

## ISSUE 2

### Does Wilderness Have Intrinsic Value?

YES: Rick Bass, from "On Wilderness and Wallace Stegner," *The Amicus Journal* (Spring 1997)

NO: William Tucker, from "Is Nature Too Good for Us?" *Harper's Magazine* (March 1982)

#### ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Nature writer Rick Bass defends the need for true wildlands, rather than managed ecosystems, if we are to preserve our ecological heritage and the cultural treasures that it inspires.

NO: William Tucker, a writer and social critic, asserts that wilderness areas are elitist preserves designed to keep people out.

48 The environmental destruction that resulted from the exploitation of natural resources for private profit during the founding of the United States and its early decades gave birth after the Civil War to the progressive conservation movement. Naturalists such as John Muir (1839-1914) and forester and politician Gifford Pinchot (1865-1946) worked to gain the support of powerful people who recognized the need for resource management. Political leaders such as Theodore Roosevelt (1858-1912) promoted legislation during the last quarter of the nineteenth century that led to the establishment of Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Mount Rainier national parks and the Adirondack Forest Preserve. This period also witnessed the founding of the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, whose influential, upper-class members worked to promote the conservationist ethic.

Two conflicting positions on resource management emerged. Preservationists, like Muir, argued for the establishment of wilderness areas that would be off-limits to industrial or commercial development. Conservationists, like Roosevelt and Pinchot, supported the concept of "multiple use" of public lands, which permitted limited development and resource consumption to continue. The latter position prevailed and, under the Forest Management Act of 1897, mining, grazing, and lumbering were permitted on U.S. forest lands and were regulated through permits issued by the U.S. Forestry Division.

The first "primitive areas," where all development was prohibited, were designated in the 1920s. Aldo Leopold and Robert Marshall, two officers in the Forest Service, helped establish 70 such areas by administrative fiat. Leopold and Marshall did this in response to their own concerns about the

failure of some of the National Forest Service's management practices. Many preservationists were heartened by this development, and the Wilderness Society was organized in 1935 to press for the preservation of additional undeveloped land.

It became increasingly apparent during the 1940s and 1950s that the administrative mechanism whereby land was designated as either available for development or off-limits was vulnerable. Because of pressure from commercial interests (lumber, mining, and so on), an increasing number of what were then called wilderness areas were lost through reclassification. This set the stage for an eight-year-long campaign that ended in 1964 with the passage of the Federal Wilderness Act. But this was by no means the end of the struggle. The process of implementing this legislation and determining which areas to set aside has been long and tortuous and will probably continue into the next century.

There are more clear-cut differences between values espoused by the opposing factions in the battle over wilderness preservation than in many other environmental conflicts. On one side are the naturalists who see undeveloped "wild" land as a precious resource, where people can go to seek solace and solitude—provided they do not leave their mark. On the opposite extreme are the entrepreneurs whose principal concern is the profit that can be made from utilizing the resources on these lands.

It has become apparent that industrial pollutants move through the air and water and find their way into every nook and cranny of the ecosphere. The notion of totally protecting any area of the Earth from contamination is an ideal that cannot be fully realized. This knowledge has encouraged those who advocate replacing the practice of wilderness designation with the strategy of "scientific ecosystem management," whereby developmental activities are restricted rather than completely prohibited in areas that are habitats to many species.

Many environmentalists and ecologists doubt the efficacy of ecosystem management. They continue to advocate the maintenance of wilderness areas as the only effective means of preserving biodiversity. This position is supported in the following selection by Rick Bass. In his essay, Bass argues that we need to preserve wild areas not only for ecological reasons but also to protect the natural heritage that nurtured such great literary giants as Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and John Muir. In the second selection, William Tucker, who is critical of environmentalism, views the wilderness movement as elitist and the idea of excluding most human activity from wilderness areas as a consequence of a misguided, romantic, ecological ethic.

critical of these inundations, but they must recognize that they have at least contributed to them.

I am not arguing against wild things, scenic beauty, pristine landscapes, and scenic preservation. What I am questioning is the argument that wilderness is a value against which every other human activity must be judged, and that human beings are somehow unworthy of the landscape. The wilderness has been equated with freedom, but there are many different ideas about what constitutes freedom. In the Middle Ages, the saying was that "city air makes a man free," meaning that the harsh social burdens of medieval feudalism vanished once a person escaped into the heady anonymity of a metropolitan community. When city planner Jane Jacobs, author of *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was asked by an interviewer if "overpopulation" and "crowding into large cities" weren't making social prisoners of us all, her simple reply was: "Have you ever lived in a small town?"

It may seem unfair to itemize the personal idiosyncrasies of people who feel comfortable only in wilderness, but it must be remembered that the environmental movement has been shaped by many people who literally spent years of their lives living in isolation. John Muir, the founder of the National Parks movement and the Sierra Club, spent almost ten years living alone in the Sierra Mountains while learning to be a trail guide. David Brower, who headed the Sierra Club for over a decade and later broke with it to found the Friends of the Earth, also spent years as a mountaineer. Gary Snyder, the poet laureate of the environmental movement, has lived much of his life in wilderness isolation and has also spent several years in a Zen monastery.

All these people far outdid Thoreau in their desire to get a little perspective on the world. There is nothing reprehensible in this, and the literature and philosophy that merge from such experiences are often admirable. But it seems questionable to me that the ethic that comes out of this wilderness isolation—and the sense of ownership of natural landscapes that inevitably follows—can serve as the basis for a useful national philosophy.

### THAT FRONTIER SPIRIT

The American frontier is generally agreed to have closed down physically in 1890, the year the last Indian Territory of Oklahoma was opened for the settlement. After that, the Conservation Movement arose quickly to protect the remaining resources and wilderness from heedless stripping and development. Along with this came a significant psychological change in the national character, as the "frontier spirit" diminished and social issues attracted greater attention. The Progressive Movement, the Social Gospel among religious groups, Populism, and Conservation all arose in quick succession immediately after the "closing of the frontier." It seems fair to say that it was only after the frontier had been settled and the sense of endless possibilities that came with open spaces had been constricted in the national consciousness that the country started "growing up."

Does this mean the new environmental consciousness has arisen because we are once again "running out of space"? I doubt it. Anyone taking an airplane across almost any part of the country is inevitably struck by how much greenery and open territory remain, and how little room our towns and cities really occupy. The amount of standing forest in

the country, for example, has not diminished appreciably over the last fifty years, and is 75 percent of what it was in 1620. In addition, as environmentalists constantly remind us, trees are "renewable resources." If they continue to be handled intelligently, the forests will always grow back. As farming has moved out to the Great Plains of the Middle West, many eastern areas that were once farmed have reverted back to trees. Though mining operations can permanently scar hillsides and plains, they are usually very limited in scope (and as often as not, it is the roads leading to these mines that environmentalists find most objectionable).

It seems to be that the wilderness ethic has actually represented an attempt psychologically to reopen the American frontier. We have been desperate to maintain belief in unlimited, uncharted vistas within our borders, a preoccupation that has eclipsed the permanent shrinking of the rest of the world outside. Why else would it be so necessary to preserve such huge tracts of "roadless territory" simply because they are now roadless, regardless of their scenic, recreational, or aesthetic values? The environmental movement, among other things, has been a rather backward-looking effort to recapture America's lost innocence.

The central figure in this effort has been the backpacker. The backpacker is a young, unprepossessing person (inevitably white and upper middle class) who journeys into the wilderness as a passive observer. He or she brings his or her own food, treads softly, leaves no litter, and has no need to make use of any of the resources at hand. Backpackers bring all the necessary accouterments of civilization with them. All their needs have been met by the society from which they seek temporary release. The

backpacker is freed from the need to support itself in order to enjoy the aesthetic and spiritual values that are made available by this temporary removal from the demands of nature. Many dangers—raging rivers or precipitous cliffs, for instance—become sought-out adventures.

Yet once the backpacker runs out of supplies and starts using resources around him—cutting trees for firewood, putting up a shelter against the rain—he is violating some aspect of the federal Wilderness Act. For example, one of the issues fought in the national forests revolves around tying one's horse to a tree. Purists claim the practice should be forbidden, since it may leave a trodden ring around the tree. They say horses should be hobbled and allowed to graze instead. In recent years, the National Forest Service has come under pressure from environmental groups to enforce this restriction.

Wildernesses, then, are essentially parks for the upper middle class. They are vacation reserves for people who want to rough it—with the assurance that few other people will have the time, energy, or means to follow them into the solitude. This is dramatically highlighted in one Sierra Club book that shows a picture of a professorial sort of individual backpacking off into the woods. The ironic caption is a quote from Julius Viancour, an official of the Western Council of Lumber and Sawmill Workers: "The inaccessible wilderness and primitive areas are off limits to most laboring people. We must have access. . . ." The implication for Sierra Club readers is: "What do these beer-drinking, gun-toting, working people want to do in our woods?"

This class-oriented vision of wilderness as an upper-middle-class preserve



is further illustrated by the fact that most of the opposition to wilderness designations comes not from industry but from owners of off-road vehicles. In most northern rural areas, snowmobiles are now regarded as the greatest invention since the automobile, and people are ready to fight rather than stay cooped up all winter in their houses. It seems ludicrous to them that snowmobiles (which can't be said even to endanger the ground) should be restricted from vast tracts of land so that the occasional city visitor can have solitude while hiking past on snowshoes.

The recent Boundary Waters Canoe Area controversy in northern Minnesota is an excellent example of the conflict. When the tract was first designated as wilderness in 1964, Congress included a special provision that allowed motorboats into the entire area. By the mid-1970s, outboards and inboards were roaming all over the wilderness, and environmental groups began asking that certain portions of the million-acre preserve be set aside exclusively for canoes. Local residents protested vigorously, arguing that fishing expeditions, via motorboats, contributed to their own recreation. Nevertheless, Congress eventually excluded motorboats from 670,000 acres to the north.

A more even split would seem fairer. It should certainly be possible to accommodate both forms of recreation in the area, and there is as much to be said for canoeing in solitude as there is for making rapid expeditions by powerboat. The natural landscape is not likely to suffer very much from either form of recreation. It is not absolute "ecological" values that are really at stake, but simply different tastes in recreation.

### NOT ENTIRELY NATURE

At bottom, then, the mystique of the wilderness has been little more than a revival of Rousseau's Romanticism about the "state of nature." The notion that "only in wilderness are human beings truly free," a credo of environmentalists, is merely a variation on Rousseau's dictum that "man is born free, and everywhere he is in chains." According to Rousseau, only society could enslave people, and only in the "state of nature" was the "noble savage"—the preoccupation of so many early explorers—a fulfilled human being.

The "noble savage" and other indigenous peoples, however, have been carefully excised from the environmentalists' vision. Where environmental efforts have encountered primitive peoples, these indigenous residents have often proved one of the biggest problems. One of the most bitter issues in Alaska is the efforts by environmentalist groups to restrict Indians in their hunting practices.

At the same time, few modern wilderness enthusiasts could imagine, for example, the experience of the nineteenth-century artist J. Ross Browne, who wrote in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* after visiting the Arizona territories in 1864:

Sketching in Arizona is... rather a ticklish pursuit... I never before traveled through a country in which I was compelled to pursue the fine arts with a revolver strapped around my body, a double-barreled shot-gun lying across my knees, and half a dozen soldiers armed with Sharpe's carbines keeping guard in the distance. Even with all the safeguards... I am free to admit that on occasions of this kind I frequently looked behind to see how the country appeared in its rear aspect. An artist with an arrow

in his back may be a very picturesque object... but I would rather draw him on paper than sit for the portrait myself.

Wilderness today means the land *after* the Indians have been cleared away but *before* the settlers have arrived. It represents an attempt to hold that particular moment forever frozen in time, that moment when the visionary American settler looked out on the land and imagined it as an empty paradise, waiting to be molded to our vision.

In the absence of the noble savage, the environmentalist substitutes himself. The wilderness, while free of human dangers, becomes a kind of basic-training ground for upper-middle-class values. Hence the rise of "survival" groups, where college kids are taken out into the woods for a week or two and let loose to prove their survival instincts. No risks are spared on these expeditions. Several people have died on them, and a string of lawsuits has already been launched by parents and survivors who didn't realize how seriously these survival courses were being taken.

The ultimate aim of these efforts is to test upper-middle-class values against the natural environment. "Survival" candidates cannot hunt, kill, or use much of the natural resources available. The true test is whether their zero-degree sleeping bags and dried-food kits prove equal to the hazards of the tasks. What happens is not necessarily related to nature. One could as easily test survival skills by turning a person loose without money or means in New York City for three days.

I do not mean to imply that these efforts do not require enormous amounts of courage and daring—"survival skills." I am only suggesting that what the back-packer or survival hiker encounters is

not entirely "nature," and that the effort to go "back to nature" is one that is carefully circumscribed by the most intensely civilized artifacts. Irving Babbitt, the early twentieth-century critic of Rousseau's Romanticism, is particularly vigorous in his dissent from the idea of civilized people going "back to nature." This type, he says, is actually "the least primitive of all beings":

We have seen that the special form of unreality encouraged by the aesthetic romanticism of Rousseau is the dream of the simple life, the return to a nature that never existed, and that this dream made its special appeal to an age that was suffering from an excess of artificiality and conventionalism.

Babbitt notes shrewdly that our concept of the "state of nature" is actually one of the most sophisticated productions of civilization. Most primitive peoples, who live much closer to the soil than we do, are repelled by wilderness. The American colonists, when they first encountered the unspoiled landscape, saw nothing but a horrible desert, filled with savages.

What we really encounter when we talk about "wilderness," then, is one of the highest products of civilization. It is a reserve set up to keep people *out*, rather than a "state of nature" in which the inhabitants are "truly free." The only thing that makes people "free" in such a reservation is that they can leave so much behind when they enter. Those who try to stay too long find out how spurious this "freedom" is. After spending a year in a cabin in the north Canadian woods, Elizabeth Arthur wrote in *Island Sojourn*: "I never felt so completely tied to *objects*, resources, and the tools to shape them with."

What we are witnessing in the environmental movement's obsession with purified wilderness is what has often been called the "pastoral impulse." The image of nature as unspoiled, unspotted wilderness where we can go to learn the lessons of ecology is both a product of a complex, technological society and an escape from it. It is this undeniable paradox that forms the real problem of setting up "wildernesses." Only when we have created a society that gives us the leisure to appreciate it can we go out and experience what we imagine to be untrammelled nature. Yet if we lock up too much of our land in these reserves, we are cutting into our resources and endangering the very leisure that allows us to enjoy nature.

The answer is, of course, that we cannot simply let nature "take over" and assume that because we have kept roads and people out of huge tracts of land, then we have absolved ourselves of a national guilt. The concept of stewardship means taking responsibility, not simply letting nature take its course. Where tracts can be set aside from commercialism at no great cost, they should be. Where primitive hiking and recreation areas are appealing, they should be maintained. But if we think we are somehow appeasing the gods by *not* developing resources where they exist, then we are being very shortsighted. Conservation, not preservation, is once again the best guiding principle.

The cult of wilderness leads inevitably in the direction of religion. Once again, Irving Babbitt anticipated this fully.

When pushed to a certain point the nature cult always tends toward sham spirituality.... Those to whom I may seem to be treating the nature cult with undue severity should remember that I am treating it only in its pseudo-religious

aspect.... My quarrel is only with the aesthete who assumes an apocalyptic pose and gives forth as a profound philosophy what is at best only a holiday or weekend view of existence....

It is often said that environmentalism could or should serve as the basis of a new religious consciousness, or a religious "reawakening." This religious trend is usually given an Oriental aura. E. F. Schumacher has a chapter on Buddhist economics in his classic *Small Is Beautiful*. Primitive animisms are also frequently cited as attitudes toward nature that are more "environmentally sound." One book on the environment states baldly that "the American Indian lived in almost perfect harmony with nature." Anthropologist Marvin Harris has even put forth the novel view that primitive man is an environmentalist, and that many cultural habits are unconscious efforts to reduce the population and conserve the environment. He says that the Hindu prohibition against eating cows and the Jewish tradition of not eating pork were both efforts to avoid the ecological destruction that would come with raising these grazing animals intensively. The implication in these arguments is usually that science and modern technology have somehow dulled our instinctive "environmental" impulses, and that Western "non-spiritual" technology puts us out of harmony with the "balance of nature."

Perhaps the most daring challenge to the environmental soundness of current religious tradition came early in the environmental movement, in a much quoted paper by Lynn White, professor of the history of science at UCLA. Writing in *Science* magazine in 1967, White traced "the historical roots of our ecological crisis" directly to the Western Judeo-

Christian tradition in which "man and nature are two things, and man is master." "By destroying pagan animism," he wrote, "Christianity made it possible to exploit nature in a mood of indifference to the feelings of natural objects." He continued:

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions (except, perhaps, Zoroastrianism), not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.... In antiquity every tree, every spring, every stream, every hill had its own *genius loci*, its guardian spirit.... Before one cut a tree, mined a mountain, or dammed a brook, it was important to placate the spirit in charge of that particular situation, and keep it placated.

But the question here is not whether the Judeo-Christian tradition is worth saving in and of itself. It would be more than disappointing if we canceled the accomplishments of Judeo-Christian thought only to find that our treatment of nature had not changed a bit.

There can be no question that White is onto a favorite environmental theme here. What he calls the "Judeo-Christian tradition" is what other writers often term "Western civilization." It is easy to go through environmental books and find long outbursts about the evils that "civilization and progress" have brought us. The long list of Western achievements and advances, the scientific men of genius, are brought to task for creating our "environmental crisis." Sometimes the condemnation is of our brains, pure and simple. Here, for example, is the opening statement from a

book about pesticides, written by the late Robert van den Bosch, an outstanding environmental advocate:

Our problem is that we are too smart for our own good, and for that matter, the good of the biosphere. The basic problem is that our brain enables us to evaluate, plan, and execute. Thus, while all other creatures are programmed by nature and subject to her whims, we have our own gray computer to motivate, for good or evil, our chemical engine.... Among living species, we are the only one possessed of arrogance, deliberate stupidity, greed, hate, jealousy, treachery, and the impulse to revenge, all of which may erupt spontaneously or be turned on at will.

At this rate, it can be seen that we don't even need religion to lead us astray. We are doomed from the start because we are not creatures of *instinct*, programmed from the start "by nature."

This type of primitivism has been a very strong, stable undercurrent in the environmental movement. It runs from the kind of fatalistic gibberish quoted above to the Romanticism that names primitive tribes "instinctive environmentalists," from the pessimistic predictions that human beings cannot learn to control their own numbers to the notion that only by remaining innocent children of nature, untouched by progress, can the rural populations of the world hope to feed themselves. At bottom, as many commentators have pointed out, environmentalism is reminiscent of the German Romanticism of the nineteenth century, which sought to shed Christian (and Roman) traditions and revive the Teutonic gods because they were "more in touch with nature."

But are progress, reason, Western civilization, science, and the cerebral cortex

really at the root of the "environmental crisis"? Perhaps the best answer comes from an environmentalist himself, Dr. Rene Dubos, a world-renowned microbiologist, author of several prize-winning books on conservation and a founding member of the Natural Resources Defense Council. Dr. Dubos takes exception to the notion that Western Christianity has produced a uniquely exploitative attitude toward nature:

Erosion of the land, destruction of animal and plant species, excessive exploitation of natural resources, and ecological disasters are not peculiar to the Judeo-Christian tradition and to scientific technology. At all times, and all over the world, man's thoughtless interventions into nature have had a variety of disastrous consequences or at least have changed profoundly the complexity of nature.

Dr. Dubos has catalogued the non-Western or non-Christian cultures that have done environmental damage. Plato observed, for instance, that the hills in Greece had been heedlessly stripped of wood, and erosion had been the result; the ancient Egyptians and Assyrians exterminated large numbers of wild animal species; Indian hunters presumably caused the extinction of many large paleolithic species in North America; Buddhist monks building temples in Asia

contributed largely to deforestation. Dubos notes:

All over the globe and at all times... men have pillaged nature and disturbed the ecological equilibrium... nor did they have a real choice of alternatives. If men are more destructive now... it is because they have at their command more powerful means of destruction, not because they have been influenced by the Bible. In fact, the Judeo-Christian peoples were probably the first to develop on a large scale a pervasive concern for land management and an ethic of nature.

The concern that Dr. Dubos cites is the same one we have rescued out of the perception of environmentalism as a movement based on aristocratic conservatism. That is the legitimate doctrine of *stewardship* of the land. In order to take this responsibility, however, we must recognize the part we play in nature—that "the land is ours." It will not do simply to worship nature, to create a cult of wilderness in which humanity is an eternal intruder and where human activity can only destroy.

"True conservation," writes Dubos, "means not only protecting nature against human misbehavior but also developing human activities which favor a creative, harmonious relationship between man and nature." This is a legitimate goal for the environmental movement.

## POSTSCRIPT

### Does Wilderness Have Intrinsic Value?

Bass's rhapsodic descriptions of the beauty and wonder of the Yaak Valley and other wild areas that have inspired many great nature writers would surely qualify him as a member of what Tucker refers to as the "cult of wilderness," but his preservationist motives include such practical ecological goals as preserving biodiversity, which Tucker does not discuss.

Despite the increasing popularity of backpacking, Tucker is correct in maintaining that it is still primarily a diversion of the economically privileged. Indeed, a lack of financial resources and leisure time prevents the majority of U.S. citizens from taking advantage of the tax-supported parks that multiple-use conservationists such as Tucker support, as well as from enjoying a small fraction of the acreage that has been set aside as protected wilderness.

The controversies over oil development in Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge and mineral exploitation in Utah's vast red rock region are currently the two most bitterly contested struggles concerning U.S. wilderness areas. Although the huge 1989 oil spill in Prince William Sound by the supertanker *Exxon Valdez* dealt a temporary setback to proponents of oil exploration in the Alaskan wilderness, the development lobby has continued its efforts. President Bill Clinton's executive action to protect part of Utah's remaining wilderness by creating the Grand Staircase—Escalante National Monument—is still being challenged by congressional opponents. For information about the Alaskan wilderness controversy, see the article by Douglas Kuzmiak in *The Geographical Magazine* (April 1994) and the report *The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* by M. Lynne Corn, Lawrence C. Kumins, and Pamela Baldwin, available from the Committee for the National Institute for the Environment in Washington, D.C. Daniel Glick presents a strong argument for preserving Utah's wilderness region in the Winter 1995 issue of *Wilderness*. The results of a recent survey that expands by 3 million acres the area of Utah that is eligible for inclusion in the National Wilderness Preservation System are reported by T. H. Watkins in the November/December 1998 issue of *Sierra*.

Two moving and thought-provoking essays commemorating the 30th anniversary of the U.S. Wilderness Act are "An Enduring Wilderness," by Bruce Hamilton, in the September/October 1994 issue of *Sierra* and "Toward Wild Heartlands," by John Daniel, *Audubon* (September/October 1994). For a comprehensive collection of essays on the subject, see *Voices for the Wilderness* edited by William Schwartz (Ballantine Books, 1969).