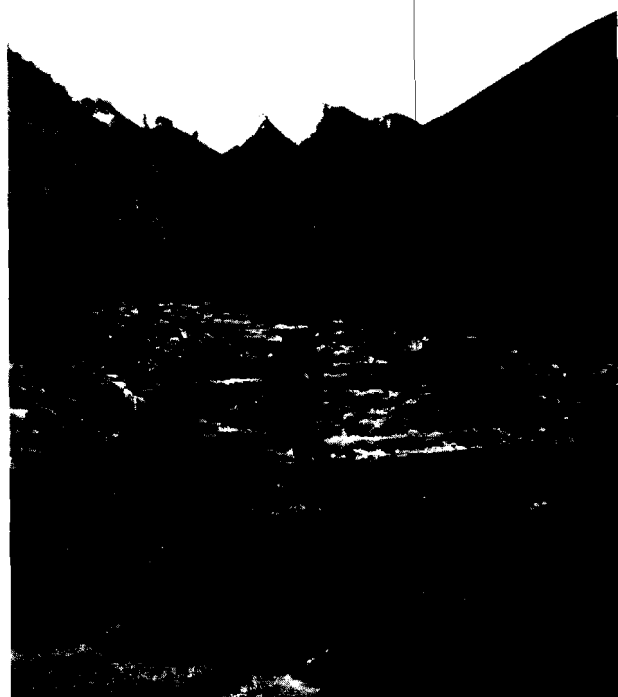


WILDERNESS

Throughout history wilderness has had many definitions and connotations. In the Book of Joel in the Bible the wilderness is characterized as a "desolate" place to put behind one and set in contrast to the "Garden of Eden" before one. For American transcendentalists such as John Muir wilderness was to be preserved because it was viewed as the handiwork of God. For Muir's father, Daniel, in contrast, wilderness was to be destroyed because it was the foothold of the Devil. Dictionary definitions range from the Middle English denotation of "a place of wild beasts," to a place "uncultivated," to a place "undisturbed" or "uninhabited" by human beings. Aldo Leopold referred to wilderness as "the raw material out of which man has hammered the artifact called civilization" and therefore considered it "a resource which can shrink but cannot grow" (1949, pp. 188, 199). For the historian Frederick Jackson Turner experience with the wilderness frontier shaped and has continued to influence the American character.

ORIGINS OF WILDERNESS PRESERVATION

Though wilderness is a variously defined and ancient concept, many environmentalists consider the preservation of wilderness one of the most important goals of environmentalism. The focus on wilderness preservation is perhaps



Hiking in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, Alaska. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge encompasses 19.2 million acres of Arctic and subarctic habitat, 8 million acres of which are designated wilderness. Established in 1960, the refuge became a place of debate in the 1980s and onward because of the presence of (projectedly) billions of barrels of crude oil underneath its surface. U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE.

the most characteristic component and contribution of North American environmentalism. The movement to preserve areas of wilderness in the United States, for instance, goes back to the early 1900s and can be seen as a reaction against a certain level of civilizing transformation and the despoliation of a presumably pristine landscape, whether the battle to save Hetch Hetchy Valley in the Yosemite from damming in the early 1900s or the early twenty-first-century battle over oil drilling in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge.

Wilderness preservation has been the cause célèbre of a number of environmental groups. In late 1934 and early 1935 a group of American environmental leaders that included Benton MacKaye, Robert Marshall, Aldo Leopold, and Robert Sterling Yard founded the Wilderness Society, whose purpose is “to save from invasion . . . that extremely minor fraction of outdoor America which yet remains free from mechanical sights and sounds and smell.” Other environmental groups, including the Wild-

lands Project and the Rewilding Institute, also focus their efforts on the preservation of wilderness, and groups such as the Sierra Club (founded by John Muir in 1892) see wilderness preservation as a significant dimension of their work. The uniqueness of North American ideas about wilderness is pointed out by the fact that although the preservation of “protected areas” has become a component of conservation efforts in other parts of the world, the term *wilderness* seldom is evoked in those places; when it is used, American ideas about the meaning of wilderness almost always are cited.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s a number of environmental historians and philosophers introduced a series of criticisms of the concept of wilderness. Those criticisms prompted defensive responses from other environmental scholars and activists. This “great new wilderness debate” continues to rage. The concept is “alleged” by its critics “to be ethnocentric, androcentric, phallogocentric, unscientific, unphilosophic, impolitic, outmoded, even genocidal” (Callicott and Nelson 1998, p. 2).

THE RECEIVED WILDERNESS IDEA

The legitimacy of such charges depends on the existence of a “received wilderness idea,” or a conception of wilderness that is socially crafted and that infiltrates the collective consciousness of a specific community in an essentially uniform fashion. Thus, those who offer a critique of the concept of wilderness do so with the assumption that wilderness is a social construction and that even from an environmental standpoint it is flawed, counterproductive, and even dangerous. Many of those who consider themselves defenders of wilderness deny that there is a received wilderness idea, asserting instead a wilderness realism or the idea that wilderness has a reality beyond that which people socially construct for it. Others defend the concept of wilderness by agreeing that it is a social construction but argue that it is not the social construction that critics believe it to be.

Wilderness constructivists point out that the concept of wilderness has been defined variously and incommensurably over millennia, that the word *wilderness* does not appear in all languages, and that current ideas and laws about wilderness preservation reflect previous definitions of and justifications for wilderness preservation while ignoring others. Hence, when the most important piece of wilderness legislation, the Wilderness Act of 1964, was enacted in the United States, a wilderness area was defined in a way that reflected—and now codified as law—the dominant received wilderness idea: “in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape . . . an area where earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain.”

CRITICISMS BY WILDERNESS CONSTRUCTIVISTS

Constructivist critics suggest that even though variations in definition occur in characterizations of wilderness, all the definitions set wilderness in opposition to humans and human civilization (“visitors who do not remain”), make the presumed lack of human influence the measure of “untrammeled,” and generally consider wilderness areas to be places “in contrast” to human works. Further, critics argue that this characterization has a series of significant shortcomings.

First, the received wilderness idea is said to be ethnocentric to the point of being genocidal when transported outside North America. Wilderness critics suggest that the concept as constructed in its North American context is so specific to that context that it has negative human implications when exported to other countries. They point out that if one considers long-term human habitation as anathema to wilderness, if a country desires to create a wilderness area and there are aboriginal people living in that area, those people must be deported. To the degree that the identity of a people is embedded in its landscape, the forced removal of that people from that landscape may constitute a form of cultural genocide. Wilderness defenders sometimes deny this implication and sometimes admit it and openly opt for the preservation of the nonhuman over the preservation of specific human communities. Some historical work (Spence 1999, Burnham 2000) suggests that evicting native peoples from their homelands to establish national parks and other “protected areas” occurred in the United States in a number of instances.

Second, the received wilderness idea is said to be inappropriately andro- or phallogocentric. Former U.S. president Theodore Roosevelt touted the importance of wilderness experience because it “promoted that lacking vigorous manliness,” and the nature writer Sigurd Olson championed wilderness travel because it provided “that virile, masculine type of experience men need today” (quoted in Callicott and Nelson 1998). This hypermasculine image of wilderness is thought by some to be offensive and exclusionary.

Third, constructivists argue that wilderness (set in opposition to humanity) is viewed as the highest manifestation of nature. In light of the fact that the received wilderness idea evolved parallel to and was influenced directly by the development of the science of ecology and the fact that people often look to ecology to deliver the clearest images of the ontology of nature, ideas about wilderness and the preservation of wilderness reflect those early ecological paradigms. Whether portrayed as a collection of superorganisms by Frederick Clements or likened to a functioning economy by Charles Elton, the

background reality of nature—and therefore wilderness—was thought to be harmonious and balanced, static and unchanging unless spoiled by human impact. Since the 1980s and drawing on ecological thought going back to the 1920s, however, the reigning ecological image of nature has been one of disturbance, flux, change, and discord. This background image of an ever-changing nature contrasts sharply and incommensurably with received ideas of wilderness as primeval, a place frozen in time, land as it was before human conquest. This rethought image of nature and wilderness affects people’s corresponding assumptions about how they should interact with wilderness or what constitutes harm to wilderness. If wilderness is protected properly only when it remains static, any impact that alters wilderness also harms wilderness. However, if nature and wilderness are inherently dynamic, the idea of an untouched and unchanged wilderness as a properly treated wilderness has to be revised.

Fourth, critics of the received idea suggest that this view is unphilosophical and impolitic. The image of wilderness as land at the far end of the spectrum between the natural and the unnatural perpetuates a metaphysical bifurcation between humans and nature. Such an image also creates and enforces a value dualism in light of the positive value that wilderness advocates assign to wilderness and the corresponding and consistent negative value they are obligated to assign to humans and human activities. Wilderness critics point out that these dualisms are malignant. For instance, from them flows the inevitable condemnation of human interactions with nature, including not only oil spills and species eradication but also acts of ecological restoration. Moreover, because of the logic of these dualisms, wilderness advocacy has been criticized for being elitist and exclusionary in that non-wilderness areas are treated as places of lesser value, and the people who love them are by implication environmentalists of lesser worth.

Fifth, wilderness critics suggest that the received wilderness idea interferes with the acquisition of an inclusive environmental ethic, especially the land ethic of Aldo Leopold. That is seemingly the environmental ethic of many environmental activists, natural resource managers, and the environmentally literate public, and it promises to deliver direct moral standing to the nonhuman world. If Leopold is correct and an appropriate moral relationship between humans and land depends on people viewing themselves as fully and properly part of an inclusive biotic community, anything that conceptually separates people from land, even people’s images of wilderness, stands in the way of an inclusive environmental ethic. According to this line of thought, to the degree that people’s ideas about wilderness conceptually separate

humans from nature, wilderness destroys the ability to extend direct moral consideration to nature.

RESPONSES TO THE CRITICS

In response to these criticisms, wilderness defenders deny that wilderness is a received concept and attempt to refute these criticisms one by one or admit that wilderness is a received idea but suggest that wilderness critics have portrayed it in the wrong light or that it can and should be reconceived. Some wilderness critics agree that the concept of wilderness should be and can be reworked, whereas others have suggested that the idea is too burdened with past associations and should be jettisoned in favor of some other term and corresponding “protected area” strategy. J. Baird Callicott (Callicott and Nelson 1998, Nelson and Callicott 2008), for example, suggests that *biodiversity reserve* is a preferable label in that it clearly indicates that such set-asides are protected first and foremost for the good of biodiversity, not for the good of human recreational, scientific, or aesthetic interests.

Ideas about the nature of wilderness and prehuman conditions can affect ecological sciences in different ways. The effect of a prehuman or nonhuman landscape is not apparent in “pure” ecology or in ecological descriptions and modeling aimed at understanding how a specific system works; examples of this would be the answers to questions such as: Why are there so many species in an ecosystem? and Why do predator-prey systems seem more stable than theory suggests they should be? However, that effect is present in more normative “applied” ecology, in which the goal is to predict the future with an eye toward guiding people’s actions. Various forms of applied ecology—from restoration to wildlife management—seem to evoke a kind of naturalism (equating the good with the natural) in which a wilderness or pre- or nonhuman condition is seen as good or desirable and constitutes the proper target of conservation efforts, whereas the humanized is thought of as a bad or undesirable state of affairs. The alternative interpretation in this context appears to be uncritically anthropocentric.

SEE ALSO *Bible*; Callicott, J. Baird; *Land Ethic*; *Leopold. Aldo*; *Muir, John*; *North America*; *Preservation*; *Roosevelt, Theodore*; *Sierra Club*; *Social Constructivism*; *Wilderness Act of 1964*.

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