

THE WILDERNESS OF HISTORY

DONALD WORSTER (1997)

I live in northern Kansas, a part of America without any wilderness—no large tracts of land existing within hundreds of miles that are free of producing a commodity. This country used to be wild prairie running north all the way to the Saskatchewan; now, we have less than 1 percent of the original tallgrass prairie left, and much of the shortgrass is gone too.

Two years ago, it is true, Kansas finally got a prairie protected area. The struggle was long and tough against the Farm Bureau, the cattlemen's association, and former senator Robert Dole (who balked at spending \$10 million for an addition to the National Park System but not at \$1 billion for National Guard aircraft to beat back our enemies). Even now, with the Tallgrass Prairie National Preserve a legislative reality, a Texas businessman has his cattle out there, on a lease, and the antipark forces are insisting that the cattle stay there; they demand it be a monument to the beef industry rather than returning it to bison and pronghorn. Anyway, they say, that land was never wilderness.

Such assertions are getting support, unintended though it may be, from some of my colleagues in environmental history, many of whom I fear have not spent enough time among the good folks who claim to “work for a living”—members of the Farm Bureau, for example—and do not sufficiently appreciate how hard it is to establish an ethic of environmental restraint and responsibility among fierce private property and marketplace advocates. Otherwise, my colleagues would be a little more careful about the sensational headlines they encourage, like “Wilderness Is a Bankrupt Idea.”

That is not the headline that William Cronon really wanted to see when he wrote his controversial essay “The Trouble with Wilderness, or Getting Back to the Wrong Nature,” published in the book *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature* (1995). What he meant to say, I think, was that sometimes wilderness defenders have hurt their cause by sophomoric rhetoric that alienates thoughtful people and lacks any social compassion. He is right on that score. The wilderness movement needs more self-scrutiny, needs a larger commitment to social justice—and, above all, needs the patience to read its critics more carefully. On the other hand, Cronon and some of the other authors in *Uncommon Ground* should take a dose of their own medicine. They have at times inflamed the discourse, missed the more profound ethical core of the movement, and made a few weak arguments of their own—arguments that need critical scrutiny and exposure. Therefore, with hope for a more mutually respectful and probing debate than we have had so far, I examine some of those arguments. Here is my list of major errors about wilderness being committed by some environmental historians.

Error #1: North America (we are told) was never a “wilderness”—not any part of it.

Some revisionist historians now argue that ignorant Europeans, animated by “virgin land” fantasies and racial prejudices, had it all wrong. The continent was not a wilderness; it was a landscape thoroughly domesticated and managed by the native peoples. Indians, not low rainfall and high evaporation rates, created a vast sweep of grassland all the way from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains, and they did so by constant burning. They herded the bison like domesticates in a big pasture. They cultivated the wild plants and made a garden of the place. All over the continent, they completely civilized the wasteland long before the white man got here.

I respect Native American stewardship and would not take credit

away from any of their considerable achievements, but such characterizations by historians are huge extrapolations from limited examples. Two million people spread over what is now Canada and the United States, a people armed with primitive stone tools, simply could not have truly “domesticated” the whole continent.¹ By comparison, 300 million Americans and Canadians today, armed with far more powerful technology, have not wholly domesticated the continent yet; in the United States, by a strict standard of evaluation, roughly 100 million acres of virtually pristine wilderness exist under protection while more are without protection, and in Canada areas with no roads, towns, mines, or mills still dominate most of the north.

We are further told by some historians that the Indians were pushed out of their domesticated homeland in order to *create* a wilderness for the white man. There certainly was a massive dispossession, often bloody and ruthless. But if our national parks, wilderness areas, and wildlife refuges were once claimed by Native Americans, shifting in tribal identity over time, so once were our cities, farms, universities, indeed the very house lots on which we dwell. What are we now to do about that fact? Should we give all national park and wilderness areas back to the Native Americans? Or open them for subsistence hunting (by people likely to be armed with modern rifles and snowmobiles) or for agriculture? If we do that, then we are logically bound to permit the same repossession of our campuses, suburbs, and cornfields. I have not heard anyone, however, seriously propose that Los Angeles or Stanford University be returned to their “rightful owners.” Why not? Why are parks and wilderness areas viewed as suspect forms of expropriation while the vast portion of the country under modern American economic use is not really questioned? Obviously, Indian land claims are not the real issue here; debunking preservationists is.

A more sensible policy would be to find out whether any of the 100 million acres of currently protected wilderness are in violation of valid treaty rights and, if they are, to settle in court or get the lands

returned to their proper owners, as we should be doing with all contested lands. But I haven't seen any historian actually undertake that research project into land claims within the wilderness system. Nor do I see any definite, clear proposal coming from scholars about where and how to alter the size, shape, or rules governing our wilderness areas. Meanwhile, let it be noted that any American citizen, Indian or non-Indian, has free and equal access to the nation's wilderness, which is more than can be said about access to universities or suburbia.

Error #2: The wilderness is nothing real but is only a cultural construct dreamed up by rich white romantics.

I trace some of that oversimplified thinking to Roderick Nash's book *Wilderness and the American Mind*, which (for all its many virtues) set up a flawed narrative that environmental historians have cribbed from ever since. The now-standard story starts with an ancient, intense Judeo-Christian hostility toward the wild, an antiwilderness culture of spectacular proportions and longevity. That hostility supposedly reached a crescendo in Puritan New England, where every farmer stepped out of his saltbox scowling at the forest. Then the story moves on to a dramatic reversal of attitudes as affluent, white, educated, secular, urban Americans became sensitive romantic lovers of nature. Part of the scarcely hidden moral in that story is that ordinary people, without education or income, have been in serious cultural lag and cannot be depended on for any significant environmental change. But a more complicated reading of the past would suggest that the love of wilderness was not simply the "discovery" or "invention" of a few rich men with Harvard or Yale degrees coming at the end of a long dark age.

If you assume that standard account, then it becomes very easy to turn the entire story into a polemic against elitist snobs who seek the sanctuary of wilderness at the expense of peasants, workers, Indians, or the poor of the world. Of course there were and are people like that. If the story didn't have a kernel of truth in it, the revisionists would not

get any kind of hearing at all. But it is a small kernel, not the whole complicated truth of what wilderness has meant to people through the ages or of what draws them to protect wilderness today.

Contrary to the established story, the love of nature (i.e., wilderness) was not merely a "cultural construct" of the romantic period in Europe. It has much older cultural roots, and it may even have roots in the very structure of human feelings and consciousness going far back into the evolutionary past, transcending any cultural patterns. Historians of late have been far too quick to dismiss as "essentialist" any deep residuum of humanity and to reduce all thought and feeling to shifting tides of "culture." Nineteenth-century romanticism, with its glorification of the sublime, was indeed an important cultural expression, but it also may be understood as an effort to recover and express those deeper feelings that in all sorts of cultures have linked the beauty of the natural world to a sense of wholeness and spirituality. The enthusiasm for wilderness in America was undeniably a cultural fashion, but it also drew on that other-than-cultural hunger for the natural world that persists across time and space. Finally, it drew in the United States on a frontier-nourished spirit of liberty, which itself reflected both cultural and biological needs. Most importantly, that enthusiasm was felt by poor folks as well as rich.

Historians have tended to miss the broad social appeal of the wilderness movement, particularly in the twentieth century. They like to feature that brash, big-game-hunting, monied New Yorker, Teddy Roosevelt, especially if they want to do a little lampooning, and ignore all the men and women from more humble origins, before and after him, who played an important role in saving the wilderness. John Muir and Ed Abbey, to be sure, get plenty of attention, though historians have seldom appreciated the fact of their rural, nonelite roots. Nor do they give much emphasis to the millions of wilderness seekers who do not like to kill big animals or thump their chests or order from Eddie Bauer catalogs. And then, after reading the poorer class of people out

of the wilderness “construct,” the historians turn around and proclaim: “See, wilderness has been an upper-class fetish all along.” Finally, with no little condescension and inconsistency, they set out to correct the “naive,” popular, grassroots “misunderstanding” of these matters.

Error #3: The preservation of wilderness has been a distraction from addressing other, more important environmental problems.

Precisely what are those problems? The protection of less exalted beauty close to home, we are told, not only in the remote, western public lands. The health and well-being of urban people, particularly impoverished minority people, in the neighborhoods where they live. The wise, efficient use of natural resources that furnish our means of living. I grant that all these are important problems for environmentalists to face. They are in many ways linked, and they should not be severed and rigidly compartmentalized one from one another. Actually, I don't know any wilderness advocates who are so single-minded, who deny the existence or importance or interconnectedness of those other environmental problems. There may be some, but I have never met them. But I have met, and will defend, the person who, out of deep moral conviction, believes that the preservation of the world's last wilderness is a higher obligation than cleaning up the Hudson River or preventing soil erosion. Someone who gives his or her life to wilderness issues instead of those other problems is not necessarily misguided or immoral or needing to be “reeducated.”

But the main historical issue here is whether the wilderness movement has in fact significantly diminished American interest in other environmental problems. The claim that it has is repeatedly made; outside the carefully hoarded wilderness areas, it is charged, the country is a mess and their wilderness “obsession” encourages many environmentalists to do nothing about it. It is sometimes argued that preserving wilderness gave Americans a green light for exploiting other less pristine environments with no compunction. But where

is the evidence that this has been so on any important scale? The major reason we abuse land, as Aldo Leopold told us a while back, is “because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us” rather than “a community to which we belong.” Protecting wilderness by itself may not change that situation, but neither is it responsible for it.

Since the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964, the United States has seen an extraordinary increase in the number of people who call themselves environmentalists, and the issues they are working on range from preserving remnant wetlands threatened by shopping malls to stopping toxic dumping on Indian reservations to getting emission controls on smokestacks. The movement has become more and more diverse, inclusive, and pervasive. Far from being a distraction, the example of wilderness activism may even have encouraged that diversification of environmental concern occurring across the whole country!

I live in a place where the immediate, compelling, and most practical need is to create an agriculture that is less destructive to soil, water, and biota, along with preventing real estate developers from turning our towns into cultural and biological deserts. I serve on the board of directors of the Land Institute, which is trying to meet that important environmental need. Yet I can still cherish the thought of large, unmanipulated wilderness on this continent where the processes of evolution can go on more or less as they have for millennia. Does my commitment to saving wilderness in Alaska “alienate” me from the place where I live? Some historians say it must, but people are more complicated than that. Like millions of other Americans, I have a whole spectrum of concerns, near and far. I can support the Library of Congress without losing interest in my local public library.

We do have a legacy of using land badly all over this country. It has left us with degraded forests, grasslands, and cities, and that legacy requires profound reform along a broad front. Developing an ethic of care and restraint wherever we live and wherever we take our resources—on that 95 percent of the nation's land area not protected

as wilderness—is a clear, important need. How do we address it and move toward intelligent, just, and wise use of the land beyond wilderness areas? Our recent history does not suggest that we need to get rid of the wilderness “fetish” in order to do so, or that we need to trash the leading, popular arguments for preserving wilderness, which on the whole have worked pretty well against implacable opposition.

The wilderness has been a symbol of freedom for many people, and it is a primordial as well as cultural sense of freedom that they have sought. Freedom, it must be granted, can become another word for irresponsibility. Yet almost always the preservation of wilderness freedom in the United States has been interwoven with a counterbalancing principle of moral restraint. In fact, this linkage of freedom and restraint may be the most important feature of the wilderness movement. Those 100 million acres exist not only as a place where evolution can continue on its own terms, where we humans can take refuge from our technological creations, but also as a place where we can learn the virtue of restraint: this far we drive, plow, mine, cut, and no farther.

Old-time religions enforced moral restraint on their followers by the practice of tithing, a practice that has almost completely disappeared under the impact of the market revolution. But the practice of tithing is too good an idea to lose. Without saying so, we have created in the form of wilderness a new, more secular form of the ancient religious tithe. We have set aside a small portion of the country as the part we return to the earth that supports us, the earth that was here before any of us. We are not yet up to a full tithe, but we are still working on it.

A place of restraint as well as a place of freedom for all living things, the wilderness has promoted, I believe, a broader ethic of environmental responsibility all across this nation. Far from being an indefensible obsession, wilderness preservation has been one of our most noble achievements as a people. With no broad claims to American exceptionalism, I will say that here is a model of virtuous action for other societies to study and emulate. This is not to say that historians have

been wrong to criticize weaknesses in the wilderness movement. They have only been wrong when they have denigrated the movement as a whole, carelessly encouraged its enemies, and made bad historical arguments. The real danger we face as a nation, we should remember, is not loving wilderness too much but loving our pocketbooks more.

NOTE

1. I am using the cautious but authoritative estimate of Douglas H. Ubelaker of the Smithsonian Institution, in his 1988 article “North American Indian Population Size, A.D. 1500 to 1985,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology* 77: 291. He calculates an average density of eleven people per 100 square kilometers, ranging from a low of two or three in the arctic and subarctic regions to a high of seventy-five in California. Much larger and more controversial are the estimates of H. F. Dobyns in *Their Number Become Thinned* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1983).