

## The Call and Meaning of Wilderness in a Time of Global Turmoil

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"Wilderness is the antidote to an overurbanized, supertechnological [geopolitically conflicted] age."

- Michael Frome, *Battle for the Wilderness*

"They stood in awe at the foot  
Of the green mountain. Pleasure  
Seemed to grow from fear for Gilgamesh.  
As when one comes upon a path in woods  
Unvisited by men, one is drawn near  
The lost and undiscovered in himself;  
He was revitalized by danger."

- Epic of Gilgamesh[1]

Be it in catching a glimpse of the interstellar throws of the Perseus arm in our own Milky Way, or in a stroll through the vernal pools emerging from Vermont snows, humankind has always sought refuge in places wild. No one captured this call of the wild more gracefully than Henry David Thoreau, when he proclaimed "in wildness is the preservation of the world." [2] Thoreau's prophecy, perhaps more than ever before, rings true, as we all steep in the daily ticker-tape of warfare and its countless sufferings. And so, the urgency to experience wildness and to contemplate its beauty has seen a steady rise. On the empirical side of things, numerous studies have shown how walking in the wilds reduces blood pressure and stress, two essential ingredients on the road to healing. [3] We also have the account of the esteemed wilderness sage himself, testifying to the therapeutic and spiritual effects of wilderness:

When I entered this sublime wilderness the day was nearly done, the trees with rosy, glowing countenances seemed to be hushed and thoughtful, as if waiting in conscious religious dependence on the sun, and one naturally walked softly and awe-stricken among them. I wandered on, meeting nobler trees where all are noble, subdued in the general calm, as if in some vast hall pervaded by the deepest sanctities and solemnities that sway human souls. [4]

What exactly is wilderness, or the wildness in which the seeds of our own preservation are sown? One would think the concept of wilderness would not be cause for equivocation or misinterpretation. Yet, the meaning of wilderness, and thus the implications for its designation and management have been ensnared in bureaucratic and philosophical debate since the designation of the first wilderness area in 1924. [5]

In the Wilderness Act of 1964, [6] for example, there was much debate over the precise wording of the definition of wilderness. [7] The Act defines wilderness "in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape . . . 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." [8] Douglas Scott, the policy director of the Pew Wilderness Center, recently investigated the potential weakening of the Act through a misreading of untrammelled. He explains that the word trammel has Latin and Old French roots, "meaning a kind of net used to catch fish or birds." [9] Other definitions include "unrestrained," "unrestricted," "unimpeded," "unencumbered," and "unconfined." [10] Yet, as Scott explains, trammel is often misconstrued as trample, which creates the erroneous connotation that wilderness can only exist in areas that have hitherto been left untouched, unmanipulated, or undisturbed by man. [11]

Such a purist concept of wilderness reduces the amount of land eligible for designation. More importantly, a purist interpretation of wilderness was clearly not the intention of the Act's drafter, Howard Zahniser who stated,

The problem with [using instead] the word . . . '[u]ndisturbed' is that most of these areas can be considered as disturbed by the human usages for which many of them are being preserved; . . . [t]he idea within the word 'Untrammeled' of their not being subjected to human controls and manipulations that hamper the free play of natural forces is the distinctive one that seems to make this word the most suitable one for its purpose within the Wilderness Bill.

Michael Frome explains Zahniser's choice of untrammeled versus undisturbed, pointing out that,

in this age of fallout there are no places left on the earth free of human disturbance, not even at the polar icecaps \* Wilderness [rather] is where man's sounds, chemicals, and other byproducts of civilized life are not dominant. It can be any area where nature prevails or might prevail given the passage of time.[12]

Recently, a debate over the meaning and management of wilderness took root between the "wilderness manipulators" and those who advocate a "hands off" approach.[13] The manipulators, made up of conservation biologists like Michael Soulé and Reed Noss, and wilderness managers from the various land management agencies, interpret the Act to require manipulations preserving or restoring the "natural conditions"[14] of wilderness areas. They dismiss the "hands off" approach with accusations that only anthropocentric humanists favor such a position with a bias toward preserving "empty" alpine areas at the expense of the more biodiverse lowlands.[15]

This is not a scientist versus lawyer debate,[16] although the vocal players fit those roles. As with most debates, there is science supporting both sides. The "hands off" group of wilderness advocates, which is led by wilderness advocates like George Nickas, of Wilderness Watch, and Michael McCloskey of the Sierra Club make the case that wilderness is forever being abstracted from its true wild nature. This point was made most eloquently by the mountaineer-philosopher Jack Turner, in his recent book, *The Abstract Wild*. McCloskey argues that the manipulators fail to appreciate the scientific and public value of wilderness as an unhumanized benchmark and, like economists, fashion elaborate webs of reductionist management techniques that often prove maladaptive.[17] Scott Silver, the executive director of Wild Wilderness,[18] repeatedly explains that he wishes the name of his non-profit was not redundant, but unfortunately the placement of "wild" in front of wilderness is needed more than ever today, where recreation has become the new extractive industry for land managers with fewer receipts from the traditional industries of timber and hard-rock mining.[19] Thus, "hands off" does not mean that there should be no management whatsoever. Rather, management should focus instead on achieving the non-degradation and solitude principles of the Act, not on engineering what we envision as being most "natural."

Philosophically speaking, "how much confidence can we have anymore in the supposition that a given association of plants and animals is "natural"?"[20] McCloskey and Soulé agree that the ecological theories based on nature achieving equilibrium through successional stages have been supplanted by dynamic paradigms.[21] So for those who see no inherent value in wilderness qua wilderness, it's interesting that this recent shift in theoretical paradigms favors dynamic chaos over what the majority of biologists believe will achieve wilderness qua maximized biodiversity. Soulé is correct in pointing out that the goal of achieving what is most "natural" is one laid out by lawyers and bureaucrats.[22] And he is absolutely correct in describing the thrust of those seeking the hands off, or "neglect" approach, as he puts it, as anthropocentric humanists.[23] But he fails to acknowledge the practical merits behind supporting such neglect as an initial step in attaining maximal biodiversity.[24]

How many citizens in Atlanta, Georgia, New York City, Portland, Oregon, and Seattle, find solace in knowing that solitude has not been destroyed and abstracted by motorized recreationists? These voters are a powerful constituency. Why not placate them and in so doing accommodate the same group that is likely to support biodiversity corridors in more enlightened legislative efforts down the road? What is

fundamental, is that we all seek refuge in our sacred places during this time of global turmoil, and try and heal the deep wounds inflicted by so much conflict. For now, why not bow to the humanist project of protecting wilderness qua sacred wildness in hopes that we might be improved thereby? We then might be empowered enough to take the next step of seeking a maximally biodiverse nation and world.

Are the two positions mutually exclusive? No, but they conflict to the extent that the manipulators are willing to make political concessions that sacrifice solitude and non-degradation in the name of biodiversity; in one manner of speaking, manipulators favor the aesthetic of life and its services rather than that of the more austere, yet sublime places known to have a palliative effect on the human soul, not just for elites, Patagonia-clad mountaineers mind you, but for anyone with the spirit to put on a pair of boots and adventure. With all due respect to Soulé and Noss and our wilderness managers, let's keep our tinkering to a minimum, for every time we tinker we further abstract the wild, especially when it means introducing exotic species vectors like snowmobiles and roads to achieve our manipulative ends.

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[1] Herbert Mason, *Gilgamesh A Verse Narrative* (1970) cited in Max Oelschlaeger, *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology* 39 (1991).

[2] Henry David Thoreau, *Walking* (1862).

[3] Charles Sourby, *The Relationship Between Therapeutic Recreation and Palliation in the Treatment of the Advanced Cancer Patient* (7/2/1998) available at <http://www.recreationtherapy.com/rt.html>.

[4] John Muir, *National Parks* 325 (1913).

[5] Michael McCloskey, *The Wilderness Act of 1964, Its Background and Meaning*, 45 Or. L. R. 288, 296 (1966) [hereinafter McCloskey I]; Douglas W. Scott, "*Untrammelled, "Wilderness Character," and the Challenges of Wilderness Preservation*," 11 *Wild Earth* 72 (Fall / Winter 2001 - 2002) [hereinafter Scott].

[6] For a list of the bills leading up to the final passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, see McCloskey, *supra* note 5, at n. 40.

[7] Scott, *supra* note 5, at 72.

[8] 78 Stat. 890-896, § 2(c) (1964) (codified at 16 U.S.C. 1131-1136 (1965)). (emphasis supplied).

[9] Scott, *supra* note 5, at 74.

[10] *Id.*

[11] *Id.*

[12] Michael Frome, *Battle for the Wilderness* 12 (1974).

[13] J. Baird Callicott, Michael P. Nelson, *Introduction to the Great New Wilderness Debate* 1 (J. Baird Callicott, Michael P. Nelson eds., 1998). The "hands off" group relies on the language in the definition section of the Act, section 2(c) to support its position of limited human manipulation of wild areas.

[14] 78 Stat. 890 § 2 (a).

[15] Michael E. McCloskey, *Changing Views of What the Wilderness System is All About*, 76 *DENV U. L. REV.* 369, 373 (1999) [hereinafter McCloskey II].

[16] *But see*, Michael E. Soulé, *The Social Siege of Nature in Reinventing Nature* 161 (Michael E. Soule, Gary Lease eds., 1995) [hereinafter *Reinventing Nature*].

[17] McCloskey II, *supra* note 15, at n. 43, 55, 56 citing David N. Cole, Peter B. Landres, *Threats to Wilderness Ecosystems: Impacts and Research Needs*, 6 *Ecological Applications* 168 , 179, 180 (1996).

[18] *See generally* <http://www.wilderness.org>. This is a common introduction for Mr. Silver at his many speaking engagements.

[19] Jan G. Laitos and Thomas A. Carr, *The Transformation of Public Lands*, 26 *Ecology L.Q.* 140, 152-60 (1999).

[20] McClosky II, *supra* note 15 at 380.

[21] *See also* Reinventing Nature, *supra* note 16, at 159-60.

[22] *Id.*

[23] *Id.*