

ECOFORESTRY OR PROTECTED STATUS? SOME WORDS IN DEFENSE OF PARKS

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In the 1990s, the tremendous growth in the environmental movement has been accompanied by numerous changes within the movement, many for the better but some for the worse. Among the detrimental changes has been an increasing tendency among activists to downplay the need for parks and protected areas. Many such individuals and groups are either fighting wilderness destruction in a vacuum, that is, with no clear alternative to the destruction, or are calling for “ecoforestry” and other forms of supposedly benign, environmentally friendly resource extraction. I hope to show here that a call for anything other than protected status in priority wild areas is to the detriment of native biodiversity. I’ll examine the primary arguments against park establishment that some environmentalists use and the strategic consequences of not advocating for parks.

A REBUTTAL TO SOME PRIMARY ARGUMENTS AGAINST PARKS

Much of the lack of advocacy for protected areas can be attributed to ignorance. Many activists simply do not have an overview of the status of endangered ecosystems in North America and are unaware that it is precisely in parks and protected areas that ecosystems are healthiest and most secure from environmental destruction. Hence, they do not understand the importance of directly campaigning for protected status, as opposed to mere moratoria on destruction that usually get lifted later.

It is the philosophical criticisms of parks and protected areas that must be most vigorously addressed, however, for the development of such antiwilderness environmental arguments is on the rise, as exemplified by William Cronon's essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in the recent anthology *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Dave Foreman, David Johns, George Wuerthner, Mike Matz, and Reed Noss have already responded to many critiques of the wilderness concept and wilderness areas in the Wildlands Project anthology, *Place of the Wild*, as well as in *Wild Earth*, and there is no need for me to repeat their refutations. Still, I would like to add a few insights of my own, because I think it is crucial that such misguided criticisms of parks (the most common Canadian wilderness designation) are refuted once and for all before they gain a further foothold in the movement. The environmentalist arguments against protected areas, and my rebuttals, are as follows:

1. *The concepts of parks and wilderness separate humans from nature when, in fact, humans are a part of nature. Thus, parks reinforce the man/nature dualism of Western civilization.*

Of all the arguments against protected areas, this one takes the cake for being ill-considered and just plain illogical. That human society *should be* in harmony with nature does not mean it *is* in harmony—far from it, thus the whole environmental crisis. There's a difference between what *should be* and what *is*. Industrial society with its automobiles, factories, DDT, and shopping malls is certainly not one with nature, and by using the word *wilderness* we are not somehow creating a dualism; a dualism already exists. There is a world of difference between a parking lot and a prairie, a clear-cut and an old-growth forest. Human civilization has already separated from nature, from the wilderness; the task is to put humans back into harmony with nature by developing an environmentally harmonious society *and* by protecting nature in wilderness parks *while industrial society still exists*. Wilderness advocates didn't

create the human/nature dualism; agriculture, technology, and industrial society did by destroying nature, thereby creating an obvious distinction between wilderness and human society. We must recognize this wilderness/civilization dichotomy if we are to overcome it. Creating parks, protecting the nature that people are supposed to be a part of, is the most important step in transcending that dualism.

2. *"Ecoforestry" and environmentally harmonious lifestyles and practices are needed, not more parks. It is not humans per se that are at fault, but rather the ways we live that are destructive.*

Fair enough. Hunting-gathering lifestyles have more or less allowed the ecosystems in which they occur to remain intact. Arguably, such lifestyles are environmentally harmonious. However, ecoforestry, permaculture, and organic agriculture with the use of today's advanced technologies and with the present human overpopulation are far cries from hunter-gatherer lifestyles.

In ecoforestry, large numbers of trees, up to the annual growth of the forest, are removed and used for lumber. This is in contrast to the small number of trees, if any, removed by hunter-gatherers to make the odd boat or building. True, where a swidden (slash and burn) agricultural system is also practiced along with hunting and gathering, as in many tropical aboriginal cultures, many more trees are taken. This may represent the beginning of a primarily agricultural lifestyle in such peoples, which would certainly be ecologically destructive, as with all agriculture. Agriculture is the destruction of native organisms in an area and their replacement by one or a few species useful for humans.

In *primarily* hunting-gathering societies, however, swidden takes only tiny fractions of the forest cover, which are quickly reclaimed when the small patch clearings are abandoned in a couple of years. In contrast, through selection logging and commercial thinning, which are much more practical possibilities than ecoforestry in an industrial society, trees far in excess of the annual growth may be removed, to the

point where forest interior conditions are lost. Tree removal aside, problems of road building, habitat fragmentation, soil compaction, erosion, stream damage, and the introduction of exotic species arise even with selective forestry practices. Nor should indigenous practices of burning tracts of forest to provide better grazing for ungulate prey be used to justify alternative forestry practices. Increasing numbers of studies are revealing the differences between logged and burned areas (Noss 1993), such as changes in soil chemistry, successional species composition, and the presence of gradients of defoliation in burned areas but not logged areas. Clearly, wild nature and areas used for forestry are not the same. Ecoforestry may be needed in areas not available for protection, but such practices are not appropriate everywhere and are not a replication of natural processes.

Some opponents of protected areas cite the example of indigenous peoples living in harmony with nature to deny the necessity of protected areas in which human habitation is prohibited. Fine, let's have protected areas that include the protection of native hunting-gathering tribes. Most wilderness advocates would support the continuance of indigenous hunter-gatherers living in protected wilderness areas, as long as the native peoples possess traditional technologies and population levels (as with several tribes in tropical Africa, Asia, and South America). Few protected area advocates, however, would support native peoples with industrial technologies and larger populations harvesting resources in protected areas, especially not for commercial purposes. This is where ecocentric environmentalists often differ from more anthropocentric environmentalists, who support native peoples with chain saws, bulldozers, rifles, steel traps, and snowmobiles extracting resources in proposed protected areas. Support of native hunting-gathering lifestyles does not negate the need for protected areas. Rather, it is a justification for protected areas that include hunter-gatherers.

Proponents of native sovereignty may object to the notion of native people living in parks controlled by colonial governments,

whether here in North America or elsewhere in the world. Native sovereignty may be a legitimate right; but in the meantime, before the ruling governments are either pressured into accepting native sovereignty or are overthrown, it does neither the environment nor native people any good to have corporations destroy wilderness. Parks are the best means within the present society to prevent this.

3. Changing society to become environmentally harmonious is the crucial task, not creating more parks that exist parallel to consumer society without challenging its fundamental basis. Industrial society will eventually destroy protected areas anyway through pollution (ozone layer depletion, greenhouse effect, acid rain, etc.) and by opening park borders in times of resource scarcity.

This is a critique used by both reformists and radicals. Its two main problems are that it confuses the means with the ends and that it is strategically unsound. First, from an ecocentric perspective, the continued existence of Earth's complete natural biodiversity is the most fundamental goal. To achieve this goal, we must advocate *both* the protection of this biodiversity in wilderness parks—a particular means that is also identical to the ends—and the establishment of an environmentally harmonious society so that pollution and population growth don't destroy protected areas and the rest of nature. Thus, when one pushes for new environmental laws to regulate logging practices or to curb pollution or, more fundamentally, when one works to dismantle industrial society, it is to ensure the long-term security of protected areas and all species, including humans. Yet the critics of protected areas, believing the primary task is the survival of the human species, do not see any reason to protect wilderness; a world with the basic necessities for survival—clean air, water, soil, and renewable agriculture—is all that is needed to secure human existence. The existence of the world's vast array of biodiversity in functioning ecosystems (some species may be reserved in genetic banks) is for the most part not a necessity for human survival; the garden vision, as critiqued by Roderick Nash (1982), is seen as sufficient.

To some critics, wilderness protection is simply a means to “save the planet,” meaning to secure human existence, while the reform or replacement of industrial society is the most crucial task for ensuring human survival. Such people have confused the means of creating a green society to secure wilderness with the ends.

In addition to being anthropocentric, this critique is strategically unsound. If, as many confused park critics claim, protection of more wilderness would be great but society must be changed first, then it will simply be too late for most wild areas and species by the time the revolution succeeds. Already, most of the parks and designated wilderness areas in the United States and in southern Canada are surrounded by agriculture, clear-cuts, and urban development. If it weren't for the protective designations, these natural areas would be long since destroyed.

4. Our parks have failed miserably in halting the loss of biodiversity. Most parks, too small to begin with, are located in high-elevation areas of rock and ice or lands otherwise unsuited for human use, while the most productive and diverse low-elevation ecosystems have been largely left out. In addition, parks have been subject to industrial tourism, which has destroyed much of their biotic integrity.

As George Wuerthner (1994) points out, “The fact that our present preserve system does not work as well as it should does not mean that it could not work.” That our parks are too small to maintain healthy populations of all their species doesn't mean we should not advocate parks; it means we fight to get bigger parks, as in the proposed Northern Rockies Ecosystem Protection Act. That parks are rarely established in old-growth forests or prairie grasslands doesn't mean we stop advocating the creation of parks; it means we work to get old-growth forests and prairie grasslands protected. For example, here in British Columbia, the tremendous push by the public to protect old-growth rain forests has resulted in recent years in significant tracts of prime, low-elevation old growth being protected: the Carmanah,

Megin, Stein, Khutzeymateen, Boise, Kitlope, Mehatl, Skagit, Clendenning, and Niagara Valleys, as well as South Moresby. These are not lands marginal for human use; they are worth billions of dollars in timber value. That some parks contain ski resorts, livestock grazing, and logging doesn't mean parks are useless; it means we fight against ski resorts, livestock, and logging in parks.

Moreover, to say that parks have failed is to accept a very narrow and uninformed view of ecosystem protection. Alpine and sub-alpine ecosystems, which have their own unique species that are just as important in their own right as old-growth endemics, have been reasonably well protected. All other ecosystems partly protected by parks—including the small and moderate-sized tracts of productive, economically valuable lands—also represent partial victories. Park creation is a process in which all areas protected thus far are victories while still more and larger parks must be created to complete an ecologically viable system of protected areas.

Ultimately, if one believes that nature has intrinsic value and that humans cannot improve it, then there really is no truly sound option other than to leave wilderness as is, and to secure it from future human alteration; this is the definition of a protected area, or what is often called a “park.” Some people have a problem with the word *park*, because it holds a connotation that wilderness is for human recreation; fine, then let's call them “ecological reserves” or “wilderness reserves.” But to not advocate the protection of an endangered ecosystem because of a name, and thus allow it to be clear-cut or strip-mined, is a crime.

5. Nature needs human management to stay healthy. For example, exotic species must often be controlled, prescribed burns must be set in isolated habitats, predators must sometimes be controlled to allow endangered species to recover their populations, and new individuals must be introduced into small, isolated populations to prevent inbreeding. Thus, because nature must be managed, there is

fundamentally nothing wrong with managing a landscape through selection forestry, controlled grazing, or limited agriculture.

This argument is made by some conservation biologists and land managers who realize that active management of some wild areas is necessary to maintain their natural character. Humans have so disrupted natural populations and processes that human intervention is often needed to correct past mistakes. The difference between correcting and managing *human-induced mistakes* on nature and managing *nature itself*, however, is huge. One can still advocate parks even if the areas of concern need such corrective management; their protected status should nonetheless forbid the managing of nature itself. Unfortunately, some people lump both managing human mistakes and managing nature under the general concept of “management” and support “alternative” forms of commodity extraction in place of full protection, thinking that such activities are fundamentally no different from prescribed burns or the elimination of exotics.

IMPLICATIONS OF FAILING TO ADVOCATE PARKS

With the main philosophical arguments against protected areas out of the way, the strategic implications of not calling for full protection can be examined. Environmentalists' failure to call for protected status commonly has one of two “best-case” consequences:

1. A moratorium on destruction, by court injunction (in the United States) or by simple government decree (in Canada). Moratoria can always be lifted, so the same fight will be repeated all over again, except that political circumstances may not be as favorable the next time around; new antienvironmental politicians may be in power, the “wise use” backlash may have grown, or the environmental movement may be on the downswing. Moratoria are not solutions.
2. A half-baked solution in which the pristine status of the area is

compromised. This may include smaller clear-cuts, limited road building, or, very unlikely, implementing the alternative forestry suggested by the environmental group (which, as already discussed, is not a replication of nature). These half-baked solutions are often harder to overturn than full-scale onslaughts, since they may render complacent much of the more moderate environmental movement. Meanwhile, the wilderness is progressively eaten away at a reduced pace.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, direct calls for the establishment of protected areas are necessary if wilderness areas are to be saved once and for all. Of course, there is no guarantee that protected areas will not be opened up for development in the future, but there is no guarantee on anything in society; protected status is the most secure way to ensure the survival of native biodiversity.

Sometimes in building a coalition with nonenvironmental groups that share opposition to a proposed development, a direct call for protected status may destroy the alliance. Some locals may be against the development of gas wells in their area but still want to continue grazing their cattle, or may oppose logging plans but still want to trap commercially. In such areas, conservationists must use their judgment in deciding whether the coalition is worth temporarily forfeiting a protected area. In any case, the ultimate goal of the campaign should be complete protection once the immediate threats are defeated. In addition, one must question whether a coalition with other groups is desirable in the context of the overall campaign, especially if such groups oppose all protective designations and will end up becoming the opposition after the common threat is defeated. As a general principle in wilderness campaigns, the sooner one calls for complete protection, the better.

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