree of clear thinking and vigilance historians can avoid these dangers, and bring an historical analysis shaped by an independent historical perspective to both personal and political dimensions of environmental affairs. In this case, such vigilance requires that we not be diverted into the wilderness thickets into which Cronon's "Trouble" so temptingly invites us.

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Comment

Resistance to Wilderness

Michael P. Cohen

One doesn't read a cultural critique like "The Trouble with Wilderness" for the essay's conclusions alone. Cronon's essay is provocative; it also has a substantial method and a rhetorical strategy. What follows is a response to the essay's method; 1) what questions it asks, to whom, how it goes about answering them, and its strategy; 2) how the discourse frames wilderness as a term, how it interrogates the ideology of wilderness, and how it tries to resolve the problems it poses.

The following series of *shared* questions indicates that Cronon and I share a set of goals in this inquiry. I have ordered these, framing the central ideological questions with issues of actual environmental politics. One enters these questions through literature and exits into rhetoric. I refer to them multiply, and in relations signified by colons (:).

- 1) How is it possible to offer a constructive critique of environmentalism, of the past and present, especially of its "save the wilderness" version, without damaging valuable parts of the movement, and without offering an argument largely usable by the opponents of environmentalism who are motivated only by narrow economic gain?
- 2) How can the literature of wilderness, sometimes called "nature writing," be understood as a literary canon, in itself? How can this literature be used as part of a critique of its own tradition, in a way that does full justice to the literature as literature, but also historicizes the texts?
- 3) How can a clear distinction be made between the salient parts of a scholar's version of this literary tradition and popular misconceptions about the structure and function of the environmentalist's thinking?
- 4) Is it possible, or desirable, to distinguish between the secular and sacred strains of environmentalism? Aside from the difficulty of making such distinctions, what will be the social or political effect of making them?

5) How—and to what extent—can environmentalists alter their own ideologies in light of significant advances in historical, geographical, and scientific knowledge about the “nature of nature,” without losing their sense of identity, losing their political focus, or losing their economic and popular constituency?

6) Is there a central position from which the various environmental issues and agenda can be launched? From the “middle ground,” perhaps? What are the risks and benefits of looking for such a central position?

7) What new and hopefully more powerful strategies will this critique of environmentalism create?

8) What is the relationship between environmental history and a critique of environmentalism? How can the environmentalist be educated by the environmental historian?

Our strong personal commitment to the inquiries associated with these questions creates conflict: we hope it will also offer better solutions to real social and environmental problems.

We share the questions: we do not share a method for answering them. It is perhaps obvious that for Cronon western American history is a process, not a place, and wilderness is a part of that process. I don't agree entirely, but I want to see where this itinerary takes him.

He is not speaking of any concrete place because wilderness is, in this essay, studied largely as a socially constructed abstraction. This is a matter of emphasis. His social construction does not seem to mean that wilderness is *only* textual, as does the social construction of Michel Foucault. If we were to follow the social construction of Foucault, we might have to give up environmental history altogether, for reasons I hope will become clear. Nevertheless, Cronon's way of speaking of wilderness places the reader in an argument: Those who focus on concrete places, landscapes, or ecosystems as wilderness will find little ground in Cronon's discourse where they can stand.

“Look,” you might say, “are you talking about Yellowstone, some forest along the Pacific coast, the Great Basin, the Colorado Plateau?” You cannot find these places in his essay, or their concrete geographies.

The essay is about human perceptions of place, the constellation of human ideas, embodied in language. This discourse, in other words, is indebted to and reproduces Roderick Nash's distinction, that wilderness is a noun, but acts like an adjective. Cronon takes this distinction farther than Nash.

His is a discourse about discourse, or to be more precise, he presents wilderness as a discourse. The term wilderness itself is multiple in its continuity of uses as:

- a) Noun or adjective: name or quality (what it is)
- b) image, or icon: symbol (how it means)
- c) ideology (where it fits in a system of values)
- d) representation (how its literary or political rhetoric mediates)
- e) the Law (The Wilderness Act as social convention and tool).

References to linguistic shadings of discourse interact with the questions numbered above (a–e: 1–8) because each way of conceiving the “language of wilderness” can draw out different questions and vice-versa. Cronon's analysis focuses on wilderness primarily as ideology (c). His analysis thins when it approaches either the literature of the wild (a:b) or the politics of the wild (d:e). This indicates one “middle ground” of the essay.

Cronon comes close to describing popular wilderness ideology as bourgeois delusion, though he does not call it such (3). But an ideology that has erased human and natural history, that has privileged certain kinds of landscapes over others and certain social classes and genders over others, that was urban, dissociated from “real” work, nostalgic, individualistic, and failed to recognize its complicity in a system it claimed to counter, might be called such.

Because this ideology has not known its center, or has not acknowledged the center Cronon has shown—“But the trouble with wilderness is that it quietly expresses and reproduces the very values its devotees seek to reject”—he recenters it in the latter parts of his essay, closer to its home, where he believes it can in the future operate more fairly and effectively (6).

Let us enter the ideology of wilderness, and see the situation from the perspective of historians who are also wilderness advocates (3:5:c:d). Calling such people “historian/advocates” suggests their polarity. To compare small thing to great, historian/advocates are like communist historians writing a history of the late-twentieth century. Their point of view may be intact and valuable, but the concrete referent to it seems to have dissolved into chaos.

They go to wilderness hearings fruitlessly advocating legal designation (d:e) and to academic meetings to hear traditional conceptions of wilderness demolished (a:b:c). They are sure that these two situations are related and are tempted to blame the latter for the former. Meanwhile, they might find themselves blamed for both. If they, or Howard Zahniser, knew better in 1964, and had more precisely written the Wilderness Act, this situation would not have occurred. The possible culpabilities and guilts in this triangle are, no doubt, facile.

Wilderness advocates are afraid to abandon the traditional polarity of nature/culture (particularized as wilderness/civilization), not because they doubt its accuracy, but because doing so makes much of their commitment seem futile if not impotent. They are forced to leave behind an entire tradition of discourse (esp. b:d) and rebuild from the ground up. They are not ready to ask (historicizing by placing this question in the past), “*Did the wilderness movement mean anything?*”

How can advocate/historians be educated (8)? In this wilderness issue, as in education generally, the *resistance* to knowledge, not ignorance, is relevant. The teacher knows resistance has its own good reasons. Why does the advocate resist?

Before giving up the wilderness/civilization duality, the wilderness advocate/historian would like to be certain that the social construction of Cronon or any other form will carry the day without turning everything into textuality (3, 4; 5). Cronon's position is that wilderness/civilization is not polar but relational, and is not simply textual. Nevertheless, there is an argument within Cronon's argument for middle ground: Advocate/historians would be wise, especially given the way nature and wilderness (1)

have been destabilized and turned into dynamic, perhaps disturbed, sites, to accept some site closer to culture/civilization as the most stable center for advocacy, from which arguments can successfully be launched. Cronon has a point, but in the late-twentieth century "culture" or "civilization" seem hardly a less destabilized and disturbed site.

Nevertheless, a move to either side of ideology (to b or d), may allow a redeposition of the issues. Nearly every academic who has critiqued the received wilderness concept (1) and whom I have queried supports at present maximum wilderness designation of Bureau of Land Management lands in Utah under the Wilderness Act (d:e), or advocates continuing management of these lands as Wilderness Study Areas. None of these people wish to "get on with it," as the Utah Congressional delegation would like.

Further, wilderness designation (d:e) is to a great extent a symbolic act. It symbolizes a shared set of values and a "primary source," as a relatively small gesture toward thinking of land as whole, not fragmented, stable as it is possible to make it. Clearly this gesture is related to the naming and symbology of the Eugene Odum paradigm of wilderness (a:b): but the desire to designate in this way (b => d:e), as Cronon makes clear, is a social aspiration and it can be valued even while the way of realizing this ideal undergoes modification. In the reading of literary symbols, it is a basic error to mistake meaning for object. Wilderness (b) as a symbol partakes of the reality that it renders intelligible. The symbol is not the reality, nor is it only the intelligible. Reading must mediate and be double. It is here that I indicate my basic methodological difference with Cronon by exploring my own method of reading.

I hold in my hands a book, *The Jacob's Ladder*, by Denise Levertov (1961) whose second poem, entitled "A Common Ground," ends with the following:

iii
...everything in the world must
 excel itself to be itself.
Pasternak

Not 'common speech'
a dead level
but the uncommon speech of paradise,
tongue in which oracles
speak to beggars and pilgrims:

not illusion but what Whitman called
'the path
between reality and the soul,'
a language
excelling itself to be itself,

speech akin to the light
with which at day's end and day's
renewal, mountains
sing to each other across the cold valleys.

I enter a poet's landscape. It is not history, you might say. It sets too high a stock on the visionary. It is not a direct means to environmental justice. It is a hell of a biblical poem. Levertov herself is also a long-time advocate of environmental justice, an ally of Muriel Rukeyser. Here is an abstract of Levertov's poetics:

To believe, as an artist, in inspiration or the intuitive, to know that without imagination...no amount of acquired craft or scholarship or of brilliant reasoning will suffice, is to live with the door of one's life open to the transcendent, the numinous. Not every artist, clearly, acknowledges that fact—yet all, in a creative act, experience mystery. The concept of 'inspiration' presupposes a power that enters the individual and is not a personal attribute; and it is linked to the artist's life as one of obedience to a vocation."

I respect the power of this poet's landscape, politics, and poetics, valuing it more, perhaps, than the historian's. This literature has more meanings than one and a reading that focuses on the literal or referential level is a narrow reading. One must read for other levels of meaning (b:d).

As a professor of literature, I do not simply read texts to be inspired, but neither do I reduce them to formulas. I note the close relationship between reading and writing. When someone says that something needs to be rethought, I think that they have not gotten down to work until they really mean it needs to be rewritten. These are my grounds. There is no point in arguing with Cronon on his grounds, because they are different from my own. His essay implies that historians should rewrite wilderness, and reevaluate it too.

I wouldn't know about "quasi religious values" except that I read them in Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Dickenson, Muir, or Levertov. I don't call them quasi-anything. I wouldn't venture to guess what constitutes "The nation's most sacred myth of origin."

I am familiar with the texts Cronon cites in the first half of his essay. I see them not as constituting "the mountain as cathedral" but as constituting "the cathedral as mountain." This is no clever inversion of dualities. What I mean is that the mountain is prior in the mind and literature to the human mode of expression we call "cathedral." Arne Naess has made this point. It is a basic difference between my perspective and Cronon's. He says he understands this, but I am not sure that he does.

Paul Shepard refers to the hierarchy of "the mountain as cathedral" as the "Marjorie Nicolson Syndrome." The difference between Cronon's views and my own are comprised precisely in the two versions of this hierarchy. The process of reading illustrated by "The Trouble" differs from my own. I believe that literature tells truths that historians have not approached; not literal truths, but figurative truths.

Wilderness can be reduced to a social construction using the same methods of analysis that reduce mountains to cathedrals. But mountains are not made by men.

I prefer the prose of the writer of the Book of Job to the prose of any historian I have read. Job has his say in verse 28. The Lord replies: "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundations? / Speak if you have understanding." (38.4) This is THE question of the book, and I do not believe that historians can answer it satisfactorily if they separate the secular from the sacred (4).

Very frequently I acquire a certain humility in my reading of literature, and find it a better source of political sentiment than history, perhaps because I am not entirely a materialist. Which is why I read to discover the relationships or tensions between the sacred and profane in wilderness ideology.

A tradition constitutes a set of texts—a canon—with which we think. A “strong reading” normally confronts the full force of literary canon, but Cronon compresses the tradition too much for me, not confronting Emerson, for instance. The language of “nature writing” is complex and interesting in its freeplay. Policing both the texts and their language, reading for trouble spots and offering corrections, is a constricted form of cultural critique (2). Historians need to be better at exploring the dissemination of the multiple meanings and differences in literature, and in distinguishing between serious literature and popular culture (3). Sometimes Cronon is weak on his own behalf. On gardening he cites Michael Pollan rather than Jamaica Kincaid. One would like to know where his critique of the “received concept of wilderness” fits in the tradition including Anna Bramwell, Brigid Brophy, or Baird Callicott.

Consequently the literary history he presents is more linear than credible. For instance, the popular form of Deep Ecology is represented without the context of its most rigorous thinkers—Foreman and McKibben rather than Naess, Sessions, Oelschlaeger, and Shepard. This canon cannot adequately justify Cronon’s fracturing the tradition of Deep Ecology and extracting only bioregionalism.

Nevertheless, the issues Cronon raises are pertinent and extend beyond wilderness, though they may start with it. He is right that the critique of modernity is one of environmentalism’s most important contributions to political and moral discourse. I am considerably less certain that “Most of our most important environmental problems start right here, at home...”

What are the real dangers of thinking about or acting against modernity? For me, modernity includes multiple genocides, fire bombings or modern warfare in Europe or Asia, nuclear bombings of people in Japan, Russia, Southern Utah, and worldwide extinction of biodiversity, all part of the same process that takes the form of business as usual. In my neck of the woods, the nonviolent opponents to wilderness who want to “get on with it” represent business as usual. The violent ones who send death threats over the telephone to local environmentalists are just downright dangerous. I am frightened of these people, who I believe are made by a mass culture that is in serious trouble. This may explain why I don’t take kindly to jokes about environmentalists.

Lynn Margulis once said that humanity is at the edge of the petri dish. And what happens right before reaching the edge? Everyone says, “what a good time we are having, and there are so many of us!” The matter or consequence of wilderness is probably small in this larger context. But not to me.

I have a thick file in which I have written for nearly a decade, called “Why the wild is doomed.” It begins as follows:

Paradox #1

“As for adopting the ways which the State has provided...They take too much time and a man’s life will be gone. I have other affairs to attend to. I came into this world not chiefly to make this a good place to live in, but to live in it, be it good or bad.” So Thoreau writes.

As for his other affairs, they seem to include first and foremost what he calls losing himself in the woods: “I cannot preserve my health and spirits, unless I spend four hours a day at least—and it is commonly more than that—sauntering through the woods and over hills and fields, absolutely free from all worldly engagements.”

If both of these statements are true—and they are true to the extent that we believe them—then they create a predicament with which I ended my history of the Sierra Club.

At the center of the predicament David Brower stands at a campfire, saying “...how through enjoying these things we acquire an obligation to fight for them if threatened” (reported by Phil Berry) (1:4:5). This is the preaching on the High Trip, calling us back down to the affairs of state. Brower did not believe he was speaking for class privilege.

These centripetal and centrifugal forces tear at the environmentalist as wilderness devotee, who wants to live in a healthy world and who wants to work for it. I think much of the literature of wilderness dramatizes this predicament, which may lead to self loathing and is worth studying in some detail; its source is not only in the ideology of the environmentalist. Nor have I been convinced, yet, that it is possible to change the ideology of a person, or the society in which he is embedded. As to a rewriting by historians, why should I not consider it an arrogant or audacious project? I turn now to this rewriting.

Cronon’s central thesis *permits* him to rewrite the wilderness tradition in his moral conclusion, and suggests also that the past errors of devotees should lead those who have made them to repentance and self-loathing.

Self-loathing: to believe that environmentalists are responsible for “wise use.” “Wise Use” may be explored by 1) researching the sources of the “sagebrush rebellion” in the 1940s and 1950s, sources closely related to the sources of McCarthyism; 2) listening carefully to the rhetoric in the newspapers and bars of Ely, Eureka, and Tonopah; 3) tracing the money behind the organizations and leaders of Wise Use; 4) assessing the contributions of cattle, mining, and lumber to modern western economic welfare; 5) determining the way western workers in extractive industries have allied themselves with corporate interests.

Perhaps Wise Use was born from an ideology of “working the land with one’s own hands”; coming from Crèvecoeur and Jefferson—“The farm,” wrote Emerson in 1839, “is the right school”—and shaping itself as an abasement of the intellectual toward the proletariat in the 1930s. Lately it has taken its language from the Gifford Pinchot

...these disturbed sites to accept

I enter a poet's landscape. It is not history, you might say. It sets too high a stock on environmental justice. It is a hell of a biblical

school of conservation. Its ideology is surely ethnocentric; its relevance to modern work may be nostalgic. In this context I notice the way Frederick Jackson Turner enters Cronon's wilderness canon, and the way Muir drops out. The Turner thesis gives us a frontier as a place where capitalistic accumulation could flower without restraint, and peopled with restless men, quick to expedients, rough and ready, who don't want to settle down, but develop and exploit. I still see people right out of Turner, carrying Turner's ideology, rewriting it into the twenty-first century. Some of them advocate wilderness (d:e). They represent a contradiction contained within the wilderness tradition (c).

If our texts have said that gods live (religious), nature dwells (humanistic), species exist in diverse relations (science: ecology: biodiversity), or we obtain sustenance (recreation/domestic) in wilderness, Cronon's historicizing demonstrates that these premises, not about wilderness, reveal social constructions of it. They can be reconstructed.

Such a reconstruction requires that the writer seize the discourse, sometimes by discrediting the discourse of the past. "The Trouble" must do this in order to redefine a "middle ground," a social construction we may trace in Leo Marx's book (c). Yet it also claims that the "middle ground" represents more than a rhetorical construction, might actually be a thing or place (a). However, the author is as much a prisoner of discourse as his adversaries, and vulnerable to the same deconstructive process he sometimes uses.

I decouple the two halves of Cronon's essay to dramatize a major problem in rewriting wilderness. I find his problem congruent, but not identical to that of Paradox #1, stated above. An environmental historian might desire to re-narrate the past, showing how it miswrote its own history. But Cronon desires to rewrite also, not simply show the way nature has been invented. These separable desires create real trouble: despite his careful methodology and its implications of secularization, fragmentation, eternal problematization, he wants to rewrite with a conservative stance in the tradition of the middle ground (6). His is a return to a set of traditional values of property, work, and use which he has pointedly *not* discussed. He expresses values; he places them in a landscape, he projects them into the future. Like the language of wilderness, the language of the middle ground slips, slides, or shifts from the name (a) to the law (e).

When I read the wilderness tradition I find it impossible to escape from multiple grounds and points of view, spirits who might parse not just wilderness but the Wilderness Act. Wilderness discourse is peopled. This torrent or swarming of voices, too, historicizes the wilderness.

Such multiplying perspectives remind me that wilderness is more than word or syntax. A set of ideologies of wilderness appear dimly in multiplicity and contradiction, including the words of groups I have seen testifying in Washington, D.C., or Cedar City, in rooms filled with a much more diverse group than Cronon describes. Some of them do speak from the middle ground. They are already using the strategies he suggests (6:7).

The way he simplifies the tradition I see as a way of wresting the discourse of wilderness from literature, from people, and appropriating it to a historical theory. When contemporary literary scholars "problematize a term," as they say, they try not

to privilege one idea over another: discovering that an idea is a cultural construct, bearing traces of gender, class, era, culture, etc., does not call for purification, policing, deletion, replacement, but guarded use that opens conversations. One problem illustrated by the literature of wilderness, for instance, is the difficulty of articulating value that does not flow through human hands. Cronon turns this problem on its head, saying that devotees of wilderness are essentially consumerist in their motives. Once again, the tension here matters more than the poles.

I would prefer to open a dialogue of wilderness texts, not close it. I consider the purpose of contemporary ideological criticism, beginning with Theodore Adorno, for whom "ideology means society as appearance," was not simply to expose and debunk but to illustrate and decode. Ideology as a "non historical reality" reflects conceptions of reality and the role of language in their construction. Ideology mediates between text and context, and the critic interested in that issue shows the social process of mediation.

This is why I am offended by the words "getting back to the wrong nature," which seem to introduce not a discourse interested in the process of mediation: but one interested in wrong and right. Are there wrong natures and right natures? Yes there are, to those who have power.

We have not gotten to ground here, precisely because this discussion passes to, but does not confront, issues of power. Real discussions of wildernesses go on in the context of public and private property, in a place and social situation, and as such, they call for "thick description:" they are not divorced from action. Wilderness as a term, syntax, and ideology becomes what literary theorists call a "representation" (a => e). "Representation" presents legal and literary issues. Land which may become legal wilderness is, for me, close to home. Not literally right next door, but close. I am an urban westerner, as I have learned in part from Cronon. These lands—Paiute lands, Mormon lands, Federal lands—surround my city. They are full of the voices of the people who have lived here. Many of my neighbors do not want them to become, legally, wilderness, not because wilderness is ethnocentric, predarwinian, ecologically naive, or anthropocentric, but because of the representation's power to limit their own power, and impose upon them certain complex prohibitions and responsibilities (d => e). Some neighbors resist being part of the larger social structure to which their personal desires will be subsidiary, precisely because wilderness is a shared representation: all representations are socially constructed fictions.

Dare I ask if my neighbors have something in common with those academics who have, of late, been engaged in the deconstruction of the "wilderness idea" of the 1950s? Like the academics, they want to seize and control the discourse about land management in this region. They want to do it under the aegis of reason. The principle ethic of the sheepmen and cattlemen I dealt with when I was the token environmentalist on the Iron County Human and Natural Resources Advisory Committee: "Waste not, want not." The ethic of the environment under the sign of the balanced budget. I do not believe this is Cronon's ethic.

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I might take an actual walk in an actual canyon near my home where an actual endangered species, the Mexican Spotted Owl, nests. Taking a walk is not, except in a very narrow sense, a form of consumerism, but where and how we walk matters. This place, designated a "Wilderness Study Area," could be Wilderness, and will be managed that way until Congress acts (e). The place itself can be understood by humans in ways without number. In the broad sweep of history, all except change is illusion: the canyon, the Douglas-firs, the owls, I myself, all are ephemeral. Few orders of change belong to humans.

As a result of Cronon's previous work one must accept geographies of second nature, but in the trans-Mississippi west where I live, first natures are prominent; in the Sierra nourishing the Central Valley; in Greater Yellowstone, a scarred mother of rivers; in the grand canyons of the Colorado, sources of wealth from headwaters in the Wind Rivers to depletion in the valleys of southern California. That is why wilderness and bioregionalism are linked in the ideology of deep ecology that Cronon attempts to split.

"In wildness is the preservation of the world," wrote Thoreau, *because we draw our nourishment and vigor from natural forces in places beyond us. Wildness exists in a concrete and complex relationship to our cities; of necessity our management of ourselves and wild places we call wildernesses will be complex.*

When men of my father's generation decided to think and act toward the land according to a concept they wrote as wilderness, they might have done better if they had been more inclusive, more knowledgeable, and more subtle, and they might have done worse. As a part of their tradition, interested in revising their writing, not substituting mine for theirs, I shall designate the entire realm of the discourse of wilderness, and any phenomenon to which this discourse could conceivably refer as "Wilderness Study Area."

Michael P. Cohen, a professor of English at Southern Utah University, is the author of The Pathless Way: John Muir and American Wilderness (University of Wisconsin Press, 1984) and The History of the Sierra Club: 1892 to 1970 (Sierra Club Books, 1988). He is engaged, at present, with the environmental history of the Great Basin, focusing upon human conceptions of the bristlecone pine.

Comment

But What Did You Go Out into the Wilderness to See?

Thomas R. Dunlap

When William Cronon delivered the preceding article as a paper, he told of environmentalists resisting earlier versions. They were, he said, dubious, and while they might admit there was something to his case, they were never comfortable with it. Some in the conference audience clearly shared that unease. It is easy to see why. Cronon says that the concept of wilderness is not reality but a social construction that is a flight from reality. Far from bringing people into communion with nature it creates a false dichotomy that separates them from it, dulling their appreciation of the daily beauty of the world, denying the appropriate middle ground of sustainable and responsible use, and encouraging an apocalyptic "end of nature" thinking that hinders action and draws attention away from pressing issues of environmental justice. Adverse reactions may be partly a case of, as Mother used to say, the hurt dog howling first. The environmental movement has long overlooked the people who suffered the most from the industrial economy. In pushing for wilderness and national parks its advocates have too often taken little account of those who lived on the land. Besides, sympathetic and nuanced as Cronon's approach is, it sounds too much like the extreme anti-environmentalist case. To admit he is right to any degree seems to open the gates to the enemy. The central problem, though, is that he analyzes one of the central emotional commitments of modern environmentalists—and finds it wanting.

Wilderness is the modern environmental religion, and the only reason its more enthusiastic advocates have not deified it is that they are too secular to know how to do the job. Consider the emphasis placed on wilderness and species emblematic of that unfallen condition. Look at the pictures in environmental magazines—church architecture, sacred sites, and illustrations of pilgrimages. Leaf through the catalogs of nature's consumer goods, where one may purchase everything but pieces of the true wilderness. Those with a sardonic sense of humor can easily map the environmental movement onto American Protestantism. Earth First! becomes the Appalachian snake-handlers, the Sierra Club the Episcopal church (and its president the

Episcopal Bishop of Washington, D.C.). Thoreau is John the Baptist and John Muir is Saint Peter. Recycling is good works, ecology is theology (Wolf T-shirts are "cheap grace"). As for wilderness: take your troubles to that old rugged wilderness, my brothers and sisters, and lay them down. Environmentalists may live in suburbia, but they are determined to be not of it. They will look to the Eden beyond, to the days on vacation when they can lash themselves with John Muir to the top of a Sierra fir and appreciate the full fury of the storm.

Against this Cronon preaches the uncomfortable doctrine that we cannot live pure and unspotted by suburbia. The way we now think about wilderness, he says, blinds us to our dual position as human beings. We are both part of nature and apart from nature (translating this into religious terms will be left, as the mathematics textbooks say, as an exercise for the reader). He wants us to abandon the security blanket of purity and live with ambiguity, partial solutions, and our neighbors' manicured lawns. This is not an impossible challenge, but it does require a change of heart. We cannot measure the movement's success so conspicuously by species saved or parks set aside; the yardstick must be changes in the culture and in everyone's daily experience. It also, possibly more painfully, would require us to deal more consciously with that strain of smug superiority that endangers all reform movements.

Very well, I accept Cronon's argument. Now, where does his paper take us? It walks around and across the conventional boundaries we have erected between environmental history and environmental advocacy. It is a sophisticated use of an historical perspective to criticize, with a view to improving, policies and perspectives within a contemporary political and cultural movement. Are the chaste scholarly pages of *Environmental History* sullied by its presence? No. Not every paper should speak so directly to current questions, but some should, and we might examine, besides Cronon's advice to the environmental movement, the value he places on history and the role he suggests for it. Those who founded the field were concerned about the environmental crisis, and often wanted to apply their professional skills to solving it. There is nothing wrong with that or particularly new; one of the classic uses of history is to tell us how we got into this mess. That the field addresses a contemporary issue, though, means that we are involved in our subject in a way that scholars of say, Jacksonian democracy, are not. People will use our work, whether we will or no. There is in the construction of the field of "environmental history" an implicit promise of something more than advocacy, and if our work is not in some sense "objective" we will be only advocates. We cannot, though, appeal to the conventional standard of "detachment." It suffers from the flaw that Cronon finds in the environmental movement—taking one part of a complex thing as a whole. Just as environmentalism must balance people's being part of nature with their being outside of nature so environmental history must deal with the conflicting claims of relevance and objectivity.

We have all worked out individual solutions to this problem. Some of us do history and also write or work for environmental causes. Others trust that their work will contribute to the public's knowledge. Still others see themselves as "public intellec-

tuals" (an ill-defined position but all the more useful for that). We need to work out a general solution, a better and more conscious balance among our often-conflicting responsibilities. Aldo Leopold's ideas about game management suggest a useful line of thought. He saw his profession as an instrument of social change. It was "the art of making land produce sustained annual crops of wild game for recreational use," but the manager actually labored for a larger goal, "to bring about a new attitude toward the land." The test of civilization was the capacity to live in high densities without destroying the environment, and the "practice of game management may be one of the means of developing a culture which will meet this test." It served "a motivation—the love of sport—narrow enough actually to get action from human beings as now constituted but nevertheless capable of expanding with time into that new social concept toward which conservation is groping" (see Aldo Leopold, *Game Management* [New York: Scribner's, 1933], pp. 422-23).

That is a direction. To get down to cases, we can consider the emphasis in our field. We as scholars, as much as we and others as activists, have maintained the wall of separation between humans and nature of which Cronon complains. We study wilderness and nature apart from human life and experience, and as a group (there are some conspicuous exceptions) have neglected issues of the built environment. This is in part a result of what Americans have emphasized (no sense trying to study what is not being thought about or done), but it is not a necessary intellectual stand. Australian environmental history, for example, deals with worker housing and human landscapes as well as wilderness, sees the world of nature as part and parcel of society. Environmentalism there also makes social connections that are less obvious here. Labor unions, for example, were deeply involved in some of the first Australian environmental actions, calling "green strikes" to protect the Great Barrier Reef. The Australian example is no more directly applicable than Leopold's formula, but it is food for thought. We need a framework that will integrate city and country, factory and forest, daily life and wilderness experience. We need it in environmental history, and it is a social concept toward which at least some environmentalists are groping.

Let us go deeper. Cronon suggests that the end of our work is not knowledge but wisdom. Those steeped in the objective traditions of historical study will find this heresy, post-modernists will see it as old-fashioned. It does echo an old idea—the classic aim of a liberal arts education—but its roots are in the stream of American pragmatic philosophy. Against the conventional standard of strict detachment pragmatism insists on action, if only as the way to further our incomplete and contingent knowledge. Against post-modernism it insists that we *can* act. Against both it insists on our responsibility. This stance is hardly foreign to historical practice. It is controversial, but it is a controversy each generation must face. Pragmatism is also part of the environmental movement. The detail work of lobbying legislators and keeping track of administrative action is grounded there. So are programs to pay for predators by compensating ranchers for livestock killed, as are the equivocal and messy laws governing the national wildlife refuges (though here the descent into expediency is perhaps too marked). Cronon does not give us a complete solution or even a guide to

tactics, and his stand lacks the philosophical completeness and simplicity we all crave. Following it will not always give us a warm glow of rectitude, and it does not guarantee success. It is, though, good advice. The environmental movement will succeed in the next generation just to the extent to which it moves beyond moral crusading and the politics of self-satisfaction to seek a social consensus—which will involve compromise—that will give us time to establish a culture, society, and economy that are sustainable in the long run. Putting away certainty and purity is hard, but it is necessary to avoid pessimism, apocalyptic thinking, and a retreat to the wrong wilderness.

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The Trouble with Wilderness

A Response

William Cronon

It's evident from these comments, as well as from other reactions I've received to this essay, that it has struck even more of a nerve than I intended it to. I meant to be provocative, to encourage people to think in unfamiliar ways about this idea called "wilderness" because I regard it as a more problematic part of our environmental politics and cultural values than we commonly recognize. I did not mean to anger people in the process, yet I fear that I have done just that for at least some of my readers. And so perhaps I should begin with an apology—in the formal sense of offering an explanation for the parts of this essay that may give offense to some readers.

First, I hope readers of *Environmental History* will realize that this is only a single essay from an entire book devoted to examining nature as a cultural construction. Entitled *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (edited by William Cronon, W. W. Norton, 1995), it offers a wide array of perspectives by authors from many different disciplines on the ways human beings construct ideas of nature which provide the labels, categories, and values with which we understand our relationships with the nonhuman world. Our purpose in writing the book was to suggest that "nature" is not nearly so natural a concept as people usually assume. *Uncommon Ground* asserts that unless we're willing to reflect long and hard on the unnaturalness of the ideas we project onto our earthly home, we are not likely to make much progress in building more just and sustainable relationships with that home. This essay on wilderness should be read in the context of that larger project.

Perhaps it is worth noting as well that the essay was written in the summer of 1994, before the November 1994 elections gave us the most anti-environmental Congress in American history. Read after that election, this essay may seem still more dangerous and provocative, perhaps even appearing to offer aid and comfort to hostile forces that would gladly roll back all the progress that has been made in preserving wilderness and protecting the environment over the past thirty or more years. I would feel deep regret were my words to be used toward such an end. That said, I can't help declaring that I wrote the essay because I feared precisely the kind of political backlash we are now experiencing—a backlash which I believe has been aided and abetted by the way environmentalists have chosen to frame their understanding of wild nature. It gives me no pleasure to be proven prophetic in this, but I also do not believe that

the apparent triumph of those opposed to environmental protection excuses environmentalists from the task of self-criticism. Quite the contrary. I meant this essay as an exercise in such self-criticism, and I will continue to defend it as such.

The self-criticism is quite personal. Donna Haraway once remarked that anyone involved in cultural criticism should be implicated in their own critique, and I certainly am in this one. Despite Sam Hays' claim that I haven't looked much at the movement to protect wilderness, my earliest political involvement as an environmentalist—long before I became an academic—began with wilderness, and I have continued to be involved in that cause right down to the present. Among other activities, I have served on the state board of the Nature Conservancy in Connecticut, and am currently a member of the national Governing Council of the Wilderness Society. Many of the arguments I make in this essay come from reflecting on what I regard as problems or paradoxes in my own values and beliefs, many of which I find widely shared by contemporaries in the environmental movement and by those who have shaped environmentalism over the past century. I hope it is clear from the second half of the essay that I have no desire to undermine these values, many of which I have devoted my adult life to supporting. But values, like everything else, shift context and content over time, and we must be prepared to rethink them as their circumstances change. It is precisely my devotion to the nonhuman world (as well as to ideas like justice) that persuades me that we cannot hope to protect wild nature without attending in the broadest (and most local) ways to our *human* homes.

Of these three comments, I find Sam Hays' the most difficult to engage. On the one hand, Hays agrees with many of my central arguments: he accepts, for instance, my claim that the preservation of wilderness has been primarily an urban project pursued by urban folks, and that the growth of designated "wilderness" areas has been within the context of an increasingly urbanized landscape. He regards wilderness primarily as recreational space for those who can afford the leisure time to enjoy it (he sees such people as "middle class," a description I am willing to accept so long as we recognize that the extraordinarily capacious American "middle class" does exclude a fairly large number of less privileged folks at the bottom of the socioeconomic scale). And he supports my most important moral claims, that nature should be fully a part of even the most urban lives, that we should attend as much to our own "backyards" as we do to remote wilderness areas, and that we should not make a fetish of pristine nature as we pursue these goals.

So why does Sam Hays disagree so strongly with my essay? Perhaps part of the problem is generational, since we clearly have different notions of the historian's role and of what counts as legitimate history. Hays feels enough impatience with cultural and intellectual history that he comes close to dismissing discussions of "abstracted ideas" and "major thinkers" as irrelevant to the questions he thinks I should be addressing. Because he can't remember ever thinking about Henry David Thoreau or John Muir as he and his friends worked to preserve wilderness areas in the 1960s, he concludes that the ideas and writings of these and other intellectuals are not of much importance in understanding the history of wilderness protection in the United States. Never mind that the Sierra Club's most influential book of that generation, Eliot Porter's *In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World*, was filled with Thoreau's

words and became very nearly a Bible for those young people like myself who came to see the defense of wilderness as a compelling moral mission. Never mind that John Muir's books became best sellers during this period, or that Aldo Leopold's celebration of wilderness, *Sand County Almanac*, became second only to Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* as an intellectual blueprint for the new environmental movement. Hays claims that he and his fellow wilderness defenders were not much influenced by such texts, mainly read each other's newsletters, and got on with the practical business of environmental politics without worrying much about "abstracted ideas." He posits a human engagement with wilderness in which "outdoor recreation, not the romanticizing of nature" is the center, and yet never explains why these two categories are necessarily antithetical to each other.

Instead, Hays says that he is interested in "the more day-to-day and down-to-earth ideas and actions wilderness advocates carried out," and perhaps for that reason he doesn't ask why they were drawn to wilderness in the first place. Throughout his commentary, he takes it as a given that when people become more urban and have more leisure time they naturally turn to the task of preserving wild nature. Why this should be so does not concern him. He does not ask why white middle-class Americans were pulled so powerfully toward wilderness when people from different cultures with different histories and different class backgrounds were not invariably drawn to wild landscapes even though they too were moving to cities and gaining leisure time.

I'll be the first to admit that my discussion of "the sublime" and "the frontier" is only a first-order approximation of the complex history that lies behind American cultural values about wild nature. Crude as it is, though, it at least has the virtue of treating cultural values as a legitimate object for historical analysis. If I had to write a history of why a group of middle-class white people (including both Sam Hays and myself) wanted to protect wilderness areas in the 1960s and 1970s, at a minimum I would want to know why so many of us took inspiration as we did so by reading Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold. Not to see the linkages between the practical politics of environmental activism and the deeper cultural currents of romanticism is to miss more than half the story. It is to miss some of the key engines of this historical movement.

Ideas do matter. My essay wasn't intended to be mainly about the people who worked to defend wilderness in the years after the 1964 Wilderness Act; it's about the cultural history that could produce such an act in the first place. Hays need not be so defensive on behalf of himself and other wilderness activists, for I really wasn't singling them out for criticism. Much of the difference between Hays' perspective and my own comes from his close focus on wilderness activists, and my broader interest in how the American love affair with wilderness has played out in the culture generally. He wants to emphasize the day-to-day battles and campaigns of wilderness defenders; I want to emphasize the Thomas Cole paintings, the Ansel Adams photographs, the calendars and direct mail appeals, the wilderness books, the nature documentaries, the representations of wild nature that permeate so many parts of our cultural landscape. I do not believe these projects need to be in opposition to each other, and I am sorry if Sam Hays believes that they are. I do not think we disagree or need to disagree as much as he seems to think we do.

Finally, Hays asserts that I have violated the professional norms of scholarship by interjecting "personal moral struggles and the ideology of contemporary debate" into my historical analyses. By giving in to polemic, he says, I have written "bad history" and tempt others to do the same. This is an interesting argument coming from someone whose critique of my essay so clearly flows from his own experience and politics. Personal struggle and contemporary debate are hardly absent from what Hays says, and why should they be? Hays writes from his experience as I write from mine, and I believe our histories are the better for it. But his criticism is fair in one important respect. I do not regard "The Trouble with Wilderness" as solely or even primarily a work of original historical scholarship. It is self-consciously an effort to take familiar ideas from the work of environmental historians—familiar because scholars like Samuel Hays, Roderick Nash, Marjorie Hope Nicholson, Leo Marx, and Barbara Novak have written so tellingly about them—and explore their relevance for contemporary political debates.

The tone of my essay is sometimes polemical in an effort to draw attention to problems which I believe the environmental movement would do well to address. Indeed, the second half of the essay, in which I try to offer "home" as an alternative to pure "wilderness" as a more encompassing foundation on which to defend the environments in which we live, is not really history at all, but a meditation on values. My own view is that scholars ought to worry about the ways in which their work speaks to the world in which they live: I believe we must at least occasionally descend from the ivory tower to address contemporary issues and people beyond the academy. The irony of Hays' criticism is that he has done precisely the same thing in his own work, to great effect: no one has done more to shape our understanding of environmental politics in the twentieth century, albeit from an analytical, methodological, and rhetorical position different from my own. Given how much I admire and respect the contributions that Sam Hays has made, it saddens me that he cannot recognize in the different approaches of another generation a project more in sympathy with his own than he is willing to acknowledge.

Michael Cohen and I, on the other hand, are clearly of the same generation, and have both been influenced by movements in cultural criticism and intellectual history for which Sam Hays has little patience. Cohen's critique is both acute and subtle, and I cannot hope to respond to more than a tiny subset of the points he makes. Even where he and I disagree most strongly, I admire his insights and learn from the differences in our perspectives. The list of "shared questions" he offers at the beginning seems to me precisely right—he defines our common ground with admirable precision and economy—and environmental historians would do well to ponder his questions 1 through 8 as measures of the way we wish our work to engage the world.

Question 8 in particular, about the relationship between environmental history and environmentalism, is especially interesting, and worth more explicit conversation than environmental historians usually devote to it. Given how important conceptions of nature and of the past are to environmentalism, and given how much environmental history has to say about both, it would be surprising if there were not at least some tension—critical but also creative—between this body of scholarship and the movement that helped spawn it. To the extent that environmentalism has

drawn some of its political energy from declensionist narratives in which a stable, benign, and natural past gives way to an unstable, malign, and unnatural present—and such narratives are pretty deeply embedded in the topic of wilderness—environmental history is likely to raise challenging questions when it investigates the accuracy and cultural origins of those narratives. Sometimes, as in "The Trouble with Wilderness," investigating the historical roots of our own environmentalist beliefs may seem to threaten those beliefs—and yet this is surely no reason to abandon our efforts to see and know the world (and ourselves) as clearly as we can. My own faith as a historian is that even when my knowledge of the past leads me to question things in the present which I might otherwise have taken for granted, the knowledge I gain by so doing is worth the price. My faith as an environmentalist is that defending and protecting the environment are such compelling goals that they can withstand any critical scrutiny we might bring to bear on them. And so I aspire to an environmental history that will be unflinching in its examination of environmentalism past and present, because I believe environmentalism will not only survive such investigations, but ultimately be strengthened by them.

Michael Cohen does not share my faith in history, and he is appropriately disturbed by the crude, oversimplified ways in which historians often read literary texts. To this charge I will certainly plead guilty in the case of my own essay. By enlisting Wordsworth, Thoreau, Muir, and others in the service of my cultural critique, I unquestionably did not do justice to the complexity of their beliefs or their rhetoric. I gave only a crude sketch of the literature surrounding wilderness, and I agree with both Cohen and Hays that I did not adequately explore the ideas and motivations of those who have worked to protect wilderness areas over the course of the past century. All of this is true, and fair criticism. When Cohen says that he prefers "to open a dialogue of wilderness texts, not close it," I agree with and celebrate the critical practice he wishes to defend. To the extent that my essay violates that practice, I will join him in trying to find a more generous and welcoming ground on which to hold this conversation.

But there are lots of ways to "open a dialogue." I chose a fairly polemical starting point in "The Trouble with Wilderness" because I feared I might not otherwise persuade readers to take my questions seriously. I simplified the story and made it linear, accentuating the polarities in order to crack open a nature that might otherwise have appeared too unitary and seamless to merit this kind of critique. The trouble is that our cultural traditions and our very language encourage us to think that wilderness and nature are, well, *natural*. And the trouble with "nature" as a linguistic category is that it tends to shut down conversations rather than open them up. As soon as we assert that something is natural, we imply that there is little we can do to alter its essential qualities. Often we go further and imply that there is only one right ("natural") way to look at it; that different people are not entitled to legitimately different views of it; that it does not have a human history; that if we change it in any way we are likely to do it harm; and that therefore the best thing we could do is to leave it alone. There is nothing necessarily wrong with any of these assertions, but it seems to me that each should be the *start* of a conversation rather than the end of one.

My own experience is that it is pretty difficult to start a conversation among environmentalists that questions the meaning of wilderness or nature. The hostile reactions to my essay are perhaps some evidence of this. I am struck by the number of people who read this essay and react first by declaring that we all know wilderness to be a cultural construction, and then proceed to offer a string of arguments in which wilderness is not cultural at all, but purely natural. Roderick Nash began *Wilderness and the American Mind* in just this way, asserting that wilderness is an idea and then writing a long, whiggish history in which the wilderness condition becomes a reality whose recognition and protection is a cause for unambiguous celebration. I too celebrate the protection of wild nature, but I am conscious as I do so that there are many ironies in my own position, some of which I try to identify in "The Trouble with Wilderness." I wrote the essay because I think we can learn from these ironies. Michael Cohen says of my criticisms that "Policing both the texts and their language, reading for trouble spots and offering corrections, is a constricted form of cultural critique." I agree. Far better to engage the full linguistic and artistic complexity of the documents we study in order to discover their multiple meanings, their tensions and ironies. But to do that, we must first recognize that "wilderness" and "nature" are ideas susceptible to this kind of cultural analysis, not just facts of nature that we are entitled to take for granted as standing outside the realm of human perceptions and values. This is not a perspective that comes naturally to most of us.

And so my essay does not attempt to offer a subtle reading of complex literary texts. I am grateful to Michael Cohen for suggesting what can be gained from such a reading, and I very much hope that before this conversation is done we will find ourselves in the "Wilderness Study Area" he describes in his conclusion, where we can explore together "the entire realm of the discourse of wilderness, and any phenomenon to which this discourse could conceivably refer." I agree that the tensions in our ideas matter more than the poles, but often we do not even recognize those tensions until we have first learned to recognize the poles. My own goal was therefore much less ambitious than Cohen's: precisely because I hoped to get us into his "Study Area," I wanted to move our discussions of wilderness onto a terrain where it might become more possible to talk openly about the values and ideas that lie behind them. I admit that this may be a dangerous agenda. Like my critics, I worry that this is an especially hazardous political moment for those of us who believe that wild nature and the rest of the environment deserve our most thoughtful and careful protection. But I also believe that we find ourselves in this crisis because we have not been adequately attentive to human needs and human desires, and that we have given enemies of the environment powerful weapons against it by not being more careful to connect our project of protecting nature with the equally compelling project of protecting our common humanity.

There are those who believe quite passionately that worrying about human needs and human interests is hopelessly anthropocentric and therefore wrong, and I can understand some of the attractions of this point of view. But if it leads to political behavior which defeats itself by alienating the very people whose support is crucial if the environment is to be protected in a sustainable way, then I cannot help but criticize it. If we defend wilderness and wild nature in such a way that we lose the support

of the general public—because we fail to recognize and honor the human cultural values which members of the public hold dear—then we will produce the very opposite of our intended effect. When I quote Wendell Berry in my essay saying that the only thing we have to protect wilderness with is domesticity, this is what I mean. Because it is human beings who threaten nature, it is human beings we must engage and understand, not just nature.

Cohen is surely right that the cynically named "Wise Use Movement" is in part the product of corporate money, right-wing reaction, and redneck rhetoric, but I am struck by the success with which it has succeeded in attracting sympathy from a public which only fifteen years ago responded with nothing but angry backlash to the so-called "Sagebrush Rebellion." Something has changed. Corporate money and right-wing ideologues have become much more successful of late in attacking the environment without nearly so much public outcry—a phenomenon that Michael Cohen and Sam Hays, like many environmentalists, seem disinclined to take seriously, almost to the point of denial. Why is the public now listening to the anti-environmentalist message, when twenty years ago it had no rhetorical resonance whatsoever? This is the kind of collective behavior that interests historians more than literary critics. Although we cannot analyze it with the subtlety we bring to a Denise Levertov poem, it desperately deserves our attention if we wish to protect the environment.

Some will say that I am blaming the victim, but I believe that environmentalists are partly responsible for the political crisis they now face. How on earth could a movement so fiercely hostile to environmental protection seize for itself a label like "Wise Use"? It's a brilliant phrase, for it embodies values that are near and dear to the hearts of most Americans. What does the rhetoric of the Wise Use Movement represent itself as supporting? Using natural resources wisely and responsibly for the benefit of ordinary folks. Putting faith in local communities rather than in remote, faceless bureaucrats. Getting government off our backs. Helping families make a better living from the land. Defending jobs and the possibility of a better future. Even: protecting the environment.

The use to which this rhetoric is being put may be cynical indeed, but it represents values that are pretty near American bedrock. So it is no surprise that it is working; the only surprise is that environmentalists were willing to cede this ground to their enemies. Surely the old conservation roots of modern environmentalism were about nothing so much as using natural resources wisely: conservation meant "wise use," and so should environmentalism. But because we have not always been careful to keep in balance the preservationist and conservationist wings of the movement, because we have not always spoken as passionately about the parts of nature we use as opposed to those we do not, it became possible for those with no real sympathy for the environment to seize "wise use" and use it toward their own ends. The idea of wilderness is partly to blame for this: that is why I speak in my title about "getting back to the wrong nature." Considered as a cultural construct, wilderness does not even sustain the ground on which it itself can be defended. And so we have the ultimate irony: by not adequately defending and celebrating non-wild nature we have helped create a political coalition that threatens wild and non-wild nature alike.

Some of the crudeness that Michael Cohen objects to in my essay thus flows from the fact that I am trying, in the most pragmatic of ways, to engage the political rhetoric of our time. There are surely risks in this, for by so doing I open myself to readings which through carelessness or malign intent might confuse my position with the very arguments against which I would like to fortify the environmental movement. And there is a further risk as well, one that I only fully understand after conversations with Michael Cohen and other sympathetic readers who have been troubled by this essay. Historians enter difficult waters when they seek to explore the deepest of human cultural values, those grounding principles and faiths so central to people's collective and personal being that we label them with words like Nature or God. History is for the most part a secularizing activity, in which even sacred timeless truths are analyzed within the flow of profane time. Historians know the value of doing this, because we have plenty of evidence that timeless truths can undergo profound transformations as they wend their way along the twisting paths of the human past. Recognizing that the truths we hold to be self-evident are not so universal as we imagine is a good thing, most historians believe, because it leads to insights whose subtlety and complexity help us understand the world more truly.

And yet we run the risk as we pursue this secularizing project of forgetting the essential mystery that hides beneath the shifting shapes of profane time. History knows that God wears different masks for different peoples at different places and times. It is good at describing those masks. But it sometimes forgets, as Michael Cohen reminds us, that its documents and analytical methods cannot touch the face *behind* the changing masks. When people say that they have encountered something sacred in the world, the truth of their vision is not to be denied simply by pointing to the historical context that has shaped it. The sacred, after all, is the place where we imagine that phenomena from another, more eternal world enter and rupture the flow of time in our own. Historians can document and situate such ruptures, but in some ultimate sense we cannot explain them, at least if we wish to show our respect for people who believe that their own experience transcends the secular world. This is one reason why we need poets and priests, and not just historians, if we hope to discover the many meanings of the world in which we make our homes.

One problem with "The Trouble with Wilderness," then, is that in reminding those who worship at the altar of wilderness that their God (like all deities) has a complicated and problematic past, I have perhaps not been as respectful of this religious tradition as I ought to have been. I mean this quite genuinely: to the extent that I have given offense by treading too carelessly on hallowed ground, I sincerely apologize. Had I been writing about Judaism or Christianity or Islam or Buddhism, or about the spiritual universes of native peoples in North America and elsewhere, I would almost certainly have been more careful to show my respect before entering the temple to investigate and comment on its architecture and origins. The reason I did not do so in this case is that the religion I was critiquing is my own, and I presumed a familiarity which readers who do not know me can be forgiven for doubting. Perhaps I was tempted in this by the prophetic rhetorical traditions of Christianity and Judaism—for these are of course the foundations on which romanticism erected its new religion of Nature—in which the faithful are exhorted to return to the

true path, to abandon false idols and worship the true God after having flirted with Satan in the desert. My essay is not without elements of the jeremiad, and it shares the strengths and weaknesses of its genre. To say this is not to undermine its arguments, which I will continue to defend with conviction, but *is* to acknowledge that there might have been ways of presenting these arguments that would not have offended some of the people I hoped to persuade.

For this reason, I am especially grateful for the generous and constructive remarks that Tom Dunlap offers in his comment. Like Cohen, he recognizes that my discussion touches on religious matters, and he shares my sense that the church of the environment could use some shaking up if we wish to move beyond the current crisis. Like Hays, he recognizes that I write in this essay not just as a historian but as a public intellectual and cultural critic, and he shares my belief that historians can play this role without necessarily sacrificing their integrity. His suggestion that environmentalism might usefully be mapped onto the intellectual topography of American Protestantism is more serious than his humorous presentation may suggest, and would be worth pursuing at some length; perhaps someday he'll do this himself. But most of all, I am delighted that both Dunlap and Cohen recognize in this essay my effort to honorably engage precisely the question which Hays believes I have not: "What can history bring to policy decisions and how should the discipline bring it?" Dunlap and Cohen each offer answers to this question which I find both provocative and valuable, and which I hope environmental historians will ponder at length.

It is Dunlap's final paragraph that comes closest to describing my own convictions in such matters. He is right that I still maintain an old-fashioned pragmatic belief in wisdom, and in history as a way of thinking about the world that can move us toward wisdom even if we never quite attain that exalted form of knowledge. I criticize wilderness because I recognize in this, my own religion, contradictions that threaten to undermine and defeat some of its own most cherished truths and moral imperatives. I have *not* argued that we should abandon the wild as a way of naming the sacred in nature; I have merely argued that we should not celebrate wilderness in such a way that we prevent ourselves from recognizing and taking responsibility for the sacred in our everyday lives and landscapes. If we wish to preserve wild nature, then we must permit ourselves to imagine a way of living in nature that can use and protect it at the same time. Otherwise, we will keep reproducing the very contradiction which has too often made modern humanity such a devastating presence on the planet. If in fleeing to the wilderness we imagine that we are leaving one nature for another, a fallen for an unfallen world, then we are indeed embarking on an impossible journey back to a nature that has never existed outside our own heads. It is a journey—to a nature whose implications and consequences I regard as "wrong"—that I hope we will be wise enough not to make.