

Origins of Environmental Action

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Abstract: Wilderness preservation has been a battleground issue for forty years because it involves fundamental values about humans and the world, positions that reached the level of religion--taking that as humans' attempts to find a place in the universe and a purpose in life. Both sides held to variants of the modern secular religion of science, one seeing wilderness as sacred space and ecology as our guide to a new harmony with nature, the other viewing the land as, ultimately, resources.

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Text:

Wilderness preservation has been a contested issue for the last forty years, a problem management practice, public hearings, laws, and negotiations defused but did not settle. They could not, for the debate went deeper than public policy; it involved basic issues of value and humans' place in the world, and each side held a position that went to these fundamental questions. Environmentalism held that ecology would lead humans into harmony with nature, and it regarded wilderness as sacred space; those on the other side looked on economic development unchallenged universal good, a view that made wilderness at best an amenity, at worst the nostalgia or the indulgence of a favored few. Neither side saw the controversy in those terms, for everyone thought of religion in terms of denominations, creeds, and belief in supernatural beings, and holding that their own beliefs were based in science and observation, did not see them as religious. They were,

though, for religion arose from humans' need to find a place and purpose in the universe, an answer to the ultimate questions of what humans were, what the world was, and how humans were related to it, and commitments on that level, regardless of what they say about deities or and afterlife, must be seen as religious. (James, 1902) Only if we seen the wilderness debate in this way, as a clash of fundamental beliefs, can we understand why is it so intractable as a public policy issue.

Modern secular religion began in the seventeenth century with the rise of science, grew as science explained the world, and by the nineteenth century displaced conventional faith, particularly among the educated. For the last century most educated people viewed religion as an early stage in cultural progress our civilization has, happily, passed beyond. Even those who did not accepted much of the gospel of progress— science as the only way to accurate knowledge and technology as the force that humans could use to bend the world to their will. But while people ceased to call their ultimate beliefs religion and believed they acted on the basis of reason they still held their ultimate beliefs, as everyone must, on faith. The canons of economic development, the belief that knowledge and power would lead us to the secular paradise of consumer goods and the belief that ecology would lead us to an earthly paradise of harmony with nature that would heal the alienation characteristic of modern society were all matters of faith, no more capable of being proved than the proposition that a white-bearded God in a robe created the universe in six twenty-four days or the hope that the righteous would after death sit around on clouds and strum harps while the unrighteous would be cast into the outer darkness. It might seem impossible to enlist science in the search for ultimate values or to form them around science, which insisted on material causes and resolutely

ignored moral questions and ultimate ends, but people had since the seventeenth century used science to find meaning in the world, and while Darwinian evolution made simple and sunny versions of natural theology impossible it did not bar more sophisticated ones. Indeed, it supported them, for there was, as Darwin famously said, a certain “grandeur in this view of life”—evolution’s picture of the world as the scene of continuing struggle producing from simple forms all the beautiful and varied things we saw. Economics offered no similar grandeur but it had at least the security of science.

Accepting science as authoritative knowledge about the world, though, did more than substitute engineering for epistemology. It led away from a sense of the sacred, toward what nature writer Annie Dillard called “the unhinging of materials from meaning.” (Dillard, 1982, 136) Environmentalism built on that lack, offering to those unable to accept the conventional heaven and repelled by the consumer one a vision of a new world and the chance to participate in making it. From its beginnings the movement went beyond reform, the building of a better society, to the level of religion. It called people to a new way of life that would heal them and a world that was sacred and filled with meaning. Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, which touched off the public environmental movement, preached—that is not too strong a word—our “obligation to endure” the need to change our values and our hearts. (Carson, 1962) Her opponents recognized that, for while they questioned her use of science they concentrated on what they saw as her betrayal of the highest ideal of Western civilization: our duty to conquer nature. They were wrong in thinking the public would rally to the old cause—most people saw at least some merit in Carson’s case—but right in seeing the contest as fundamental.

(Dunlap, 1981) The “conquest of nature” and living as “a plain citizen of the biotic community” involved different views of humans and their place in the world.

Environmentalism as a public issue relied on growing evidence that human numbers and technology threatened to destroy much of the biological systems of the earth in the near future, as a religion it built on that and a robust faith grounded in American thought and history. Ralph Waldo Emerson’s Transcendentalism, as preached by Thoreau and especially by John Muir, established in American culture the idea of nature as the ground of reality and the place to seek insight into the ultimate, and even before the rise of environmentalism gave wilderness a special place. Here, where the veil of society was thinnest, people might most easily look into nature and see ultimate reality. In addition to spiritual insight, though, wilderness offered contact with pioneer America and the chance to test character and courage against nature, the ultimate hunting experience, and a refuge from society. By the 1960s wilderness was a key conservation cause, and a decade later a geographer described it as “a contemporary form of sacred space, valued as a symbol of geopiety and as a focus for religious feeling.” (Graber, 1976, ix)

People saw wilderness in many ways but the most popular view remained the ancient vision of sacred groves, redefined by environmentalism as ecologically intact old-growth forest. These became environmentalism’s sacred cause, and wilderness’s defenders, most conspicuously in the early years in Earth First!, waged a holy war against those who would destroy these lands. Opponents of logging or roads skated close to the law’s edge by “recommending” or just “describing” such actions as spiking trees, crippling earth-moving equipment, and destroying logging roads, and although they emphasized action against property only and said that successful ecotage would not kill

or injure people, critics accused them of indifference to human life. Opposition reached a high point in 1987, when pieces of a shattered saw blade injured a mill operator in California. Earth First!'s enemies howled for prosecution and imprisonment. Ecotage attracted the attention of federal authorities, and an FBI sting operation resulted in the arrest of several people for the attempted dynamiting of a power pylon. (Zakin, 1993) It could hardly have been otherwise. A society that saw property as the defining characteristic of the individual and economic development as the central social good could only see Earth First!'s program as an attack on core values. Despite prosecutions, new members with new issues, and some radical stands—AIDS as a form of population control and recommending an end to all immigration into the United States—the group survived, and so did radical action. No one could say, for obvious reasons, just how many participated or how many fires set for other reasons were blamed on environmental terrorism, but interest was high enough to produce a second edition of Ecodefense: A Field Guide to Monkeywrenching, that had enough changes and new tips to suggest people had used the first. (Foreman and Haywood, 1985) It looked cheap but it was deadly serious and principled--a shop manual for sabotage with philosophical justification included.

Through ecology environmentalism connected daily life to the wilderness, showing how our decisions to buy tropical woods, use weedkiller on the lawn, or drive an SUV contributed to the destruction of the planet, and with environmental ethics, most famously in Aldo Leopold's land ethic, which used ecology to lay a moral foundation for our treatment of the land, gave people ways to think about their daily lives in the context of ultimate values. "A thing is right," he said, "when it tends to preserve the integrity,

stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.” (Leopold, 1949, 262) That connected fact and value, the world science showed with what might and ought to be, and while philosophers did not find Leopold’s arguments entirely satisfactory that hardly mattered. People did not live by philosophical systems but by applying those systems to their lives--usually in ways that horrified philosophers--and they found the land ethic a useful framework to think with. It was not always apparent what would “preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community,” but the problems of deciding what we should do were in principle no different from those encountered in using the Golden Rule to guide our relations with other people. Millions recycled and found energy-efficient ways to live and get to work as their contribution to saving nature and in particular wilderness.

Behind the fervent physical defense of wilderness lay an equally fervent belief in its ultimate value. People defended wilderness for many ranging from the directly economic to its intrinsic value and borrowed concepts from conservation, preservation, nature appreciation, economics, ecology, or the counter-culture, but they did not risk fines or jail or their lives because something might evolve in the next few million years or because wild land formed our nation’s character. They did it for much more important reasons. Julia Butterfly Hill, for instance, sat 180 feet up in a redwood tree for 738 days, and neither common sense nor her testimony suggested an economic or utilitarian motives or even a particularly well-developed intellectual defense of nature or wilderness. She acted, she said, because clear cuts were turning “these majestic ancient places which are the holiest of temples, housing more spirituality than any church” into muddy fields. Hill, 2000, 9) In Confessions of an Eco-Warrior Dave Foreman declared

that wilderness had value because it “*is*. Because it is the real world, the flow of life, the process of evolution, the repository of that three and a half billion years of shared travel.” All things are good and equally good “because they exist.” The preservation of wilderness was “an ethical and moral matter. A religious mandate. Human beings have stepped beyond the bounds; we are destroying the very process of life.” (Foreman, 1991, 3-4)

The reaction to William Cronon’s essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness,” showed how committed people were to their ideas. Cronon argued that “wilderness” was a word we gave to a part of what was “out there,” a position which, he emphasized, did not make it unreal, less interesting or less worthy of our respect, but which did suggest we needed to put wilderness in perspective. Thinking of it as the “real” nature encouraged a belief that humans and nature were separate rather than parts of a whole and neglect of what was around us every day in favor of far-off areas we might never or only rarely see. We should not discard the idea of wilderness, he said, but we should fit it into an inclusive view of how we lived with and for nature. (Cronon, 1995) That raised no eyebrows in Western philosophy, which readily acknowledged that ideas in our heads did not exactly match the world outside, and it resonated with many environmentalists, but it drew vociferous criticism. An audience at the American Society for Environmental History convention suggested Cronon gave an unbalanced critique or played into the hands of the anti-wilderness coalition. (*Environmental History*, 1996, 29-46) Wild Earth devoted most of an issue to what editor Dave Foreman described as “the dirt clod Professor William Cronon recently tossed at the Wilderness Act and at defenders of Wilderness Areas.” (*Wild Earth*, 1996) Most of the critics attacked a case Cronon had not made.

They took his statement that concepts were social constructions to mean he believed what was “out there” was entirely a social construction, which he did not. They said he confused reality and text, but he argued--paradoxically and somewhat ironically—that this was what wilderness’s defenders too often did. Seeing what was out there through the lens of “wilderness,” they mistook the name for the reality.

Like fundamentalist Christians refusing to see the Bible as texts produced at different times and within particular cultures, they saw wilderness as outside historical and cultural context, something that could not be analyzed but had to be experienced. Like Biblical literalists, believing the Bible spoke to all who came with an open heart and that it was the only source of light, they saw “wilderness” as something we could only stand in awe of, and while they did not quite appeal to the insight of the unlettered which confounds the learning of the wise, they did see it as a reality directly accessible to the believer. That stopped analysis, in the same way Foreman’s declaration that the wilderness had value “because it *is*. Because it is the real world...” If wilderness was the real world and if its value lay in showing humans ultimate reality, then academic arguments like Cronon’s were at best irrelevant, at worst impious mental meddling with what lay beyond our ken.

That view led wilderness advocates to give travel in the wild the qualities of a pilgrimage or quest by surrounding it with totems and taboos. In a stroke of genius or insight, they harnessed pioneer activities and outdoor recreations to a spiritual journey, the familiar appeals of pioneer nostalgia and the strenuous life to a quest for meaning. Emphasizing immersion in another world as a way to carry us beyond our usual limits, they promised that by that effort we might come to a personal, emotional understanding

of the intellectual truths of our situation. Relying on a common intuition about the sacred, that it was not defined but encountered, and that ritual guided the encounter by providing ways to step outside daily life, enthusiasts defined the wilderness journey as a passage outside the ordinary. Wilderness seekers did without ATVs for the same reason people engaged in Zen meditation turned off their cell phones. Spiritual search required a break with daily conventions and common behavior and patterns of behavior. Pilgrims had to abandon modern transport. If a small plane took seekers to a remote wilderness lake the experience only began when the plane's engine faded in the distance. Technology could be used if it preserved the land. Wilderness travelers did not sleep in animal skins or cook on sticks over open fires because even small numbers of people using wood for campfires and boughs for camp beds would destroy popular areas. Where it detracted from the experience or harmed the wilderness it had to be banished. That led to considerable argument. Ordinary use of cell phones harmed the isolation necessary for the wilderness experience and helicopters were even worse, but was either permissible in an emergency? Some grumbled about seeing other parties on a journey, even at a distance, others ignored or tolerated long-range reminders of the rest of the species. How wild did wilderness have to be? One school of thought looked for size, another emphasized visible lack of human change, still another an ecosystem intact to the point of having top predators. Not even the fanatics insisted you had to be eaten by the grizzly to gain the full measure of insight but some did believe that the possibility, however slim, of participating in the food chain at less than the top level was essential.

From the other side the environmental stand seemed an impractical, emotional commitment and the conventional view reasonable and practical, but that perspective

relied, as much as the environmental one, on a faith in science and reason leading us to the promised land of economic development. We might, with only a little license, call it Gifford Pinchot's land ethic. "A thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and economic development of the nation. It is wrong when it tends otherwise." A half-century ago Samuel P. Hays recognized the fervor behind Progressive era conservation when he titled his book on that subject, one that dealt with the rise of the Forest Service and Gifford Pinchot's conservation crusade, Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency. (Hays, GET CITE) While he intended the title as a metaphor, we might profitably take it more literally. The conventional faith in economic development ignored individual transcendence and spiritual values, usually called in conventional faiths to supplement Americanism and Progress, but did constitute a fighting faith. Evidence that a policy will bring yield a better cost/benefit ratio commands the assent that the cry of "God wills it" had in an earlier phase of our civilization. Recognizing battles over wilderness as episodes in a religious war may not make them any easier to fight, but it is always good consciously to know where you stand and why. With luck, good will, and some intelligence that perspective might help us get beyond the current stalemate.

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