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# KEEPING THE WILD

## AGAINST THE DOMESTICATION OF EARTH

### *What's So New about the "New Conservation"?*

CURT MEINE

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#### KEEPING THE WILD: AGAINST THE DOMESTICATION OF EARTH

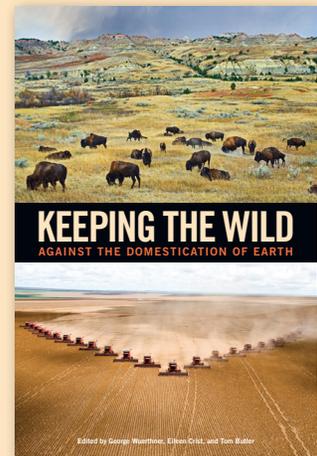
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**WE ARE BEING OFFERED** a new story about human beings and the rest of nature. It goes something like this . . .

*Once there was an environmental movement. It was a good movement—or at least it had good intentions—but it had some wrong ideas. All it really cared about was protecting and preserving the remote, unpeopled wilderness. It didn't care much about (or for) people. It ignored the places where people lived, worked, grew food, raised families, made things, and did things. What's worse, the "wilderness" to which it was so devoted did not really even exist in the first place, except as something that elite European people invented after they left Europe, colonized the far reaches of the planet, and displaced and subjugated its native peoples through waves of disease, conquest, and economic exploitation.*

*Some of the colonizers' descendants—the ones who felt remorse instead of pride—imagined the now-mythical "wilderness" to be pristine, unpeopled, static, timeless, fragile, and fraught with religious meaning. Ultimately they became conservationists and, later, environmentalists. But their romantic fixation on the false ideal of wilderness led the well-meaning movement to create an impregnable divide between humans and nature, to disdain people, to care nothing for the poor and dispossessed, and to exude undue pessimism over human prospects and the fate of the planet. And, perhaps worst of all, this obsession led the otherwise worthy movement astray. Environmentalism did not work. The movement grew larger, wealthier, and more influential, but it failed. It was unable to achieve its aims, many of which were actually quite sensible and laudable.*

*Fortunately, and just in the nick of time, some rebellious "new conservationists" came forward to fix the wayward movement. They understood the fatal flaws in the old environmentalists' vision. They coolly explained: There is no wilderness, and there never really was; the natural world, in fact, changes; nature, far from being fragile, is actually quite tough and resilient; and with all this in mind, we can and should now turn our environmental concerns to the places where they are most needed, the "working" landscapes and cities in our thoroughly human-shaped and human-dominated world. In so doing, we can change the movement into what it ought to have been in the first place: humane, just, optimistic, and forward-looking. We can do what we human beings do best, and what in any case we must do: create a new world and manage it in a way that, while still respecting many of the wild things in our midst, does so in service of the human good, and the ever-growing human economy that promotes that good. It is the only way forward.*

It's a compelling story, and an alluring one. Nobody wants to be considered old-fashioned, naive, ineffective, uninformed, and unjust. And absolutely no one wants to be thought uncool or stodgy. The story does what a good story must: It explains a lot. It has an awesome plot and fascinating characters. And since we humans are the main characters, it flatters us. Finally, it has this going for it: Portions of it are true.

Of course, this is not the only version of the story, and I'm not certain that I have done it justice. It is always risky to tell someone else's story. However, assuming that I have been accurate with at least the main story lines, they are worth examining more closely.

***The "old" conservation/environmental movement had an idealized and illusory view of wilderness as pristine, and its adherents believed therefore that such wilderness can and should be walled off, separated from, and unaffected by human beings and human impacts.*** Nothing new here. Correctives to the "classic" view of wilderness date back, just in the relatively recent literature, more than twenty years.<sup>1</sup> But let's go back further, beyond the horizon of environmentalism and into the older world of conservation. We might pause in our time-travel to attend the landmark 1955 international symposium, *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth*. The symposium brought together 75 leading conservation scientists, thinkers, and advocates in Princeton, New Jersey, to consider the fact of "man, the ecological dominant on the planet," and "to understand what has happened and is happening to the earth under man's impress." William L. Thomas, the editor of the conference proceedings, wrote: "The dichotomy of man and nature is . . . an intellectual device and as such should not be confused with reality; no longer can man's physical-biological environment be treated, except in theory, as 'natural.'"<sup>2</sup> Lewis Mumford, the guiding intellectual force of the symposium, suggested that "as the dominant biological species, man now has a special responsibility to his fellow-creatures as well as to himself."<sup>3</sup>

We might stop in 1933, to consider Aldo Leopold's textbook *Game Management*. Perhaps the readers of his day found it shocking to read: "Every head of wild life still alive in this country is already artificialized, in that its existence is conditioned by economic forces. Game management merely proposes that their impact shall not remain wholly fortuitous. The hope of the future lies not in curbing the influence of human occupancy—it is already too late for that—but in creating a better understanding of the

*extent of that influence and a new ethic for its governance*” [emphases added].<sup>4</sup> Leopold saw the reality of human environmental impacts and ecological connections more clearly than most, and as deeply as the ecological science and environmental history of the day allowed. That did not deter him from his lifelong efforts to protect, sustain, and restore wildness, at any and all scales, in any and all places.

We might pause again to visit with the Progressive Era conservationists of the early twentieth century. The movement included utilitarians devoted to “wise use” of natural resources and preservationists devoted to protecting special and scenic wild places (largely for human recreational use). We are captivated by the dramatic narrative of the tension between these two conservation camps (and many apparently assume that little has changed since). However, we risk overlooking their shared disdain for reckless economic exploitation of the land. We forget that the early movement included many who were sympathetic to and active in both causes and intent on keeping them connected. We fail to diagnose what *both* approaches to progressive conservation missed.

We might return all the way to George Perkins Marsh’s classic 1864 volume *Man and Nature*, the book that Mumford described as “the fountainhead of the conservation movement.” In the opening sentence of his weighty tome, Marsh described his first aim: “to indicate the character and, approximately, the extent of the changes produced by human action in the physical conditions of the globe we inhabit.” Marsh regarded as “doctrine . . . that man is, in both kind and degree, a power of a higher order than any of the other forms of animated life, which, like him, are nourished at the table of bounteous nature.”<sup>5</sup> Instead of congratulating ourselves on our own discovery of human agency, we might give Marsh a deep and careful reading, to see just what he got right and wrong in his telling of the story, and to gain greater insight into what we have learned since.

In brief, it has long been understood by leading conservation thinkers that the natural world has been thoroughly affected by the actions of people, and that wild places cannot simply be preserved behind the walls of “fortress conservation.” That understanding has not been an impediment to action on behalf of the wild, wherever and to whatever extent it exists.

***The “old” movement aimed to protect this idealized wilderness, while ignoring and making no allowance for human action to promote more sustainable rural landscapes and cities.*** This statement would come as a surprise

to those early progressive conservationists, led by game protectors responding to the bane of market hunting, foresters responding to the devastation of the forestlands of the upper Great Lakes, and agrarians responding to the destruction and degradation of soil. It would surprise the all-too-forgotten Liberty Hyde Bailey and Hugh Hammond Bennett (among many others of course) who, in the first half of the 1900s, focused on rural landscapes, livelihoods, and communities; built the movement for soil, water, and watershed conservation; and provided the foundations for the more recent sustainable agriculture movement.<sup>6</sup> It would surprise those who, over the last century, began to use the insights of ecology to actively restore degraded landscapes, waterways, and ecosystems. It would surprise those who pushed for and enacted the Clean Air Act (1970) and the Clean Water Act (1972)—among other signature laws of the modern environmental movement—legislation that had much to do with urban pollution concerns, and little to do with wilderness. And it now surprises the many contemporary conservationists who over the last generation have focused their work not on “classic” wilderness but on ecosystem management, urban and landscape ecology, private lands conservation, community-based conservation, watershed-based programs, maintenance of agricultural biodiversity, organic and urban agriculture, the local food movement, and other approaches to integrating conservation across the landscape.<sup>7</sup>

Meanwhile, appreciation of the embeddedness of cities within ecosystems, and of wildness in the city, is hardly new. For more than a century, a venerable literature has addressed the need and potential for better integration of cities and landscapes in the industrial age and for more socially and ecologically sensitive urban design and planning. The new conservationists need only consult such standard sources as Frederick Law Olmsted, Patrick Geddes, Jane Addams, John Nolen, Lewis Mumford, Jane Jacobs, Benton MacKaye, Jens Jensen, and Ian McHarg (again, among many others). The rising wave of interest in new urbanism and sustainable cities over the last two decades builds on these and other sources.<sup>8</sup> Evidently the effort in conservation to integrate the wild and the human is at least as old as the movement itself.

***The “old” movement, blindly adhering to the mythical “balance of nature,” assumed that nature in its pristine and undisturbed state was and would remain static.*** The new story seems to hold that the dynamism of natural systems and phenomena was discovered sometime in the late

1980s and came as a sorry surprise to naive environmentalists beholden to a “balance of nature” mythology. But the realization that nature changes is hardly new. Sticking just to the modern Western scientific tradition, we might point out that this view has been outmoded since the days of Alexander von Humboldt, Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace, and George Perkins Marsh. Even ecological succession, however flawed in its early formulations, was an effort to understand and explain patterns of ecological variation and change in time and space. We find Leopold cautioning in the 1930s that “the ‘balance of nature’ is a mental image for land and life which grew up before and during the transition to ecological thought. It is commonly employed in describing the biota to laymen, but ecologists among themselves accept it only with reservations, and its acceptance by laymen seems to depend more on convenience than conviction.”<sup>9</sup> Scientific and popular understanding of a vast range of both natural and human-influenced phenomena—plate tectonics, climate change, glaciation, erosion and sedimentation, ecosystem disturbance, population cycles, population genetics, speciation, range expansions and contractions, biological invasion, extinction, etc.—has been compounding for decades, if not centuries. The theme may have required extra emphasis; it did not require *invention*. But it requires now that we understand more critically some fundamentals: that not all change is created equal; that the causes, rates, spatial scales, types, and impacts of ecological disturbance and environmental change vary; that natural and anthropogenic change are interwoven in complex ways; and that our challenge is to calibrate more finely our understanding of historic change, and to explore more carefully our ethical response to the human role amid such change.<sup>10</sup>

*The “old” movement regarded nature as precious and fragile, whereas we now know that it is tough and resilient.* Resilience has become the watchword of contemporary ecosystem science, but it has deep roots in ecological thinking and conservation practice. Leopold captured the essence of the modern formulation of resilience in the 1940s, when he advised his fellow conservationists to pay attention not only to the continuous supply of “natural resources” but also to the fountain from which all ecosystem goods and services flow. His term for this was *land health*, which he defined as “the capacity for self-renewal in the soils, waters, plants, and animals that collectively comprise the land.”<sup>11</sup> For a generation that had witnessed epic deforestation, the depletion (and, in some cases, ex-

tinction) of wildlife populations, the widespread degradation of watersheds, and the Dust Bowl, the vulnerability of land to the ravages of unchecked economic exploitation was plain. Resilience was not merely a compelling ecological idea; it was a dire conservation need.

The more recent emergence of resilience as an organizing concept does not obviate the observable fact that ecosystems—human-modified and human-simplified worldwide, to varying degrees—for all their toughness and resilience, will not recover, on their own, their full complement of native diversity and their fine-tuned functionality. Ecological restoration recognizes and employs the potential “capacity for self-renewal” in ecosystems as a pragmatic standard—and it has done so since at least the 1930s. Restoration is not new, and anyone who works in restoration knows that it does not see land, or fragility, through rose-colored glasses. We can throw up our hands and take comfort in nature’s inherent “toughness”; or we can choose to put our hands—and heads and hearts—to work on behalf of the vulnerable, the ruined, the ignored, and the desecrated.

In both cases—defining the concept of resilience and engaging in the practice of restoration—conservation scientists and practitioners have for decades turned to the wilder portions of our landscapes for insight, knowledge, and actual biotic materials (genes, species, seeds, pollinators, etc.). Vulnerability and toughness, fragility and resilience, turn out to be not opposing but interwoven qualities of ecosystems. But one needs history and perspective to make sense of the terms.

*The “old” movement is, and always has been, inhumane and oppressive in dealing with people, especially by removing them from their home places in the name of preserving “pristine” nature.* The observation that wrong, bad, and even tragic things have been done—to people and to the natural world in the name of conservation and environmentalism—is undoubtedly true. Large movements are not homogeneous. Movements do not control the actions of all who participate in them. Movements also learn, change, and grow. To represent conservation and environmentalism as inherently and forever inimical to social justice is to erect a very frail straw man. History does indeed provide plenty of examples of short-sighted social ethics in American conservation in the first half of the twentieth century, as well as the later environmental movement. It also provides much evidence of a shared conviction: that there is an intimate connection between society’s treatment of our

fellow citizens (both the indigenous and the more recently arrived) and of our fellow creatures and landscapes.

It is entirely appropriate to behold the mote—and the beam—that we find in our movement’s eye. We engage in selective history, however, if we do not at the same time hold up those who have helped us to see more clearly the connections between social justice and conservation. In our critiques of, for example, the myopic utilitarianism of Progressive Era conservation, we may overlook its foundational commitment to economic equity and fairness. Bob Marshall, founder of the Wilderness Society, championed the people and culture of *Arctic Village* as much as he did the wild inhabitants of the *Arctic Wilderness*.<sup>12</sup> The eminent wildlife biologist Olaus Murie called for conservationists to broaden their ethical horizons, to mark “our heavy-footed progress in toleration of ‘other’ races of men,” and to seek “tolerance for the views and desires of many people.”<sup>13</sup> We cannot ignore historic tensions between advocates of social justice and nature conservation, but we can also build upon the efforts of those, from all sides, who have long sought to address those tensions and act upon commonality of purpose and values.

Then there is the question of respect for wild places and sacred spaces among indigenous peoples themselves. Is regard for the wild and nonhuman confined to only those with a Western worldview? Or is it reflected in varied cultures around the world, throughout history (and prehistory)? What are we to make, for example, of the Cree Nation of Wemindji, working in close partnership with Parks Canada and others to create, in 2008, the Paakumshumwaau-Maatuuskaau Réserve de Biodiversité Projetée, a protected area on the Wemindji lands along the east coast of James Bay?<sup>14</sup> Or the Red Cliff Band of Lake Superior Chippewa, which established in 2012 the Frog Bay Tribal National Park along the south shore of Lake Superior in Wisconsin—the first such tribal wildland park in the nation?<sup>15</sup> We could cite many other such partnerships. Perhaps we can make more than examples of these places and communities. Perhaps they can serve as reminders and guideposts, showing that concepts of *home* and *wilderness* are not, and never have been, as antithetical as we sometimes presume. Perhaps they can inspire others to make the same connections.

**The “old” movement failed.** This story line simply presents an inherent paradox.

The statement is true. Alas, it is also true of every other movement for social, economic, political, and envi-

ronmental betterment that the world has ever seen. The civil rights movement has failed to eradicate racism. The women’s movement has failed to do away with sexism. The labor movement has failed to eliminate economic injustice. Thinking that movements work this way—that they emerge, do their work, triumph, and then disappear—reveals a superficial understanding of history and social change, and the complexity of the human condition. Every movement involves steps forward, steps backward, and steps to the side—and an occasional leap to a new level.

The statement is also false. This movement for healthier relations between people and nature—call it what we will—has succeeded wildly. Over the last century and a half (at minimum), it has effectively challenged the currently dominant assumptions of human social and economic development: that humans are the sole source of meaning and value in the universe, and that other people and nature exist to be exploited for maximum individual and corporate economic benefit. Paul Hawken has described it as “the largest movement in the world”: “I began to count . . . I now believe there are over one—and maybe even two—million organizations working towards ecological sustainability and social justice.”<sup>16</sup>

Hawken might have added that the movement is also the most complex, difficult, and necessary movement in human history. Because ecological relationships cannot be divorced from human social and economic relationships, progress in improving the former cannot be made without addressing the tensions in the latter. But the converse is also true: Healthier, more just human social and economic relationships cannot be achieved in any lasting sense without appreciation of the context of the biophysical world within which they exist.

Leopold had it about right in 1947:

*I have no illusions about the speed or accuracy with which an ecological conscience can become functional. It has required 19 centuries to define decent man-to-man conduct and the process is only half done; it may take as long to evolve a code of decency for man-to-land conduct. In such matters we should not worry too much about anything except the direction in which we travel. The direction is clear, and the first step is to throw your weight around on matters of right and wrong in land-use. Cease being intimidated by the argument that a right action is impossible because it does not yield maximum profits, or that a wrong action is to be condoned because it pays. That philosophy is dead in human relations, and its funeral in land-relations is overdue.”<sup>17</sup>*

The power of the proposed story is that there is some truth in all of these story lines. Yet all of the story lines are, as I have argued, oversimplified and/or unoriginal. Considered together, they provide reasonable criticisms of the modern environmental movement, but they do so by painting a caricature of that movement, poorly informed by the history of conservation science, philosophy, policy, or practice.

There is another story about human beings and the rest of nature that we might offer. It is not a complicated one, and it is actually not so different from the one being proposed, especially in its concern for justice. But the story broadens this concern to include championing justice for the land, for its nonhuman denizens, and for future generations. This story would thus include in its narrative a firm place for the wild with, within, and (yes) without, the human. That story line is so important that it reframes the entire narrative. We are engaged in a collective effort to understand and redirect the relationship between the human (and humanized) and the “natural, wild, and free.” To do so, we need to understand, in ways we do not yet fully understand, the complicated history of humans and nature, and the evolution of what we now call conservation and environmentalism, over decades, centuries, and millennia, among varied cultures, in varied places, according to varied traditions. It is a vast task of intellectual and spiritual synthesis. It demands more than oversimplification and caricature. It requires, above all, humility. We have work to do.

Without knowing how that task will finally work out, I have the feeling that it will all come down to a pretty basic set of principles in practice. We need to think of conservation in terms of whole landscapes, from the wildest places to the most urban places. We need to safeguard the wildlands we still have, at all scales. Where we can, we need to restore such wildlands specifically, and *wildness* more generally. We need to do more and better conservation work outside protected areas and sacred spaces; on our “working” farms, ranches, and forests; and in the suburbs and cities where people increasingly live. We need to meet our needs for food, fiber, and fuel in ways that do not simplify and deplete but actively replenish, ecosystems close to home and around the world. We need to treat water as the essential ingredient of life that it is, and we need to respect its function in the landscape. We need to sustain and restore the two great global commons: the atmosphere above and the oceans below. No part of the landscape—however wild, however humanized—is sustainable if the whole is not. And so we need to know and respect the connections among all these parts of any landscape, while building resilience into all those relationships. We need to build a just and restorative economy that serves all these goals. We need to do all these things for people, for human communities, for future generations, for all the other members of the community of life, and for the health of whole landscapes and the entire Earth. We are all in this together.

## NOTES

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