

## A CRITIQUE OF AND AN ALTERNATIVE TO THE WILDERNESS IDEA

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I gave a talk at a symposium in Bozeman, Montana, celebrating the thirtieth anniversary of the 1964 Wilderness Act. I was preceded at the podium by a well-spoken, Amherst College-educated cattleman, Chase Hibbard, who described himself as the token redneck at this gathering of the wilderness faithful. He proclaimed his love of things wild and free and his dedication to steward the lands, private and public, grazed by his stock. He urged us all to find consensus and strike a balance between wilderness preservation and economic necessity.

When it was my turn to speak, I began by saying that if Mr. Hibbard was the token redneck, I was fixing to be the skunk at this garden party—a little simile I borrowed (without attribution) from a piece by Dave Foreman in *Wild Earth*. Thus at once I endeared myself to the audience—people can't hate a self-proclaimed skunk—and put them on notice that I might have something unsettling to say. There are two debates about the value of wilderness, I went on to note. One we just heard about, that between wilderness preservation and "jobs." (And, I pointed out, *profits*, doubtless the most important consideration to Mr. Hibbard, who doesn't work for wages, but one he never mentioned in his speech.) The other debate—*within* the community of conservationists, not between conservationists and cowboys—is about the value of the wilderness ideal to the conservation of biological diversity.

As a dedicated conservationist and environmentalist, I think we

must reexamine the *received* wilderness idea, that is, the idea that wilderness is, as the Wilderness Act states, "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain." I want to emphasize that my intent in doing so is not to discredit the *areas* designated "wilderness," and thus make them more vulnerable to development pressures. On the contrary, we need to multiply and expand such areas. Here I criticize rather the *concept* of wilderness, that is, how we conceive of the areas that we call wilderness. I do so hoping to strengthen conservation efforts by helping to ground conservation policy in a sound environmental philosophy.

After the existence of an "environmental crisis" was widely acknowledged the late 1960s, the benchmark of environmental quality was the wilderness ideal of pristine, untouched nature. Accordingly, the new breed of environmentalists believed that the best way to preserve nature, if not the only way, was to exclude all human economic activities from representative ecosystems and designate them as wilderness preserves. In them, some old-growth forests could remain standing, wild animals could have a little habitat, and so on. In effect, we attempted to achieve environmental preservation by zoning the planet into areas where environmentally destructive human economic activities—like livestock grazing, mining, logging, agriculture, mechanized recreation, manufacturing, and real estate development—would be permitted and areas where such activities would be excluded. Several recent and not so recent realizations are subverting this simple philosophy of nature conservation through wilderness preservation.

First, at the practical level, the original rationale for wilderness preservation was not articulated in terms of biological conservation by turn-of-the-century environmentalists like John Muir. Instead, they emphasized the way wilderness satisfies human aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual needs. Wilderness, in short, was originally regarded as a psychospiritual *resource*. Often the most haunting, beautiful, silent,

and solitary places are too remote, rugged, barren, or arid to be farmed or logged or even mined. Hence, an early criterion for identifying suitable areas for national parks, such as Yellowstone and Yosemite, long before the Wilderness Act of 1964 and public acknowledgment of the environmental crisis, was their *uselessness* for practically any other purpose. Consequently, as Dave Foreman puts it with his characteristic bluntness, much designated wilderness is “rock and ice,” great for “scenery and solitude” but not so great for biological conservation.

Second, at the political level, the wilderness preservation philosophy of nature conservation is defensive and ultimately represents a losing strategy. The development-permitted zones greatly exceed the development-excluded zones in number and size. More acreage of the contiguous United States is under pavement than is under protection in wilderness areas. Less than 5 percent of the lower forty-eight states is in a designated or de facto wilderness condition. As the human population and economy grow, the pressure on these ragtag wild areas becomes ever greater. In temperate North America, wilderness reserves, national parks, and conservancy districts have become small islands in a rising tide of cities, suburbs, farms, ranches, interstates, and clear-cuts. And they are all seriously compromised by human recreation and by exotic species colonization. Big wilderness has receded to the subarctic and arctic latitudes. Even these remote hinterlands are threatened by logging, hydropower schemes, oil exploration, and other industrial intrusions, not to mention the threats posed by global warming and by exposure to sharply increased levels of ultraviolet radiation. The wilderness idea, hopefully and enthusiastically popularized by John Muir’s best-sellers at the close of the nineteenth century, has played itself out, here at the close of the twentieth, in the pessimism and despair of Bill McKibben’s recent best-seller, *The End of Nature*. McKibben’s thesis needs no elaboration by me because his title says it all.

Third, at the international level, the uniquely American wilderness idea is not a universalizable approach to conservation. But the

environmental crisis, and particularly the erosion of biodiversity, is global in scope. Thus we need a conservation philosophy that is universalizable. In western Europe, conservation via wilderness preservation is meaningless. In India, Africa, and South America, American-style national parks have been created by forcibly evicting resident peoples, sometimes with tragic consequences. The Ik, for example, were hunter-gatherers living sustainably, from time immemorial, in the remote Kidepo Valley of northeast Uganda. In 1962 they were removed in order to create the Kidepo National Park, an area where the community of life would henceforth be untrammelled by man, where man would be a visitor who does not remain. When the Ik were forced to settle in crowded villages outside the park and to farm, their culture disintegrated and they degenerated into the travesty of humanity made infamous by Colin Turnbull.

Fourth, at the historical level, we are beginning to realize that wilderness is an ethnocentric concept. Europeans came to what they called the “new world” and since it did not look like the humanized landscape that they had left behind in the “old world,” they thought it was a pristine wilderness, where, as David Brower put it, the hand of man had never set foot. But the Western Hemisphere was full of Indians when Columbus stumbled upon it. In 1492 the only continental-size wilderness on the planet was Antarctica. The aboriginal inhabitants of North and South America, further, were not passive denizens of the forests, prairies, and deserts; they actively managed their lands—principally with fire. Some paleoecologists believe that in the absence of Indian burning, the vast, biologically diverse open prairies of North and South America would not have existed, that the American heartland would instead have been grown over with brush. Some believe that the North American forests would not have been as rich and diverse in the absence of the Indian’s pyrotechnology.

By the seventeenth century, when English colonists began to settle the eastern seaboard of North America, the native peoples had

suffered the greatest demographic debacle of human history. Their populations were reduced by perhaps 90 percent due to the ravages of Old World diseases, which had swept through the hemisphere transmitted first from European to Indian and then from Indian to Indian. So the Pilgrims did find themselves in a relatively desolate and howling wilderness, as they lamented, but it was, ironically, an *artificial* wilderness—though that combination of words seems oxymoronic. Europeans inadvertently created the New World wilderness condition by means of an unintended but utterly devastating biological warfare on the aboriginal inhabitants.

Fifth, at the theoretical ecology level, ecosystems were once thought to remain stable unless they are disturbed, and if they are disturbed, to return eventually to their stable states, called climax communities. To be constantly changing and unstable is now believed to be their usual, rather than exceptional, condition. Thus, whether we humans interfere with them or not, ecosystems will undergo metamorphosis. But wilderness *preservation* has often meant freeze-framing the status quo ante, maintaining things as they were when the “white man” first came on the scene. Hence the wilderness ideal, so *interpreted*, represents a conservation goal that would be possible to attain, paradoxically, only through intensive management efforts to keep things the way they were in defiance of nature’s inherent dynamism.

Sixth, at the philosophical level, the wilderness idea perpetuates the pre-Darwinian myth that “man” exists apart from nature. Our oldest and most influential cultural traditions have taught us that we human beings are exclusively created in the image of God, or that we are somehow uniquely endowed with divine rationality. Thus we, and all the products of our essentially supernatural minds, were thought to exist apart from and over-against nature. For wilderness purists, encountering any human artifact (not their own) in a wilderness setting spoils their experience of pristine nature. But Darwin broadcast the unwelcome news that we self-exalting human beings are mere accidents

of natural selection, no less than any other large mammal. We are one of five living species of great ape. We are, to put it bluntly, just big monkeys—very precocious ones, to be sure, but monkeys nonetheless. And everything we do—from bowling and bungee-jumping to writing *Iliads* and engineering space shuttles (and committing acts of ecotage, most definitely)—is monkey business. For many people, Darwin’s news was bad news because it seemed to demean us and to undermine our noblest pretensions and aspirations. But I think it’s good news. If we are a part of nature, then we have a rightful place and role in nature no less than any other creature—no less than elephants, or whales, or redwoods. And what we may do in and to nature—the transformations that we impose upon the environment—are in principle no better or no worse than what elephants, or whales, or redwoods, may do in and to nature.

I say “in principle” because I certainly do not wish to leave anyone with the impression that I think because we are just as natural as all other organisms, everything we do in and to nature—every change we impose upon the environment—is okay. Most anthropogenic change is certainly not okay. Indeed, most of what we do in and to nature is very destructive.

But other species, too, may have either beneficial or harmful effects on the rest of nature. If there were 6 billion elephants on the planet instead of 6 billion people (or, remembering that an adult elephant is more than a hundred times as heavy as an adult human, if there were as much elephant biomass as presently there is human biomass), then planet Earth would still be in the throes of an ecological crisis. Elephants, in other words, can also be very destructive citizens of their biotic communities. On the other hand, the biomass of bees and other insect pollinators of plants is probably greater than the human biomass (I don’t know, I’m not a biologist) and certainly the bee population far exceeds the human population, but the ecological effect of all these bees is undoubtedly beneficial. So, if the ecological impact of

the activities of bees and elephants can be either good or bad, then why can't the ecological impact of human activities be good as well as bad? Measured by the wilderness standard, all human impact is bad, not because human beings are inherently bad, but because human beings are not a part of nature—or so the wilderness idea assumes.

Personally, I hope that those of us affluent North Americans who wish to do so can go on enjoying the luxury of respectfully, worshipfully visiting wilderness areas. In my opinion, the greatest value of the Wilderness Act of 1964 is ethical. It formally acknowledges a human commitment to humility, forbearance, and restraint. But as the centerpiece of a nature *conservation* philosophy, we need to find an alternative to the wilderness idea. Fortunately, we need not look far. We find the appropriate alternative in the concept of biosphere reserves, a concept hatched in Europe, focused on the tropics, and given the imprimatur of the United Nations. Thus, it has genuine international currency. Further, biosphere reserves are selected not on the basis of scenic qualities and not because they are otherwise useless, but on the basis of ecological qualities. Such reserves, intended to preserve biological diversity and ecosystem health, should be designed to harbor not only the charismatic megafauna—bears, wolves, bison, and the like—but also the entire spectrum of indigenous species, invertebrates as well as vertebrates, plants as well as animals.

A policy of invasive human management—by means of, say, prescribed burning or carefully planned culling—is cognitively dissonant with the wilderness idea, but not with the biosphere (or biodiversity) reserve idea. Indeed, one of the signal differences between the old wilderness idea and the new concept of biosphere reserves is a provision for compatible human residence and economic activity in and around reserves. Had the Kidepo National Park been conceived as the Kidepo Biosphere Reserve (though of course to think that it actually might have been is anachronistic), then the Ik and their culture could have been part of what was preserved. Looking toward the future, the

idea of a restored American Great Plains—the Buffalo Commons envisioned by Frank and Deborah Popper—was, upon first hearing, so violently opposed because it was originally uncritically cast in the wilderness mode. It is becoming politically more palatable, even attractive, as residents of the target regions see an opportunity to stay, not leave, and switch from farming and livestock ranching to various ways of sustainably exploiting bison, elk, deer, and pronghorn antelope. As I envision a Buffalo Commons, private herds of cattle and sheep would be removed all over the arid and semiarid West. Absent domestic stock, the native vegetation could reclothe the range. And with the fences down, the native ungulates could roam free and wild. Erstwhile ranchers and farmers could retain a home forty and form management co-ops to allot themselves culling rights, proportional perhaps to how much land each put into the commons. If the Blackfeet, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Lakota could cull the unowned elk and buffalo herds without compromising biological diversity, why can't the contemporary residents of the same region?

The biosphere reserve idea may be the centerpiece of a coherent and universalizable conservation philosophy, but not the whole of such a philosophy. The wilderness idea is half of an either-or dichotomy: *either* devote an area to human inhabitation and destructive economic development, *or* preserve it in its pristine condition as wilderness. The classic wilderness advocates, such as Roderick Nash, in other words, envisioned no alternative to industrial civilization offset by wilderness preservation. As long as it stayed on its side of the fence, industrial civilization went unchallenged.

The core-buffer-corridor concept of the Wildlands Project is cast in the new biosphere reserve paradigm. But the authors of the 1992 “Wildlands Project Mission Statement” still, in my opinion, concede too much to industrial civilization as we know it when they write, “Intensive human activity associated with civilization—agriculture, industrial production, urban centers—could continue

outside the buffers.” Complementing the biodiversity reserve idea in a sound nature conservation philosophy are the ideas of appropriate technology and sustainable livelihood—*if* by “sustainable livelihood” is meant human economic activity that does not compromise ecological health and integrity. Solar alternatives to hydroelectric and fossil-fuel energy should be aggressively explored. Alternatives to industrial agriculture should be encouraged by means of policy changes. Urban sprawl should be controlled by better planning and stricter zoning. Timber reserves should be harvested ecologically as well as sustainably, as now ostensibly mandated by the new Forest Service policy on national forests. And so on. Thus some biological conservation might be integrated with economic activities in areas not designated as biodiversity reserves (cum buffers and corridors), just as some economic activities might be integrated with biological conservation in those that are.

I was impressed with how the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem seemed to be a looming presence in the collective consciousness of Bozeman. Almost all the symposium speakers mentioned it. Some dwelled on it. A few spoke of nothing else. It being my spring break and all, I had set aside a few days afterward to go trekking. The park pulled me like a magnet. I rented a car and drove up the Paradise Valley to the north gate. Then I poked around the valley of the Yellowstone River and those of the Lamar and Gardiner, two of its tributaries, on foot.

Tired of a long, bitter Wisconsin winter and with my cross-country skis back home in my shack, I never got anywhere near the backcountry. Climbing up on McMinn Bench near Mount Everts, I could see the park headquarters village in the vicinity of Mammoth Hot Springs, the town of Gardiner off to the north, U.S. 89 running south to Norris Geyser Basin, and U.S. 212, which is kept open all winter as far east as Cooke City, Montana. But the difference between inside and outside the park boundaries was like the difference between night and day. Inside, the headquarters village, the roads, the

campgrounds, all had hard edges. And there were no fences. Outside, the gate town had a long filament of gas stations, motels, fly shops, and whatnot strung out along the highway. New-looking houses were scattered here and there on the nearby bluffs. Though I was usually walking through a mixture of mud and elk manure, the park seemed clean. Beyond, the landscape seemed marred and cluttered.

Both outside and inside the park I saw elk, mule and white-tailed deer, and pronghorn. Inside the park I saw plenty of bison. At close range the evidence of elk overpopulation was ubiquitous: aspen were absent, an elk-eye-level browse line was on the Douglas-firs and whitebark pines, game trails traversed the slopes every fifty feet or so of elevation, the riverbanks were denuded and eroding, and everywhere I stepped, I stepped in elk scat.

The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (comprising Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks, the Bridger-Teton, Targhee, Gallatin, Custer, Caribou, and Beaverhead National Forests, three national wildlife refuges, and BLM, state, and private lands) is the biggest relatively intact ecosystem in the Lower 48. The park is a listed UNESCO Biosphere Reserve and World Heritage Site. What the Yellowstone Biosphere Reserve lacks is a thoughtful buffer zone policy and well-articulated corridors connecting it with the Bitterroot, Bob Marshall, Glacier, and Cascade core habitats. I have no personal experience with potential corridors, but the Paradise Valley is an ideal candidate for a buffer zone on the north boundary of Yellowstone National Park. Under the new mandate for ecosystem management, the Forest Service should manage its “multiple use” forests as buffer zones to the adjoining parks and to its designated wilderness areas in the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem. Up to now, the Forest Service has extensively roaded its lands and permitted clear-cut logging, especially in the Targhee and Gallatin National Forests, “treatments” not consistent with biosphere reserve buffer zone management. Stock grazing is permitted on nearly half the public lands in the ecosystem, including

(incredibly) designated wilderness areas in the national forests and parts of Grand Teton National Park. But what hope can we entertain that the absolutely essential winter ungulate habitat represented by a multitude of private properties in the Paradise Valley will be managed as a buffer zone?

Let's look at what's going on in the valley now. With my first quart of cold beer in three days on the seat between my legs, my left hand on the wheel, and the right taking notes as I drove from Gardiner to Livingston, this is what I saw:

Immediately beyond the park boundaries a good deal of open land in the side hills between the Yellowstone River valley and the mountains has been bought for winter range by the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. But virtually within sight of the park gate and only a stone's throw from the river, some enterprising entrepreneur has dug a gravel pit. As I drove by, a bulldozer was pushing loose rock around in a cloud of dust.

The next notable landmark on the landscape is the former alpine estate, Royal Teton Ranch, of the late Malcolm Forbes, who must not have known that his view opened on the Gallatins, not the Tetons. As his last rite to Mammon, Forbes got top dollar for his prime Montana property from a California survivalist cult, the Church Universal and Triumphant. Right on the riverbank the hard core cultists live in a tacky shantytown (and the rest in places like Livingston and Bozeman). Back in the sidehills of the Gallatin Range they have erected bomb shelters whose fuel storage tanks were found leaking diesel oil. As I drove by at eventide, cult cattle were watering in the Yellowstone and trampling its banks. It so happens that the old Forbes place has geothermal "resources," and I saw steam rising near the little settlement. The "church" plans to develop these resources, putting the park's geysers at the risk of being extinguished.

Then, on the side of the road away from the river, I passed an "elk farm," a rundown house and some ramshackle outbuildings beside a

small, grassless paddock enclosed by a high fence. I was told that game wardens had finally caught the wily proprietor luring hungry wild elk into his compound by night. Later he would sell them as pen-raised animals.

A little relief from this world of wounds came when I drove into Yankee Jim Canyon, most of which is part of the Gallatin National Forest, where the mountains on either side of the valley narrow and the river flows fast through a shallow gorge.

Down north of the Yankee Jim respite, the valley widens, framed on the east by the Absoroka and on the west by the Gallatin ranges. Once more the property is mostly private. Ranches. Cattle. I wasn't around long enough to know whether or not the ranchers in the Paradise Valley were conscientious land stewards, like Mr. Hibbard. But what I could see through the windshield at sixty miles per hour was the meaning of "trammed"—to be caught or held in, or as if in, a net; to be enmeshed; to be prevented or impeded; to be confined, according to my dictionary. The valley was trammed, enmeshed, and impeded by a network of fences.

Interspersed with the ranches, closer to a wide spot on the road called Emigrant and on into Livingston, are riparian smallholds with mansions sitting on them, belonging to gentry from elsewhere who found their little piece of paradise on the Yellowstone River. Two miles east of Emigrant on a big bend of the river is Chico, a hot springs resort. I didn't go there, since I had just had an *au naturel* soak in the park.

To accommodate itinerant pilgrims to the valley, someone was rearranging the river bluff with a bulldozer and building an RV "campground" farther down the road. The hookups were all installed. When I passed by, the driveways were just going in.

As I got closer to Livingston, the gentrification of the riparian zone became more intense. The mountains pinch in again and stop at the north end of Paradise Valley, near a place called Allen Spur. I rolled on into town—gradually. The highway is lined with modest houses

along the river, lumberyards, gas stations, 7-Eleven stores, motels, fast-food joints, trashy empty lots—the usual mishmash of totally planless strip development, Anyplace, U.S.A.

And what could the valley become? A Buffalo Commons. Or, more precisely, an Ungulate Commons.

Most cults—the Branch Davidians were an especially spectacular example—eventually self-destruct. The Church Universal and Triumphant, one hopes, will be no exception to the rule. Then the federal government can do what it tried before to do, purchase the old Forbes place and devote it to wildlife.

The government thought it couldn't afford Forbes's asking price, and so probably would shrink from the thought of buying the whole Paradise Valley, much of which may not be for sale. So what can be done? Convince the ranchers to tear down their fences, the most ubiquitously trammeling presence on the land; get rid of their cattle; and invite in the elk, bison, antelope, and deer. Coyotes will keep the ground squirrels in check; black-footed ferrets will limit the prairie dog population; gray wolves and mountain lions will take out old, sick, and less fit large herbivores, leaving the cream of the free-ranging crop for the erstwhile cattle ranchers to skim. The gentry should love to look out their picture windows and see free wild animals, rather than their neighbors' fenced cattle. And the tourists might pay even more money to park a Winnebago in the midst of "free nature"—as Arne Naess dubs this fair mix of people and wildlife—instead of in just another roadside attraction.

But how to avoid the tragedy of the commons? Through cooperation. The Paradise Valley is well defined and self-contained. A ranchers' co-op could hire its own wildlife ecologists and, in consultation with the Fish and Wildlife, Forest, and Park Services, set their own sustainable harvest quotas.

After my talk at the wilderness symposium, Chase Hibbard was asked what he thought of my remarks about switching from cattle

ranching to market-hunting native ungulates. He was opposed to it. Categorically. Why? I asked him, if market analyses suggest that such a scheme would be more economically attractive than cattle ranching. You know, business is business. Are cattle a religion in Montana, or what? Yes, he answered, they are. (This symposium was full of surprises.) And he went on to lay down the usual line of bullshit (pun intended) about how cattle are a part of what makes the West the West (in the Hollywood-mediated American mind), and how his family has been running cattle here a long time. A long time! I wanted to say, but didn't—a blip on the trajectory of the true history and future of the West, which belongs to the bison and to those whose livelihood once did and may soon again center on this shaggy symbol of North America's high, semiarid country and on the other native grazers and browsers.

Thinking over this exchange of opinions, I came to the conclusion that cattle were not the real cult object of the western ranchers' religion. Private property is. The Paradise Valley is not home to, in addition to the Church Universal and Triumphant, neo-Baal cultists. No, John Locke is the theologian of cattlepersons. As I envision a Paradise Valley Ungulate Commons—a key part of the Greater Yellowstone Biosphere Reserve Buffer Zone—private "real" property would remain in private hands. Privately owned "animal units" are what would go, along with fences, one purpose of which is to mark real estate boundaries and segregate one rancher's privately owned herd from another's.

Would this be so un-American? Not if we think more expansively, in historical terms. That's more or less the way the Indians—bona fide Americans if anyone is—did it. Each group had a territory to which they claimed and enforced the property rights. But the animals were their own bosses. And if, to get a hearing, we must confine ourselves to the short-term scale of Euro-American history, pelagic fisherpersons, traditionally, own their boats and tackle, but the fish go where

they will, owned by no one. So the precedent and paradigm for an economically exploited native Ungulate Commons should perhaps be marine fisheries rather than terrestrial ranches. With this difference: A network of North American Ungulate Commons would be far less liable to overexploitation, because the stocks are composed of large, visible specimens that are fairly easy to count and they fall under national jurisdictions (those of the United States, Canada, and Mexico, now, for better or worse, coordinated by NAFTA).

The biosphere reserve conservation concept includes another, less often discussed zone, the transition zone. Here too, the key is appropriate technologies and sustainable economies. Starting at Livingston and going east, montane Montana gives way to high plains Montana. The Great Plains region is already moving in the direction of a Buffalo Commons. The fences are still up, but several big ranches—most famously, the one belonging to Ted Turner—are switching from cattle to buffalo. While buffalo are certainly less tractable and more difficult to contain, they need less care than cattle, and so are becoming an increasingly attractive alternative for imaginative and well-landed high plains entrepreneurs. And many Indian groups are expressing a keen interest in restoring buffalo herds to reservation land, with the added incentive of the bison's place in their histories, cultures, and religions.