Preserve the Wilderness!

Friends at home! I charge you to spare, preserve and cherish some portion of your primitive forests; for when these are cut away I apprehend they will not easily be replaced.

Horace Greeley, 1851

APPRECIATION of wilderness led easily to sadness at its disappearance from the American scene. What to do beyond regretting, however, was a problem, especially in view of the strength of rationales for conquering wild country. But as the Romantic and nationalistic vindications of wilderness developed, a few Americans conceived of the possibility of its deliberate preservation. Perhaps society could legally protect selected areas, exempting them from the transforming energies of civilization. Such a policy, of course, completely countered dominant American purposes. For the pioneer, wilderness preservation was absurd, and even those who recognized the advantages of reservoirs of wildness had to admit the force of civilization’s claims. This ambivalence, moreover, was no idle matter. Preservation entailed action. The dilemmas which had previously been chiefly philosophical now figured in the very practical matter of land allocation. In confronting them Americans began to deepen their understanding of wilderness. In fact, since the middle of the nineteenth century the preservation issue has been the major vehicle for national discussion of wilderness.

Concern over the loss of wilderness necessarily preceded the first calls for its protection. The protest originated in the same social class that led the way in appreciating wild country: Easterners of literary and artistic bents. John James Audubon is a case in point. His Birds of America (1827–38) marked him as a leader in calling attention to natural beauty. As he traveled through the Ohio Valley in the 1820s in search of specimens, Audubon had many occasions to observe “the destruction of the forest.” Even though he sensed that this meant the end of what he loved, he hesitated about condemning the westward march. “Whether these changes are for the better or worse,” he wrote, “I shall not pretend to say.” But as he heard “the din of hammers and machinery” and saw “the woods . . . fast disappearing under the axe,” Audubon put restraint aside. “The greedy mills,” he concluded, “told the sad tale, that in a century the noble forests . . . should exist no more.”

The writers responsible for the Romantic interpretation of the American wilderness joined Audubon in his lament. Cooper expressed similar sentiments in The Prairie, while with Thomas Cole the denunciation of an all-consuming civilization attained the proportions of a tirade. Indifference to wilderness, Cole declared in 1836, was symptomatic of the “meagre utilitarianism” of the age. The landscape already revealed the “ravages of the axe,” and no end appeared in sight. Drawing on a favorite image of wilderness advocates, Cole pleaded with his countrymen to remember “we are still in Eden; the wall that shuts us out of the garden is our own ignorance and folly.” Five years later he attempted to be the mouthpiece of the virgin continent in a poem entitled “Lament of the Forest.” Speaking through Cole, the forest grieved at the way man, “the destroyer,” invaded its New World sanctuary. “Our doom is near: behold from east to west the skies are darkened by ascending smoke; each hill and every valley is become an altar unto Mammon.” In only “a few short years” the wilderness would vanish. William Cullen Bryant was equally pessimistic. After touring the Great Lakes region in 1846 he sadly anticipated a future in which even its “wild and lonely woods” would be “filled with cottages and boarding-houses.” In view of the poet’s earlier concern for maintaining his country’s “wilder image,” this was cause for alarm.

And Charles Lanman, the Romantic traveler and essayist, minced few words in recounting the fate of places “despoiled by the hand of civilization of almost everything which gives charm to the wilderness.”

3. See also Cole to Luman Reed, March 26, 1836 in Noble, Cole, pp. 150–61.
4. Bryant, Letters of a Traveller; or Notes of Things seen in Europe and America (New York, 1859), 302.
Washington Irving also deplored the elimination of wildness from the American landscape. He assisted in 1837 in preparing for publication Captain Benjamin L. E. Bonneville's journal of western exploration because of a desire to preserve something of "the romance of savage life." Weaving his own impressions into Bonneville's account, Irving observed that geography had provided wild country with one remaining hope. The Rocky Mountains constituted a "belt" of uninhabited land "where there is nothing to tempt the cupidity of the white man." While civilization sprang up around it, this region would remain "irreclaimable wilderness" and a refuge for Indian, trapper, and explorer. In Irving's estimation the advantages of having such a primeval resource far outweighed the loss to civilization in lumber and other raw materials.6

For the Bostonian Francis Parkman, Jr. sadness at the disappearance of wilderness stemmed from personal tastes combined with a keen sense of the historical process. As long as he could remember, Parkman was, by his own admission, "enamored of the woods." Wildness tantalized his imagination, possibly because it contrasted so sharply with his ultra-sophisticated Brahmin milieu. As a Harvard student he indulged his passion with a series of summer camping trips into northern New England and Canada. In a journal account of an 1841 excursion in the White Mountains, Parkman explained that "my chief object in coming so far was merely to have a taste of the half-savage kind of life . . . and to see the wilderness where it was as yet uninvaded by the hand of man." During his college years Parkman also decided on a career, history, and a subject for research, the conflict between France and Great Britain for the North American continent. He hoped to write a book that would be distinctively American because of its central concern with wilderness. "My theme fascinated me," Parkman remarked, "and I was haunted with wilderness images day and night." The French

subsequent editions of his book provided a chance to express it. In the 1873 edition of The Oregon Trail he added a lengthy paragraph to the preface concerning the vanishing wilderness. Although he had omitted it from the initial account, he now recalled a conversation with his traveling companion while riding near Pike’s Peak. The wilderness, they agreed, was doomed. Cattle would soon replace the buffalo and farms transform the range of the wolf, bear, and Indian. While pioneers might celebrate such events, the young gentlemen from Boston felt nothing but regret at the prospect. Returning to 1873 Parkman added that his earlier premonitions had not suggested the extent of the changes. Not only farms but “cities... hotels and gambling-houses” had invaded the Rockies as men sought gold in “those untrodden mountains.” Moreover, “polygamous hordes of Mormon” had arrived. Capping it all was the “disenchanting screech of the locomotive” which broke “the spell of weird mysterious mountains.” Parkman sadly concluded that “the mountain trapper is no more, and the grim romance of his wild, hard life is a memory of the past.”

In 1892 just before his death, Parkman again revised the preface of Oregon Trail. There was no longer any doubt: “the Wild West is tamed, and its savage charms have withered.” This frame of mind produced the first expressions of the idea of preserving some of the remaining American wilderness.

George Catlin, an early student and painter of the American Indian, was the first to move beyond regret to the preservation concept. In 1829 he began a series of summer excursions in the West; during the winters he completed his sketches and journal in an Eastern studio. The spring of 1832 found Catlin impatient to leave once more for the frontier where his brush and pen could capture “the grace and beauty of Nature” before the advance of civilization obliterated it. Setting out from St. Louis on board the Yellowstone for the headwaters of the Missouri River, Catlin arrived at Fort Pierre, South Dakota, in May. A large number of Sioux were camped near the Fort, and when Catlin observed them slaughtering buffalo totrade for whisky, it confirmed his suspicion that the extinction of both Indian and buffalo was imminent. Saddened at this thought he climbed a bluff, spread a pocket map of the United States before him, and considered the effects of an expanding civilization. “Many are the rudenesses and wilds in Nature’s works,” he reflected, “which are destined to fall before the deadly axe and desolating hands of cultivating man.” Yet Catlin was convinced that the primitive was “worthy of our preservation and protection.” Keeping it mattered because “the further we become separated from that pristine wildness and beauty, the more pleasure does the mind of enlightened man feel in recurring to those scenes.”

Others had said as much, but Catlin’s 1832 reflections went beyond the idea that Indians, buffaloes, and the wilderness in which they existed might not have to yield completely to civilization if the government would protect them in “a magnificent park.” Fascinated with this conception, Catlin continued: “what a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation’s Park, containing man and beast, in all the wild[ness] and freshness of their nature’s beauty!”

Similar recognition of the value of the American wilderness led to other calls for its preservation. In the late 1840s Thomas Cole, whose European travels dramatized the fate of unprotected wilderness in a populous civilization, proposed to write a book concerning, in part, “the wilderness passing away, and the necessity of saving and perpetuating its features.” Contact with the Old World in 1851 also prompted Horace Greeley to charge Americans “to spare, preserve and cherish some portion of your primitive forests.”

12. Parkman, The Oregon Trail: Sketches of Prairie and Rocky-Mountain Life (Boston, 1873), pp. vii-viii. Marx, Machine in the Garden, alerted me to the significance of the railroad-disrupting-nature theme in American letters. But in Parkman’s case it was wilderness, not a pastoral paradise, that was invaded. More exactly, in his mind wilderness had reversed its traditional role and become a sort of paradise.


14. George Catlin, North American Indians: Being Letters and Notes on their Manners, Customs, and Conditions, written during Eight Years’ Travel amongst the Indian...1830s.


16. Ibid., 1, 294-95.
these disappeared, he warned, they could not be replaced easily. Seeing Europe carried Greeley's thoughts back to the "glorious... still unscathed forests" of his country which he had "never before prized so highly." 17

Henry David Thoreau, with his refined philosophy of the importance of wilderness, made the classic early call for wilderness preservation. Like the others, the disappearance of wild country made him uneasy. Of course primitive places might still be found in Maine and the West, but every year brought more lumbermen and settlers into the forests. Maine was tending toward Massachusetts and Massachusetts toward England. "This winter," Thoreau commented in his journal for 1852, "they are cutting down our woods more seriously than ever... It is a thorough process, this war with the wilderness." Faced with the prospect of a totally civilized America, Thoreau concluded that the nation must formally preserve "a certain sample of wild nature, a certain primitiveness." His thoughts came to a head in 1858, in an Atlantic Monthly article describing his second trip to Maine five years previously. Near the end of the essay Thoreau defended wilderness as a reservoir of intellectual nourishment for civilized men. Next he asked: "why should not we... have our national preserves... in which the bear and panther, and some even of the hunter race, may still exist, and not be 'civilized off the face of the earth'-our forests... not for idle sport or food, but for inspiration and our own true recreation?" 18

Along with Catlin, Thoreau desired to prevent the extinction of Indians and wild animals, but he went beyond this to the position that protecting wilderness was ultimately important for the preservation of civilization.

In 1859 Thoreau again advocated reserving wild areas, this time with reference to the Massachusetts townships in which he lived. Each of them, he contended, "should have a park, or rather a primitive forest, of five hundred or a thousand acres." The public should own such places and make them sacrosanct. Thoreau’s defense for this proposal climaxed several decades of American nationalism: "let us keep the New World new, preserve all the advantages of liv-

17. Noble, Cole, p. 299. Noble does not make clear if these were Cole’s actual words or a paraphrase. The book in question was never written. See also Greeley, Glances at Europe (New York, 1851), p. 99.


20. Hammond, Wild Northern Scenes; or Sporting Adventures with the Rifle and Rod (New York, 1857), pp. x, 23, 90-91. Occasionally Hammond put his discussion of wilderness in the form of a dialogue between members of his camping party, but for purposes of simplification I have attributed all remarks to him.
thing were to be measured by the dollar and cent standard." Yet on other occasions Hammond embraced the very values he apparently rejected. In campfire discussions he and his friends applauded the retreat of the forest in pioneer terms: "the march of civilization has crossed a continent . . . making the old wilderness blossom as a rose." The result of this "progressive influence" was not only miracles like locomotives, telegraphs, and photography but "moral prestige" as well.21

Given his simultaneous attraction toward wilderness and civilization, Hammond understandably desired conditions under which both could flourish. Preservation of limited wild areas resolved his dilemma. Describing his plan, Hammond declared he would "mark out a circle of a hundred miles in diameter, and throw around it the protecting aegis of the constitution." This land would be "a forest forever" in which "the old woods should stand . . . always as God made them." Lumbering or setting would be prohibited.22 Wilderness was to be maintained, but immediately Hammond made clear that he had no intention for civilization to suffer. The "circles" of primitive forest, while insuring the continued existence of some wild country, at the same time served to keep wilderness out of the path of progress. Civilization could expand unimpeded "in regions better fitted for it . . . Let it go where labor will garner a richer harvest, and industry reap a better reward for its toil. It will be of stunted growth at best here."23 In this roundabout way Hammond justified wilderness preservation without gainsaying the values of civilization.

While Hammond and Thoreau talked of compromising between the conflicting interests of wilderness and civilization, George Perkins Marsh contended that in the case of forests wildness served utility. He expounded his influential thesis in Man and Nature: or, Physical Geography as Modified by Human Action (1864). In a varied career24 Marsh observed how man had abused his power to alter nature. The disruptive effects of civilization on natural harmonies appeared everywhere. Endeavoring to present an alternative to the pioneer interpretation of Genesis 1:28, Marsh declared: "man has too long forgotten that the earth was given to him for usufruct alone, not for consumption, still less for profligate waste." This was not an academic or even an ethical question to Marsh, but involved the earth's ability to support mankind.

As his principal illustration Marsh chose the effects of indiscriminate lumbering. Clean cutting of the forests on the watersheds of rivers resulted in drought, flood, erosion, and unfavorable climatic changes. Such disasters, Marsh believed, were responsible for the decline of Mediterranean empires in power and influence. The New World must school itself in history. "Let us be wise in time," Marsh pleaded, "and profit by the errors of our older brethren." In Marsh's opinion, the sponge-like qualities of a primeval forest made it the best possible regulator of stream flow. Wilderness preservation, consequently, had "economical" as well as "poetical" justifications. With the Adirondacks in mind, Marsh applauded the idea of keeping a large portion of "American soil . . . as far as possible, in its primitive condition." Such a preserve could serve as "a garden for the recreation of the lover of nature" and an "asylum" for wildlife along with its utilitarian functions.25

Primarily because it made protecting wilderness compatible with progress and economic welfare, Marsh's arguments became a staple for preservationists.26 Even Romantics recognized their force. The year after Man and Nature appeared, William Cullen Bryant wrote: "thus it is that forests protect a country against drought, and keep its streams constantly flowing and its wells constantly full."27

Along with sentiment for saving wilderness, the idea of governmental responsibility was necessary to set the stage for actual preservation. As early as 1832 a natural object, the Arkansas Hot Springs, was set aside as a national reservation.28 Far more important from the standpoint of the subsequent history of wilderness,

22. Ibid., p. 83. Hammond came close to this idea in an earlier statement in his Hunting Adventures in the Northern Wilds (New York, 1856), p. v.
however, was the 1864 federal grant of Yosemite Valley to the State of California as a park "for public use, resort and recreation."\textsuperscript{29} The reserved area was only about ten square miles, and a flourishing tourist-catering business soon altered its wild character, but the legal preservation of part of the public domain for scenic and recreational values created a significant precedent in American history.

Frederick Law Olmsted, in the process of becoming the leading American landscape architect of his time, recognized the importance of the Yosemite reservation. He went to California in 1863, became familiar with the Valley, and received an appointment as one of the first commissioners entrusted with its care.\textsuperscript{30} In 1865 Olmsted completed an advisory report on the park for the California Legislature. It opened with a commendation of the preservation idea which precluded "natural scenes of an impressive character" from becoming "private property." Olmsted next launched a philosophical defense of scenic beauty: it had a favorable influence on "the health and vigor of men" and especially on their "intellect." Of course, Olmsted agreed with previous exponents of wilderness that "the power of scenery to affect men is, in a large way, proportionate to the degree of their civilization and the degree in which their taste has been cultivated." Still, almost everyone derived some benefit from the contemplation of places like Yosemite. Capping his argument, Olmsted declared: "the enjoyment of scenery employs the mind without fatigue and yet exercises it; tranquiliizes it and yet enlivens it; and thus, through the influence of the mind over the body, gives the effect of refreshing rest and reinvigoration to the whole system." If areas were not provided where people could find the glories of nature, he added, serious mental disorders might well result. There was a need to slough off the tensions and cares of civilization. California and the Yosemite Commissioners, Olmsted concluded, had a "duty of preservation."\textsuperscript{31}

At least one early visitor to Yosemite recognized that it might be a model for a nationwide system of reservations. Samuel Bowles, editor of the Springfield, Massachusetts, \textit{Republican}, toured the Valley in August 1865 and hoped the park would stimulate concern for other scenic places. Niagara Falls occurred to him as an obvious candidate. But Bowles went on to state the need of preserving from "destruction by settlement" a "fifty miles square of the Adirondacks in New York, and a similar area of Maine lake and forest."\textsuperscript{32} With the idea of saving wild country gaining momentum and the precedent of Yosemite State Park established, actual wilderness preservation, such as Bowles envisaged, was not far off.

\textsuperscript{29} U.S., \textit{Statutes at Large}, 15, p. 325. The present-day Yosemite National Park composed of some two million acres of wilderness in the high Sierra was not created until 1890 (see Chapter 8). In 1906 California receded Yosemite Valley to the federal government, and it became part of the national park.


\textsuperscript{31} Olmsted Papers, Box 32. Olmsted's report has been published as "The Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Big Tree Grove," \textit{Landscape Architecture}, 43 (1953), 12-25.

\textsuperscript{32} Bowles, \textit{Our New West} (Hartford, Conn., 1869), p. 385.
Wilderness Preserved

[The Yellowstone region] is hereby reserved and withdrawn from settlement, occupancy, or sale . . . and set apart as a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people. . . . The Secretary of the Interior shall provide for the preservation . . . of all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders within said park . . . in their natural condition.

United States Statutes at Large, 1872

The world's first instance of large-scale wilderness preservation in the public interest occurred on March 1, 1872, when President Ulysses S. Grant signed an act designating over two million acres of northwestern Wyoming as Yellowstone National Park. Thirteen years later the State of New York established a 715,000-acre “Forest Preserve” in the Adirondacks with the stipulation that it “shall be kept forever as wild forest lands.” With these milestones in the early history of American wilderness preservation, the ideas of Catlin, Thoreau, Hammond and Marsh bore fruit. Yet in neither case did the rationale for action take account of the aesthetic, spiritual, or cultural values of wilderness which had previously stimulated appreciation. Yellowstone’s initial advocates were not concerned with wilderness; they acted to prevent private acquisition and exploitation of geysers, hot springs, waterfalls, and similar curiosities. In New York the decisive argument concerned the necessity of forested land for an adequate water supply. In both places wilderness was preserved unintentionally. Only later did a few persons begin to realize that one of the most significant results of the establishment of the first national and state park had been the preservation of wilderness.

through the wilderness marveling at what they termed "curiosities" and "wonders"—the geysers, hot springs, and canyons. On September 19, as they were leaving for home, the explorers participated in a campfire discussion of Yellowstone’s future. Most said they intended to file claims on the land around the geysers and waterfalls in anticipation of the demands which tourists would make to see them. But Hedges dissented. According to Langford, he proposed that instead of being divided among private speculators, Yellowstone "ought to be set apart as a great National Park." Langford added that he lay awake most of the night thinking about the idea. He felt a reservation was possible if Congress could be persuaded of the uniqueness of Yellowstone’s natural attractions. The "park" Hedges and Langford envisaged consisted of a few acres around each of the geysers and along the rims of the canyons. In this manner the right of the public to see these sights would be safeguarded and the scenery itself saved from defacement. Wilderness preservation did not figure in the 1870 plans.

During the winter following his trip, Nathaniel P. Langford lectured several times in the East in an effort to arouse enthusiasm for the park proposal. In addition, he published two articles on Yellowstone in Scribner’s Monthly, complete with engraved illustrations of its canyons and geysers. The public was interested, but some of the things Langford reported as fact seemed beyond credence. One of those who heard Langford lecture and was in a position to test their validity was Ferdinand Vandiveer Hayden, director of the Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories. Hayden was leading annual scientific expeditions in the West, and determined to include Yellowstone on his 1871 trip. He persuaded Thomas Moran, the landscape artist, and William Henry Jackson, a pioneer photographer of outdoor scenes, to accompany him and gather a pictorial record.

Hayden’s expedition generated considerable interest in the East. In an editorial in the issue of September 18, 1871, the New York Times seemed vaguely aware of the wilderness qualities of the Yellowstone country. "There is something romantic in the thought," it declared, "that, in spite of the restless activity of our people, and the almost fabulous rapidity of their increase, vast tracts of national domain yet remain unexplored." But more typical of the general reaction was the Times’ subsequent description of the "New Wonder Land" as a place whose attractions were limited to unusual natural phenomena such as geysers.

The firm of Jay Cooke and Company, financiers of the Northern Pacific Railroad through Montana, also evinced an interest in a Yellowstone park. In October a Cooke representative wrote to Hayden with the proposition that he lead a campaign for an act that would reserve “the Great Geyser Basin as a public park forever—just as it has reserved that far inferior wonder the Yosemite Valley and the big trees.” The railroad interests hoped that Yellowstone would become a popular national vacation mecca like Niagara Falls or Saratoga Springs with resulting profit to the only transportation line serving it. A wilderness was the last thing they wanted.


The suggestion that he father a national park movement appealed to the publicity-hungry Hayden. Along with Nathaniel P. Langford (whose initials and enthusiasm inevitably earned him the sobriquet “National Park”) and Montana’s Congressional delegate William H. Clagett, he began to build pressure for a reservation. Wilderness preservation did not figure in the appeal the park proponents made before Congress. They argued that speculators and squatters who were allegedly ready to move into the Yellowstone region endangered what Hayden called the “beautiful decorations.” When the question of park boundaries arose, legislators called on Hayden as the man most familiar with the region. His reason for including over three thousand square miles had no relation to wilderness preservation, but rather stemmed from the feeling that there might be other “decorations,” as yet undiscovered, in the vicinity of the known ones.16

On December 18, 1871, Congress began consideration of a park bill. The brief debate that followed focused on the need for protecting “remarkable curiosities” and “rare wonders” from private claims.17 Supporters of the bill assured their colleagues that the Yellowstone country was too high and cold to be cultivated; consequently its reservation would do “no harm to the material interests of the people.”18 The strategy was not to justify the park positively as wilderness, but to demonstrate its uselessness to civilization. Before voting, the legislators received copies of Langford’s articles in Scribner’s and William H. Jackson’s photographs.19 Since neither these documents, nor the Congressional debate, nor the text of the bill itself made mention of wilderness, it is clear that no intentional preservation of wild country occurred on March 1, 1872, when President Grant signed an act creating “a public park or pleasuring ground.” Yet the stipulation that “all timber, mineral deposits, natural curiosities, or wonders” within the park be retained “in their natural condition” left the way open for later observers to construe its purposes as preserving wild country.20

The initial public reaction to the creation of Yellowstone National Park also ignored wilderness. It was praised as a “museum” and “marvellous valley,” an area where people could see the “freaks and phenomena of Nature” along with “wonderful natural curiosities.” Far from recognizing the park as a wilderness preserve, Scribner’s anticipated the time when “Yankee enterprise will dot the new Park with hostelries and furrow it with lines of travel.”21 And a Montana newspaper went so far as to regret the park because it tended to keep the Yellowstone country wild and undeveloped.22 A few joined Hayden in regarding the act as “a tribute from our legislators to science,” and one writer in the American Naturalist felt its value lay in the provision of a habitat where bison might be saved from extinction. Others pointed out that the forests within the park were situated on the watershed of both the Missouri and the Snake Rivers and served to regulate their flow.23

Gradually later Congresses realized that Yellowstone National Park was not just a collection of natural curiosities but, in fact, a wilderness preserve. Yet indifference and hostility persisted. In 1883, for example, Senator John J. Ingalls of Kansas attacked Yellowstone as an expensive irrelevancy. Speaking in opposition to an appropriation for its upkeep, he declared there was no need for the government to enter into the “show business.” “The best thing the Government could do with the Yellowstone National Park,” Ingalls contended, “is to survey it and sell it as other public lands are sold.” George G. Vest of Missouri arose to reply. He referred to the park as a “mountain wilderness” and defended it in the Romantic manner as esthetically important in countering America’s ma

17. As quoted from the report on the Yellowstone bill by the House Committee on the Public Lands in Hayden, Preliminary Report, p. 163.
22. Helena, Mont., Rocky Mountain Gazette, March 6, 1872.
terialistic tendency. After touching this raw nerve of the national conscience, Vest argued that a nation whose population was expected to exceed 150,000,000 needed Yellowstone “as a great breathing-place for the national lungs.”

In the mid-1880s, debate in Congress concerning Yellowstone centered on the attempt of the Cinnabar and Clark’s Fork Railroad Company to assist several mining ventures by securing a right-of-way across park land. Representative Lewis E. Payson of Illinois, who approved the railroad’s plans, pointed out on December 11, 1886, that no harm could come to the geysers and hot springs. In his opinion the question was whether or not a mine “whose output will be measured by millions upon millions of dollars, shall be permitted to have access to the markets of the world.” A spokesman for the railroad appeared before the House to express his astonishment that anyone would question hallowed American values. “Is it true,” he demanded, “that the rights and privileges of citizenship, the vast accumulation of property, and the demands of commerce are to yield to... a few sportsmen bent only on the protection of a few buffalo.”

Previously wilderness had always succumbed to arguments such as these.

Samuel S. Cox of New York replied to the demand for a right-of-way. “This is a measure,” he declared, “which is inspired by corporate greed and natural selfishness against national pride and beauty.” In Cox’s opinion utilitarian criteria were irrelevant in evaluating Yellowstone. In the tradition of the Transcendentalists and Frederick Law Olmsted, he saw support of the park as a matter of keeping inviolate “all that gives elevation and grace to human nature, by the observation of the works of physical nature.” Posterity had a stake in the park’s “marvelous scenery,” he concluded. The House burst into applause.

Representative Payson leaped back to his feet to assure the House that, except for Mammoth Hot Springs, which was four miles away, there was not “another object of natural curiosity within 40 miles” of the proposed railroad. Along with most of the early commentators, Payson understood the park’s function as the protection of curiosities. “I can not understand the sentiment,” he admitted, “which favors the retention of a few buffaloes to the development of mining interests amounting to millions of dollars.”

But to Representative William McAdoo of New Jersey, Yellowstone performed a larger function. Answering Payson, he pointed out that the park also preserved wilderness which the railroad would destroy even if it did not harm the hot springs. He added that the park had been created for people who might care to seek “in the great West the inspiring sights and mysteries of nature that elevate mankind and bring it closer communion with omniscience” and that it “should be preserved on this, if for no other ground.”

McAdoo continued with a vindication of the principle of wilderness preservation: “the glory of this territory is its sublime solitude. Civilization is so universal that man can only see nature in her majesty and primal glory, as it were, in these as yet virgin regions.” In conclusion he put the issue in terms that previous advocates of wilderness had long used, pleading with his colleagues to “prefer the beautiful and sublime... to heartless mammon and the greed of capital.”

A vote followed in which the railroad’s application for a right-of-way was turned down 107 to 65. Never before had wilderness values withstood such a direct confrontation with civilization.

Recognition of the wilderness attributes of Yellowstone National Park also appeared in the 1886 report of Secretary of the Interior Lucius Q. C. Lamar. In a manner reminiscent of George Catlin and Francis Parkman, he interpreted the intention of Congress in establishing the park as “the preservation of wilderness of forests, geysers, mountains... and the game common to that region in as nearly the condition of nature as possible, with a view to holding for the benefit of those who shall come after us something of the original ‘wild West’ that shall stand while the rest of the world moves, affording the student of nature and the pleasure tourist a restful contrast to... busy and progressive scenes.” In fact, Lamar was wrong in his interpretation of Congress’ purposes. With the exception of the geysers and game this had not been the reason for action in 1872, but from Lamar’s vantage point almost fifteen years later, it seemed increasingly credible that the Park was a wilderness
preserve and should be defended as such. And in 1892, twenty years after the Yellowstone Act, Senator William B. Bate of Tennessee explained its purpose as protecting a region for Americans who desired to see "primeval nature, simple and pure." 27 Certainly not all Americans at the time agreed, or even cared about Yellowstone, but Bate's opinion was a harbinger.

Westward expansion left a large island of heavily forested, mountainous country in northern New York generally uninhabited. By the 1880s more had been written about the Adirondack country than any other wilderness area in the United States. Charles Fenno Hoffman, Joel T. Headley, and Samuel H. Hammond (see Chapters 3, 4 and 6) were among the first to describe the pleasures of vacations in the area. As the population of the East increased and more people lived in urban situations, the Adirondacks received still more attention. The upland was said to be an "enchanted island" where men in quest of health and refreshment could find relief from "the busy world, away from its noise and tumult, its cares and perplexities." 28 No single statement did more to publicize the region than William H. H. Murray's Adventures in the Wilderness: or, Camp-Life in the Adirondacks of 1869. A Yale graduate and pastor of Boston's fashionable Park Street Congregational Church, "Adirondack" Murray's book not only described the hunting and fishing of the area in a manner that sent hundreds of eager sportsmen into it the following summer, but attempted to give his personal reasons for seeking wilderness. For clergymen like himself, Murray declared, "the wilderness provides that perfect relaxation which all jaded minds require." After seeing the works of God in wild nature, the preacher would return "swarth and tough as an Indian, elasticity in his step, fire in his eye, depth and clearness in his reinvigorated voice, [and] wouldn't there be some preaching!" 29


Wilderness and the American Mind

The popularity of the Adirondacks focused attention on the disappearance of their wilderness qualities. 30 One anonymous writer, describing the region's charm, sadly concluded that "in a few years, the railroad with its iron web will bind the free forest, the lakes will lose their solitude, the deer and moose will flee to a safer resort... and men with axe and spade will work out a revolution." 31 The idea of preservation followed. Samuel H. Hammond's plea for a one-hundred-mile "circle" of wilderness (Chapter 6) came in 1857; two years later the Northwoods Walton Club called for laws protecting "our Northern Wilderness." The result would be a "vast and noble preserve" where fish and game could flourish and where "no screeching locomotive [would] ever startle... Fauns and Water Sprites." 32 In 1864 the New York Times seconded the idea with an editorial urging the state to acquire this land before it was "despoiled." Lumber mills and iron foundries could operate in places not reserved, the Times believed, thus ensuring the balance "which should always exist between utility and enjoyment." 33

As the editorial in the Times suggested, even those who favored wilderness preservation avoided placing themselves in opposition to progress and industry; the argument that eventually secured protection for the Adirondacks had the same characteristic of supporting civilization. The technique appeared in the first report of the New York State Park Commission, created in 1872 to investigate the possibilities of establishing a public park in the Adirondacks. 34 "We do not favor the creation of an expensive and exclu-

sive park for mere purposes of recreation,” the commissioners began, “but, condemning such suggestions, recommend the simple preservation of the timber as a measure of political economy.” Specifically, the wilderness ensured a regulated water supply for New York’s rivers and canals. “Without a steady, constant supply of water from these streams of the wilderness,” the report continued, “our canals would be dry, and a great portion of the grain and other produce of the western part of the State would be unable to find cheap transportation to the markets of the Hudson river valley.” In this manner wilderness preservation and commercial prosperity were tied together.

In 1873 a new periodical for sportsmen, Forest and Stream, declared that the watershed argument held the key to success in the matter of an Adirondack wilderness preserve. The most effective way to propose the idea to the state legislature, it added, “is to have them look at the preservation of the Adirondacks as a question of self-interest.” However much they might desire the wilderness for non-utilitarian purposes, sportsmen and Romantics realized that arguments on those grounds alone would not suffice. Consequently they were willing to give full support to the watershed rationale.

By the 1880s, evidence of declining water levels in the Erie Canal and Hudson River generated widespread concern. An intensive campaign began in the fall of 1883 with the New York Tribune contending that wilderness in the north must be preserved “seeing that it contains the fountainheads of the noble streams that feed our rivers and canals of the State.” This was especially true of the Adirondack rivers. As quoted in Brown, Morris Jesup: A Character Sketch (New York, 1910), pp. 60–64, 165. The New York Chamber of Commerce, led by Morris K. Jesup, joined the fight for preservation and brought the politically powerful business interests of New York City into play. Jesup petitioned the legislature that it was necessary to save the forests because “their destruction will seriously injure the internal commerce of the State.” Moreover, the merchants believed that if drought eliminated the Erie-Hudson route as a means of shipping goods, railroads would have a monopoly and be able to raise rates at will. It did not require a love of wilderness to come to the defense of the Adirondacks on these grounds. With business interests applying the necessary pressure, on May 15, 1885, Governor David B. Hill approved a bill establishing a “Forest Preserve” of 715,000 acres that was to remain permanently “as wild forest lands.” The aim of the law was the preservation of wilderness, but for commercial ends.

Although indisputably effective, the watershed argument took no account of other values of wild country that many were coming to feel had at least equal importance. For one commentator who felt the Adirondacks should be made a national park instead of a state reserve, the wilderness was “of higher importance to man than that of a mere industrial and commercial utility.” And a person who lived near the reserve declared of one location in his neighborhood: “it is the most wild and beautiful spot in the whole wilde-
ness and its beauty should be enough to save it. But," he added, 
"that sentiment has little chance with our lawmakers." On 
the contrary, New York's legislators were taking increasing notice 
of the nonutilitarian values of wilderness. In 1891 the New York 
Forest Commission suggested that the state consider redesignating 
the forest preserve as a park. Among its reasons, to be sure, was the 
standard one about forested watersheds, but the Commission also 
observed that a park would provide "a place where rest, recupera-
tion and vigor may be gained by our highly nervous and over-
worked people." A year later the legislature established a state 
park embracing over three million acres. The wording of the act 
indicated a change in motivation: Adirondack State Park was to be 
"ground open for the free use of all the people for their health and 
pleasure, and as forest land necessary to the preservation of the 
headwaters of the chief rivers of the state, and as a future supply of 
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"Wilderness and the American Mind"

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Many New Yorkers were dissatisfied with the protection the 
Adirondacks received under the park act and desired to have the 
principle of wilderness preservation written into the state constitu-
tion. The constitutional convention of 1894 presented an opportu-

ances of business and every-day life in the man-made towns, [the 
Adirondacks] offer to man a place of retirement. There... he may 
find some consolation in communing with that great Father of 
all... For man and for woman thoroughly tired out, desiring 
peace and quiet, these woods are inestimable in value." Others came to McClure's support, and Article 7, Section 7 
received the unanimous consent of the 1894 convention. When 
New York's voters approved it in November, wilderness values 
were given preeminence in an area the size of Connecticut. Un-
questionably the watershed argument had been the preservation-
ists' mainstay, but by the 1890s those justifying the Adirondack 
wilderness, like Yellowstone's supporters, began to turn to non-
utilitarian arguments. The rationale for wilderness preservation 
was gradually catching up with the ideology of appreciation.

45. Revised Record of the Constitutional Convention of the State of New York, ed. 