

AMERICAN WILDERNESS

An Introduction



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Shining Rock. The Big Horn Mountains. Cumberland Island. Gates of the Arctic. Mojave. From the Absaroka-Beartooth to Yosemite, the names alone thrill. These are some of the 677 federally designated wilderness areas of the United States, the most carefully preserved landscapes in the nation. In many of these places, you can walk for days without seeing another person or any obvious signs of human artifice, should you choose to do so. Outside this federal national wilderness system, more wilderness is preserved in our national parks, our national forests, and the numerous other categories of federally managed land. Still more wilderness can be found in private property—from estates and hunting clubs to Nature Conservancy sites. In a world that is increasingly paved and groomed, such places are precious. And given the continued thirst of our consumerist society for resources, their existence is at first glance surprising. The nation that, arguably, most fully has embraced industrial capitalism and consumer culture, a nation whose wealth has been predicated on its ability to harvest and transform an unusually rich bounty of natural resources, simultaneously developed rationales and models for setting aside landscapes (often spectacular ones) as permanent wildlands. This book explores the apparently contradictory history of Americans and their wilderness.

Twenty-first-century Americans love wilderness. We idealize it, we romanticize it, we hike in it, we camp in it, we long to experience it. So many Americans want to enjoy wilderness that recreational specialists have devised “low-impact” camping techniques so that thousands of U.S. citizens can visit the same mountain or the same forest and feel as if they are the first to set foot in it. We name our automobiles after mountain ranges and rugged Western landscapes. We advertise beer with wilderness—“The taste of the Rockies,” or “Come to the mountains, come to Busch beer.” We hang pictures of wilderness on our walls. People dress every day as if they were heading out on a wilderness hike, carrying

backpacks instead of briefcases, wearing polar fleece and hiking boots. Our national park system is the oldest in the world, and every year millions of Americans make pilgrimages to these spectacular, even sacred, sites. The U.S. environmental organizations that focus upon the preservation of wilderness and wild species have combined memberships reaching into the millions.

Of course, to say that "Americans love wilderness" is far too simple. At times, it seems that we might love our wilderness to death. Automotive gridlock exists not just in our cities; national parks such as Yellowstone, the Smoky Mountains, and the Grand Canyon can look like parking lots in the summer, with bumper-to-bumper traffic crawling along park roads and automotive exhaust clouding the sky. We show our love for our national parks by driving hundreds of miles to see them in RVs and SUVs that, at their best, travel fifteen miles per gallon of gas. Nowhere is our national schizophrenia more in evidence than in the ongoing debates over drilling for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge. Many Americans want to preserve the wilderness characteristics of this landscape, but they also drive the very cars—GMC Yukons and Toyota Tundras being the most ironically named—that make new sources of Arctic oil appear to be necessary.

When Americans are not on vacation, their lifestyles seem distinctly anti-wilderness. Suburban sprawl is eating up thousands of acres of land every year. National parks and wilderness areas are besieged by energy and mineral interests, by conflicts over wild carnivores leaving the parks, and by debates about forests and fires, to name just a few. Contemporary U.S. society is the most environmentally destructive in the world, if measured by resource use, energy consumption, per capita trash production, and other pollution measures. The United States, with approximately 4 percent of the world's population, emits roughly 25 percent of the global production of carbon dioxide. As we sit at home, the resources of the world's forests and fields surround us, from the wood of our furniture to the food in our refrigerators. Insofar as the countries of the developing world adopt a U.S.-style resource-intensive consumer culture, it bodes ill for the wilderness of the world.

So what does it mean to say that Americans love wilderness? Are we hypocrites? Our love for wilderness is tangibly visible on our national maps. The American national park system is perhaps our most globally accepted governmental idea, found (unlike democracy or the separation of powers) even in the cruelest dictatorships and single-party states. Yet national parks, with their tourist-oriented infrastructure of roads, visitor centers, and lodges, were not wild enough for many Americans, and in 1964 the Wilderness Act was passed, establishing national wilderness areas. According to this law, "wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are

untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain." Wilderness areas have no roads, buildings, motorized vehicles, or campgrounds—not even chainsaws are allowed. They are held to a higher standard of nature protection than any other federal land in our country—and, at the time of the act's passage, in the world. Yet still, our national schizophrenia is everywhere in evidence, as the history of the implementation of both national parks and wilderness areas has been laced with setbacks and disappointments. Since the 1970s, many local communities have felt that a new wilderness area designated in their backyard would be a disaster. And love and legislation notwithstanding, the inexorable trend in the United States has been the steady net loss of wilderness and wild areas, even as a few new remnants are set aside.

Some historians have tried to explain these contradictions by analyzing wilderness politics—charting the growth of the wilderness movement over the years, the passage of legislation, and changing ideas about wilderness. Some others have attempted to explain why these political decisions were made and why American ideas about nature changed through time. They often look to other cultural trends and forces, and they try to study the American love of wilderness as a manifestation of larger cultural patterns. Still others have focused upon histories of the landscapes themselves, showing how particular natural areas have changed. They have all shared, however, the conviction that the key to understanding contemporary American interactions with wilderness is by studying the past and how those attitudes arose and changed through time.

The historicizing of love can be profoundly disconcerting to one *in* love. Wilderness advocates have often found the history of their movement, and their central life commitment, to be alienating, much as many religious people dislike religious history. This has been especially true when historians have attempted to analyze why people do what they do. It is one thing to chronicle *what* people do, and quite another to interpret *why* they do it. Who, after all, would want to be described as a person who buys wilderness art as part of a process of denial about her own environmentally destructive lifestyle, or as a person who supports wilderness bills for Alaska as a salve for his subconscious guilt over living in suburban sprawl? Not surprisingly, some wilderness advocates have come to think that wilderness history is irrelevant or even an impediment to their activism. As an example, when historians write about cultural constructions of wilderness—how wilderness is defined by the observer's culture—some activists are frustrated and reply that wilderness is a real thing, not an idea or a construction of culture.

Many an argument has begun because of a lack of understanding of a simple truth: wilderness is simultaneously a real thing and a human construction. Wilderness is difficult to define in part because it is a noun that "acts like an adjective," joining similar words, such as beauty or wisdom.¹ But unlike those words, wilderness refers to a completely nonsubjective, nonhuman, wild nature.

Although different people perceive wilderness in different ways, it is inaccurate to argue that wilderness (like beauty) is purely in the eye of the beholder. Historians are trained to study culture rather than forest ecosystems (more properly the province of scientists), and thus even environmental history often focuses more upon reconstructing past human perceptions and ideas than on reconstructing ecosystems. It is a mistake to read into that focus the assumption that human perceptions create reality.

For example, to a seventeenth-century Iroquois, a mid-Atlantic forest might look quite different than it would to a European explorer. The Iroquois might see the forest as a mosaic of habitats: some wilder wilderness sections, some periodically burned and managed for easy hunting of deer and turkey, and some former village or farming sites, now regenerating young shrubs and trees. The European explorer might see all of the forest as pure wilderness, a dark and mysterious landscape illustrating God's original paradise, a fearsome haunt of the devil, or even a collection of marketable commodities. Neither, probably, would be interested in joining a twenty-first-century backpacker voluntarily spending a week living in that same forest wilderness among the mosquitoes, snakes, and bears and cooking bad food over a fire, all in the name of relaxation. These three ways of seeing the wilderness are different, but the wilderness itself—the forest that they perceive and interpret—does not change.

It is also important to distinguish between wilderness and wildness. I have a tulip poplar tree in my backyard that is infested with aphids. Ants eat the highly nutritious excrement of aphids and in turn defend the aphids from marauding ladybugs that eat not the excrement but the aphids themselves—a life-and-death struggle over my back deck that is repeated every summer. This tree and insect community is wild; it is not wilderness. This is not because of the tameness of the tree (I did not plant it, and in fact it is too close to my house) or the lack of wild beasts (the insects are voracious and completely outside of my control). The tulip tree/insect community is not wilderness primarily because it is small. Wilderness is a concept devised by humans to define a particular type of wild environment—with its plants, animals, and ecosystems—and it is entirely appropriate to declare that wilderness, as distinct from wildness, must be large on a human scale. Wild nature can be found everywhere; wilderness cannot. The grass that grows in the seam of a concrete sidewalk is as wild as a bear in the Brooks Range of Alaska. No one, though, should question that one is in wilderness, the other is not, and learning to appreciate wildness need not replace an appreciation of wilderness. Too often, the two are treated as oppositional categories.

Just as wilderness has fascinated Americans over the last two hundred years—whether they responded with fear, loathing, respect, or love—every generation has had historians who wrote about nature or wilderness. Some historians have viewed the interaction between settlers and raw wilderness as the central reality of

early American history. Francis Parkman, a historian at Harvard in the mid-1800s, wrote his most famous book about the Oregon Trail after walking a portion of the trail as research. Parkman saw the struggle of pioneers to settle the wilds of North America as the key story of his age, but he also mourned the end of the glorious, unsettled West (and was not at all flattering in his descriptions of the pioneers). Not coincidentally, Parkman taught at Harvard with such luminaries as Ralph Waldo Emerson, and he knew Thoreau as well.² At the turn of the twentieth century, there was another renowned generation of wilderness activists, including figures such as John Muir, Mary King Sherman, and Gifford Pinchot, and they also had their wilderness historian. In 1893, Wisconsin professor Frederick Jackson Turner delivered a paper, subsequently serialized in several books, entitled “The Frontier Thesis of American History.” Turner argued that American civilization was in trouble, because the 1890 census had declared the frontier to be closed (the continental United States had achieved a minimal population density in all territories). He proposed that the frontier had acted as a release valve for the pressures of urbanization and as a forge for the national character. With no more empty wild lands, America seemed destined for a long, slow, decline. Turner's reading of the crucial role of wilderness (as frontier) in U.S. history helped to provide a justification for political action to save wilderness in the decades that saw the beginning of the national forest system, the expansion and formalization of the national park system, and the popularization of wilderness appreciation among the women and men of the United States.

In the 1960s, historians began to look more closely at the history of wilderness as an idea and the history of conservation efforts, as well as the earlier notion of wilderness as a forge for national character. Not coincidentally, the cultural context of that historical scholarship was the booming wilderness movement, highlighted by the 1964 passage of the national Wilderness Act. The incredible popularity of some of that historical scholarship—most particularly Roderick Nash's 1967 *Wilderness and the American Mind*—reflected not just the considerable quality of these writings, but also the degree to which Nash and his colleagues captured the environmental spirit of the age. That this scholarship is still popular forty years later reflects the continued relevance of the 1960s wilderness movement to the present. Nash's book, still in print and now in its fourth edition, is popular both in university courses and among general readers. Not only did Nash capture the wilderness pulse of America, he helped to define that pulse, so that subsequent generations of environmental scholars and activists discussed American wilderness in Nash's terms, with his examples, and with his heroes.

Nash argued that early Americans were predisposed by European culture and their Judeo-Christian heritage to see wilderness as evil, dangerous, and ungodly (in this, he was joined by the historian Lynn White, who wrote a celebrated 1967

article claiming that the Judeo-Christian world view of dominion, as expressed in Genesis, was incompatible with biocentric environmentalism).³ As the forests of North America were cleared, however, and romanticism became the ascendant Western mode of thought, educated elites and urbanites began to attribute positive virtues to wilderness. Thus, wilderness appreciation originated among East Coast elites who were separated from wilderness by an industrializing civilization. By the twentieth century, this elite movement had spread into a "wilderness cult," a widespread and almost fanatical belief on the part of (still primarily middle-class and urban) Americans that wilderness would cure the problems of industrial society. This wilderness movement, however, was contested at its very core by preservationists, who saw wilderness as possessing intrinsic worth—Nash's heroes, Thoreau, Muir, and Aldo Leopold—and by conservationists, represented by Gifford Pinchot and his followers, who saw the conservation of wilderness as only a strategy for prolonging access to key natural resources for human use. In the twentieth century, then, Nash's history of wilderness was primarily the history of the conflict between these two groups. To Nash and his followers, the contradictory American behaviors listed at the start of this chapter represent a society in transition, where true wilderness lovers are still a minority in a population that is gradually moving away from more anthropocentric (human-centered) ways of seeing nature. Thus, different Americans are spread over a spectrum of wilderness appreciation, from high to low, with many still mixed up in the middle (and thus conflicted in their actions).

Insofar as Nash's ideas sound familiar, that reflects the degree to which they, and the cultural attitudes they reflect, continue to dominate popular American conceptions of wilderness. Historian Samuel P. Hayes makes an interesting contrast to Nash. Like Nash, he considered the beginnings of the wilderness conservation movement in 1890–1920 in *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency* (1959). Unlike Nash, Hayes viewed the conservation movement debates and changes firmly within the context of the Progressive Era, arguing that wilderness activism was not motivated solely by appreciation for the wilderness, but often by progressive concerns with order, rationality, and permanence. While historians have found Hayes's insights useful, he never gained as much of a following among the wilderness activists of the 1960s, who read Nash's work in such large numbers. His thesis did not dovetail as neatly with the goals of the wilderness movement, and perhaps activists found his larger historical concerns less relevant to their activism.⁴

In the decades since Nash's path-breaking book, dozens of historians followed in his footsteps and studied different aspects of the history of American wilderness ideas and politics. Practically every chapter of his book became the subject of numerous dissertations and monographs, and wilderness history became a key component of the growing discipline of environmental history. As is

inevitably the case, as more scholars studied this history, it became increasingly complex. Among the gradual modifications of Nash's original argument, they suggested that the Christian legacy was not only subduing the earth but also saving God's creation; farms were sometimes as destructive of wilderness as industry; women played a key role in conservation efforts; not all wilderness activism began with urban elites; American Indians inhabited most of the "virgin wilderness"; not all European settlements shared the same values as New England; the conservation-preservation dichotomy was too stark, rigid, and simplistic; "wilderness" itself was not necessarily best studied in the history of wilderness areas. By the 1990s, a growing number of historians argued that these findings called for a different interpretation of wilderness and its history. Among these wilderness revisionists, none has been more influential than William Cronon, particularly through his 1995 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature."⁵

Cronon's essay argued that the traditional definition of wilderness (a pristine landscape untouched by human hands) was part of a persistent Western dualism juxtaposing wilderness and civilization, nature and human, as pure opposites. Ultimately, Cronon speculated, this wilderness idea actually worked against the emergence of an environmental movement that could make industrial societies livable. By claiming that any human touch (or, less extreme, any sign of industrial civilization) degrades a landscape beyond being worth saving, there is no need to focus upon improving the local environments in which we all work (and whose degradation is so economically attractive). We can save distant pure landscapes and abuse those on which we live. This allows many Americans to be good wilderness-loving environmentalists while they continue to participate in environmentally destructive development at home. In this view, wilderness preservation is not a reaction against industrialization, but actually enables the process. Wilderness is the cultural sleight of hand that makes our (often grotesque) contemporary development and exploitation mentally acceptable. He concluded that Americans need to spend more time focused on wildness—the wildness that can be found in the middle landscape that blends the human and the natural—than on a pure wilderness that exists outside of history.

Cronon's essay (and the other essays in the book of which it was a part) helped to ignite a raging debate that quickly moved from the pages of academic journals to newspapers and popular periodicals. Was wilderness a problematic concept? Was it the "wrong nature," as Cronon's title implied? Cronon had acknowledged that his essay was, in places, speculative, and some of his ideas were so sweeping as to be ultimately impossible to prove or disprove. Unfortunately, many of the arguments resulting from the essay eschewed subtlety (as was true of the essay's title as well, though the essay itself was far more nuanced). Not all responses were polemical, however, and at its best the controversy

encouraged a number of people to reconsider the relationship between wilderness and American culture. The best arguments and essays (by historians, philosophers, and environmentalists) were collected in *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (1998).⁶ As that volume demonstrates, both the traditional and revisionist interpretations are useful in understanding the past; any attempt to analyze the complexity of changing U.S. culture inevitably comes to realize that no one explanation is sufficient for any historical phenomenon. There is not just one monolithic American mind or way of seeing—or of loving—wilderness.

The new wilderness historians (those writing since 1990 and particularly those who began their work in the years immediately before and after the wilderness debates) share several characteristics. They are more attuned to power disparities and the politics of race, class, and gender than their 1960s predecessors. They are often concerned with U.S. overconsumption, the dismal state of our cities and urban sprawl, and America's role as the world's top polluter. And they are almost always people who have grown up enjoying wilderness in the United States—hiking and camping in the landscapes preserved by earlier wilderness activism. Their work has, however, been received by many contemporary wilderness activists as antithetical to the goal of preserving more wilderness on earth. Dave Foreman, a leading wilderness advocate, playfully suggested that Cronon and other wilderness historians had come up with their ideas "as they hold hands in a darkened room around a séance table, trying to hear voices from the misty shades of Jonathan Edwards and Henry David Thoreau." They were fixated on the past rather than the crises of the present. More seriously, he continued, "I have spent my life fighting the lies, blather, and myths of extractive industry about wilderness. I have concluded that their pitiful arguments against wilderness are actually more legitimate, rational and grounded in reality than those of the postmodern deconstructionists" (he means the historians).⁷ Not surprisingly, then, most of the new wilderness histories have not received anything like the popular response afforded to Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Quite simply, the new wilderness historians are not telling stories that many environmentalists want to hear.

The new wilderness historians tend to argue that their work reflects the natural maturation of any academic subfield, particularly a subfield born of the concerns of a social movement. Over time, wilderness historians have deepened their analysis, discovered new sources and stories, and inevitably acquired a critical distance from the movement not initially possible in the first heady days of activist-fired academic inquiry in the 1960s. Nonetheless, it is still possible to see a cultural context for the new wilderness historians that is revealing. Just as Nash and his cohort wrote wilderness histories that bore the imprint of 1960s environmentalism, contemporary wilderness historians reflect a series of concerns and events that have emerged since the 1980s.

Rather than reflecting the exuberance of the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the ascendant environmental movement, the new wilderness histories arose in a different set of contexts. In 1987, the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice issued a report, "Toxic Waste and Race in the United States," that helped to bring national attention to the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice activists critiqued the ways in which traditional environmentalism had ignored the plight of the less privileged. What did wilderness conservation have to do with the poor or with racial minorities? they asked. On the opposite side of the political spectrum, the 1980s saw the Sagebrush rebellion, a conservative backlash in the Western United States against federal land management policies that were believed to favor elite Eastern interests and to ignore local concerns.

Internationally, there was a postcolonial backlash against what many developing-world activists, scholars, and government leaders referred to as the inappropriate imposition of U.S.-style wilderness preservation in the third world. These complaints were most famously voiced by Ramachandra Guha in his 1989 article, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," which argued that U.S. wilderness ideas were not appropriate in Asia and Africa.⁸ At the UN-sponsored Rio Conference in 1992, representatives from the developing world roundly criticized what they saw as first world hypocrisy in proposing wilderness preservation in the developing world while not curbing first world resource consumption. In sum, historians writing about wilderness in the 1990s could not help but be aware of the voluminous critiques—at home and abroad—of the legacy of wilderness ideas. Whether they agreed or not, inevitably the debate influenced the way they conceived of and presented their scholarship.

By this point, the cumulative work on U.S. wilderness history fills several library shelves. The time has come to bring this new scholarship together and reframe the history of U.S. attitudes and actions toward wilderness in light of the last forty years of historical inquiry and to move past the wilderness debate of the last decade. The fourteen contributors to this volume do not agree on all points, but they do agree on the importance of drawing on the best ideas from both sides of the wilderness debate. Many of the traditional wilderness heroes and events are found here—Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Hetch Hetchy, Echo Park, and the Wilderness Act—with new historical evidence and a wider historical context that makes them seem new. Conversely, there are several people, ideas, and events that will not be as familiar, from the way English settlers feared that wilderness might affect their bodies, to the agricultural roots of conservation, to the hiking women of the Appalachian Mountain Club, among many others.

There are five primary threads drawing these essays together. The most basic is a history of the growing wilderness movement, looking both at differing

visions of what conservation might entail and at the movement's politics itself. Intertwined with that story, though, is the countercurrent of how the preservation of wilderness has negatively affected peoples as diverse as backwoods settlers, American Indians, and Maasai pastoralists. Analyses of the changing ideas that both shape and reflect American wilderness thinking—from religion, philosophy, agrarian conservation, art, literature, and science—constitute a third theme for the volume. A fourth key theme is how wilderness is linked to the nation, and nationalism, both in the United States and overseas. And woven through all of these stories is the backdrop of the expansion of U.S. agriculture, industry, population, and settlement over the last four hundred years and the resulting environmental degradation. As several chapters demonstrate, the ecological transformations that occurred in the American wilderness led to cultural and political responses.

The wilderness ideas and practices of the United States have been widely imitated around the globe and, in many cases, with striking historical parallels. Has this wilderness idea traveled so broadly because it fit into similar historical, cultural, and ecological contexts throughout the world, particularly, the emergence of nation-states and nationalism concurrent with industrialization and environmental degradation? Or, perhaps, was it linked to the spread of liberal democracy, as Donald Worster argues in this volume's epilogue? Though crucial to U.S. identity and history, the wilderness idea has never been just an American idea. Rather, it was derived from the shared human experience of modernity—the initially Euro-American, then global, experiences of the scientific revolution, exploration, colonialism, industrialization, and the dramatic transformation of the natural world. From Parkman to the present, U.S. historians have been convinced that to understand American wilderness is to understand a crucial part of America. Perhaps they have undersold the importance of wilderness history; perhaps to understand wilderness is to understand part of the more global history of modernity and its discontents: our values, our hopes, our blind spots, and our fears, overlaid on a rapidly changing planet.

Notes

1. Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 4th ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 1.
2. Francis Parkman, *The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky Mountain Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1944).
3. Lynn White, "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* (March 7, 1967): 1203–7.
4. Samuel P. Hayes, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959).

5. William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, ed. William Cronon (New York: Norton, 1995), 69–90. The other contributors to that volume make similar arguments, as do popular books like Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education* (New York: Dell, 1991).
6. J. Baird Callicott and Michael Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998).
7. Dave Foreman, "The Real Wilderness Idea," in *Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference*, vol. 1, *Changing Perspectives and Future Directions*, ed. David Cole, Stephen McCool, Wayne Freimund, and Jennifer O'Loughlin (Ogden, Utah: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2000), 32–38.
8. Ramachandra Guha, "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique," *Environmental Ethics* 11 (1989): 71–83.