

# A Letter to the Editors

IN DEFENSE OF THE RELATIVE WILD

Curt Meine

Dear Ben and Steve,

I appreciate very much the invitation to contribute to your volume, and I apologize for my procrastination. To compound matters, I have been spending way too much time *pondering* my procrastination. But now I know why I have been dawdling. Your title has stopped me in my tracks! *After Preservation*. There it sits, ahead of me on the trail, a patch of quicksand, inconspicuous, covered with leaves, camouflaged so well that I wonder myself if I'm making too much of it. Nothing personal, but my instincts tell me to be wary.

The title implies a premise that I can't accept. It does so subtly, which makes me even warier. It imposes upon the volume, from the get-go, a narrative that I question. It says to the reader (if I may):

Fellow environmentalists: Get with the program. Wake up from your dream of wilderness; the dream, alas, was never anything more than that, an illusion. Conservation, construed as the preservation of wilderness—and it has *always* been construed in that way—has failed. (And by the way, don't think too hard about the evolution of, and differences between, *conservation* and *environmentalism*. That was before your time, and you needn't bother yourself with fine distinctions, or with history. Trust us.) The creation of protected areas was and is the sole technique available to conserva-

tionists, and the protection of wilderness from people and modernity has been conservation's overriding goal. That is how we *did* conservation.

But no more. We have learned. And just in time, because it simply does not work in a world of constant change. It most especially doesn't work in a world still in the early stages of accelerating climate disruption, ocean disruption, and ecosystem disruption. The world is all a human artifact now. And that's not such a bad thing. In fact, it can be great for us if we're smart about it. The good news is that, after all, it's a resilient old world. Conservation-as-preservation was merely a phase, a naive one at best, an elitist and imperialist and unjust one at worst, in the development of environmentalism. It is now over, and none too soon. Get over it. It is time to move on. For the first time, we can think about and work on conservation outside protected areas. We can finally begin to care about the rest of the landscape, and the people who are in it.

Perhaps this is unfair and I'm reading too much into two words. But it seems to me that this narrative is not only implied in the title, but is explicit in much of the debate that has played out in the last few years (and in many of the texts that feed it). While I actually concur with many of this narrative's points, I don't believe we can make the debate more fruitful, much less resolve it, as long as we accept the nutshell version of conservation's past that the title conveys. If we consent to a caricatured notion of preservation as a mere historical stage, long dominant, embarrassingly unfit in view of current knowledge and needs, now finally and mercifully being put behind us, we vastly oversimplify the history of conservation, and we perpetuate contemporary challenges in conservation that we are trying to—and must—overcome.

As a way of working myself around the quicksand, let me explore a few side trails.

One trail leads us into the Anthropocene. The presumption is that we have just recently come to understand that we live in a “postwild,” absolutely humanized world, and that this undermines the foundations of an environmentalism based on preserving unsullied wild nature apart from people. But the history of the Anthropocene is far more complicated, and more interesting, predating the environmental movement and the conservation movement before it. Steffen et al. (2011) recognize this when they note that “the term Anthropocene may seem a neologism in scientific terminology. However, the idea of an epoch of the natural history of the Earth, driven by humankind, notably ‘civilized Man’, is not completely new. . . . In retrospect, this line of thought, even before the golden age of Western industrialization and globalization, can be traced back to remarkably prophetic observers and philosophers of Earth history.” The authors recognize important historic precedents for this understanding going back (“before preservation”?) to the mid-1800s, in the work of such figures as the Italian geologist-priest Antonio Stoppani and proto-conservationist George Perkins Marsh.

To their account I would add another character too much forgotten. In 1883, the Wisconsin geologist T. C. Chamberlin oversaw publication of *Volume I* (though actually the last to be published) of the four-volume *Geology of Wisconsin*. Chamberlin’s own studies contributed fundamentally to glaciology, climatology, and planetary geology, and undergird modern understanding of the global carbon cycle and climate change. He himself wrote the first part of the long volume, on general and historical geology. After 15 chapters exhaustively surveying the state of geological knowledge from the formation of the earth to the recent glacial stages — stages that he himself would actually later classify and name — Chamberlin added a short sixteenth chapter, entitled “Psychozoic Era.” In a remarkable six paragraphs, Chamberlin suggested that scientists recognize this new era

on a strictly geological basis [italics in original], for it is contended . . . that man is the most important organic agency yet introduced into geological history. . . . The entire land life is being revolutionized through man’s agency, and to a very considerable extent, that of the waters. . . . Both the organic and inorganic agencies of geological progress are powerfully influenced by him, and . . . a new and profoundly marked era was inaugurated when he became the dominant organic being.

Chamberlin apparently coined the term *Psychozoic*, to indicate that the human influence on the earth “springs from man’s intellectuality, more than from his animal force.” He concluded his account in italics: “*This is the geology of the living present.*”

Chamberlin was no obscure scientist. He was among the preeminent geologists of his time, founding editor of the *Journal of Geology*, president of the University of Wisconsin, creator of the geology department at the University of Chicago, and president of the Chicago Academy of Sciences. He contributed significantly to the Progressive-era conservation movement. The fact that Chamberlin is now so faintly remembered is instructive. Beyond such iconic figures as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and John Muir — and beyond our latter-day *perceptions* (not to mention currently fashionable criticisms) of Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir — lay a much more complicated background of evolving understanding of the influence of people on, and in, nature. There is no doubt that a romanticized “myth of the pristine” influenced the nascent conservation movement. There is also plenty of evidence that a clear-eyed view of human impacts on natural systems did as well. And for at least some at the intellectual vanguard, the myth of the pristine was shattered long before the conservation movement identified itself as such.

Here we intersect another side trail. This one involves the hundred-year record of the American conservation movement,



Figure 11. Male luna moth (*Actiurus luna*) from a restoration site at the former Badger Army Ammunition Plant in Sauk County, Wisconsin. If we can agree that the “myth of the pristine” was long ago recognized and is now behind us, then perhaps we can agree that the “myth of the humanized” deserves equal scrutiny. And if we can agree on that, then perhaps we may begin to explore the middle ground of the relative wild: the degrees of wildness and human influence in any place, and the ever-changing nature of the relationship between them over time. Photo credit: Curt Meine.

its purported focus on protection and preservation, and its reincarnation as environmentalism beginning in the 1960s. The presumption is that conservation from the outset focused primarily, if not exclusively, on the preservation of “pristine” wilderness, apart from people, in parks and other protected areas; and we are now at pains to exorcise that romantic fixation. This ignores the long history, predating and postdating the emergence of conservation, of stewardship of soils and waters and fisheries and wildlife outside reserves; of conservation on private lands, on indigenous and communal lands, on “working” farms, ranches, and

forests, on whole watersheds; of devoted attention to the quality of urban life and care for the urban environment.

Thus we find Theodore Roosevelt not only extolling the Grand Canyon — “Leave it as it is. You cannot improve on it. The ages have been at work on it, and man can only mar it” — and establishing the US Forest Service and the earliest wildlife refuges, but also appointing the National Commission on Country Life, seen in retrospect as “a milestone in American agricultural history . . . [and] the struggle for sustainability” in the nation’s rural landscapes and communities. Thus we hear soil evangelist Hugh Hammond Bennett exhorting farmers, lawmakers, and bureaucrats alike to value soil as the “most fundamental and important of all resources. . . . Shall we not proceed immediately to help the present generation of farmers and to conserve the heritage of posterity?” Thus we witness the creation, in 1935, of the US Soil Conservation Service (now the Natural Resources Conservation Service), dedicated exclusively to conservation, not in protected areas, but on the nation’s private lands. Thus we meet Aldo Leopold, his students, and his family in the 1930s and 1940s, pioneering ecological restoration at the University of Wisconsin Arboretum, on Wisconsin watersheds, and at the Leopold farm — “first worn out and then abandoned by our bigger-and-better society” — along the nearby Wisconsin River. Thus we read Lewis Mumford, connecting conservation and the vigor of urban life: “Nothing endures except life: the capacity for birth, growth, and renewal. As life becomes insurgent once more in our civilization, conquering the reckless thrust of barbarism, the culture of cities will be both instrument and goal.” Thus we encounter Rachel Carson, triggering the modern environmental movement not by focusing on protected areas, but by opening eyes to changes occurring in the everyday landscapes of farms, suburbs, and cities. There is no doubt that the history of conservation includes a bright and prominent thread of preservation. There is also abundant evidence, for those who care to look for

it, that that thread was *never* isolated — that all along it has been woven into the much more complex (and even more colorful) fabric of conservation.

So how did we lose those other threads? One answer (in the United States at least) is that modern environmentalism, as largely an urban and suburban movement emerging in the 1960s and 1970s, left the agrarian and urban conservation traditions behind—even as rural agricultural America became increasingly mechanized, depopulated, corporatized, monetized, and commodified; and as urban America ignored connections to the larger landscapes in which they are embedded. Now, a generation later, younger environmentalists (as well as environmentalism's critics and its reformers) are likely never to know the full richness of the conservation tradition, never to have heard of Liberty Hyde Bailey or Bennett or Leopold or Mumford or perhaps even Teddy Roosevelt.

Another answer is that we didn't really lose those threads after all. They have been carried forward through the neo-agrarian writings of Wendell Berry, Wes Jackson, and Gary Paul Nabhan (among others); through the growth of the local food and watershed and land trust movements (among others); through the now widespread practice of ecological restoration; through robust movements in urban conservation, sustainability, and agriculture. These are not radical departures from an exclusively wilderness-focused environmentalism, but expressions of reclaimed *continuity* with conservation's past, and of connections within contemporary conservation, that point decidedly to the future.

Which brings me to another side trail, one that winds through wildlands and "working" lands and urban lands—and connects them. The presumption is that conservationists and environmentalists have not only been fixated on wilderness, but only pure, pristine wilderness at that; that "traditional" conservation finds value only in absolute wilderness. Of many possible retorts, in 1925, Aldo Leopold, fresh from having successfully advocated

for designation of the first "wilderness area" in the United States, on the Gila National Forest in New Mexico, wrote: "Wilderness exists in all degrees . . . Wilderness is a relative condition. As a form of land use it cannot be a rigid entity of unchanging content, exclusive of all other forms. On the contrary, it must be a flexible thing, accommodating itself to other forms and blending with them" (emphases added). Leopold had no trouble envisioning and acting for conservation across the landscape, advocating forcefully for wildland protection, for conservation farming and ranching and forestry, for ecological restoration, for vibrant, livable towns and cities. He bound them together by exploring *land health*—defined as "the capacity for self-renewal" in the land as an entire, functioning community—as a unifying concept and theme. As an ecologist and a conservationist, he was no purist and he did not segregate wilderness and people. "The weeds in a city lot," he held, "convey the same lesson as the redwoods."

If we can agree that the "myth of the pristine" was long ago recognized and is now behind us, then perhaps we can agree that the "myth of the humanized" deserves equal critical scrutiny. And if we can agree on that, then perhaps we may begin to explore the middle ground of *the relative wild*: the degrees of wildness and human influence in any place, and the ever-changing nature of the relationship between them over time. We can see that reverence for the wild was (and is) not exclusively reserved for wealthy, elite, romantic, Caucasian, Western colonists and imperialists; that such reverence is an inherent aspect of our shared humanity, surfacing in indigenous and agrarian and industrial and postmodern urban cultures alike. We can recognize the wildness in our midst: in our landscapes, in our backyards, on our skin, in our guts, in our souls.

Between the extremes of the thoroughly wild and the thoroughly humanized—and have there been any absolutes since our first ancient hominid ancestor achieved self-consciousness, drew in her first breath, and then exhaled the first molecules of humanized carbon dioxide?—there is a continuum of land-

use intensity, from the wild to the urban, bounded above by the atmospheric commons, and below by the oceanic commons. Biological diversity, ecosystem function, and human agency are at work dynamically at every point on and across that continuum. If we seek sustainability and resilience *in the continuum as a whole*, then we may at least make greater common cause. And unless the whole continuum becomes sustainable and resilient, no point or part within it can be so.

Similarly, we can explore the relative wild not just in *space*, but over *time*: human impacts on ecosystems are not uniform or consistent or persistent over time. Human agency intensifies and relaxes, expands and contracts. We now recognize more fully the profound influence of Pre-Colombian cultures on the life and landscapes of the Americas. But now we may move beyond a single, simple dividing line of “presettlement” and “post-contact” cultures in the Western hemisphere. We can see 1491 as just one, albeit highly consequential, point of contact, and put that point into full historical context. We can follow the tracks of our common ancestors within and then out of Africa, splaying out across Eurasia, into Australia, over the oceans and onto islands, into and across the Americas. We can see what we humans have left in our long wake. We can calibrate more carefully the waxing and waning, the character and extent, of human ecological impacts on both sides of ever-shifting, emerging, fading, and still new lines of “contact.” We can put into clearer perspective the now global threats we collectively face. This may in turn allow us, in the interest of conservation, to dim the sharp boundary line we are prone to see between our human and natural communities—but to appreciate the shades of contrast we can discern there.

I suppose one could identify conservationists and environmentalists who have placed value on and advocated only for “pure” wilderness and strict preservation, and who have been blind to the social justice concerns that such a stance has, at times and places, entailed. Perhaps every polemic must find, or

create, its strawmen. But there is much evidence to the contrary: that for as long as there has been a conservation movement (and arguably before that), there have been people dedicated to making connections across our landscapes and among our varied concerns and goals—before, during, and “after preservation.” Wendell Berry frames well the upshot. He writes: “The question before us, then, is an extremely difficult one: How do we begin to remake, or to make, a local culture that will preserve our part of the world while we use it?” To *use* and to *preserve* simultaneously? That may well be a paradox. It may also be a fair mission statement for conservation.

So: the realization that we live in an increasingly humanized world is hardly new; conservation has never been exclusively focused on preserving pure wilderness; and when conservationists *have* focused on protecting wildlands, we should not assume they have done so apart from conservation in the rest of the landscape, blinded by a romantic notion of the pristine. Environmentalism may well have distorted and broken the connections to “pre-environmental” conservationists who envisioned, and to some degree built, continuity of purpose across the landscape. At the same time, it must be admitted: the older conservation movement, for various reasons, could not sustain those connections through the transformation to environmentalism, and on to today. The connections were ignored, forgotten, lost. In our efforts to reclaim them, some apparently hold that we are starting from scratch, here, now. It would not be the first time that those of one generation have claimed to discover, and believed that they did discover, a new idea.

That is what I worry many readers will take from your book’s title. Forgive me, guys, for being contrary, and for wanting to avoid the quicksand that I see before me. From where I walk, we moved beyond preservation generations ago. In the working world of conservation, many of us spend most of our time in that place. We also revisit *preservation* with regularity, always confronting both illusions and realities, but always discovering



Figure 12. Gangkhar Puensum (“Mountain of the Three Siblings”) in Bhutan. Photo credit: George Archibald.

new things about our places and ourselves, always making us, somehow, simultaneously, more wild and more human. Relearning the relevant parts of conservation history, and bringing them forward into the future, might be one of the most valuable contributions of your volume. I sincerely hope so!

All the best,

Curt

P.S. Just as I am completing this letter, my friend and colleague George Archibald of the International Crane Foundation has written an e-mail to me from Bhutan, where he is counting wintering black-necked cranes in the Phobjikha Valley, and attending the annual festival in honor of the cranes at the Gangteng Monastery. He includes a wonderful series of photos: a gaudily multicolored monal pheasant; the elderly monk who feeds the pheasant (and also feeds George); a beaming weaver and her brilliant silk creation (as colorful and iridescent as the pheasant); a hand-framed quotation on a schoolroom wall (“Earth provides enough to satisfy everyman’s need, but not his

greed” — Mahatma Ghandi). George attaches another photo, of the great mountain Gangkhar Puensum, its long jagged ridge-line of snow rising above unbroken forest, against a deep-blue Bhutan sky. The Bhutanese have chosen to prohibit mountaineering in deference to local spiritual beliefs. George’s comment on his photo: “The highest mountain in Bhutan and the highest unclimbed peak in the world (mountain climbing in Bhutan is illegal — the gods live up there).”