

## 13. Wilderness, Spirituality and Biodiversity in North America – tracing an environmental history from Occidental roots to Earth Day

Bron Taylor

### 1. Introduction

Exploring competing perceptions of wilderness, and disputes over places said to be wilderness, opens an illuminating window into environmental history. Understanding such cultural evolution requires special attention to religion. My analysis begins with some generalizations about the idea of wilderness in the Occidental world and then focuses on the history of the nexus of wilderness and religion in North America from European contact to the first Earth Day in 1970. This history demonstrates how deeply the idea of wilderness and wilderness-related spirituality are related to nature conservation movements in U.S. culture. It also reveals how the idea of wilderness and the rationale for protecting it has shifted since the Darwinian revolution, from the preservation of natural beauty and its various spiritual values, to the notion that biological diversity is intrinsically valuable and sacred, and thus, worthy of reverence and defense.

### 2. “Wilderness” as idea and place in the Occidental World

In *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, Robert Pogue Harrison wrote:

From the family tree to the tree of knowledge, from the tree of life to the tree of memory, forests have provided an indispensable resource of symbolization in the cultural evolution of humankind (Harrison 1992, 8).

The same could be said for the term “wilderness.” Contemporary dictionary definitions generally agree that wilderness refers to environmental systems where natural processes occur with little or no significant influence by human beings. Wilderness definitions often also generally indicate that the place is uninhabited and uncultivated, and sometimes carry a

connotation that such places are deserted, barren, wastelands. But the term's meaning is contested in ways that dictionaries do not reflect. There is, for example, no consensus whether the places the term stands for are sacred or profane; whether such places are needed for human physical and spiritual health, or in contrast, are actually physically and spiritually dangerous; whether such places reflect democratic values or are a preserve of an imperial elite. For some, therefore, the meaning of the term, and the purposes it has served, are troubling. Then there are the places to which the word supposedly refers. These places are in their own ways troubled, ever declining in size, biodiversity, and ecological resilience. So while there is at least vague agreement about the term's meaning, ever since the first significant wave of Europeans began to arrive in North America during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the idea of wilderness and the places to which the term refers have both been ideological, spiritual, and physical battlegrounds. And by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, with the spread of American-style conservation to many countries around the world, especially through National Parks and wilderness reserves, contention over the ideas and practices related to "wilderness" went global.

Before we can focus on wilderness ideas and places in North America we must begin with antecedent notions in the Occidental world, for as Roderick Nash explained in his seminal *Wilderness in the American Mind* (and as many ethnographers have noted) there is no cognate for the term wilderness in the languages of the peoples who were already inhabiting the continent before Europeans arrived (Nash 2001 [1967], xiii). Nash suggested that in English, "the root seems to have been 'will' with a descriptive meaning of self-willed, willful, or uncontrollable", adding that as expressed in early Teutonic and Norse languages, the term was initially applied to human beings; only later, in Old English, was it extended to other organisms and to wild, dangerous places and forested lands (Nash 2001 [1967], 1–2). Peering back deeper into Occidental history involves more conjecture, but in *The Idea of Wilderness* (1991), Max Oelschlaeger made a strong case that, while there are appreciative themes toward perceived beauties of nature in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, and ancient Western philosophy, the more nature-reverencing forms were likely remnants from earlier foraging cultures, which tended, to use contemporary terminology, to be animistic and pantheistic. Nash and many other scholars have noted that in the Hebrew Bible (the textual root of all Abrahamic traditions) wilderness (e.g., the Sinai Peninsula) was seen as a place to escape. Judaism, Christianity and Islam, therefore, have favored agricultural places replete with "milk and honey," and often

derided wild habitats as deserts and wastelands, even if such habitats also at times were seen as places of refuge from moral corruption and other evils (Nash 1967, 13, 16, 18). The general scholarly picture painted by Nash and Oelschlager was that Occidental agricultures, including the religions accompanying them, while sometimes expressing appreciation for undomesticated habitats as places of spiritual trial and opportunity, and other times as a reflection of the power and beneficence of God, generally viewed the sacred not as the earthly world we inhabit but as somehow above and beyond it.<sup>1</sup>

It is equally important to recognize that agriculture is the basis of civilization, and that the now dominant, so-called “world religions” lend it spiritual and ethical legitimacy. As Harrison demonstrated during his examination of classical cultures as well as Christianity:

The governing institutions of the West – religion, law, family, city – originally established themselves in opposition to the forests, which in this respect have been, from the beginning, the first and last victims of civic expansion (Harrison 1992, ix).

The same could be said of wildlands of all kinds, including wetlands and deserts.

It should not be missed that religion-infused agricultures are inherently and necessarily expansionistic (not to mention often violently imperial). Steven Stoll put it simply: “Agrarian societies also generated people – more than hunting and gathering societies did – so they continually created their own necessity for expansion, as sons and daughters sought to reproduce the material world of their parents” (Stoll 2007, 56). Since the land that agricultures need for expansion are almost always already inhabited, agricultures have been imperial; killing or displacing through force already-present inhabitants or converting them, either through example, persuasion, coercion, or threat, to their own agricultural and religious lifeways. This process, which began 10,000 years ago when humans began to domesticate plants and animals, has thus precipitated the dra-

---

1 When reading this section, Laura Feldt noted that it is difficult to assess the role that ancient Judaism, Christianity and Islam played in agricultural expansion and bio-simplification. She added in her comment to me that the difficulty is compounded by the differences between these religions and the distance in time and perception between them and the Hebrew Bible that they share as a sacred text, and the present time. As she noted, such interpretive difficulties should be kept in mind when considering the historical background presented in this section, which is necessarily brief and thus may involve some overgeneralization, in the interest of setting the stage for a consideration of wilderness in North America.

matic, global decline of both cultural and biological diversity (Marsh 1979 [1874]; Diamond 1987, 1997, Shepard 1992, 1998, Oelschleger 1992, Mason 1993, Lockwood and McKinney 2001, Williams 2003, S. Stoll 2007, Pointing 2007). Agricultures exercised little restraint in this long process. Despite the expression of nature-related insights, such as of the interdependence of all life, or of ethics enjoining compassion for sentient creatures, by some religious figures in Occidental or Asian agricultures, the necessity and inertia of expansion in agriculture has been a powerful variable in producing biodiversity decline. Focusing on Europe, Harrison put provocatively the general pattern:

The Christian church that sought to unify Europe under the sign of the cross was essentially hostile toward the impassive frontier of unhumanized nature. Bestiality, fallenness, errancy, perdition – these are the associations that accrued around forests in the Christian mythology. In theological terms forests represented the anarchy of matter itself, with all the deprived darkness that went with this Neoplatonic concept adopted early on by the church fathers. As the underside of the ordained world, forests represented for the church last strongholds of pagan worship (Harrison 1992, 61).

But on the North American continent, in land that became the United States of America, something remarkable happened in 1872: The United States Congress created Yellowstone National Park. Commenting on its significance, Steven Stoll wrote that this was “the first time that Congress imposed legal limits on the spread of agricultural settlement. The park created an entirely new category of land use – protected wilderness – where no crops or domestic animals would be allowed” (Stoll 2007, 68–69). And as Donald Worster has argued, this wilderness was a democratic space, owned by the public at large (Worster 2007). This was in marked contrast to most countries where wildlands held back from agricultural development were the reserves of the nobility, and commoners were excluded. The remarkable contrary development in the United States is inconceivable without the peculiar history of religion and nature that unfolded in North America after first Europeans reached its shore.

### 3. “Wilderness” perceptions early in the colonial history of North America

The imposition of legal limits to the spread of agriculture and the creation of wilderness areas owned by the public at large is not a development that one would expect when considered in the light of the reaction to

wildlands by the first Europeans who arrived in North America with the intention of settling. This was significantly later than when Christopher Columbus, who in 1492 landed in the Bahamas, and then several Caribbean Islands, thus inaugurating the period of European imperial exploration of the Americas. It was also later than the next Spanish expeditions, the next of which in North America began in 1508 with Juan Ponce de León, who claimed for the Spanish crown what later became the U.S. state of Florida.<sup>2</sup> During the 16<sup>th</sup> century, after gaining military advantage over the Spanish, the English began trolling the Atlantic coast, looking for appropriate places to establish colonial settlements.

Like the Spanish and other colonial powers pursuing riches, power, and Christian converts, in Eastern North America, the English found a landscape domesticated by large numbers of Native Americans, who had shaped the land to their benefit and liking through fire and agriculture (especially corn cultivation).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the English conveniently imagined the land as a little-populated wilderness. Such a perception, while difficult to maintain initially due to the many aboriginal people they encountered, became easier and more accurate a few decades after initial contact, for the Europeans carried diseases for which the aboriginal populations had no evolution-inherited immunities. This led to epidemics that devastated Native American populations, by some estimates, upwards of 80 %.<sup>4</sup> Some English colonists who noticed the diseases and the following depopulation took the epidemics as evidence that it was God's will that they take possession of the land (Perreault 2007, 23). To such individuals, the wilderness was God's gift.

It was the kind of gift, however, about which they were both naturally and culturally ambivalent. For anyone unaccustomed to large and dense forests inhabited by dangerous animals, fear would be perfectly natural.

- 
- 2 I sidestep, therefore, the earliest, Spanish, claims made in Florida, by Juan Ponce de León, in 1513, and the subsequent battles between the French, and later the English, for control of the region, as well as discussion of the country's first settlement on Florida's north Atlantic coast, named for St. Augustine in 1565. For a number of reasons, Florida and the southeast was settled later than the rest of North America, much of which remained what would typically be called wilderness well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, but this is not a story that can be told here. It is also a story largely ignored by the standard wilderness histories.
  - 3 On population estimates see Denevan 1992a, Thornton 1987, and on Native American environmental impacts, Denevan 1992b.
  - 4 This brief overview draws especially on Perreault 2007, Nash 1967, Denevan 1992b, Diamond 1997.

The fear was also of the aboriginal inhabitants who were considered “wild” or “savage” (Perreault 2007, 27–30). Such fears were magnified by Christian religious beliefs that, while viewing wild habitats as places of spiritual and commercial opportunity, also considered them to be places of religious and moral peril. As recalled by William Bradford, who arrived on the now-famous *Mayflower* in America in 1620, along with several dozen Puritan dissidents who were seeking religious freedom and economic opportunity, and who later became the second governor of the Plymouth Colony, the continent was a terrifying, “hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and men” (Bradford, in Nash 23–24; Albanese 34; Perry 1956). As if that were not bad enough, for many pious European Christians, including the Spanish explorers and friars who founded missions and settlements in what would become Mexico and the American Southwest, as well as Florida, the American wildlands were also a haunt of Satan (Taylor and Van Horn 2006, 167).

Given these dangers, to tame Satan and wilderness, both the land and its people would need to be subjugated. The new arrivals generally believed that a religiously righteous culture could only be achieved by domesticating wildlands and subduing their inhabitants. Steven Stoll put it simply, “American expansion was agricultural expansion, and it came at the expense of Indians and wilderness” (Stoll 2007, 55). According to such historiography, the pattern resembled that of Europe, where the expanding agriculture, which often displaced people and usually reduced biological diversity, was deeply religious.

This sort of interpretation coheres with the history of the idea of wilderness in North America, which was famously advanced by Nash in 1967 (and reinforced by Oelschlaeger in 1991). Nash’s book became as nearly canonical among scholars as histories can be, and in the main, it has held up well. Much of what follows draws on it but Nash’s account is supplemented by more recent scholarship that has qualified and challenged some of it.

#### 4. Wilderness in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe & North America

For Nash and many of his scholarly progeny, European settlers had a two-fold imperative to subjugate wilderness: First, because pioneer settlers “lived too close to wilderness for appreciation” for it “constituted a formi-

dable threat to his very survival.” Second, because these settlers felt obliged to battle “wild country ... in the name of nation, race, and God” (Nash 1967, 24). Even when early European Americans expressed appreciation for “nature” in early American history, “it was not for its wildness but because it resembled a ‘Garden or Orchard in England’” (Nash 1967, 33). For Nash, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrims Progress from this World to That which is to come*, which was published in London in 1681, well expressed “the prevailing viewpoint of wilderness as the symbol of anarchy and evil to which the Christian was unalterably opposed” (1967, 34). The Puritans, moreover, contrasted the city on the hill they wished to build with the wilderness, which first had to be transformed. Moreover, “their Bibles contained all they needed to know in order to hate wilderness,” which showed, according to Nash, that “the colonist’s conception of the wilderness was more a product of the Old world than the New” (Nash 1967, 35). One early puritan colonist even explicitly noted that towns and churches were established precisely where the “wilderness was subdued” and where previously there had been nothing but “*Heathenism, Idolatry, and Devil-worship*” (in Nash 1967, 37; see also Miller 1956). Nash noted that these New England colonists called themselves Christ’s soldiers and thought they were engaged in “in a war against wilderness” (1967, 37). Nash’s exposition analyzed the views of a variety of literary figures and politicians, who in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries extolled agrarian civilization while contrasting it with untamed wilderness, including most notably Thomas Jefferson, who drafted the Declaration of Independence and became the republic’s third president.

Nash noted, however, that antipathy to wilderness was not universal among the European arrivals: “A handful of mountain men and voyagers were literally absorbed by the forest, ... in some cases even joining Indian tribes. These exceptions regarded civilization with the antipathy most pioneers reserved for wilderness” (Nash 1967, 43).<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Nash also acknowledged that in the 18<sup>th</sup> century Jonathan Edwards, the Reformed (Calvinist) theologian, and famous “fire and brimstone” preacher, found “spiritual joy” and beauty in “natural objects such as clouds, flowers, and fields” (Nash 1967, 39). Nevertheless, Nash concluded, for Edwards, “wilderness was still beyond the pale,” and as evidence, he quoted a passage from Edwards that considered wilderness an obstacle

---

5 Voyagers were the explorers, fur trappers, and guides who paddled interior waterways of present day Canada and the northern United States, often developing commercial and sometimes intimate relations with native peoples.

on the path to Heaven (Nash 1967, 39). Some other scholars, however, have found greater appreciation for nature among the Puritans and within the Reformed (Calvinist) Protestant tradition.

John Gatta and Mark Stoll, for example, have argued that the Reformed tradition was actually quite sympathetic to wild nature. As evidence, they cited the reverent attitude toward nature as early as in the 17<sup>th</sup> century poetry of Anne Bradstreet (who is sometimes called America's first poet), as well as in other passages by Edwards (Stoll 2007, 39; Gatta 2004, 40–48). To explain such views Stoll noted that if one believes God communicates with human beings through nature (which fits with the Platonic doctrine of correspondence that has often been embedded in Christian thought) then as John Calvin (the founder of the Reformed Tradition) once conceded, “the expression ‘Nature is God,’ may be piously used, if dictated by a pious mind” (in Stoll 2007, 39). Stoll buttressed his argument by citing a variety of wilderness proponents, all the way up through the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who had deep roots in the reformed tradition. Stoll also contended that Catholics, non-Reformed tradition Protestants such as Methodists and Baptists, new religious sects such as the Mormons (properly known as members of the Church of Latter Day Saints), and some ethnic groups, such as African Americans, were less prone to nature appreciation than those with roots in the Reformed tradition. Stoll concluded, “particularly for children of the Reformed tradition, wilderness has been irradiated with [positive] spiritual meaning” (Stoll 2007, 50). In a similar way, Gatta also concluded that, after their initial hostility and fear, the attitudes of some Puritans, and some Christian sects, such as the Society of Friends (Quakers), began to shift toward an appreciation of the American land as sacred. My own view is that these revisionist efforts rely, however, on scant evidence; they are based on cases that might more accurately be taken as exceptions that prove the rule.

Nash concluded his analysis of Early America by agreeing with Alexis de Tocqueville, who contended that those living in the wilds were biased against them, for, with only “a few exceptions, American Frontiersmen rarely judged wilderness with criteria other than the utilitarian or spoke of their relation to it other than a military metaphor” (in Nash 1967: 43). According to Nash, it would be as subsequent generations of European Americans were “removed from a wilderness condition” that they would begin “to sense its spiritual and aesthetic values... Appreciation of the wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance



against the strong currents of antipathy” (Nash 1967, 43, 44). This is surely an overstatement, as the ability to appreciate the beauties of nature and the joys of existence within is part of the human emotional repertoire and known to people of all ethnic, class, and cultural backgrounds. Moreover, as Karl Jacoby has shown with regard to rural people, and other scholars are bringing forward with regard to African Americans, these groups often have their own environmental appreciation and ethics that are unknown or unseen by literary classes (Jacoby 2001, Glave and Stoll 2006, Smith-Cavros 2007a, 2007b, Smith 2007, Ruffin 2010). Nevertheless, it is true that in environmental history, it is often urban, not rural people, who have led conservationist battles. So there is significant truth to Nash’s observation.

For Nash and other historians, and contrary to some of the views just mentioned, an appreciation of wild nature did not really begin until European Americans were primed for it by new intellectual trends in Europe, specifically, by “the flowering of Romanticism in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries” (Nash 1967, 45). And while the earlier fearful if not hostile attitudes remained dominant, by the middle of the eighteenth century, strong voices had emerged promoting an aesthetic and spiritual appreciation for wilderness, even, an “association of God and wilderness” (Nash 1967, 44). But the tributaries to it were not in orthodox Christianity, whether Protestant or Catholic. Nash saw this new trend as beginning with Enlightenment science, which heightened a sense of awe and wonder at the universe. Given the theistic cultural context in which such perceptions emerged, these wonders were often believed to derive from God. In this century, two new trends emerged, neither of which squared with traditional theism – Deism, which saw God as mysteriously ordering the universe in deep time, and Romanticism which, as Nash noted, “resists definition, but in general implies an enthusiasm for the strange, remote, solitary, and mysterious” (Nash 1967, 47). Romanticism also idealized wilderness and even primitivism, which according to Nash, is a belief “that man’s happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to his greater degree of civilization” (Nash 1967, 47).

Both Deism and Romanticism, in their own ways, inculcated a perception that nature, including wild nature, was beautiful if not also sublime. Numerous books by theologians and philosophers began to appear

that expressed the newfangled perceptions and beliefs.<sup>6</sup> Among the most important, which Nash duly noted, were Edmund Burke's *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Immanuel Kant's *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* (1764), and most critically for Romanticism, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's writings, especially *Emile* (1762) and *Julie ou La Nouvelle Heloise* (1761). Rousseau contended that agriculture was the original human sin; that it led to private property, antagonism, and civilization, and that it destroyed the good life enjoyed by foraging peoples. For Rousseau, happiness and wellbeing depended on finding a way back to a natural existence (Oelschlaeger 1991, 110–111).

Those inspired by Rousseau, including poets and other artists, would soon travel to America to experience first hand the wild places and peoples there, playing some role in the spread of Romanticism (Nash 1967, 49). Among the most prominent Romantic poets was the English nobleman George Gordon "Lord" Byron (1788–1824). Byron was disenchanted with civilization but enchanted with nature, and even though he never traveled to North America, his poetry was much loved and cited by American nature enthusiasts, even many generations later. The following poem is perhaps the most often quoted one. Nash quoted it only partially, as do I, although I add two lines printed below that were omitted by Nash because I think they add significantly to the affective feeling of this poem, and because they are typical of Romantic poetry more generally.

THERE is a pleasure in the pathless woods,  
 There is a rapture on the lonely shore,  
 There is society, where none intrudes,  
 By the deep sea, and music in its roar:  
 I love not man the less, but Nature more,  
 To mingle with the Universe, and feel  
 What I can ne'er express, yet cannot all conceal.<sup>7</sup>

Here are the feelings of belonging and connection to nature, and perceptions of its sacredness, that characterize earth and nature-based religions in diverse cultures and periods around the world (Taylor 2001a, 2001b,

6 By the late 18<sup>th</sup> century Romanticism was growing rapidly in Europe and finding expression in philosophy, poetry, visual art, and music. There are too many figures to review here, given the focus here on American wilderness, but they include Goethe, Shelling, Blake, and Wordsworth.

7 Lord Byron (George Gordon), from *Childe Harold*, Canto iv, Verse 178, available at <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/byron01.html>

2010). And while there have long been people with such spiritual sentiments, it is nevertheless true that there are some times and places that provide fertile ground for the spread of such perceptions and nature-revering practices. Romanticism emerged and spread influentially from European soil, but American soil, especially during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, provided even more fertile ground for it, playing a leading role in the emergence of a unique wilderness protection movement. The movement would eventually spread to over 100 other countries, in large part because people in other parts of the world came to share the sentiments animating it.

There were hints of this emerging nature appreciation during the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, as Philip Freneau, a hermit known as “the Philosopher of the Forest,” began publishing essays in 1781, which criticized civilization and celebrated wild forest life. Meanwhile, Daniel Boone, who was celebrated during his own time and, in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, became an icon in American popular culture due to Disney films celebrating his life, wrote an autobiography in 1784. In this book, Boone depicted himself not only a mountain man engaged in settling the American wilderness, but as a philosopher of nature and its beauties who was ambivalent about the expansion of human settlements that he, ironically, had helped make possible (Nash 1967, 63). Boone’s popularity may in part reflect an aesthetic appreciation for wild places by the Americans who read him, as well as a nascent ambivalence about the course of “progress” and its increasingly obvious destructive impacts. His popularity might also be one of the early signs that some Americans felt something important about a man’s strength and character depended on his connection to wilderness. As wilderness shrank a corresponding anxiety would grow.<sup>8</sup>

---

8 The foremost exemplar of this anxiety was Frederick Jackson Turner, whose “Frontier Thesis” (1893) captured such anxiety, shortly after as the last of the tribes resisting the European invasion were suppressed and the frontier was officially declared closed by the U.S. Census Bureau, as the European presence then stretched coast to coast.

## 5. Wilderness in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century in North America

Possibly exemplifying this nascent trend of nature appreciation and anxiety about the loss of human wildness was the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush, who in 1800, “explicitly connected primitivism and wilderness by observing that ‘man is naturally a wild animal, and ... taken from the woods, he is never happy ... ’till he returns to them again’” (Nash 1967, 56). This recognition of human animality was a remarkable acknowledgement for a person writing more than a half century before Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* was published. Soon after Rush, in 1818, the New Hampshire lawyer Estwick Evans put such feelings into practice. Wearing clothes and moccasins made of buffalo and bearskin, he headed west, writing, “I wish to acquire the simplicity, native feelings, and virtues of savage life; to divest myself of the factitious habits, prejudices and imperfections of civilization ... and to find amidst the solitude and grandeur of the western wilds, more correct views of human nature and the true interest of man” (in Nash 1967, 56). Soon Evans would write what Nash called a “Romantic paean” to wilderness:

How great are the advantages of solitude!  
How sublime is the silence of nature’s ever-active energies!  
There is something in the very name of wilderness, which charms the ear,  
and soothes the spirit of man.  
There is religion in it (Evans 1819, in Nash 1967, 56).

Nash accurately commented: “In the sweep of Western thought, this was a relatively young idea, and one with revolutionary implications. If religion was identified with wilderness rather than opposed to it, as had traditionally been the case, the basis for appreciation, rather than hatred, was created” (Nash 1967, 56). Evans’ statement also represents an example and early recognition of “nature religion”, namely, the idea that nature itself can be the wellspring of religious belief, perception, and reverence.<sup>9</sup> It also represents the long stream in North American culture of appreciation of Native Americans for their supposed connection to nature,

---

9 This paper is rooted in an approach to the study of religion that is unconcerned with where the boundaries of “religion” lie, and more interested in what can be learned about social phenomena that have traits and characteristics typically associated with the term. For more on this “family resemblance” approach to religion studies, see Taylor (2007 or 2010, 1–4).

which often coexisted with fears and negative stereotypes (Pedersen 1995; Krech 1999; Kalland 2005).

Poets and other writers proliferated, expressing feelings of being spiritually connected to nature. William Cullen Bryant, for example, wrote “A Forest Hymn” in 1825 about his conviction that the Creator’s hand could be found in the very forests that most European Americans had previously found perilous. Shortly afterward, James Fenimore Cooper began publishing five “Leatherstocking tales” novels, beginning with *The Last of Mohicans* in 1826. The tales focused on a Native American named Leatherstocking (and Natty Bumppo), who was a liminal figure navigating a perilous space between Native American, nature-revering cultures, and the dominant, expanding, Euro-American empire. Readers learned that good character depends on a rootedness in nature, nature is holy, deforestation is a desecrating act, and America’s superiority over Europe is due to its wild nature (Nash 1967, 75–77). Cooper not only expressed reverence for the land but an appreciation for Native American lifeways and what he considered to be their closeness to nature, a perspective that would become an important feature typical of much environmentalist thinking. This perspective was also evident in the earliest calls for nature preservation, such as in 1832 when George Catlin, “an early student and painter of the American Indian,” became the first to promote the idea of setting aside large national parks that would include both wild natural beauty as well as Indians (Nash 1967, 100–101). This would not be the course that the wilderness preservation movement would take, as has now been pointed out by numerous critics; Indian removal, even if not always immediate or violent, became the official policy in the management of National Parks and forests (Keller 1998, Spence 1999).

More dramatic expressions of Romanticism soon followed Cooper and Catlin, this time, in the landscapes of a group that became known as the Hudson River School painters. Led by Thomas Cole, who was directly influenced by Lord Byron, and whom Nash called a romantic pantheist, these artists generally depicted human beings as insignificant and nature as sublime (Nash 1967, 78–79, 81). Cole’s famous “Course of Empire” series, five paintings he produced in 1836, repeated the romantic theme of a decline from a harmonious state of nature to a devastated world wrought by civilization. Nevertheless, in the final painting, nature was seen re-emerging, after the environmental apocalypse. Many environmental artists would revisit such themes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Yet another painter from the school, Edward Hicks, depicted “Noah’s Ark” in 1849,

perhaps implicitly expressing an affinity for the earth's biological diversity, shortly before advocates for wilderness would begin to make the case explicitly. The fledgling Christian environmental movement, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, used the painting when lobbying congress in the hopes of protecting endangered species (Kearns 1997).

The same year that Cole focused his paintings on empire, 1836, the great transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson published his now-famous essay, *Nature*, arguing that all natural objects can awaken reverence, "when the mind is open to their influence" (Emerson 2000 [1836]). Emerson wrote in ways that sometimes sounded pantheistic, other times animistic, speaking of spiritual truths conveyed by nonhuman organisms. He did not advocate protection of wilderness, however, very likely because of his Platonic view (central to Transcendentalism) that nature is more "the pathway to spiritual truth than ... a spiritual end"; nevertheless, he "contributed decisively to the dramatic rise in nature appreciation in the latter decades of the nineteenth century" (Taylor and Van Horn 2006, 169). It was an appreciation advanced famously in an often-quoted passage by Emerson's friend Walt Whitman, who wrote in *Leaves of Grass* (1855), "This is what you shall do: love the earth and sun and animals" (Whitman 2005 [1855], vi). Whitman seemed to be more clearly speaking about here-and-now nature than did Emerson, however, and he articulated a religious kinship ethic with non-human nature that easily fits with the then nascent ethics that values wilderness for its biological diversity.

One can certainly wonder whether Henry David Thoreau would have become the 19<sup>th</sup> century's most important philosopher promoting wilderness (and wildness) had he not forged his thinking with Emerson as his mentor and muse. But to do so, he had also to break decisively with Emerson's Platonic spiritualism in favor of a more naturalistic spirituality in which wild nature, including a wild human nature, could become the centerpiece. Indeed, Thoreau wrote of experiences and perceptions that were pantheistic and animistic, and he spoke sympathetically of paganism. He rejected Christianity, doing so in a way that reflected his lifelong interest in Native Americans and *their* worldviews, once stating that that he had much to learn from Indians (and implicitly their spirituality and life practices) but nothing to learn from missionaries or even Christ.<sup>10</sup> While in his most mature thinking he seemed to remain

---

10 "A snowstorm was more to him than Christ," according to Walter Harding 1965, 464, in Gould 2005, 1635.

convinced that there was some divine dimension to the universe, he also eschewed metaphysical speculation, and instead, articulated an ecological understanding of the interdependence, and mutual dependence, of all life. Moreover, he confessed a strong faith in nature (which was idolatrous in the eyes of the religious mainstream) and promoted kinship ethics and concern for biodiversity, a century before the term was even coined.<sup>11</sup> Indeed as Lawrence Buell noticed, Emerson implicitly recognized Thoreau's ecocentrism when he paid "tribute to him as the attorney of the indigenous plants" (Buell 1966, 363).

With Thoreau, a decisive shift began, only rarely hinted at previously, in which wilderness ecosystems would be understood holistically and valued for the biological diversity they harbor. Before Thoreau, appreciation for nature and wilderness, if present at all, was for anthropocentric reasons, either for aesthetic pleasures, spiritual enlightenment, or for its ability to buttress the national self-esteem among the citizens of the relatively young American republic by providing a positive, comparative reference point to Europe. Increasingly from this time forward, and this accounts for much of the material interests that drove wilderness protection movements, wilderness would also be valued for its commercial value as a tourist destination. All of these wilderness values would get wrapped up and exceptionally complicated in the American conservation movement, including among its wilderness advocates. But after Thoreau, there would always be some for whom the protection of the country's natural heritage, and all of its diverse ecosystem types and species, was the central objective (Taylor 2001a, 2001b, 2010).

The next seminal figure was John Muir, who was born in Scotland in 1838, and immigrated to rural Wisconsin as a youngster, after which he helped to convert wild woods into a farm, as demanded by his severe and ardently Christian father. In 1861 Muir enrolled at the University of Wisconsin, where he developed an interest in natural science, but he eventually drifted away on long journeys, first to the southeastern

---

11 David Takacs stated that while the importance of biological diversity had been known and discussed for several generations, the term was not coined until 1986 by someone involved in the 1986 "National Forum on BioDiversity," which "was sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences and the Smithsonian Institution" (Takacs 1996, 36). His book shows the strong, religion-resembling love of nature among many biologists who work to defend biodiversity, some of whom have also been ardent wilderness partisans, such as the conservation biologists Michael Soulé (see 1995) and Reed Noss (see 1994, 2002); see also Meine, Soulé and Noss (2006).

U.S., and eventually to California. Along the way, he rejected the anthropocentric and anti-nature views of the Christianity he knew growing up. He found such views to be incompatible with natural facts, especially, the “conceit” that nature and all creatures were created just for humankind (Muir 1997 [1911], 231]; see also Muir 1997[1916], Taylor 2010, 61–70). Although inspired early by the Transcendentalist writings of Emerson, he was more drawn to the German explorer and naturalist Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), whose path-breaking analyses help account for Muir’s keen awareness of ecological interdependence, notions reinforced by his reading of Thoreau. Muir became an adventurer, naturalist, writer, and eventually, the driving force behind the Sierra Club, which he founded in 1892. His preservationist goals were incorporated into National Park Service’s management philosophy in the United States, and later, the idea and model spread to over 100 countries beyond the U.S.

Muir’s spirituality was rooted, first and foremost, in ecstatic experiences in nature that variously involved both animistic and pantheistic perceptions, as well as a deep understanding of ecological interdependence. While some Christian writers consider Muir as one of their own (Cartwright 1987), the most comprehensive studies, as well as my own research, portray Muir as more pagan than theistic (Fox 1981, Cohen 1984, Worster 1998, Taylor 2010, 61–70). Muir wrote in prose indebted variously to Transcendentalism and Romanticism; nature as both beautiful and “sublime” is woven into his descriptions of dramatic natural areas, as well as were descriptions of intimate encounters with plants and animals, and expansive feelings of belonging to the universe. And while he would sometimes use theistic language it is likely he did so because he thought it was politically useful to use language that, he hoped, would be compelling to the dominantly Christian public he sought to enlist in the wilderness cause. Certainly Muir’s writing often viciously (and humorously) attacked the Christian thinking prevalent in his day. Even though the terms anthropocentrism or biocentrism had not been coined, without any doubt, he had contempt for the former and affinity with the latter. Indeed, Muir’s biocentric moral sentiments were more consistently and clearly expressed than Thoreau’s.

Muir understood that the anthropocentric Christianity predominant at his time was antithetical to wilderness preservation; but there were forms more conducive. Gifford Pinchot, the utilitarian forester and founder of the United States Forest Service, was influenced by the Social Gospel movement that flourished at the turn of the 20th century, and



placed a priority on providing for the poor and needy (Naylor 1999, 2005). With his utilitarian and progressive approach, Pinchot wanted to conserve natural resources so that all people could benefit from them, not just the wealthy. Pinchot succeeded in establishing a utilitarian, “multiple use” management philosophy for most federal forests and other wildlands. This approach seeks to allow the extraction of “natural resources,” as well as diverse forms of human recreation, so long as these resources would be taken in a way that would not deny them to future generations. In practice, however, the multiple use philosophy has seldom prevented serious degradation of natural ecosystems, a fact that preservationists are quick to point out. But preservationists have also, often, viewed wildlands as sacred places that should remain inviolate, set off from human extractive and commercial enterprise; anything less is desecration, they often feel. Indeed, for those who consider wilderness and wildlife as sacred, the terminology of “natural resources” was misleading and spiritually misguided. Muir certainly clearly felt this way: after a falling out with Pinchot (who he had met and with whom he initially felt great affinity), for pursuing dam building, unregulated grazing, and other commercial enterprises, he likened him and his allies to temple destroyers. For just one example, when in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Pinchot sought to dam the Tuolumne river at Hetch Hetchy valley in California’s Sierra Nevada mountains, Muir compared him to “Satan,” and called him and his allies “mischief makers and robbers” (in Fox 1981, 141) – and with the fervor of a prophet, he declared “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people’s cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man” (in Cohen 1984, 330).

This strategy, to label perceived opponents of wilderness as desecrating agents, has periodically been deployed by wilderness advocates ever since Muir’s time. It has at times been effective because many Americans have come to view their National Parks and wilderness areas as sacred places that should be off limits to commercial incursions (Graber 1976, Ross-Bryant 1990, Taylor 1995). Indeed, the breach between the anthropocentric and utilitarian conservationism of Pinchot, and the biocentric and spiritual preservationism of Muir, would, throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, characterize much of the tension among conservation-minded Americans.

One more figure deserves mention at this point, even though he was not as directly engaged in wilderness issues. John Burroughs was a contemporary of Muir and Pinchot, living and writing during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. He became a prominent literary naturalist

who is best known for the decisive role he played in spurring back-to-the-land movements in North America. Even though he was rooted in a secular, evolutionary worldview, he was nevertheless an important voice for appreciating the wonders of nature, and he often expressed this appreciation using religious rhetoric, as in this remarkable statement, which captured a trend then well underway, and that fits many Americans in subsequent generations: “The forms and creeds of religion change, but the sentiment of religion – the wonder and reverence and love we feel in the presence of the inscrutable universe-persists. Indeed, these seem to be renewing their life today in this growing love for all natural objects and in this increasing tenderness toward all forms of life. If we do not go to church so much as did our fathers, we go to the woods much more, and are much more inclined to make a temple of them than they were” (Burroughs 2001 [1912], 246). The very effort to establish and protect wilderness areas can be understood to be a way of establishing such places as sacred spaces, as temples for those who have left behind conventional religions.

## 6. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the Wilderness Act of 1964

The religious dimension of the diverse figures and movements that understand nature as sacred in some way, and that think all life deserves respect and reverent care, has not always been as obvious as they were in Burroughs’ words. Over time, as increasing numbers of Americans came to see themselves as secular naturalists (either agnostics or atheists), the religious (or religion-resembling) perceptions and feelings that lead to passionate wilderness advocacy sometimes became more subtle. With the right lenses, however, these perceptions can be brought into view.

Just as Thoreau is properly considered the greatest environmental philosopher in North America during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Aldo Leopold (1887–1948) deserves a similar title in the 20<sup>th</sup>. One of the country’s first foresters with the United States Forest Service, and later, while a professor of game management at the University of Wisconsin, in 1935, Leopold co-founded the Wilderness Society. These experiences, as well as a great deal of time spent in close observation of natural systems, went into *A Sand County Almanac*, which was published posthumously in 1949, shortly after Leopold’s untimely death. In this text, Leopold subtly expressed a deep emotional connection to and reverence for the earth, which has resonated with a great many readers. He also articulated an or-

ganicist understanding of ecological interdependence that presaged James Lovelock's Gaia theory (1979), and most importantly, set forth his "land ethic," which many consider to be the foremost expression of an ecocentric land ethic.<sup>12</sup> The *Almanac* has become a sacred text for many environmentalists and wilderness lovers, who commonly cite certain passages including:

The land is one organism . . . . If the land mechanism as a whole is good, then every part is good, whether we understand it or not... . All ethics so far evolved rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... . The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively: the land... . A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community (Leopold 1949, 190, 239, 262).

Less well known is the influence on Leopold's thought by the Russian mystic Pyotr Demianovich Ouspensky, who was in turn influenced by other Russian mystical thinkers, including Georges Ivanovitch Gurdjieff, as well as by Theosophy. Leopold's holism, some scholars think, can be traced to these influences (Pecotic 2005; Pryor 2011). Like Thoreau and Muir, however, far more decisive for Leopold was his long personal observation of nature. Indeed, although Leopold was reticent to talk publicly about spiritual matters, he did confide to family members that his own religion came from nature, and that if he had to characterize it, he would probably say that he was pantheistic. His offspring were certain that he did not believe in a personal God, but nevertheless, felt that the living world was sacred to him, and that he considered it to be valuable apart from human needs (Meine 1988, 506–07).

Although it took some time for Leopold's book to find its audience, Muir's Sierra Club, and the Wilderness Society Leopold helped to shape, and a host of environmental groups that would follow, drew Romantics who found wild habitats aesthetically pleasing and spiritually meaningful. Generally speaking and increasingly, such feelings were fused with ecological understandings of the interdependence, and corresponding values that put a premium on the retention of all of the living things that constitute and contribute to the resilience of environmental systems. Wilder-

---

12 Biocentrism and ecocentrism are often understood to be synonyms, but there are differences; the former refers to life-centered values, the latter to ecosystem-centered value priorities, which are more focused on the health of environmental systems than on individual species, and is thus a more holistic ethics than is biocentrism.

ness “purists”, as the geographer Linda Graber (1976) labeled them in an early book about their perception of wilderness areas as sacred, ranged from those deeply suspicious of or hostile to civilization, to those who valued civilization but thought it must be constrained.

A good example of an individual who *valued* civilization but fought tenaciously to protect wilderness *from* it was the Minnesotan canoe outfitter, teacher, and writer, Sigurd Olson. Olson is best known for a series of books promoting wilderness as essential for human spiritual health and wellbeing, and also, for playing a major role in the protection of the multi-lake wilderness of north-eastern Minnesota, which eventually was designated the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness (Backes 1997). Olson was also one of the first persons to join the Wilderness Society, and he not only eventually served on its governing board and as its President, he also served as the President of the National Parks Association. His writings expressed many of the themes common among wilderness partisans, a deep feeling of belonging and connection to nature, animistic perceptions, and feelings of kinship with non-human organisms. Like John Muir, Olson had rejected the severe form of Christianity that he knew from his passionately evangelical father, partly because he so often had to battle such Christians in his efforts to save wilderness. Olson nevertheless seemed to retain a sense that God was in nature, or responsible somehow for it (Olson 2001). Unlike Leopold, however, the protection of biodiversity never seemed to be a central rationale behind Olson’s wilderness advocacy. This shows, then as now, that there are many motivations animating wilderness activists.

One incident David Backes mentioned in his excellent biography of Olson is worth special mention. In 1963, John Carver, an assistant secretary in the U.S. Department of the Interior, which supervises the National Park Service, gave a blistering speech that offended many of the assembled National Park superintendents. He charged, “When all else fails the Park Service seems always able to fall back upon mysticism.” Then, referring to a Park Service memorandum, Carver declared that it had “the mystic, quasi-religious sound of a manual for the Hitler Youth Movement”! He underscored that the Park Service was a branch of the U.S. government and insisted, “it isn’t a religion, and it should not be thought of as such” (in Backes 1997, 303). Here, Carver gave voice to a critique of the wilderness preservation movement that would within a few decades become common, that wilderness fanatics were a spiritual and political

danger; some went so far as to label environmental and wilderness advocates “ecofascists.”<sup>13</sup>

Just as revealing, Olson saved the conference and the morale of its employees with a rousing defense of the spiritual dimension of their conservationist mission. According to Backes, he exhorted these Parks employees to be unashamed about their devotion to the cause of conservation because their ultimate sentiment in so doing was love, and a desire to protect the “silent sanctuaries and the eternal perspectives” that the Parks provide (in Backes 1997, 304). In essence, Olson was affirming that indeed, federal employees charged with protecting wilderness had a sacred calling and that they should stand firm and be proud of it.

Carver’s frustrated critique was the earliest expression of what became a common criticism by critics of wilderness and of wilderness advocates, that they consider wilderness sacred and are motivated by religious (or at least religion-resembling) sentiments. Sometimes, to such criticisms are added charges that these are idolatrous and spiritually perilous beliefs that worship or trust in nature rather than God. Other times the charge has been that the U.S. Park or Forest Service, or at least some of its employees, publications, interpretive displays, films, and presentations, and even management decisions, promote nature-venerating religion in a way that violates the non-establishment clause of the United States constitution.<sup>14</sup> Some scholarly studies also have also noticed that Interior Department agencies (or personnel) sometimes promote nature spiritualities or otherwise take sides in religion-related public land disputes (Burton 2002; Mitchell 2007, Glass 2005, Taylor and Geffen 2003). A book edited by scholars associated with the Forest Service, including and especially the Foreword written by Jack Ward Thomas, Chief of the United States Forest Service during much of the 1990 s, titled *Nature and the Human*

13 For arguments that environmentalism has fascist tendencies see Bramwell 1989, Ferry 1995, Biehl 1995; for more nuanced assessments, see Zimmerman 1994, 1995, Clark 1996, 2005, Taylor 1998, 2004.

14 In October 1999 there was even a lawsuit filed by loggers against the U.S. Forest service and two environmental groups claiming they were in cahoots with environmental organizations to establish “deep ecology religion” on the public lands by restricting logging. Although the case was dismissed, and some of the legal premises were absurd, the notion that some Americans consider wilderness sacred and want to protect it for that reason was not. For a discussion, see Taylor and Geffen 2003, and for the case, *Associated Contract Loggers, Inc. and Olson Logging, Inc, Plaintiffs, versus United States Forest Service, Superior Wilderness Action Network, and Forest Guardians*, Case No.99–1485 JMR/RLE, United States District Court, District Of Minnesota.

*Spirit*, provides compelling evidence in this regard (Thomas 1996; see also Taylor and Geffen 2003). All this shows how deeply wilderness, and wilderness spirituality, has become rooted in U.S. culture, so much so that for the most part, Americans absorb and resonate with the subtle nature spirituality expressed by their resource agency rangers and other personnel; generally speaking, only the most astute individuals even notice, and only the most religiously conservative of those who do notice, object (Taylor 2010, 203–07).

It was only a year after the incident in which Carver expressed frustration with the religious sentiments animating and promoted in the National Parks, in 1964, that the U.S. Congress passed the Wilderness Act.<sup>15</sup> In its own words, the Act established procedures

to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition.

Like the establishment of the National Park and Forest Service lands, this was another stunningly unusual, if not unique, example of restraint by a nation, given the previous 10,000 years of agricultural history. The Act then stated, “It is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness.” It also provided a historically important definition of wilderness, as

an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain ... land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has ... land ... of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

It is noteworthy that, while the preservation of natural conditions and forces, and the protection of features that contain ecological value are mentioned, the preservation of biological diversity, which includes ecosys-

---

15 See <http://www.wilderness.net/index.cfm?fuse=NWPS&sec=legisAct> for the text of the Act.

tem variety and the genetic and species diversity of all organisms, was not mentioned, either as a rationale for the Act or as a central objective of it. That concern was not enshrined in law until the US Congress passed, and President Richard Nixon signed, the Endangered Species Act of 1973.

## 7. After the Wilderness and Endangered Species Acts

Space constraints preclude a detailed review of the cultural history of wilderness after the Wilderness Act, but let me briefly highlight key issues and trends.

In 1967, the historian Lynn White Jr. published a now-famous article blaming monotheistic religions, and Christianity especially, for promoting anthropocentric values and indifference if not also hostility toward nature. Such views were nothing new and had been expressed in various ways by Thoreau, Muir, and Leopold. But White's article was published at the dawning of the environmental age in the widely read journal *Science*; consequently it made sense to many readers and became highly influential. Moreover, for generations, many in the U.S. had been drawn to or developing spiritualities that were divorced from organized religions and rooted in nature. So White's critique fell on fertile cultural ground. Meanwhile, while some Christians dismissed his argument, others took it to heart, calling for an enriched appreciation and care for God's created order. Individuals from many other religious traditions, awakening to an increasingly obvious global environmental crisis, looked to their own traditions for spiritual resources to respond, sometimes being quite innovative in so doing, after finding not much in them that provided such resources. This is a process that has now been going on nearly a half century. Scholars have both participated in such revisioning and have been tracking it.<sup>16</sup> Some have mustered evidence and argued that the world's predominant religions are beginning to turn green (Tucker 2003, Gardner 2006, Gottlieb 2006a). I have contended that the most dramatic greening of religion has been outside of long-established religious traditions in "dark green religions," in which people feel a deep sense of belonging and connection to nature and a sense of its sacredness, which is accompanied by feelings of kinship with other organisms and a corre-

---

16 For a brief review, see Taylor 2005a. See also Gottlieb (2006a), and journals *Worldviews* and the *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture*, where much of this ferment is recorded.

sponding belief in their intrinsic value, all of which redound in a passionate concern to protect the biological diversity of the planet, which generally depends on preserving all ecosystem types (Taylor 2010). I have also noted that at least some in the world's predominant religions are developing their own dark green forms. Since wilderness is seen as a good way to describe the large, relatively undisturbed habitats that are needed to ensure that all ecosystems and species survive, such religious evolution is providing at least some modest support for the preservation of wilderness areas today.

The truth is, however, that the cultural gestalt shifts that lead to religious wilderness activism are relatively new, and the future of such efforts, and these places themselves, remains obscure. We do not know with any confidence whether and to what extent the world's predominant religions *are* greening, nor do we know what impact unconventional nature religions will have, including with regard to wilderness preservation. Much more research is needed to more fully understand currently unfolding trends (Taylor 2011).<sup>17</sup> What is clear is that the rationale for preserving large scale habitats, which used to be first and foremost for the spiritual benefit and aesthetic pleasures of the human species, has taken a dramatic turn, and the arguments increasingly turn on preserving wilderness, both terrestrial and marine, because these are the habitats upon which biodiversity, and even the evolutionary process itself, depends. It is important to note, however, that even as the rationales for wilderness

---

17 While in the cited article I emphasized how little we know about the influence of the religion variable and call for further research, I think that, *with regard to wilderness protection movements*, that the weight of current evidence is that religion has been an important and even a decisive variable for some individuals and groups. My views about religion and environmental action in general are indebted both to Emile Durkheim and Max Weber. Durkheim saw religion as a reflection of society, and I think most environmental concern among religious individuals and groups, when it exists, reflects cultural trends rather than does a natural outgrowth from these traditions. Weber also understood religion as a reflection of the society in which it was situated, but he also postulated that sometimes, religious innovation shapes a culture in important and even decisive ways. My view is that it is in the naturalistic nature spiritualities that I discuss in *Dark Green Religion* where the most significant, culture-influencing, and environment-valuing, religious innovation is unfolding (Taylor 2010). Many of the figures and movements promoting wilderness preservation have been a part of this innovative religious (or religion-resembling) productivity, and so at least with regard to these forms, if my current view is correct, we could also conclude that sometimes religion significantly contributes to environmental concern and action, and may continue to do so for the foreseeable future.



turn more scientific, and even when the arguments insist, as Leopold argued, that saving all parts of nature is the essence of prudence, these arguments are usually infused with religious, or at least, religion-resembling sentiment.

## 8. Conclusions

Understandings of wilderness, and the places the term refers to, are diverse and contested, as are the policies that emerged that have designated wilderness areas, as are the agencies that have been established to protect them.<sup>18</sup> In the decades since the passage of the Wilderness Act, the criticisms of the idea of wilderness and the management of places so designated have proliferated. Put briefly:

- Some say the wilderness ideal is inherently dualistic and assumes that people are somehow not a part of nature, and that this leads them to care only for places they think, falsely, they can remove themselves from and leave unimpacted. The result is that the places people routinely inhabit, and the everyday practices that people need to change if they are to create environmentally sustainable livelihoods and lifestyles, receive too little attention, even from environmentally concerned people.
- Others contend that the wilderness idea has been and remains elitist and exclusionary, that only affluent white Americans really benefit from it. They cite the deracination of indigenous and other long-term inhabitants from their lands when Parks and wilderness reserves are established, both in the United States and other countries, and conclude that the model is thus fundamentally unjust.

---

18 The sort of oversimplified binaries that fail to consider the wide range of wilderness-related ideas, spiritualities, and practices, as well as the diverse cultural and environmental habitats from which they emerge, have become all too prevalent in scholarly discourse about wilderness. Moreover, there has been a tendency to reify beliefs and practices about wilderness, as though criticisms and resistance to certain wilderness-related ideas and practices have had no effect on such ideas and practices. The articles in this volume, including the perceptive introduction by its editor, importantly call for much greater nuance in the study of “wilderness,” its various cognates, and the bio-cultural changes influenced by it. Hopefully, more such scholarship will follow.

- Still others insist that wilderness preservation is rooted in a spiritually perilous paganism, or a politically dangerous authoritarianism and an economically pernicious collectivist or socialist impulse.<sup>19</sup>

Defenders of the idea of wilderness acknowledge that while some wilderness defenders may be guilty of dualistic myopia, only caring about the wildest of habitats, but they rejoinder that properly understood wilderness is precious because all life and environmental systems are interconnected, so a desire to protect wilderness should by no means lead to a lack of effort to transform human political systems and everyday practices. Indeed, one cannot save wilderness or the city without reforming human cultures in a very comprehensive way, the most astute of wilderness advocates would argue.

Historically-informed defenders of wilderness certainly recognize shortcomings among those who have advanced the ideal, as well as injustices in the way such areas have been established and managed. This does not, they would nevertheless respond, indicate that the ideal should be abandoned, but rather, that the model should adapt and change in response to compelling criticisms. One such adaptation is that wilderness advocates speak of biosphere and wilderness reserves, and acknowledge that some human habitation can be compatible with the preservation of the spiritual and biological values found in the earth's wildest places.

Defenders of wilderness could also accurately note that as America has become more religiously plural, people of many religious faiths, including some theologically conservative Christians, have come to value wilderness. So have people of other faiths, and no religious faith.

Finally, defenders of wilderness point out that by understanding environmental systems scientifically, we can come to value biological diversity by recognizing its importance to the flourishing of ecosystems and all who depend on them, including our own species. This in turn, provides a strong basis to argue for minimizing human impacts on every type of ecosystem, so we have them as a baseline for understanding how such systems work. This sort of scientific rationale has the potential to provide a prudence-based consensus for establishing and protecting significant areas of the earth as wild habitats. It may be, however, that by understanding such

---

19 Space constraints preclude reviewing the contending arguments here, but the most influential perspectives appear in these (mostly edited) works: Noss 1994, Noss and Cooperrider 1994; Soulé and Lease 1995, Cronon 1995, Callcott and Nelson 1998, Rothenberg and Ulvaeus 2001, Butler 2002, Meine, Soulé and Noss 2006, Smith 2007, Nelson and Callcott 2008.

efforts as ways that moderns have been establishing new sacred places, that those involved in efforts to celebrate and protect such places will find more compelling ways to do so. Perhaps greater attention to the ways that ritual focuses on that which is considered sacred, for example, could help biodiversity advocates to construct experiences that will shape people's desire to care for the world's remaining, relatively intact and wild habitats.

In 2009, a multi-part documentary aired on public television in the United States that was titled "The National Parks: America's best idea."<sup>20</sup> The establishment of National Parks and wilderness reserves in the United States was certainly not the first time that human beings have set biological systems aside, by labeling them sacred, and requiring special and reverent behavior of humans when present. There has, however, been a strong religious dimension to the wilderness and biodiversity preservation movements that have promoted the establishment and preservation of such reserves. These efforts on a large scale first bore fruit in the United States. The wilderness and biodiversity reverence movements might just prove to be ecologically and culturally adaptive, helping human beings to finally learn their planetary manners.

## 9. References<sup>21</sup>

- Albanese, Catherine L. *Nature Religion in America: from the Algonkian Indians to the New Age*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1990.
- Backes, David. *A Wilderness Within: the life of Sigurd F. Olson*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 1997.
- Buell, Lawrence. *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, nature writing, and the formation of American culture*. Belknap/Harvard University Press 1996.
- Burke, Edmund. *Philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*. Edited by A. Phillips. Oxford: Oxford World Classics 1990 [1757].
- Burroughs, John. *Time and Change*. Amsterdam, The Netherlands: Fredonia Books 2001 [1912].

---

20 Ken Burns, "The National Parks: America's Best Idea," U.S. Public Broadcasting Service, 2009. See <http://www.pbs.org/nationalparks/> and from the Internet Movie Database, <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt1464482/>.

21 Bron Taylor wishes to acknowledge the generous support of the Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society which supported this research subsequent to my appointment as a Carson Fellow there in 2011.

- Burton, Lloyd. *Worship and Wilderness: culture, religion, and law in the management of public lands and resources*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 2002.
- Butler, Tom, ed. *Wild Earth: wild ideas for a world out of balance*. Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed 2002.
- Callicott, J. Baird, and Michael P. Nelson, eds. *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Athens: University of Georgia Press 1998.
- Cartwright, Richard Austin. *Baptized into Wilderness: A Christian perspective on John Muir*. Louisville, KY John Knox Press 1987.
- Clark, John. "The French take on environmentalism". *Terra Nova* 1 (1) (1996): 112–19.
- Cohen, Michael P. *The Pathless Way: John Muir and American wilderness*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1984.
- Cronon, William, ed. *Uncommon Ground: toward reinventing nature*. New York: Norton 1995.
- Denevan, William M. "The pristine myth: the landscape of the Americas in 1492". *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 82 (3) (1992):369–385.
- Denevan, William M., ed. "The Native population of the Americas in 1492". 2nd ed. Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press 1992.
- Diamond, Jared. "The worst mistake in the history of the human race". *Discover* (May1987): 64–66.
- Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: the fates of human societies*. New York: Norton 1997.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature*. In *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, edited by B. Atkinson. New York: The Modern Library 2000 [1836].
- Evans, Estwick. *A pedestrious tour of four thousand miles through the Western states and territories during the winter and spring of 1818*. Concord, New Hampshire 1819.
- Ferry, Luc. *The New Ecological Order*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press 1995. Original edition, Bernard Graset; Paris; 1992.
- Fox, Stephen. *The American Conservation Movement: John Muir and his legacy*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1981.
- Gardner, Gary. *Inspiring Progress: Religion's Contributions to Sustainable Development*. New York: Norton 2006.
- Gatta, John. *Making Nature Sacred: literature, religion, and environment in America from the puritans to the present*. Oxford & Cambridge: Oxford University Press 2004.
- Glass, Matthew. "National Parks and Monuments". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum 2005.
- Glave, Dianne, and Mark Stoll, eds. *To Love the Wind and the Rain: African Americans and Environmental History*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press 2006.
- Gottlieb, Roger S. *A Greener Faith: religious environmentalism and our planet's future*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2006.
- Gottlieb, Roger S., ed. *Oxford Handbook of Religion and Ecology*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2006.

- Gould, Rebecca Kneale. Thoreau, Henry David. In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005.
- Grabar, Linda. *Wilderness as Sacred Space*. Washington, D.C.: Association of American Geographers 1976.
- Harding, Walter. *The days of Henry Thoreau: A biography*. New York: Knopf 1965.
- Harrison, Robert Pogue. *Forests: the shadow of civilization*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1992.
- Jacoby, Karl. *Crimes against Nature: Squatters, Poachers, Thieves, and the Hidden History of American Conservation*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press 2001.
- Kalland, Arne. "The Religious Environmentalist Paradigm". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Observations on the feeling of the beautiful and sublime*. 1960 [1764]. Second Paperback Edition 2003 ed. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Kearns, Laurel. "Noah's Ark Goes to Washington: a profile of evangelical environmentalism". *Social Compass* 44 (3) (1997):349–366.
- Keller, Robert H., and Michael F. Turek. *American Indians and National Parks*. Tucson, Arizona: University of Arizona Press 1998.
- Krech, Shepard. *The Ecological Indian: myth and history*. New York: Norton 1999.
- Leopold, Aldo. *A Sand County Almanac with Essays on Conservation from Round River*. Enlarged ed. New York: Sierra Club and Ballantine Books 1966 [1949]. Original edition, Oxford University Press, 1949.
- Lewis, Michael L., ed. *American Wilderness: a new history*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2007.
- Lockwood, Julie L., and Michael L. McKinney, eds. 2001. *Biotic Homogenization*. New York: Springer.
- Lovelock, James. *Gaia, a new look at life on earth*. Oxford 7 New York: Oxford University Press 1979.
- Marsh, George Perkins. *The Earth as Modified by Human Action*. New York City: Arno 1970 [1864]. Original edition, Scribner, Armstrong and Co.; New York; 1874.
- Mason, Jim. *An Unnatural Order: uncovering the roots of our domination of nature and each other*. New York: Simon and Schuster 1993.
- Meine, Curt. *Aldo Leopold: his life and work*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press 1988.
- Meine, Curt, Michael Soulé, and Noss Reed. "A mission-driven discipline: the growth of conservation biology". *Conservation Biology* 20 (2006): 631–651.
- Miller, Perry. *Errand into the Wilderness*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press 1956.
- Mitchell, Kerry. "Managing spirituality: public religion and National Parks". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1 (4) (2007).

- Muir, John. Cedar Keys. In *Muir: nature writings*, edited by W. Cronon. New York: The Library of America 1997 [1916].
- Muir, John. "My First Summer in the Sierra". In *Muir: nature writings*, edited by W. Cronon. New York: The Library of America 1997 [1911].
- Nash, Roderick Frazier. *Wilderness and the American mind*. 4th ed. New Haven: Yale University Press 2001 [1967]. Original edition, Yale University Press, 1967.
- Naylor, D. Keith. "Gifford Pinchot, the conservation movement, and the social gospel". In *Perspectives on the Social Gospel: papers from the inaugural social gospel conference at Colgate Rochester Divinity School*, edited by C. Evans: Edwin Mellon Press 1999.
- Naylor, Keith. "Pinchot, Gifford". In *Encyclopedia of religion and nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005.
- Nelson, Michael P., and J. Baird Callicott. *The Wilderness Debate Rages On: continuing the great new wilderness debate*. Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press 2008.
- Noss, Reed F. "Wilderness—now more than ever: a response to Callicott". *Wild Earth* 4 (4) (1994): 60–63.
- Noss, Reed F., and Allen Y. Cooperrider. *Saving Nature's Legacy: protecting and restoring biodiversity*. Washington, DC: Island Press 1994.
- Oelschlaeger, Max. *The Idea of Wilderness: from prehistory to the age of ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press 1991.
- Oelschlaeger, Max, ed. *The Wilderness Condition: essays on environment and civilization*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books 1992.
- Olson, Sigurd F., and David Backes. *The Meaning of Wilderness: essential articles and speeches*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press 2001.
- Pecotic, David. "Ouspensky, Pyotr Demianovich". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005.
- Pedersen, Poul. "Nature, Religion and Cultural Identity: The Religious Environmentalist Paradigm". In *Asian Perceptions of Nature: a critical approach*, edited by O. Bruun and A. Kalland: Curzon Press 1995, 258–276.
- Perreault, Melanie. "American wilderness and first contact". In *American Wilderness: a new history*, edited by M. L. Lewis. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2007.
- Ponting, Clive. *A New Green History of the World: the environment and the collapse of great civilizations*. Rev. ed. New York: Penguin Books 2007.
- Pryor, Ashley. "Thinking like a mystic: The unacknowledged legacy of P.D. Ouspensky's Tertium Organum on the development of Leopold's, "Thinking Like a Mountain". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5 (4) (2011): 465–490.
- Quinn, Daniel. *Ishmael: "A novel"*. New York: Turner/Bantam 1992.
- Quinn, Daniel. *The Story of B*. New York: Bantam 1996.
- Reed, Charles A. *Origins of Agriculture*. The Hague: Mouton 1977.
- Ross-Bryant, Lynn. "The land in American religious experience". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 58, 3 (1990).

- Roth, Dennis M. *The Wilderness Movement and the National Forests*. College Station, Texas: Intaglio 1990.
- Rothenberg, David, and Marta Ulvaeus. *The World and the Wild*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press 2001.
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Émile*. Phoenix, AZ: Everyman 1963 [1762].
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Julie or the New Heloise (Juli ou la Nouvelle Héloïse)*. Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press 1997 [1761].
- Ruffin, K. N. *Black on Earth: African American ecoliterary traditions*. Athens, University of Georgia Press 2010.
- Shepard, Paul. "A post-historic primitivism". In *The Wilderness condition: essays on environment and civilization*, edited by M. Oelschlaeger. San Francisco: Island Press & Sierra Club Books 1992, 40–89.
- Shepard, Paul. *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*. San Francisco: Island Press 1998.
- Smith, Kimberly K. *African American Environmental Thought*. Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas 2007.
- Smith-Cavros, Eileen M. "Modern Black Churchgoers in Miami-Dade County, Florida: Place, Nature, and Memory". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1 (3) (2007): 351–370.
- Smith-Cavros, Eileen M. "Black Churchgoers, Environmental Activism and the Preservation of Nature in Miami, Florida". *Journal of Ecological Anthropology* 10 (1) (2007): 33–44.
- Soulé, Michael, and Gary Lease, eds. *Reinventing Nature?: responses to postmodern deconstruction*. Washington D.C.: Island Press 1995.
- Spence, Mark David. *Dispossessing the Wilderness: indian removal and the making of the national parks*. Oxford University Press 1999.
- Stoll, Mark. "Religion 'irradiates' the wilderness". In *American wilderness: a new history*, edited by M. L. Lewis. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2007.
- Stoll, Steven. "Farm against forest". In *American Wilderness: a new history*, edited by M. L. Lewis. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2007.
- Takacs, David. *The Idea of Biodiversity: philosophies of paradise*. Baltimore, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press 1996.
- Taylor, Bron. "Resacralizing earth: pagan environmentalism and the restoration of Turtle Island. In *American Sacred Space*, edited by D. Chidester and E. T. Linenthal. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 1995, 97–151.
- Taylor, Bron. "Religion, Violence, and Radical Environmentalism: From Earth First! to the Unabomber to the Earth Liberation Front. *Terrorism and Political Violence* 10 (4) (1998): 10–42.
- Taylor, Bron. "Earth and nature-based spirituality (part II): from deep ecology and bioregionalism to scientific paganism and the New Age. *Religion* 31 (3) (2001b): 225–245.
- Taylor, Bron. "Earth and nature-Based spirituality (part I): from deep ecology to radical environmentalism". *Religion* 31 (2) (2001a): 175–193.
- Taylor, Bron. "Threat Assessments and Radical Environmentalism". *Terrorism and Political Violence* 15 (4) (2004): 172–183.

- Taylor, Bron. "Religious studies and environmental concern". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005a.
- Taylor, Bron, ed. *The Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*. London & New York: Continuum 2005b.
- Taylor, Bron. "Exploring religion, nature, and culture". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 1 (1) (2007): 5–24.
- Taylor, Bron. *Dark Green Religion: nature spirituality and the planetary future*. Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press 2010.
- Taylor, Bron. "Toward a robust scientific investigation of the 'religion' variable in the quest for sustainability". *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 5 (3) (2011): 253–62.
- Taylor, Bron, and Joel Geffen. "Battling Religions in Parks and Forest Reserves: facing religion in conflicts over protected places". In *The Full Value of Parks and Protected Areas: from economics to the intangible*, edited by D. Harmon and A. Putney. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield 2003, 281–294.
- Taylor, Bron, and Gavin Van Horn. "Nature religion and environmentalism in North America". In *Faith in America, "Personal Spirituality Today"* (v. 3), edited by C. H. Lippy. Westport, CT, London: Praeger 2006, 165–190.
- Thomas, Jack Ward. "Foreword. In *Nature and the Human Spirit: toward an expanded land management ethic*", edited by B. L. Driver, D. Dustin, T. Baltic, G. Elsner and G. Peterson. State College, Pennsylvania: Venture Publishing 1996.
- Thornton, Russell. *American Indian Holocaust and Survival: a population history since 1492*. 1st ed., The Civilization of the American Indian series v. 186. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press 1987.
- Tucker, Mary Evelyn. *Worldly Wonder: religions enter their ecological phase*. La-Salle, Illinois: Open Court 2003.
- Turner, Frederick Jackson. "The significance of the frontier in American history". In *The Frontier in American History* (collected works), edited by unknown. Melbourne, Florida: Krieger 1962 [1893].
- White, Lynn. "The historic roots of our ecologic crisis". *Science* 155 (1967):1203–1207.
- Whitman, Walt. *Leaves of Grass*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2005 [1855].
- Williams, Michael. 2003. *Deforesting the Earth: from prehistory to global crisis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Worster, Donald. "Nature, Liberty, and Equality". In *American Wilderness: a new history*, edited by M. L. Lewis. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2007, 263–272.
- Worster, Donald. *A Passion for Nature: the life of John Muir*. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press 2008.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. "Ecofascism: threat to American environmentalism?" *Social Theory and Practice* 21, 2 (1995):207 f.
- Zimmerman, Michael E. "Ecofascism". In *Encyclopedia of Religion and Nature*, edited by B. Taylor. London & New York: Continuum International 2005.