

Chapter 9

The Myths of the Noble Savage and the Ecological Peasant

Wilderness deconstructionists also suffer qualms about the Wilderness Idea because of their romantic beliefs about the link between native peoples and Nature. Along with anthropologists and other social scientists, sustainable-development advocates, socioambientalistas, and a slew of people in industrialized countries, including many environmentalists, wilderness deconstructionists believe in the Myth of the Noble Savage. Here right-wing wilderness deconstructionists such as Alston Chase, Charles Kay, and Stephen Budiansky belly up to the bar to argue against protected areas and for resource extraction (Budiansky, for example, makes laughable claims that the Great Plains were “manufactured...by the Indians” and that old-growth in the Northeast United States was a “rarity”¹). It is this use of the noble savage myth by boosters of landscaping that makes it vital to rebut mistaken notions of native domestication of Nature. For example, the timber industry in the Pacific Northwest cries for industrial logging on this basis. University of Oregon geographers Cathy Whitlock and Margaret Knox write, “It’s not surprising that assigning a large role to prehistoric peoples is a popular concept among those who advocate active management of wilderness and commodity lands today.”² Dan Dagget calls for livestock grazing in the arid lands of the West, and for the final domestication of wilderness because he believes Indians had already domesticated the land.³ Michael Soulé writes that right-wing

¹ Thomas R. Vale, “Reflections,” in Thomas R. Vale, editor, *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape* (Island Press, Washington, D.C., 2002), 297.

² Cathy Whitlock and Margaret A. Knox, “Prehistoric Burning In The Pacific Northwest: Human Versus Climatic Influences,” in Vale, editor, *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*, 222-223.

³ Dan Dagget, *Gardeners of Eden: Rediscovering Our Importance to Nature* (University of Nevada Press, Reno, 2005). How they did this without the godlike cattle Dagget and his rancher friends hold sacred, I do not know.

wing anticonservationists in the United States contend that “because the West is no longer pristine, there should be no regulatory constraint on the pursuit of maximal short-term profits from public lands,” and that the left-wing social ecologists' claim that the Amazon rainforest was created by Indians therefore justifies “further material refashioning.”⁴

There are at least three pieces to the noble savage myth: Before civilization, (1) humans had a sustainable, respectful relationship with Nature; (2) people were egalitarian and nonhierarchical; and (3) people were gentle and peaceful.

Stephen Pinker writes that the noble savage myth came about because of the contact Europeans had with indigenes in the new lands they discovered and colonized from 1500 C.E. on. “It captures the belief that humans in their natural state are selfless, peaceable, and untroubled, and that blights such as greed, anxiety, and violence are the products of civilization.”⁵

Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the 1700s is the best-known early champion of the noble savage. “Scientifically,” it became enshrined in the Standard Social Science Model through Margaret Mead’s naive and sloppy fieldwork in Samoa during the early twentieth century. I put “Scientifically” in quotes because Margaret Mead and the school of anthropologists following Franz Boas were anything but scientific. Several recent books have shown Mead to be a fraud.⁶

⁴ Michael E. Soulé, “The Social Siege of Nature,” in Michael E. Soulé and Gary Lease, editors, *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (Island Press, Washington, D.C., 1995), 155-156.

⁵ Stephen Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The Modern Denial of Human Nature* (Viking, New York, 2002), 6. Pinker does a very good job explaining and debunking the Myth of the Noble Savage, but falls prey to the arrogance of humanism. His grasp of natural history is sometimes weak.

⁶ For the “deconstruction” of Mead's anthropology, see John Alcock, *The Triumph of Sociobiology* (Oxford University Press, New York, 2001), 131-33, 135-36, 209; Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes And The Origins Of Human Violence* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1996), 96-107; and Pinker, *The Blank Slate*.

Postmodern deconstructionists have their own twist on the noble savage myth, arguing that modern science is only a cultural construct and has no more accuracy for understanding the world than, say, the creation myths of prescientific cultures. Discussing the pervasive antiscientific beliefs in today's society, including so-called "Intelligent Design Theory," Paul Gross and Norman Levitt write, "Indeed, 'right' and 'left' are curiously united on these issues, with leftist adherents of identity politics just as comfortable with the doctrine of special creation—in its 'Native American' version—as are rightist defenders of biblical orthodoxy."⁷

Later in this chapter, I'll look at the peaceable and egalitarian pieces of the Noble Savage Myth. The bulk of my study, however, is with the claims made by wilderness deconstructionists that people had harmonious relationships with Nature before being conquered by evil Western Civilization. Holding these feel-good sentiments keeps us from understanding today's ecological crisis and doing something worthwhile about it.

Boosters of "sustainable development" and resource extraction join the deconstructionists in claiming that:

- The notion of a pristine pre-Columbian America is a myth. Native peoples were abundant and had overwhelmingly 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.

⁷ Paul R. Gross and Norman Levitt, *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left And Its Quarrels With Science* (The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1998), x.

- National parks and their kin, wilderness areas, are a legacy of Western Civilization and represent neocolonialism.

- Protected-area 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.

These claims are not compatible with each other, but that doesn't really matter in the postmodern world. This chapter considers the first two assertions and the next chapter looks at the last three.

The notion of a pristine pre-Columbian America is a myth. Native peoples had overwhelmingly changed the land—therefore, the wilderness idea is phony.

Geographer William M. Denevan of the University of Wisconsin is the most credible researcher of what he calls “The Pristine Myth.” He claims that “the Native American landscape of the early sixteenth century was a humanized landscape almost everywhere. Populations were large.”⁸ Arturo Gomez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus write, “Scientific findings indicate that virtually every part of the globe, from the boreal forests to the humid tropics, has been inhabited, modified, or managed throughout our human past.”⁹ J. Baird Callicott writes that “the wilderness idea is woefully ethnocentric. It ignores the historic presence and effects on practically all the world's ecosystems of aboriginal peoples.”¹⁰

How true are these theoretical assertions? What do research and facts tell us? Questions we must ask about the Pristine Myth are:

How many native people were there?

⁸ William M. Denevan, “The Pristine Myth: The Landscape of the Americas in 1492,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 1992, 369-385.

⁹ Arturo Gomez-Pompa and Andrea Kaus, “Taming the Wilderness Myth,” *BioScience* Vol. 42, No. 4, April, 1992, 271-279.

¹⁰ J. Baird Callicott, “The Wilderness Idea Revisited: The Sustainable Development Alternative,” *The Environmental Professional*, Vol. 13, 1991, 240.

How widespread were native people?

How widespread were the impacts of native peoples?

Do ecosystems recover from human impact?

And, finally, is the pristine myth necessary to the *Wilderness Area Idea*?

I will use the term “native people” or “natives” to refer to aboriginal or tribal peoples. In the case of the Americas, this may include quite sophisticated imperial civilizations. I will also stress the Americas because the Pristine Myth mostly deals with the New World.

How many native people were there?

Denevan has suggested a total population for the New World in 1492 of 53.9 million: “3.8 million for North America, 17.2 million for Mexico, 5.6 million for Central America, 3.0 million for the Caribbean, 15.7 million for the Andes, and 8.6 million for lowland South America.”¹¹ Others have *guessed* that there were as many as eight million people living north of the Rio Grande. Douglas H. Ubelaker of the Smithsonian Institution, however, believes there were only two million.¹² The anthology edited by Denevan, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492*, shows just how sprawling the estimates are, how questionable the evidence is on which they are based, and how ideology elbows in. Denevan is straightforward in acknowledging that his estimate is simply a doubling of Ubelaker's, which he considers too conservative.¹³ Although I think Ubelaker's population estimates are more accurate, I will follow Denevan's here so I won't be accused of undercounting.

How widespread were native people?

¹¹ Denevan, “The Pristine Myth,” 370.

¹² Douglas H. Ubelaker “North American Indian Population Size, A.D. 1500 to 1985,” *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, Vol. 77, 1988, 291.

¹³ William M. Denevan, editor, *The Native Population of the Americas in 1492* Second Edition (The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1992), xx.

Without question, nearly 23 million people in Mexico and Central America would have been a large, often dense population. However, for North America north of the Rio Grande, Denevan's estimate is a mere 3.8 million. Keep in mind that the combined population of Canada and the United States today is over 330 million. Even by Denevan's reckoning, the pre-Columbian population was little more than 1 percent of that. Nor were these fewer than 4 million people evenly spread across the landscape. There were large regions rarely visited by humans, much less hosting permanent settlements, because of inhospitability, the small total population, uneven distribution, limited technology, lack of horses, and constant warfare and raiding. Archaeology backs this assumption. Some areas, like the Colorado Plateau and parts of Central America, were depopulated centuries before Columbus because of drought and farmers overshooting the carrying capacity of the land, and had recovered their wilderness character.

University of Wisconsin geographer Thomas Vale, after carefully considering the various population estimates, wisely concludes that “much of the area of the West was only lightly inhabited.” Then he uses archaeology, ethnology, ecology, and paleoecology to estimate the actual area used by natives north of the Rio Grande for living space and agriculture, and how much land was affected by their other activities such as vegetation modification and tree cutting, to further prove his point. Vast areas remained largely unaffected by Indians.¹⁴

As for the stronghold of wilderness in the contiguous United States today, the Rocky Mountains, William Baker, a geography professor at the University of Wyoming, calculates that “the population in the Rockies itself in A.D. 1500 may have been about

¹⁴ Thomas R. Vale, “The Pre-European Landscape Of The United States: Pristine Or Humanized?” in *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*, 10-31.

32,000.”¹⁵ That's a smaller population than the single town of Missoula, Montana. Spread over the Rockies, it is far from crowded to say the least!

In making claims for the long-term management of the land by Stone-Age humans, wilderness deconstructionists (including right-wing landscapers) ignore paleontology and archaeology. Behaviorally modern humans appeared only between 50,000 and 75,000 years ago in parts of Africa. Around 50,000 years ago they began to leave Africa and did not enter the Americas until some 13,000 years ago (if any arrived earlier they were in tiny numbers). Therefore, in the long view of half a billion years of complex animal life on Earth, human presence has existed for an extraordinarily short time.¹⁶ What went on during the vastness of the epochs before we showed up? Both postmodern deconstructionists and theoretical free-marketers seem to think nothing—or at least nothing that matters. In such pathologically limited, shortsighted views, the past did not exist until modern humans showed up. I've come to suspect that such self-centered humanists are actually incapable of imagining a time or a place without humans present. They are hard social constructionists and can be unyielding foes of protecting Nature.

How widespread were the impacts of native peoples?

What was the level of impact indigenous people had in the Americas? The plain answer is that no one knows for sure. The conventional wisdom until recently was that natives north of Mexico had done very little to the landscape. New England's Puritans argued so to justify their taking of “unused” land from the Indians.¹⁷ The pendulum has swung the other way in recent years, with claims that even tiny populations transformed

¹⁵ William R. Baker, “Indians And Fire In The Rocky Mountains: The Wilderness Hypothesis Renewed,” in *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*, 50.

¹⁶ Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004), 25-44.

¹⁷ William Cronon, *Changes In The Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England* (Hill and Wang, New York, 1983), 56.

pre-Columbian ecosystems—especially through burning. The “Myth of Pristine America” has been replaced with the “Myth of the Humanized Landscape.”¹⁸

The issue is not whether natives influenced the landscape, but to what degree and where. Even if some settled and cropped places were not self-willed land due to native burning, agriculture, and other uses, it does not follow that this was the case everywhere. Because Los Angeles is paved, does this mean that everywhere in the United States is paved? Because most of Illinois is a human-created landscape, is the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area in Montana a human-created landscape? Of course not. Those early explorers and later colonists who extrapolated from the wilderness they found to claim that all of the Americas was a wilderness before Europeans are now imitated by their deconstructors who extrapolate from native-modified spots to argue that all of the Americas was domesticated. Both views are unfounded—even silly.

The first wave of skilled hunters who came into the Americas roughly 13,000 years ago caused the extinction of dozens of species of large mammals unschooled with such a predator. The Pleistocene-Holocene Extinction had profound effects that still may be reverberating through American ecosystems.¹⁹ In certain areas of the pre-Columbian Americas, high human population density and intensive agriculture led to severely degraded ecosystems and extermination of wildlife. However, I question whether the North American forests and prairies found by the first European explorers

¹⁸ Thomas R. Vale, “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape: An Example from Yosemite National Park,” *Natural Areas Journal*, Vol. 18 (3), 1998, 231-236; *Wild Earth*, Fall 1999, 34-40.

¹⁹ Josh Donlan, Harry W. Greene, Joel Berger, Carl E. Bock, Jane H. Bock, David A. Burney, James A. Estes, Dave Foreman, Paul S. Martin, Gary W. Roemer, Felisa A. Smith, and Michael E. Soulé, “Re-wilding North America,” *Nature*, Vol. 436, 18 August 2005, 913-914 (the actual title of this piece is “Pleistocene Rewilding”; the editors at *Nature* unfortunately changed the title); **[add American Naturalist piece]**; Connie Barlow, *The Ghosts of Evolution: Nonsensical Fruit, Missing Partners, and Other Ecological Anachronisms* (Basic Books, New York, 2000); Paul S. Martin and David A. Burney, “Bring Back the Elephants!” *Wild Earth*, Spring 1999, 57-64; Paul Martin, *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding Of America* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 2005).

and colonists were mostly created by burning by native tribes. Perhaps in localized areas American Indians had a heavy impact on vegetation through anthropogenic burning. But how extensive could this manipulation have been with a population of two to four million north of the Rio Grande in 1500? Even the high figure gives us a very low population density.

Donald Worster writes, “Two million people spread over what is now Canada and the United States, a people armed with primitive stone tools, simply could not have truly ‘domesticated’ the whole continent. By comparison, 300 million Americans and Canadians today, armed with far more powerful technology, have not wholly domesticated the continent yet.”²⁰

A key plank in the domesticated landscape floor is the claim that natives set fires throughout North America. More than ten years ago, however, Reed Noss pointed out that lightning-caused fires better explained the presence of fire-adapted vegetation than do Indian fires.²¹ Ecologist Craig Allen of the U.S. Geological Survey confirms this for northern New Mexico. He writes:

Widespread fires occurred about every 5-20 years wherever ponderosa pine grew, with somewhat lower frequencies on the order of 15-40 years in the bracketing piñon-juniper woodlands below and mixed conifer forests above.... Given our dry spring climate and frequent thunderstorms, lightning is believed to have caused the vast majority of these fires. This view is supported by the records of about 4000 lightning caused fires documented by firefighters in the Jemez Mountains from 1909-1996, and by

²⁰ Donald Worster, “The Wilderness of History,” *Wild Earth*, Fall 1997, 10; Worster writes, “I am using the cautious but authoritative estimate of Douglas H. Ubelaker of the Smithsonian Institution, in his article ‘North American Indian Population Size, A.D. 1500 to 1985,’ *American Journal of Physical Anthropology*, 77 (1988): 291.”

²¹ Reed Noss, “Wilderness—Now More Than Ever,” *Wild Earth*, Winter 1994/95, 60-63.

by the over 160,000 lightning strikes recorded over the Jemez country by a lightning detection system between 1985 and 1994.²²

Holmes Rolston III writes that

*every student of fire behavior knows that on the scale of regional forest ecosystems, the source of ignition is not a particularly critical factor. The question is whether the forest is ready to burn, whether there is sufficient ground fuel to sustain the fire, whether the trees are diseased, how much duff there is, and so on. If conditions are not right, it will be difficult to get the fire going and it will burn out soon. If conditions are right, a human can start a regional fire this year. If some human does not, lightning will start it next year, or the year after that.*²³

Ecological historian Emily Russell reevaluated Indian use of fire in the Northeast United States. In the abstract of her study, she writes, "Of the 35 documents that describe vegetation or Indian life in the 16th or 17th centuries, only half mention any use of fire except for cooking. Only six purportedly first-hand accounts might refer to purposeful, widespread, and frequent use of fire. These six are all consistent with use of fire only locally near camps or villages, or with accidentally escaped fires."²⁴

Forest ecologist, paleoecologist, and director of Harvard University's Harvard Forest, David Foster, has also pondered the claims that Indians in New England created the vegetation patterns there through burning. He writes, "The paleoecological record provides no support for these visions and when coupled with other historical data instead paints a very different picture of the broad landscape. Sites from the central Massachusetts uplands do record fires and associated vegetation dynamics, but only at intervals of centuries to millennia....In the Berkshires and the uplands of northern

²² Craig D. Allen, "Where Have All The Grasslands Gone? Fires and Vegetation Change In Northern New Mexico," *The Quivira Coalition Newsletter*, May 1998.

²³ Holmes Rolston III, "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed," *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 13, 1999, 374.

²⁴ Emily W. B. Russell, "Indian-set Fires in the Forests of the Northeastern United States," *Ecology*, 64(1), 1983, 78-88.

Vermont an even lower frequency of fire is recorded....”²⁵ He says that “the charcoal record does not support the notion of widespread and frequent Native American management of the land with fire [in New England].”²⁶

University of Wisconsin geographer Thomas Vale has taken perhaps the most careful look at the claims of the humanized landscape. He writes, “The desire to visualize humanized landscapes in the pre-European era derives from social ideologies, rather than from careful assessment of ecological facts.”²⁷ I think Vale has hit the nail on the head for understanding the entire deconstructionist salvo against wilderness. Social *ideology* fires those guns, not assessment of ecological *facts*. Social ideology also powers the advocates of commercial logging and livestock grazing who argue for the Myth of the Humanized Landscape as justification for exploitation.

Using archaeology, history, ecology, and logic, Vale looks at claims of a humanized landscape in a specific place—Yosemite National Park—in his article, *The Myth of the Humanized Landscape*. He suggests that a place can be called “natural, or ‘in a wilderness condition’ if the fundamental characteristics of vegetation, wildlife, landform, soil, hydrology, and climate are those that result from natural, nonhuman processes, and if these conditions would exist whether or not humans are present.”²⁸ Michael Soulé makes a like argument: “To claim that *Homo sapiens* has produced or invented the forest ignores the basic taxonomic integrity of biogeographic units: species today still have geographic distributions determined largely by ecological tolerances and geological history and climate, rather than by human activities.”²⁹

²⁵ David R. Foster, “New England’s Forest Primeval,” *Wild Earth*, Spring 2001, 42-43.

²⁶ David Foster, “*Wild Earth* Interview” by Jamie Sayen, *Wild Earth*, Spring 2001, 35.

²⁷ Vale, “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape,” 231.

²⁸ Vale, “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape,” 232.

²⁹ Soulé, “Social Siege of Nature,” 157. In an email to me, Soulé writes that his “statement applies to all kinds of species, except those that have been mostly eliminated by human enterprise or transport (including large mammals and other exploited species, and many exotic species). But numerically, the species whose

Vale explains that claims of a humanized Yosemite should not be applied outside the inhabited Yosemite Valley to include all of today's national park, and that minor modification of vegetation or use of plants does not mean that even the Valley was completely humanized in native times. Finally, he considers the sweeping assertions made about Indian burning. He writes, "A more precise assessment should ask whether the human-induced ignitions were in addition to, rather than a substitution for, natural ignitions and whether or not, moreover, any fires set by Indians changed the landscape from that which otherwise would have existed."³⁰ After weighing what science now knows about fire frequency and behavior in Yosemite, he judges that "these fire frequencies varied temporally, with burning closely tracking weather conditions—an indication that natural factors, not humans, determined fire occurrence."³¹ University of Georgia geographer Albert J. Parker, who specializes in coniferous forest disturbance, writes, "The preponderance of evidence from fire-prone ecosystems...suggests that fuel accumulation patterns are far more influential than ignition source in governing the timing and spatial extent of fires."³²

Vale also reviews the literature on other regions in the United States to learn how widespread heavy human impact was. He concludes:

The general point, then, is that the pre-European landscape of the United States was not monolithically humanized, not a "managed landscape, much of its look and ecology the product of the human presence" (Flores 1997). Rather, it was a patchwork,

geographic ranges are not determined by biogeography or ecology are a minority...."

³⁰ Vale, "The Myth of the Humanized Landscape," 232.

³¹ Vale, "The Myth of the Humanized Landscape," 233.

³² Albert J. Parker, "Fire In Sierra Nevada Forests: Evaluating The Ecological Impact Of Burning By Native Americans," in *Fire, Native Peoples*, 255-256.

*at varying scales, of pristine and humanized conditions. A natural American wilderness—an environment fundamentally molded by nature—did exist.*³³

Vale's 2002 anthology, *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*, builds on his argument with evidence and careful analysis throughout the western United States. His contributors, including some of the foremost biological geographers and fire ecologists, demolish the romantic (and, as they show, imperialistic) case for widespread Indian burning. The regions covered in the book are the Rocky Mountains, Northern Intermountain West, Southwest Lowlands, Southwest Uplands, Pacific Northwest, Sierra Nevada Forests, and California Chaparral. Their book is essential for understanding the whole question of whether Indians had domesticated the United States at the time of European settlement. Anyone who wishes to intelligently discuss the pristine-humanized (or pristine-profane as Soulé puts it) problem needs to read this book. The contributors to it know what they are talking about; the humanized-landscape wilderness deconstructionists—left and right—are woefully muddled.

Throughout the West, these experts show that lightning-caused fires ran the fire regime, not human-ignited fires. The advocates of Indian burning base much of their argument on historical accounts. But William Baker, Craig Allen, and other contributors to *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape* show how ignorant these early observers were of lightning-caused fires. For example, Aldo Leopold wrote in 1920, “As is well known to all old-timers, the Indian fired the forests with the deliberate intent of confusing and concentrating the game so as to make hunting easier.”³⁴ Leopold's old-timers didn't know what they were talking about, and the ecological role of fire remained

³³ Vale, “The Myth of the Humanized Landscape,” 234. The reference is to D. Flores, “The West That Was, and the West that Can Be,” *High Country News*, 29(15), 1997, 1, 6-7.

³⁴ Craig D. Allen, “Lots Of Lightning And Plenty Of People: An Ecological History Of Fire In The Upland Southwest,” in *Fire, Native Peoples, and The Natural Landscape*, 145.

³⁴ Allen, “Lots Of Lightning,” 162.

a blurred spot for Leopold throughout his life. Historian Stephen Pyne, widely seen as an expert on fire in America and someone who has done much good work, repeats the same misunderstanding: “Of all Indian uses for fire, the most widespread was probably the most ancient: fire for hunting.” Fire and landscape-change ecologist Craig Allen, however, counters with “in the Southwest, the idea of landscape-scale hunting fires is based upon an insubstantial foundation of minimal documentation....Primary evidence for landscape-scale burning for hunting is nearly nonexistent in the Southwest, and supporting rationales are weak.”³⁵ Pyne, Charles Kay, and others uncritically draw on a few unsubstantiated claims by Leopold's old-timers to create an ecologically incorrect history and prehistory of fire. The believers in native firebugs also extrapolate from localized burning to landscape-scale burning.

Although writing specifically about the Southwest, Allen neatly summarizes the situation for the whole West: “Modern claims of extensive aboriginal burning of southwestern landscapes are shown to be based upon broad overgeneralizations and uncritical acceptance from a few historical reports of localized fire use.”³⁶ Before Spanish conquest and colonization in the early 1600s, what is now northern New Mexico was well populated by Pueblo Indians. Allen, who probably understands the paleoecology and current ecology of this region better than anyone else, shows that even here lightning caused the fires. For example, the Jemez Mountains, west of Santa Fe, have an extensive array of automated lightning detection devices. This system “recorded 165,117 cloud-to-ground strikes...during the period 1985-1994.”³⁷ I am not the least surprised by this barrage as it has come close to taking me out a few times. (One of the best meals of my life was under a Jemez spruce tree in a terrible lightning storm—my wife Nancy grilled fresh-picked boletes in olive oil on our camp stove while we waited it out.) In the Sierra Nevada, a lightning detection network “reported that

³⁵ Allen, “Lots of Lightning,” 162-163.

³⁶ Allen, “Lots Of Lightning,” 145.

³⁷ Allen, “Lots Of Lightning,” 146.

lightning struck in the region of Yosemite National Park approximately 2,000 times per year in the 6-year period from 1985 to 1990 (65 strikes per 100 square km per year)....”³⁸

While many of those arguing for Indian domestication of the West are well-meaning, social-justice liberals, there is a darker side as well. As Craig Allen writes, “Perhaps the late-1800s prejudice that Indians set many fires was also related to a ‘Manifest Destiny’ mind-set that sought to justify removing some tribes from their native forest lands.”³⁹

Pyne writes, “Together lightning and people made the elastic matrix that defined the fire regime.” Fire ecologists Tom Swetnam and C. H. Baisan rebut that with, “We contend that, even if humans had never crossed the land bridge from Asia to North America, historical fire regimes in most Southwestern forests would still have been similar in most respects to the fire regimes that we have documented.”⁴⁰ And Allen summarizes his exhaustive research (much of it on the ground unlike that of advocates for Indian burning) with, “Multiple lines of evidence from this region overwhelmingly suggest that in A.D. 1850, as in A.D. 1580, most mountain landscapes were ‘natural’ and ‘wild’ with regard to fire regimes and associated vegetation patterns.”⁴¹

What really runs this debate? Albert Parker clearly lays it out:

Discord over the role of indigenous humans in shaping the landscape is fueled by contrasts in the academic roots and ideological affinities of the principal voices in this debate.... Evidence that argues against a pervasive role for aboriginal humans in shaping the Sierra Nevada landscape comes primarily from physical and biological scientists, foresters, and fire ecologists, who have addressed issues of late Quaternary paleoenvironments, precontact fire regimes, and the geography of lightning and

³⁸ Parker, “Fire In Sierra Nevada Forests,” 254.

³⁹ Allen, “Lots Of Lightning,” 170-171.

⁴⁰ Allen, “Lots of Lightning,” 180.

⁴¹ Allen, “Lots of Lightning,” 180.

lightning-caused fires. Their evidence is principally physical, and taken in aggregate, it provides a logically consistent history of climate/vegetation/fire linkages that have operated to structure the Sierran landscape over the last 20,000 years, primarily without significant human alteration.

Evidence favoring the view that humans have domesticated the Sierran landscape comes primarily from human geographers and cultural anthropologists....Most of the evidence presented to support this position is ethnographic, based on interviews of past and present living elders descended from Sierran tribal communities.⁴²

He further points out that these folks have “a strong urge to atone for past sins of aggression and transgression, both cultural and environmental,” and have a “political agenda” to “put the Sierra back in the hands of native peoples, who, in the image of the Noble Savage, were excellent stewards of the land.” He concludes that “nostalgia and political agendas are no substitute for valid evidence.”⁴³

Do ecosystems recover from human impact?

Gomez-Pompa and Kaus assert that

new evidence from the Maya region suggests that the seemingly natural forests we are trying to protect from our version of civilization supported high densities of human populations and were managed by past civilizations....the Maya population of southeastern Mexico may have ranged from 150 to 500 people per km² in the Late Classic Period, contrasting sharply with current population densities of 4.5 to 28.1 people per km² in the same region....These past civilizations apparently managed the forests for food, fiber, wood, fuel, resins, and medicines.⁴⁴

⁴² Parker, “Fire In Sierra Nevada Forests,” 258-259.

⁴³ Parker, “Fire In Sierra Nevada Forests,” 259.

⁴⁴ Gomez-Pompa and Kaus, “Taming the Wilderness Myth,” 274.

This is probably partly true, but the rest of the story conveniently ignored by Gomez-Pompa and Kaus is that the highly overpopulated Mayans grossly overexploited the forests, and, when drought hit, their warlike, totalitarian civilization collapsed.⁴⁵ For one thousand years, those forests have been recovering. This ecological reality also explains the differences in population densities. Jared Diamond discusses the Mayan breakdown in his new book, *Collapse*. He writes that “the population of the Central Péten at the peak of the Classic Maya period is variously estimated at between 3,000,000 and 14,000,000 people, but there were only about 30,000 people there at the time that the Spanish arrived.”⁴⁶ These population figures show that the Mayan collapse was due not to Spanish-brought diseases or Spanish conquest, but to how the Maya “managed” their forests and were thus unable to deal with drought. Gomez-Pompa and Kaus base their claims on social ideology, not ecological facts.

Common to the writings of the wilderness deconstructionists is a New Pristine Myth: once touched by humans in any way, wilderness has evaporated and cannot be restored, therefore, there is no need to protect it from further human exploitation. This is the Forest Service's outdated and bogus purity view, which the agency used after the Wilderness Act's passage to try to minimize the amount of land protected as wilderness (I will discuss this more fully in *The War On Nature*). Michael Soulé warns about this “virgin metaphor” “because virginity, like pregnancy, knows no degrees,” and is an excuse, then, “to justify further material reshaping” of wildlands.⁴⁷ Soulé also calls this

⁴⁵ Jared Diamond, *Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed* (Viking, New York, 2005); Steven A. LeBlanc with Katherine Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth Of The Peaceful, Noble Savage* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2003); and Ronald Wright, *A Short History of Progress* (Carroll & Graf Publishers, New York, 2005). **[add ref on drought]**

⁴⁶ Diamond, *Collapse*, 175.

⁴⁷ Soulé, “The Social Siege of Nature,” 155-56.

the pristine-profane dichotomy. A free-market theorist recently used the fallen virgin notion to argue for weakening the Endangered Species Act.⁴⁸

In answer to the question, then, ecosystems often can recover from human impacts over periods of time, depending on the level of impact. This resilience should never be used as justification for further intrusions into wilderness, but it does provide a valid rationale for the concept of wilderness recovery and rewilding.

And, finally, is the pristine myth important to the Wilderness Area Idea?

Denevan writes, "The pristine view is to a large extent an invention of nineteenth-century romanticist and primitivist writers...."⁴⁹ I somewhat agree, but I do not believe that Denevan's "pristine view" has much to do with the wilderness idea that led to the Wilderness Act or with the motivation of wilderness conservationists. In 1925, Aldo Leopold wrote that "the wilderness idea was born after, rather than before, the normal course of commercial development had begun."⁵⁰ Thus the father of wilderness area protection makes it clear that his wilderness idea was a new one, coming after "motor cars" began to invade the national forests following World War One. It had little to do with the Pristine Myth of "nineteenth-century romanticist and primitivist writers."

Nor does the New Pristine Myth carry water with wilderness area protection today. Places do not have to be pristine to be designated as wilderness; the Wilderness Act never required pristine conditions.⁵¹ Leopold wisely explained that "in any practical

⁴⁸ Randy T. Simmons, "Nature Undisturbed: The Myth behind the Endangered Species Act," *PERC Reports*, March 2005, 2-5.

⁴⁹ Denevan, "The Pristine Myth," 369.

⁵⁰ Aldo Leopold, "The Last Stand of the Wilderness," *American Forests*, 1925, 603.

⁵¹ The Spring 2001 issue of *Wild Earth*, with a theme of the "Wild, Wild East," should lay to rest misunderstandings about pristine areas. Particularly noteworthy are: James Morton Turner, "Wilderness East: Reclaiming History," 19-26; Douglas W. Scott, "Eastern Wilderness Areas Act: What's in a Name?" 24; and Douglas W. Scott, "Congress's Practical Criteria for Designating Wilderness," 28-32. See also Scott's technical memo to Sally Miller, "What Lands Qualify for Wilderness Designation: A Review of the Wilderness Act and Congressional Precedents," 23

program, the unit areas to be preserved must vary greatly in size and in *degree of wildness*" (emphasis added).⁵² Senator Frank Church of Idaho was the floor manager in 1964 when the Wilderness Act passed. Ten years later, when the Forest Service "would have us believe that no lands ever subject to past human impact can qualify as wilderness, now or ever," Church said, "Nothing could be more contrary to the meaning and intent of the Wilderness Act."⁵³

However, wilderness deconstructionists hatch their own Pristine Myth. For example, philosophy professor Michael Nelson writes, "The [Wilderness Act] definition is further flawed in that, quite simply, there are no longer any places untouched by human influence," and "In fact, all the enemy of wilderness needs to do to destroy the possibility of an area being designated as wilderness is to deny that a proposed area meets the wilderness designation standards."⁵⁴

Both his statements are without foundation. Frank Church made this clear more than a quarter of a century ago when he said on the floor of the Senate, "The effect of such an interpretation [the Forest Service's purity doctrine] would be to automatically disqualify almost everything, for few if any lands on this continent—or any other—have escaped man's imprint *to some degree*."⁵⁵ (Emphasis added.) The definition of wilderness in the Wilderness Act fully acknowledges that there are few if any places untouched by human influence; the Act does not require proposed wilderness areas to be untouched; and time and time again, conservationists have overcome antiwilderness

Precedents," 23 July 2001, available from the Campaign for America's Wilderness. This memo crushes the Pristine Myth of wilderness areas. Scott's recent book also very effectively covers the issue: Doug Scott, *The Enduring Wilderness: Protecting Our Natural Heritage through the Wilderness Act* (Fulcrum Publishing, Golden, Colorado, 2004).

⁵² Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), 189.

⁵³ Frank Church, "The Wilderness Act Applies To The East," *Congressional Record—Senate*, January 16, 1973, 737.

⁵⁴ Michael Nelson, "Beyond Wilderness," *Horizons*, Sigurd Olson Environmental Institute, Northland College, Ashland, Wisconsin, Spring 1998, 3.

⁵⁵ Church, "The Wilderness Act Applies To the East," 737.

arguments based on lack of purity. There are now more than 600 areas totaling more than 106 million acres in the National Wilderness Preservation System. Most of these wilderness areas were designated despite the claims of foes that they were not pure enough. So much for Nelson's "warning." It is beyond the pale of the real world of wilderness area designation.

Bill Cronon likewise seemed to misunderstand the Wilderness Act when he wrote in 1990/1991, "If you follow the federal government's definition, there is no wilderness in Wisconsin."⁵⁶ Wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong—on six counts: at the time Cronon wrote there were in fact five designated national forest wilderness areas and one national wildlife refuge wilderness area in Wisconsin—Wisconsin Islands, Blackjack Springs, Headwaters, Porcupine Lake, Rainbow Lake, Whisker Lake. They total 44,170 acres. (On behalf of The Wilderness Society, I testified in favor of Blackjack Springs and Whisker Lake before Congress in 1978.) They meet the federal government's definition of wilderness and have been so designated. Conservationists are proposing additional wilderness areas in Wisconsin, too—since Cronon wrote, Congress established the Apostle Islands National Lakeshore Gaylord Nelson Wilderness Area. The wilderness area idea embodied in the 1964 Wilderness Act comes from post-designation management rules rather than from a romantic ideal. I further discuss the wilderness purity myth in *Rewilding North America* and in my forthcoming *The War on Nature*.

Neither of the Pristine Myths—that the Americas were pristine before Europeans and that only pristine areas can be considered for wilderness designation—have much to do with the wilderness area idea.

⁵⁶ William Cronon, "Landscape and Home: Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin," *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, Vol. 74, Winter 1990-91.

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.

Gomez-Pompa and Kaus claim that “in many cases, the traditional land-use practices of the rural sector are responsible for maintaining and protecting the biodiversity of our wilderness....”⁵⁷ This Ecological Peasant Myth is a faith-based, anticolonial view for which there is little evidence.

J. Baird Callicott likewise believes that the America found by European explorers and colonists was heavily managed and modified by Native Americans; indeed, they had “improved” the land and caused the “incredible abundance of wildlife.” Fifteen years ago, he wrote, “Most of temperate North America was managed actively by its aboriginal human inhabitants.”⁵⁸ He further claimed that “the biological wealth of North America on the eve of European landfall is more attributable to the bioregional management programs of the indigenous human population than to low numbers.”⁵⁹ I simply can’t understand how he could have made this claim. Other critics of wilderness play variations on this theme. I have yet to see any scientific evidence offered for this sentimental view, however. It is remarkably alike the worn-out blather used by some ranchers, loggers, and other extractive industry boosters today to justify their ongoing abuse of the land. The great logical fallacy here is shown by asking, “Who maintained biodiversity before humans showed up?” I’ve come to realize that they cannot conceive of such a time.

Callicott uses an example of two oases in the Sonoran Desert to conclude that people improve upon Nature. One of the treasure spots of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument in Arizona is Quitobaquito Springs. A supposedly similar desert oasis is Quitovac, 100 miles south in Sonora. Quitovac, however, is a small Papago farming

⁵⁷ Gomez-Pompa and Kaus, “Taming the Wilderness Myth,” 273.

⁵⁸ Callicott, “The Wilderness Idea Revisited,” 241.

⁵⁹ Callicott, “The Wilderness Idea Revisited,” 242.

community. Because there were sixty-five species of birds seen at Quitovac and only thirty-two at Quitobaquito, Callicott argues that human presence has improved the Quitovac spring ecosystem. There are also more plant species at Quitovac.

Why are there more bird species at Quitovac? Well, birds are there that are attracted by agriculture—English sparrows and grackles, for example. These birds are abundant in human-dominated places; they are not native to the desert wilderness and we have no need whatsoever to be worried about their survival. Moreover, Quitovac is farther south and closer to the Gulf of California, therefore it has coastal, oceanic, and tropical birds that Quitobaquito does not. Plants? Why, the increased diversity comes from exotic weeds and crops. A real indication of wild Nature is to consider the mammals visiting the two springs, because mammals are more sensitive to human presence. Quitobaquito has more native mammals.

Such misunderstanding of biological diversity has been repeated by others who boast how humans improve upon Nature, but none of these biologically unschooled folks ever think to ask the simple questions that reveal the Quitobaquito-Quitovac comparison as meaningless. After the bird tallies, by the way, Quitovac was largely wiped out by a major agricultural development. Quitobaquito remains a protected natural area.⁶⁰ Holmes Rolston III does an excellent job in “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed” of showing how the comparison of the two oases is bogus.⁶¹

Where human foraging and shifting horticulture reputedly increase local species diversity, dare we ask about the *quality* of that increased diversity? Are the additional species common, weedy ones? Are many of them invasive exotics that push away native species? What happens to wildlife hunted by people for food? What happens to

⁶⁰ However, Quitobaquito Spring, like the rest of Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, is now being trashed by the hordes of illegal immigrants and drug runners crossing the border there.

⁶¹ Holmes Rolston III, “The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed,” *The Environmental Professional*, Volume 13, 1999, 372-373.

predators? All biodiversity is not equal. Rare, sensitive, native species are more important than weeds that do well in human-disturbed areas.

Fine-sounding indigenous philosophy about the relationship between natives and the land is taken by believers in the Myth of the Noble Savage to be descriptive of actual practice. Should we therefore assume that Aldo Leopold's land ethic portrayed the way Americans in the twentieth century actually interacted with the land? If we do, we will be disheartened. Likewise, we will be let down if we assume that spoken feelings toward Nature represent actual practice by natives. Archaeologist Steven LeBlanc writes, "Being aware and worshipful of one's natural resources is a far cry from actually practicing ecological conservation."⁶² Ethnologist Raymond Chipeniuk writes that "some Native American cultures express kinship and solidarity with wild animals. These, however, are highly conscious mythic interpretations of a whole way of life. They need not, and often do not, correspond to how people actually behave, much less to their unconscious structures of thought."⁶³

J. D. Hughes, in his *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations*, writes that "a good attitude toward nature is not enough. Combined with a good attitude must be accurate knowledge of the workings of nature and the ability to control and direct human impact upon nature in channels which will help, rather than hinder, the balance of nature."⁶⁴ Precivilized cultures generally lack both ecological understanding and control over destructive behavior. Even cultures that see the land as a sacred place "manage to make their surroundings a scene of deforestation and erosion," according to Hughes.⁶⁵ They also cause the extinction or extirpation of many species. A long-time wilderness

⁶² LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 13.

⁶³ Raymond Chipeniuk, "A Repertory Grid Test of the Claim That Sense of Landscape Naturalness Is Specific to Culture," *Cross-Cultural Research*, Vol. 29, No. 4, November 1995, 354.

⁶⁴ J. D. Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations* (University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque, 1975), 156, quoted in William R. Catton Jr., "What Have We Done to Carrying Capacity?" *Wild Earth*, Winter 1997/98, 67.

⁶⁵ Hughes, *Ecology in Ancient Civilizations*, 42.

manager in Alaska, who finally lost his naiveté about the Noble Savage, tells me that native elders are often ignorant about ecology, but their claims are unquestioningly accepted just as were the statements of the popes in the Middle Ages.

(Of course, civilized cultures lack control over their destructive behavior, too!)

Anthropologist T. Wayne Dye has worked with the Bahinemo in Papua New Guinea for twenty-five years. He writes, “My Bahinemo friends sometimes spoke and acted like natural conservationists, but they usually spoke and acted as if they never thought about the matter at all.” He believes that they conserve when they can directly see the effects of overexploitation, but that in many cases they are unable to see such declines. “Like Americans, Bahinemo people will not worry about an ecological problem until they are sure one exists.”⁶⁶ Leopold was right: It takes an ecological education to be aware of ecological wounds.

Tropical ecologist John Terborgh explains another piece of the problem, “Technology has fundamentally altered the footprint human beings leave on nature. A culture that hunted with bows and arrows in the past will certainly hunt with firearms if given the opportunity. Study after study has shown that once a premodern society acquires firearms, it overexploits the game supply.”⁶⁷ Chipeniuk writes, “Even where human beings have been constituents of an ecosystem for hundreds of thousands of years...their cultures and technologies change fast enough to render them just like an invading species—one to which other species have not had time to adapt, and may never have time to adapt.”⁶⁸

John Oates, a primatologist with thirty years experience in field research and conservation in West Africa, writes that

⁶⁶ T. Wayne Dye, “On Tribal Conservationists,” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 39, No. 3, June 1998, 352-353.

⁶⁷ John Terborgh, *Requiem For Nature* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 1999), 51.

⁶⁸ Chipeniuk, “Repertory Grid Test,” 355.

*there is little robust evidence that traditional African societies (or indeed 'traditional' societies anywhere in the world) have been natural conservationists. On the contrary, wherever people have had the tools, techniques, and opportunities to exploit natural systems they have done so. This exploitation has typically been for maximum short-term yield without regard for sustainability; unless the numbers of people have been very low, or their harvesting techniques inefficient, such exploitation has usually led to marked resource depletion or species extinction.*⁶⁹

Alienated from our own “corrupt” society, we still want to believe that humans are intrinsically good, so we romanticize indigenous peoples as the first ecologists. It seems we can't accept non-industrial societies for what they are—we either demonize them as savages with animal lusts and an incapacity for civilization, or we exalt them as paragons of ecological and social virtue. Just as *Wall Street Journal*-type right-wingers glorify ranchers and loggers to find the authenticity missing in their own lives, so do the politically-correct and alienated members of Western societies glorify the Noble Savage and the Ecological Peasant. In many ways, self-loathing drives the cult of the Noble Savage.

Worshippers of the Noble Savage believe that the impact of native peoples was positive. Some even place the bloody, imperialistic Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans on the ecological pedestal, too. Not only were tribal peoples the first ecologists, but also they were egalitarian and peaceful in this Rousseauistic fairy tale. Lyanda Haupt pops this little feel-good bubble when she writes, “Notwithstanding its romanticized image, native Hawaiian society was based on a rigid caste system, replete with slavery and ritual human sacrifice.”⁷⁰

⁶⁹ John F. Oates, *Myth And Reality In The Rain Forest: How Conservation Strategies Are Failing in West Africa* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1999), 55.

⁷⁰ Lyanda Haupt, “Feathers and Fossils: Hawaiian Extinctions and Modern Conservation,” *Wild Earth*, Spring 1996, 45.

An archaeological site from 32,000 years ago in Sungir, Siberia, shows inescapable evidence of social differentiation and status. Archaeologist David Lewis-Williams of the University of Witwaterstrand in South Africa writes of the people from Sungir, “This was no simple, isolated, egalitarian hunting band.”⁷¹ In reflecting on the interactions between Cro-Magnons and Neandertals, Lewis-Williams writes, “It was not ‘beauty’ or an ‘aesthetic sense’ that was burgeoning at the beginning of the Upper Paleolithic but rather social discrimination.”⁷²

Recent books by two well-regarded archaeologists demolish any credible argument that precivilized people were peaceful amongst themselves or did not engage in warfare with their neighbors. Steven LeBlanc, an archaeologist at Harvard with extensive field experience in the U.S. Southwest and elsewhere, with freelance writer Katherine Register, uncover the violent past of our kind in their book, *Constant Battles: The Myth Of The Peaceful, Noble Savage*. LeBlanc explains that archaeologists and other academics have missed “the essence of human history” and have “sanitized” the past.⁷³ In his book, LeBlanc describes how he slowly overcame his orthodox view of our peaceful past as he dug up archaeological sites around the world. He simply could no longer ignore the evidence in front of his eyes. He writes, “The common notion of humankind's blissful past, populated with noble savages living in a pristine and peaceful world, is held by those who do not understand our past and who have failed to see the course of human history for what it is.”⁷⁴

Part of this peaceful myth holds that warfare only appeared with the development of civilization, and native people became violent only after being taught by European

⁷¹ David-Lewis Williams, *The Mind In The Cave: Consciousness and the Origins of Art* (Thames & Hudson, London, 2002), 80.

⁷² Williams, *Mind In The Cave*, 95.

⁷³ Steven A. LeBlanc with Katherine E. Register, *Constant Battles: The Myth Of The Peaceful, Noble Savage* (St. Martin's Press, New York, 2003), xii. The book is written in the first person of LeBlanc.

⁷⁴ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, xi.

exploitation and colonization.⁷⁵ This notion fits in with the cultural self-loathing of postmodernists, leftists, and others.

LeBlanc describes the cause for common warfare as “Since the beginning of time, humans have been unable to live in ecological balance. No matter where we live on earth, we eventually outstrip the environment.”⁷⁶ Just as the stuff of his digs convinced him that we were not peaceful, so did it convince him that he “was under the spell of a second myth: the myth of the inherent conservationist.” He explains, “The reality is that not only do humans not have hardwired ability to act in an environmentally benign manner today, but they rarely, if ever, had such an ability in the past. Humans have not been able to control their population growth, nor have they been able to avoid overexploiting their environments.”⁷⁷ He shows that throughout our past, food scarcity has always been a danger.⁷⁸ He concludes that “no society can have an ecological conservation ethic that works unless that society somehow addresses this population-resource balance issue.”⁷⁹

Overshooting carrying capacity leads to starvation and, LeBlanc points out, conflict almost always develops with even the threat of starvation. Not only is warfare “a means of obtaining more critically needed resources,” it also “can be a factor in controlling population.”⁸⁰ In addition to the evidence of his and others' archaeological diggings, LeBlanc also mined the last thirty years of *Human Ecology*, and found “no clear evidence of conservationist behavior in any traditional societies....”⁸¹

LeBlanc uses archaeological and ethnographic evidence to shred the Myth of the Peaceful Savage and the Myth of the Ecological Savage. I highly recommend LeBlanc

⁷⁵ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 6.

⁷⁶ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, xiv.

⁷⁷ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 9-10.

⁷⁸ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 36-38.

⁷⁹ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 42.

⁸⁰ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 71.

⁸¹ LeBlanc, *Constant Battles*, 36.

and Register's book to conservationists and environmentalists so they can better understand just how deep our destruction of the land goes and the underlying reasons for it. Myths, no matter how well-intentioned, are not the basis for wise action.

The other book, *War Before Civilization: The Myth Of The Peaceful Savage*, is by University of Illinois Anthropology Professor Lawrence Keeley. He covers much of the same ground as LeBlanc, but more from the perspective of a military historian. He also looks closely at violence within groups: murder. Among small-band societies believed to be quite peaceful, such as the San (or Bushmen), the murder rate is mind-boggling: four times that of the United States.⁸²

Keeley warns, "Although archaeologists may have pacified the past almost unconsciously, a handful of social anthropologists have recently codified this vague prejudice into a theoretical stance that amounts to a Rousseauian declaration of universal prehistoric peace."⁸³ Reality, however is that "The archaeological evidence indicates...that homicide has been practiced since the appearance of modern humankind and that warfare is documented in the archaeological record of the past 10,000 years in every well-studied region....If anything, peace was a scarcer commodity for members of bands, tribes, and chiefdoms than for the average citizen of a civilized state."⁸⁴ Moreover, "wars are actually more frequent in nonstate societies than they are in state societies—especially modern nations."⁸⁵ Both Keeley and LeBlanc provide solid archaeological and ethnographic evidence for massacres and genocide among Stone Age societies.⁸⁶

To argue against a violent and ecologically destructive past for humans is to deny human nature. Keeley writes, "Our capacity for organized violence, the universal

⁸² Lawrence H. Keeley, *War Before Civilization: The Myth Of The Peaceful Savage* (Oxford University Press, New York 1996), 28-30.

⁸³ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, 22.

⁸⁴ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, 39.

⁸⁵ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, 33.

⁸⁶ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, 67-69; *Constant Battles*, 67-68, 125-127, 148.

ugliness of war, and the intricate difficulties of keeping a peace are part of the 'pain' of being human."⁸⁷

Ernst Mayr, the giant of evolution in the twentieth century, bluntly stated toward the end of his long life and career, "There is little doubt that hominid history is a history of genocide. Indeed, the same can apparently be said about chimpanzees."⁸⁸ LeBlanc and Keeley deal with the relatively recent prehistory of humans. Two additional books from credible scientists go further back to explode the myth that our hominin ancestors and more recent hunting/gathering people were peaceful and egalitarian: *The Hunting Apes* by University of Southern California anthropologist/primatologist Craig B. Stanford and *Demonic Males: Apes And The Origins Of Human Violence* by Harvard biological anthropologist Richard Wrangham and science writer Dale Peterson.⁸⁹ Stanford puts it bluntly: "None of the apes live peacefully as neighbors."⁹⁰ Wrangham (who has studied ape violence in the wild) and Peterson write that "modern chimpanzees...are surprisingly excellent models of our direct ancestors."⁹¹ In looking at existing hunter-gatherers, they write that, despite hopeful field searches, "no truly peaceful foraging people has ever been found or described in detail."⁹²

Stephen Pinker offers much good evidence against the peaceable savage in *The Blank Slate*. He also lays bare the failings of anthropology and social science because of their noble-savage ideology. One of the great scandals of academia has been the vicious, dishonest attack on anthropologist Napoleon Chagnon and his work in South America with the Yanomami tribe. Because Chagnon found much violence, his research

⁸⁷ Keeley, *War Before Civilization*, 171.

⁸⁸ Ernst Mayr, *What Evolution Is* (Basic Books, New York, 2001), 258.

⁸⁹ Craig B. Stanford, *The Hunting Apes: Meat Eating and the Origins of Human Behavior* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1999); Richard Wrangham and Dale Peterson, *Demonic Males: Apes And The Origins Of Human Violence* (Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston, 1996).

⁹⁰ Stanford, *The Hunting Apes*, 94.

⁹¹ Wrangham and Peterson, *Demonic Males*, 63.

⁹² Wrangham and Peterson, *Demonic Males*, 75.

research was deconstructed in a dastardly and slanderous way. Pinker writes that Chagnon's detractors, including Leslie Sponsel, are “open about their ideological agenda, which is to defend the doctrine of the Noble Savage. Sponsel wrote that he is committed to ‘the anthropology of peace’ in order to promote a ‘more nonviolent and peaceful world....”⁹³

An example of how deep-seated this longing for the Noble Savage lies comes from anthropologist Alice Ingerson about a course she taught at Duke University: “Many students enrolled in the course because they hoped to read about primitive or ‘first’ peoples living ‘in harmony with nature.’ But when one student realized how difficult it was going to be to document any past harmony between culture and nature she broke into tears in my office, confessing that she didn't think she wanted to learn what she was going to learn in this class.”⁹⁴ I think this student's attitude is representative of all those who yearn to believe in the Noble Savage, who are wont to take a kernel of fact—the relatively mild impact on Nature of pre-industrial, low-population societies compared to modern industrial-growth culture—and swell it into a mountain of wishful thinking.

Unlike some who have used his demographic figures to argue against a pristine New World, Denevan is clear that “the Indian impact was neither benign nor localized and ephemeral, nor were resources always used in a sound ecological way.”⁹⁵

Open-minded researchers see widespread evidence of ecological collapse in archaeology. The Hohokam and Anasazi of the American Southwest overshot carrying capacity and caused ecosystem crash in tandem with a drought. The civilizations of MesoAmerica and the Andes scalped their lands as terribly as did the Assyrians and Greeks. The extinction of the Pleistocene megafauna was caused by Stone Age hunters entering virgin territory. It may be painful to acknowledge all of this, but only by honestly

⁹³ Pinker, *The Blank Slate*, 118.

⁹⁴ Alice E. Ingerson, Response to “Revisionism in Ecological Anthropology,” *Current Anthropology*, Vol. 38, No. 4, August-October 1997, 616.

⁹⁵ Denevan, “The Pristine Myth,” 370.

honestly trying to understand human mistakes in the past can we understand how not to repeat them today. Moreover, we need to face the painful truth that basing respect for other cultures on a myth is a dangerous path.

I'll close this chapter with wise words from Thomas Vale:

Natural wildernesses, pristine landscapes, existed at the time of European contact....Not occurring everywhere, surely, they did exist in places; they did exist somewhere. This conclusion will not strike many people as novel, but it will be resisted by those for whom 'wilderness' seems a politically incorrect challenge to social justice or a strategically unwise ideal for conservation goals, or by those who argue that 'nature' is merely a socially constructed category, an artifact of the human mind and human language.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Vale, "Reflections," in *Fire, Native Peoples*, 300.