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# The Trouble with Wilderness

## A Response

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### William Cronon

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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