

## Chapter 7

# Wilderness Deconstruction

Before the postmodernist deconstruction of wilderness flashed across the firmament, other urban thinkers were bothered by the thought of wilderness areas. If we looked hard enough we could find humanist opponents of wilderness riding shotgun to the landscapers before there ever was a wilderness-protection movement. In the third edition of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, Roderick Nash considers such wilderness foes as Robert Wernick (1965), Eric Hoffer (1967), René Dubos (1970s), Martin Kreiger (1973), Eric Julber (1972), and William Tucker (1982).<sup>1</sup> In one way or another, all of them show a fear or loathing of the wild and a preference for Nature as a human-created garden instead of as a self-willed landscape.

Michael Pollan, in fact, uses stories about puttering around in his garden to question the value of wilderness in his book, *Second Nature*.<sup>2</sup> Aldo Leopold scholar Eric Freyfogle does a nice job of contrasting Pollan's garden-thoughts to Aldo Leopold's 1939 essay, "The Farmer as Conservationist." In his essay, Leopold is wise, humble, in a community, cooperative with Nature, and ecologically grounded, whereas Pollan is arrogant, walled off, and ecologically ignorant. Pollan wants God-like control over his garden; he revels in the power to decide what lives and what dies; in fact, he wants nothing to be able to survive unless he cares for it. Aesthetics drive Pollan (he loves straight lines) and he sees unkempt Nature as ugly.<sup>3</sup> Oil industry leaders share such a view and typically call the area where they want to drill in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge ugly (having spent a few weeks canoeing and hiking in the part of the coastal

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<sup>1</sup> Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind Third Edition* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, 1982), 238-244.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Pollan, *Second Nature: a gardener's education* (The Atlantic Monthly Press, New York, 1991).

<sup>3</sup> Eric T. Freyfogle, "Conservation and the Lure of the Garden," *Conservation Biology*, Vol. 18, No. 4, August 2004, 995-1003.

plain threatened by drilling, I may call them boors). As I chew on it, in fact, it strikes me that among resourcists and enviro-resourcists there is an aesthetic recoil from untidy, chaotic wilderness scenes and an artistic preference for landscapes rearranged by humans into spick-and-span pictures. Perhaps wilderness opponents just find wilderness unsightly. I'll delve into this aesthetic rejection of wild Nature more in *The War On Nature*.

I also think most of these intellectual wilderness-fearers find that places unmade by Lord Man are a slap in the face to the Idea of Progress to which they anxiously cling. Facing Nature on one's own is a hard slap to one's civilized perch. Roughing it is uncomfortable to their self-esteem as civilized beings, just as it is to their soft bodies and tender feet. To them, wilderness is what civilization has been at war with since its beginnings more than eight thousand years ago. They are horrified that land somewhere may still be largely self-willed, that wildeors still prowl outside the bars of a zoo cage, that we have not yet triumphed in the ultimate purpose of civilization, which is to completely domesticate and humanize Earth. Wilderness mocks their humanistic arrogance. For them, Gilgamesh and Beowulf and Buffalo Bill left their holy butchery only half finished. We need to get the job done!<sup>4</sup> Robert Wernick voiced such terror in the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1965, writing that wilderness "is precisely what man has been fighting against since he began his painful, awkward climb to civilization. It is the dark, the formless, the terrible, the old chaos which our fathers pushed back....It is held in bay by constant vigilance, and when the vigilance slackens it swoops down for a melodramatic revenge."<sup>5</sup> You can almost see Villain Wilderness twisting his mustache as he lays poor, little Miss Civilization on the railroad tracks.

However, the birth of a specific *wilderness deconstruction* out of the Standard

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<sup>4</sup> A character in my novel, *The Lobo Outback Funeral Home*, expresses these fears. Dave Foreman, *The Lobo Outback Funeral Home* (Johnson Books, Boulder, Colorado, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Wernick, "Speaking Out: Let's Spoil the Wilderness," *Saturday Evening Post*, November 6, 1965, 12. Quoted in Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind*, 27.

Social Science Model and postmodern deconstructionism can be dated to 1989, when Ramachandra Guha, a social critic in India, charged in the academic journal *Environmental Ethics* that national parks and wilderness areas were examples of Western imperialism imposed on poor, suffering Third World peasants—that protected areas constitute a “direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich.”<sup>6</sup>

Let me hit those points of the debate since then that are meaningful for the protection of biodiversity. David Johns, soon to be the executive director of The Wildlands Project, came back at Guha with a defense of parks and wilderness.<sup>7</sup> In 1991, philosophy professor J. Baird Callicott, University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, who had earlier done some very good work on land ethics, wrote an article entitled “The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative,” wherein he criticized the “received wilderness idea” of the modern conservation movement as “conceptually flawed: it is dualistic, ethnocentric, and static.”<sup>8</sup> Philosopher and outdoorsman Holmes Rolston III, at Colorado State University, replied with a ringing defense of the wilderness concept, “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed.”<sup>9</sup> Callicott volleyed back with “That Good Old-Time Wilderness Religion.”<sup>10</sup> Callicott’s “sustainable development alternative” was his reinvention of Gifford Pinchot’s resourcism in a politically correct form. In other words, enviro-resourcism.

In 1992, geographer William Denevan lambasted the “Pristine Myth” that the Americas had been wilderness in 1492.<sup>11</sup> Also in 1992, Arturo Gomez-Pompa, a

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<sup>6</sup> Guha, Ramachandra, “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique,” *Environmental Ethics* 11, Spring 1989, 75.

<sup>7</sup> David Johns, “The Relevance of Deep Ecology to the Third World: Some Preliminary Comments,” *Environmental Ethics* 12, Fall 1990.

<sup>8</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative,” *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 13, 1991, 235-247.

<sup>9</sup> Holmes Rolston III, “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed,” *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 13, 1991, 370-377.

<sup>10</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “That Good Old-Time Wilderness Religion,” *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 13, 1991, 378-379.

<sup>11</sup> William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1992, 369-385.

botanist from Mexico living in California, and Andrea Kaus, a U.S. anthropologist, wrote a paper charging that wilderness areas were imperialistic and misanthropic, that “environmental policy and education are currently based on Western beliefs about nature rather than on reality.” They also came to the defense of rural populations against “urban environmentalists.”<sup>12</sup> In 1994, The Wildlands Project anthology, *The Place of the Wild*, offered up some fuzzy and New Age academic criticisms of wilderness areas with reality-based responses from Reed Noss, David Johns, and me, among others.<sup>13</sup> In late 1994, *Wild Earth* featured Callicott's “A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea” with rather harsh responses from Noss and me.<sup>14</sup> The Spring 1995 issue of *Wild Earth* published a “retort” by Callicott to Noss and me, in which he claimed that he was being misunderstood, that he remained a member of the “Wilderness Church,” but that he wanted to replace wilderness areas with biodiversity reserves.<sup>15</sup> His retort is an important document in the debate even if it is mostly overlooked, because it shows his sincerity for protecting Nature, but, honestly, it is also confusing on the grounds that it really doesn't jibe with some of his other barbs at wilderness. Callicott is a supporter of The Rewilding Institute, by the way, and I don't enjoy criticizing him.

This was a reasonably contained (mostly in academia), though sometimes heated, discussion. Most folks, even in the conservation movement, didn't know about this academic/social-justice/anticolonial raid on wilderness until the rising star of environmental history, William Cronon of the University of Wisconsin-Madison, wrote a

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<sup>12</sup> Arturo Gomez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus, “Taming the Wilderness Myth,” *BioScience*, Vol. 42 No. 4, April 1992.

<sup>13</sup> David Clarke Burks, ed., *Place of the Wild: A Wildlands Anthology* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea,” Reed Noss, “Wilderness—Now More Than Ever,” and Dave Foreman, “Wilderness Areas Are Vital,” *Wild Earth*, Vol. 4, No. 1, Winter 1994/95, 54-68.

<sup>15</sup> J. Baird Callicott, “Deep Grammar,” *Wild Earth*, Spring 1995, 64-66.

little piece for the *New York Times Magazine*—"The Trouble With Wilderness."<sup>16</sup> Then the shit hit the fan, drawing approving clucks and murmurs from America's biologically ignorant public intellectuals. Cronon's piece for the magazine was condensed from a longer version in an anthology, edited by him, called *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*.<sup>17</sup> This anthology came out of an interdisciplinary seminar of avant-garde social scientists at the University of California Irvine during the spring of 1994. Irvine seems like an odd place for a seminar on Nature. Smack dab in the middle of Orange County, home of Disneyland and one of the most artificial landscapes in the U.S., Irvine is, however, the ideal setting for a postmodern deconstructionist seminar about Nature. In fact, one of the participants, Anne Spirn, wrote that the discussions seemed "so disembodied." And, she asked, "I wonder how different our conversations might have been if they had not taken place under fluorescent lights, in a windowless room, against the whistling whoosh of the building's ventilation system."<sup>18</sup>

Spirn's pregnant question was later answered by Colorado ecologist Tim Hogan when he wrote, "I am reminded of the comment a friend made as we skied across an exposed meadow one cold, windy day up near the Continental Divide. Yelling above the howling blizzard, head ducked into his parka, he asked, 'What would those postmodern deconstructionists call this?'"<sup>19</sup>

In fairness, some of these wilderness critics may not be thoroughgoing postmodern deconstructionists, even though they seem heavily influenced by the outlook in their writings about wilderness. In acknowledgment of this, I will call them *wilderness deconstructionists*. Indeed, I think Callicott and Cronon would consider

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<sup>16</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble With Wilderness," *The New York Times Magazine*, August 13, 1995.

<sup>17</sup> William Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature* (W. W. Norton & Co., New York, 1995).

<sup>18</sup> Anne Spirn, *Uncommon Ground*, 448.

<sup>19</sup> Tim Hogan, "Review of The Great New Wilderness Debate," *The Bloomsbury Review*, July/August 1999, 19.

themselves conservationists of a sort. I think I am a friend with both of them.

In response to the Cronon conference and to the general postmodern-deconstructionist claim that (in Soulé and Lease's words) "the natural world..., *if it exists*, is a human artifact produced by our economic activities, and as such is grist for further material reshaping," (emphasis added) another conference was held in 1994 at the University of California Santa Cruz (UCSC).<sup>20</sup> This conference, organized by Michael Soulé, founder of the Society for Conservation Biology and Chair of Environmental Studies at UCSC, and Gary Lease, Dean of Humanities at UCSC, offered an opposing view to the Irvine conference, namely that "the world, including its living components, really does exist apart from humanity's perceptions and beliefs about it." These scholars, including Paul Shepard, Donald Worster, Gary Nabhan, and Stephen Kellert, agreed that "certain contemporary forms of intellectual and social relativism can be just as destructive to nature as bulldozers and chain saws."<sup>21</sup> This is an essential point: left-wing wilderness deconstructionists give ammunition to radical-right landscapers.

The fact that America's public intellectuals paid attention to the Irvine conference and ignored the Santa Cruz one shows just how alienated they are from biology. Soulé was certainly not invited to write a piece for *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*.

Cronon's blast was reprinted in the inaugural issue of *Environmental History* (1996) with stout retorts from Michael P. Cohen and Thomas R. Dunlap, and a withering rebuttal from Samuel Hays.<sup>22</sup> Hays, distinguished land historian and author of two of the standard conservation histories, *Conservation And The Gospel Of Efficiency* and *Beauty, Health, and Permanence*, made quite clear in his "The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness" that Cronon was deeply mistaken in his view of wilderness. Hays

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<sup>20</sup> Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (Island Press, Washington, 1995), xv.

<sup>21</sup> Soulé and Lease, *Reinventing Nature?*, xv-xvi.

<sup>22</sup> *Environmental History*, Vol. 1 No. 1, January 1996.

based his response on “two sources of evidence, quite different from Cronon's.” These were Hays's experience as a wilderness activist during the fight for the Eastern Wilderness Areas Act in the early 1970s, and his study of the newsletters and documents actually produced by wilderness protection organizations around the country.<sup>23</sup> I have no evidence that any of the wilderness deconstructionists have ever looked at such materials, which are the bedrock writings about wilderness areas.

*Wild Earth* followed soon thereafter with an issue featuring responses to the wilderness deconstructionists by Gary Snyder, George Sessions, Don Waller, Bill Willers, and Bennett Stark.<sup>24</sup> In *Wild Earth* Fall 1997, the most distinguished land historian, Donald Worster of the University of Kansas, took on the fashionable critics of wilderness by pointing out the major errors in their reasoning.<sup>25</sup> Geographer Thomas Vale made mincemeat of the wilderness deconstructionists' beliefs in 1998 with “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape: An Example from Yosemite National Park” in *Natural Areas Journal*, later reprinted in *Wild Earth*.<sup>26</sup> He expanded his views along with those of other biological geographers in 2002 in his edited anthology, *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*.<sup>27</sup> This vital book has been mostly overlooked.

In 1998, Callicott and his colleague Michael P. Nelson collected many of these papers along with some historical writing about wilderness and some new papers on the subject for their anthology, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Like the *Chicago Tribune* shouting Dewey's defeat of Truman in 1948 or George W. Bush dancing his “Mission Accomplished” jig on the deck of an aircraft carrier, Callicott and Nelson's

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<sup>23</sup> Samuel P. Hays, “The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness,” *Environmental History*, Vol. 1 No. 1, January 1996, 29-32.

<sup>24</sup> *Wild Earth*, Winter 1996-97. [Describe each]

<sup>25</sup> Donald Worster, “The Wilderness of History,” *Wild Earth*, Fall 1997, 9-13.

<sup>26</sup> Thomas R. Vale, “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape: An Example from Yosemite National Park,” *Natural Areas Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1998, 231-236; *Wild Earth*, Fall 1999, 34-40.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas R. Vale, editor, *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape* (Island Press, Washington, D.C., 2002).

“Introduction” proclaims the “received wilderness idea mortally wounded.”<sup>28</sup> However, the wilderness idea that is supposedly “mortally wounded” is not the wilderness idea that has led to protecting wilderness areas and establishing the National Wilderness Preservation System. The truth is that the wilderness deconstructionists attack a literary and historical wilderness idea that has little to do with the idea or the reality of wilderness areas. It is much ado about nothing to anyone who knows much about wilderness.

Why, then, respond? Most folks in the wilderness movement are only slightly aware of this fracas, after all, and most of it took place fifteen to ten years ago. At first, I thought it would blow over, leaving only a passing whiff like a little brother farting under the sheets. Alas, it has not been so. Therefore, I think I need to wade back into these roiled waters for at least six reasons. First, extractive industry, motorized recreationists, “free-market environmentalists,” neoconservatives, and property-rights zealots are using the wilderness deconstructionists' arguments. Second, international advocates of “sustainable development” and, in North America, of resourcism and “working landscapes,” are using them to argue against protected areas. Third, I am finding that both undergraduate and graduate students in environmental studies departments and natural resource schools are being swayed (as are America's public intellectuals). The students then take their wilderness deconstruction ideas with them to jobs in “The Environmental Movement” or land-managing agencies. Fourth, postmodern absurdities are sometimes folded into the traits of the “Environmental Stereotype,” which gives anticonservationists ammunition to claim that conservationists are advocates of “junk science.” By showcasing the disagreements conservationists have with wilderness

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<sup>28</sup> J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, “Introduction,” in J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, eds., *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 1998), 12. Included in this anthology are many of the wilderness deconstructionist papers mentioned in this chapter, including those by Callicott, Cronon, Guha, Gomez-Pompa and Kaus, and Denevan, and some of the responses by Johns, Rolston, Noss, Foreman, and Waller.

deconstructionists, I show that we are not postmodernists. Fifth, plenty of conservationists, including academics, have been baffled and outraged by wilderness deconstruction. They have encouraged me to strap on my armor, take up my spear and net, and leap into the coliseum to do battle. Much of what I write in this section comes from discussions with my friends. And finally, rebutting the deconstructionist arguments against wilderness gives me an opportunity to delve more deeply into my ideas about wilderness. For this, I thank the wilderness deconstructionists for forcing me and other conservationists to think more deeply about what we mean by “wilderness” and “wilderness areas,” and about the relationship of humans to Nature. In countering wilderness deconstruction, I am not writing to convince the academic critics of wilderness of the error of their ways, but to give Nature lovers good ammunition with which to shield wilderness areas and other protected areas against all critics, even those supposedly friendly. Of course, my six reasons here are not necessarily consistent, but that is the way it is with intellectual and policy debates. We are all over the map here.

I identify the basic wilderness-deconstructionist arguments in Table 7.1, and then in the next chapters I will pick out the most representative summary quotes for each from the primary documents identified above. Somewhat different antiwilderness slams are stressed in Latin America, Asia, and Africa than in the United States, Canada, and Australia. Yet, while there are hybrids, they are a single herd, falling into two general categories: those grounded in a literary/historical/philosophical objection to the idea of wilderness, or even of Nature; and those sneering at wilderness and other protected areas from a Noble Savage/Ecological Peasant/Sustainable Development perspective. I will deal with the first group in the next chapter and tackle the second group in the two chapters following. Then I'll wrap up this section by discussing some general errors the wilderness deconstructionists make.

Table 7.1

Literary/Historical/Philosophical Wilderness Deconstruction Arguments

- Wilderness areas cleave humans from Nature because people are not allowed to live in them. Wilderness thus perpetuates the human-Nature dualism.
- What needs to be protected is wildness, not wilderness. Wildness is real; wilderness is a human construct.
- Wilderness areas are OK; the Wilderness Idea is not.
- Wilderness protection is based on romanticizing Nature.
- By stressing wilderness, conservationists shun the land where people live and work.
- Wilderness as a conservation strategy is defensive and therefore losing.
- Conservationists have twisted the true legacy of conservation heroes like Aldo Leopold and Henry David Thoreau. They were more interested in human-inhabited landscapes than in wilderness.
- Wilderness and Nature are all in our heads.
- Wilderness areas are a sentimental attempt to keep alive “The Myth of the Frontier.”
- The Idea of Wilderness is based on an outmoded ecological idea of climax forests and static, stable landscapes.
- Wilderness areas and national parks have failed to protect biodiversity. Something new is needed: ecosystem management that includes people.
- Humans are no more destructive than other animals.
- The role of humans is to garden the Earth. We must seize the tiller of the planet and actively manage evolution and natural processes, lest natural landscapes deteriorate.

### Noble Savage/Sustainable Development Wilderness Deconstruction Arguments

- The notion of a pristine pre-Columbian America is a myth. Native peoples were abundant and had thoroughly changed the land—therefore, the wilderness idea is phony.
- Native peoples and peasants improve on Nature with their activities. Because of their deep ecological knowledge and love for Nature, their management increases biological diversity.
- Belief in the intrinsic value of other species and natural processes is an affectation and luxury missing from non-European societies. The wilderness idea is unique to British colonial nations.
- Wilderness areas and their kin, national parks, are a legacy of Western Civilization and represent neocolonialism.
- Wilderness supporters are misanthropic and seek to exclude indigenous people and rural dwellers from the land. Instead of parks, we need indigenous reserves and sustainable development.

For those who make these charges, it is irrelevant that they are inconsistent and self-contradictory.