

IS NATURE REAL?

GARY SNYDER (1996)

I'm getting grumpy about the slippery arguments being put forth by high-paid intellectuals trying to knock nature and knock the people who value nature and still come out smelling smart and progressive.

The idea of nature as a "social construction"—a shared cultural projection seen and shaped in the light of social values and priorities—if carried out to the full bright light of philosophy, would look like a subset of the world view best developed in Mahayana Buddhism or Advaita Vedanta, which declares (as just one part of its strategy) the universe to be *maya*, or illusion. In doing so the Asian philosophers are not saying that the universe is ontologically without some kind of reality. They are arguing that, across the board, our seeing of the world is biological (based on the particular qualities of our species' body-mind), psychological (reflecting subjective projections), and cultural construction. And they go on to suggest how to examine one's own seeing, so as to see the one who sees and thus make seeing more true.

The current use of the "social construction" terminology, however, cannot go deeper, because it is based on the logic of European science and the "enlightenment." This thought-pod, in pursuing some new kind of meta-narrative, has failed to cop to its own story—which is the same old occidental view of nature as a realm of resources that has been handed over to humanity for its own use. As a spiritually (politically) fallen realm, this socially constructed nature finally has no reality other than the quantification provided by economists and resource managers. This is indeed the ultimate commodification of nature, done by supposedly advanced theorists, who prove to be simply

the high end of the “wise use” movement. Deconstruction, done with a compassionate heart and the intention of gaining wisdom, becomes the Mahayana Buddhist logical and philosophical exercise that plumbs to the bottom of deconstructing and comes back with compassion for all beings. Deconstruction without compassion is self-aggrandizement.

So we understand the point about wilderness being in one sense a cultural construct, for what isn't? What's more to the point, and what I fail to find in the writings of the anti-nature crowd, is the awareness that wilderness is the locus of big rich ecosystems, and is thus (among other things) a living place for beings who can survive in no other sort of habitat. Recreation, spirituality, aesthetics—good for people—also make wilderness valuable, but these are secondary to the importance of biodiversity. The protection of natural variety is essential to planetary health for all.

Some of these critical scholars set up, then attack, the notion of “pristine wilderness” and this again is beating a dead horse. It is well known that humans and proto-humans have lived virtually everywhere for hundreds of millenia. “Pristine” is only a relative term, but humanly used as the landscape may have been, up until ninety years ago the planet still had huge territories of wild terrain that are now woefully shrunken. Much of the wild land was also the territory of indigenous cultures that fit well into what were inhabited wildernesses.

The attacks on nature and wilderness from the ivory towers come at just the right time to bolster global developers, the resurgent timber companies (here in California the Charles Hurwitz Suits at Pacific Lumber) and those who would trash the Endangered Species Act. It looks like an unholy alliance of Capitalist Materialist and Marxist Idealists in an attack on the rural world that Marx reputedly found idiotic and boring.

Heraclitus, the Stoics, the Buddhists, scientists, and your average alert older person all know that everything in this world is ephemeral and unpredictable. Even the earlier ecologists who worked with

Clementsian succession theory knew that! Yet now a generation of resource biologists, inspired by the thin milk of Daniel Botkin's theorizing, are promoting what they think is a new paradigm that relegates the concept of climax to the dustheap of ideas. Surely none of the earlier scientific ecologists ever doubted that disturbances come and go. It looks like this particular bit of bullying also comes just in time to support the corporate clear-cutters and land-developers. (Despite blow-downs, bugs, fires, drought, and landslides, vast plant communities lasted in essence for multimillions of years prior to human times.)

It's a real pity that many in the humanities and social sciences are finding it so difficult to handle the rise of “nature” as an intellectually serious territory. For all the talk of “the other” in everybody's theory these days, when confronted with a genuine Other, the non-human realm, the response of the come-lately anti-nature intellectuals is to circle the wagons and declare that nature is really part of culture. Which maybe is just a strategy to keep the budget within their specialties.

A lot of this rhetoric, if translated into human politics, would be like saying “African-American people are the social construction of whites.” And then they might as well declare that South Central Los Angeles is a problematic realm that has been exaggerated by some white liberals, a realm whose apparent moral issues are also illusory, and that the real exercise in regard to African Americans is a better understanding of how white writers and readers made them up. But liberal critical theorists don't talk this way when it comes to fellow human beings because they know what kind of heat they'd get. In the case of nature, because they are still under the illusion that it isn't seriously *there*, they indulge themselves in this moral and political shallowness.

Conservationists and environmentalists have brought some of this on themselves. We still have not communicated the importance of biodiversity. Many if not most citizens are genuinely confused over why such importance appears to be placed on hitherto unheard-of

owls or fish. Scientists have to be heard from, but the writers and philosophers among us (myself included) should speak our deep feelings for the value of the nonhuman with greater clarity. We need to stay fresh, write clean prose, reject obscurity, and not intentionally exaggerate. And we need to comprehend the pain and distress of working people everywhere.

A *Wilderness* is always a specific place, because it is there for the local critters that live in it. In some cases a few humans will be living in it too. Such places are scarce and must be rigorously defended. *Wild* is the process that surrounds us all, self-organizing nature: creating plant-zones, humans and their societies, all ultimately resilient beyond our wildest imagination. Human societies create a variety of dreams, notions, and images about the nature of nature. But it is not impossible to get a pretty accurate picture of nature with a little first-hand application—no big deal, I'd take these doubting professors out for a walk, show them a bit of the passing ecosystem show, and maybe get them to help clean up a creek.