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Rethinking Wilderness: The Need for a New Idea of Wilderness

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Abstract: *The “received” concept of wilderness as a place apart from and untouched by humans is five-times flawed: it is not universalizable, it is ethnocentric, it is ecologically naive, it separates humans from nature, and its referent is nonexistent. The received view of wilderness leads to dilemmas and unpalatable consequences, including the loss of designated wilderness areas by political and legislative authorities. What is needed is a more flexible notion of wilderness. Suggestions are made for a revised concept of wilderness.*

Introduction¹

Throughout the world, a major contemporary concern is protecting the natural environment. The environmental spectrum ranges from the natural to the nonnatural. As the extreme on one end of this spectrum, wilderness has become the focal-point of much contemporary debate. These debates presume a noncontroversial, common concept of wilderness. Yet, the concept of wilderness as we have come to view it has serious problems.

In this essay, it is my contention that a conceptual analysis and revision of our accepted notion of wilderness will better serve to protect and defend those areas that we commonly think of and legally designate as wilderness. To begin, I briefly point out what is the contemporary “received” (as I will call it) concept of wilderness. Then, I discuss the shortcomings involved with the received idea of wilderness, including the potentially tragic implications of not revising it. Along the way, I offer some suggestions for an alternative notion of wilderness.

The “Received” Idea of Wilderness

In the minds of most people in the developed West, especially in the U.S., the conception of wilderness is noncontroversial and unproblematic. After all, we received this idea of wilderness from the likes of John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt, Henry David Thoreau, Sigurd Olson, Aldo Leopold, and Bob Marshall. Wilderness advocates of the last hundred years or so have had a common general understanding or definition of “wilderness.” A few examples are the following:

Bob Marshall: “a region which contains no permanent inhabitants, possesses no possibility of conveyance by any mechanical means and is sufficiently spacious that a person in crossing it must have the experience of sleeping out.”²

American Heritage Dictionary: “an unsettled, uncultivated region left in its natural condition.”³

Aldo Leopold: “the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization.”⁴

Aldo Leopold: “a continuous stretch of country preserved in its natural state, open to lawful hunting and fishing, big enough to absorb a two weeks’ pack trip, and kept devoid of roads, artificial trails, cottages, or other works of man.”⁵

The Wilderness Act of 1964: “. . . [an] area in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape . . . where the earth and its community of life are

untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain."⁶

In these definitions, the common conception of "wilderness" is that of an area unaffected by humans and human activities; an area where humans are at most only spectators or visitors; an area where environmental change is governed by natural processes and not by human-induced ones. Wilderness is pictured in opposition or antithesis to civilization. This view of wilderness I will call the "received" view or conception.

The received view of wilderness presents troubling puzzles, paradoxes, and dilemmas, to which I now turn.

Shortcomings of the Received Concept of Wilderness

What is troubling about "the forest primeval," to borrow Longfellow's phrase? This purist concept of wilderness presents five difficulties.

First, the received view of wilderness is very much an American idea and is arguably not universalizable. Given the fact that the environmental problems we currently face are global in scope, it would seem that we would want a corresponding philosophy of conservation that would be universalizable. However, in much of the world, the application of this received American idea of wilderness makes little sense. In much of the developed world, such as western Europe, there are no remotely untouched areas; and, hence, these parts of the world would be left entirely out of this discussion, except as a negative model and antithesis to wilderness.

In other large chunks of the world, indigenous peoples are inhabiting what we think of as and hope will be designated, wilderness. For instance, humans have lived for 11,000 years in the Natak Wilderness in Alaska. According to the received concept, these areas would not qualify. We arguably need a concept we can apply globally, and the received, purist notion of wilderness cannot be applied globally.

Second, the received idea is ethnocentric—which is likely the reason why we cannot universalize it. After the northern Europeans left the "Old World" and stepped off the boat onto the western hemisphere, they were not stepping into a pristine wilderness where human influence had not already had significant effect. They mistakenly thought they were, likely because this "New World" appeared significantly different from the human-dominated landscapes in Europe.

At the time of the "discovery" by Columbus, the western hemisphere was populated by 40 to 80 million people.⁷ These inhabitants, like all forms of life, had modified their environment. Native Americans had actively managed their lands—primarily with fire. The composition of the forest had been altered, grasslands had been created, erosion was severe in certain areas, wildlife had been disrupted, and such things as roads, fields, earthworks, and settlements were already widely scattered. The introduction of "Old World" diseases reduced the number of native peoples by as much as 90 percent, giving the early

European immigrants the illusion that they had stumbled upon a vast and unpopulated wilderness.

The so-called "wilderness" that the Pilgrims found themselves in was one created by humans. Hence, according to the purist idea, it was not a wilderness at all.

Third, the received view of wilderness is not externally consistent. That is, it is at odds with certain aspects of theoretical ecology.

The received wilderness idea paints a picture of nature as a static landscape. This image follows from the now outdated view that ecosystems remained in, and always strove toward, a stationary state, called a climax community, until and unless disturbed by some outside force.

Recent ecological thought, however, gives a much different perspective. Ecologists now believe that ecosystems are in a constant state of flux. An ecosystem's usual condition, in other words, is to be constantly changing, regardless of whether or not the interference is anthropogenic.⁸ However, the idea of preserving wilderness seems to suggest retaining wilderness as a "still-shot": preserving those conditions the landscape maintained prior to the incursion of the European settlers.

A paradox results. The only way to fulfill the purist wilderness vision of changeless preservation would be by actively and intensely managing the tracts of land. However, such actions would not only violate the innately dynamic quality of nature, but would also violate the received view of wilderness as untrammelled.

Fourth, the received view of wilderness uncritically accepts the modernist notion that there is a definite and significant distinction between humans and nature. Many naively believe that we humans exist over-and-against and apart from nature, that something qualitatively unique distinguishes our existence from that of lions, lilies, and lichens.

According to evolutionary theory and basic ecology, the boundary-line separating humans from nature is blurry and tenuous at best. As big precocious apes, humans were and are subject to the same evolutionary and ecological forces, rules, and laws as other living things. Human activities, for better or worse, are *in principle* no less natural than the activities of beavers or pitcher-plants.

Contrary to popular belief, this realization has its environmental advantages. It does not necessarily imply that clear-cuts, ozone depletion, and land development are all okay because they are natural. Quite the contrary. We humans are part of nature, and we have an appropriate role or place in nature. This does not mean that any and all of our environmental modifications are wise or permissible. In fact, many are quite harmful and bad. Just as the actions of over-browsing deer, while "natural," can be bad, many of our actions, while also "natural," can have harmful effects on the biotic community and even on the health and preservation of our own species. If the earth were populated with 5.5 billion acacia-toppling elephants instead of 5.5 billion highly-consumptive *Homo sapiens*, then we would have too many elephants and an environmental crisis on our hands, albeit an environmental crisis of different kind. Just as the environmental impact of

deer and elephants can be good or bad, so too can the environmental impact of humans.

As J. Baird Callicott observes, the received view implies that all human interventions in nature are bad:

... measured by the purist wilderness standard, all human impact is bad impact, not because we humans are innately bad, but because we humans are not a part of nature.⁹

But some human environmental impact is arguably good, for instance, rejuvenating a burned-out and environmentally decreed bit of land or the biologically diversifying effects of Native Americans' pyrotechnology. It would be premature to dismiss all anthropogenic environmental alterations.

Fifth, as thought of in the received view, wilderness no longer exists, if it ever did; it's an ontological unreality. There are no places on the earth untouched by human influence. Even Antarctica has not escaped human impact, and the oceans have been changed. Given the fact that our environmental effect is no longer merely on a local point-source level but rather is now global in scope, all of the earth's surface, subsurface, atmospheric, and aquatic regions have been altered by human hands. Acid rain respects no humanly created political boundaries, including wilderness areas. Rivers flow into and out of, and winds blow in and out of, wilderness areas, bringing with them the effluents of humanity. Global warming has altered the chemical composition of the oceans and eventually will cause populations of plant and animal species in wilderness areas to migrate. In other words, human impact, whether direct or indirect, can be seen and felt globally and universally. Hence, to cling to a purist notion of wilderness seems impractical and impossible.

Some Implications

Unacceptable practical implications flow from these five conceptual muddles of the received wilderness idea. The consequences are problematic and troubling.

Politically speaking, adopting a conservation philosophy centered on wilderness preservation would seem to be a defensive and losing strategy. Our current wilderness areas are under increasing pressure from visitors, timber interests, exotic species invasion, land developers, oil and mining interests, and hydroelectric plans. These areas exist as small and isolated islands of highly vulnerable wild areas amidst a much larger sea of human-dominated landscapes.

As wilderness advocates will tell you, it is a constant uphill battle to have an area designated and remain as wilderness. The burden-of-proof for such designation seems always to lie with the advocate and seldom with those who would despoil the area. According to the received view, there is only an ever-shrinking number of potential wilderness areas. In the words of Aldo Leopold, "Wilderness is a resource which can shrink but not grow."¹⁰ Accepting the received view of wilderness permits only a defensive and backward-looking strategy.

Not only is the received view bad conservation strategy politically, but it also leaves wilderness wide open to interpretation and abuse by the "enemies of wilderness." Given that the burden-of-proof seems to lie with the wilderness proponent, the enemy of wilderness need only provide convincing evidence that an area is not a pristine tract and its wilderness preservation status will be jeopardized and possibly ruined forever.

Currently, wilderness areas are designateable as such because they possess certain qualities. These qualities ostensibly include outstanding recreational opportunities and unique conditions of solitude. In actuality, however, the most prevalent criterion is often the absence of roads. These criteria are potentially dangerous for the follow reasons.

First, recreation and solitude are relative and tenuous conditions at best. Clearly, extremely large uninhabited tracts of land would qualify and any large city would not. Would a grassland of 5,000 acres? If an old wagon road winds through it? Moreover, recreation and solitude can be found in settings like artificial climbing walls, isolation chambers, and virtual-reality simulators.

To destroy the possibility of an area being designated as wilderness, an opponent merely needs to show that the area fails to meet the wilderness designation standards. Prairies are poor candidates because they lack many attractive recreational features and are seldom isolated since distant towns and their noises, such as civil service sirens, can be seen and heard. Many prospective places will be disqualified by erstwhile native American habitations and forgotten logging roads. What's worse, many areas can be easily sabotaged, such as by building a radio tower nearby.

A second disturbing result, especially relevant to Australia and Africa, is an implication of the received view for the aboriginal humans who historically and perhaps still utilize a wilderness area. Because wilderness is, according to the received view, unoccupied by humans, humans residing in an area must be regarded as uncivilized barbarians (namely, a kind of wildlife) or removed from the area. Either alternative is unacceptable. Relegating aboriginals to the status of nonhumans was the feeling behind their attempted eradication in Australia. Removing entire peoples from their native environment has repeatedly been shown to be the equivalent of cultural genocide, a tragic case being the consignment of American Indians to so-called reservations.

What is needed is a concept of wilderness that includes certain human activities, especially those of indigenous peoples who have sustainably occupied the area for thousands of years, often longer even than some of the plant and animal species of the region, whose presence and evolution has been intertwined with the activities of the aboriginal humans.

Next, given the received concept, the potential to rejuvenate or resurrect wilderness is impossible. Britain can never have a wilderness. Contrary to the purist ideal, wilderness has actually always been a matter of degree. Due to the nonstatic quality of nature, specific areas can slide up or down a continuum according to their degree of "wildness." Consider, for example, the

hauntingly beautiful island of Rhum. Owned by Scottish National Heritage, a conservation organization, Rhum is a mountainous island, roughly thirty-five square miles in size, off the northwest coast of Scotland. The island has had human inhabitants for thousands of years, and has been deforested. It has generally been trammled until today, including having served as a hunting retreat for exotic red deer and being regularly overgrazed by sheep. According to the received view, Rhum can never be a wilderness. But, once the abusive practices are stopped and Rhum is allowed to go wild, it would seem that Rhum should at least be eligible for some kind of wilderness status, perhaps something like "in the process of becoming wilderness."

In this regard, I disagree with Leopold, who endorsed the purist perspective when he said that "the creation of new wilderness in the full sense of the word is impossible."¹¹ We know wilderness can be lost—a cedar bog can be turned into a shopping mall. But why can't it be gained? The purist notion begs the question against reclamation. Wilderness would better be conceived as a "process" and not so much as a "product." Instead of looking backward, we could look toward "future nature." When intrusive management regimes are halted, and evolutionary and ecological processes allowed to determine speciation and ecosystem destination, then an area would be in the process of wilderness.

Concluding Summary

The common, received concept of wilderness is that of a pristine place devoid of human habitation and influence. I have argued that this concept is unacceptable for philosophical, historical, scientific, and political reasons. The concept is an unrealistic ideal. Such remote places as the polar regions and the ocean depths may once have qualified—but only until roughly a hundred years ago. Today all of the earth's surface and even subsurface has been irretrievably altered by humans. According to ecological and evolutionary biology, nature is a process, always changing; but, in contrast, the received concept is static. Finally, the received concept has been used politically by the opponents of environmentalism. They argue that no area should be designated wilderness, because the ideal no longer obtains. The received concept also has unacceptable implications for the treatment of aboriginal peoples and their

cultures.

Wilderness should be reconceived as a process, I have proposed. Accordingly, places could be reclaimed and resurrected, based on a standard of "wildness." When left alone, devoid of abusive human intrusions, any area could then be "in process of becoming wilderness."

Notes

¹Preparing an anthology on the concept of wilderness gave me the opportunity to explore my own views on this new debate. See J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

²Robert Marshall, "The Problem of Wilderness," *The Scientific Monthly* 30 (1930): 141.

³*American Heritage Dictionary*.

⁴Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), 188.

⁵Aldo Leopold, "The Wilderness and Its Place in Forest Recreation Policy," *Journal of Forestry* 19, no. 7 (1921): 719.

⁶The Wilderness Act of 1964, Sec. 2(c).

⁷The figure is taken from William Denevan, "The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (1992): 369-85; reprinted in Callicott and Nelson.

⁸See, for example, Daniel B. Botkin's two books, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), and *Our National Heritage: The Lessons of Lewis and Clark* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1995).

⁹J. Baird Callicott, "A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea," *Wild Earth* 4, no. 4 (Winter 1994/95): 56.

¹⁰Leopold, 1949, 199.

¹¹*Ibid*, 200.