

Perpetuating Natural Wildness

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Adolf Murie had a knack for saying profound things simply. In his book *The Mammals of Mount McKinley*, he wrote: “All the plants and animals enjoy a natural and normal life without human restrictions. Freedom prevails....” Foxes dig burrows where they will; they hunt ptarmigan, ground squirrels, and mice as the spirit moves. Bears wander their ancestral ranges unmolested. The “bad” wolf seeks an honest living, morally on a par with anyone else. Likewise, no species of plant is favored above the rest.

He said that the task of nature’s guardians, we here in this room, “is to perpetuate this freedom and purity of nature, this ebb and flow of life—first, by insuring ample park boundaries ... to maintain the natural relationships, and secondly, to hold man’s intrusions to a minimum.”

So, what is our basic objective? It is to preserve natural wildness in the wilderness.

That objective is under assault from a giant pincer attack. The great debate, in this modern era of more people and shrinking space and resources, is whether we encroach and eventually consume the remnant places where wild things run free—by work (say, extractive industry) or by play (motorized recreation).

Thinking about this session, I just reread Jack Turner’s 1996 book, *The Abstract Wild*. He notes that people must spend extended time in expansive space to truly experience wildness in the wilderness. Aldo Leopold said it takes a minimum of two weeks, in a space that takes that much time to traverse. Such spaces are rare indeed. Alaska has them, Canada, Patagonia. The law of wild space/time is simple: the farther from a road, the longer you are out, the wilder your experience, the closer you jibe with nature’s rhythms. Few people have such experiences.

Small, crowded wilderness areas usually lack big predators. Without big predators, the wilderness is tamed. The bear track on the trail, or in the mud by the creek, isn’t there.

Domestication follows, says Turner, when intensive recreation requires trails, bridges, directional signs—all of which diminish surprise, discovery, the unknown, and the dangerous—the very qualities that make a place wild.

He goes on to say that public policy caters to such recreational uses through artificial modes of tourism, management, and control. These, in turn, spiral out of control—as more human intrusion and more controls in what has become Institutionalized Wilderness—Wilderness for Fun. The “fun hog” approach to wilderness is, in many ways, as destructive of the natural wild as the extractive industry that spawned the wilderness movement in the first place. No wonder the debate between work and play has become so rancorous. Play in the last several decades became another consumptive industry. Well then, why not logging, mining, grazing?

Where does this sad progression lead us?

In my view we must retrace some steps, revisit the spiritual and scientific concerns of the original conservationists. Building on that earlier foundation, we need to add the evolved ecological understandings of modern conservation biologists. And somehow we must convince the gravitational mass of humanity, which will never experience Leopold’s time/space-in-the-wild prescription, that human health and survival is daily and directly measured by the health and survival of supporting natural systems, including moose, mice, and microbes.

Only with broad acceptance of that fact can we use the higher social utility of the world’s great parks, refuges, and reserves as a reason for saving and protecting them. Until uncaring ignorance is replaced by informed, inspired caring for these reservoirs of diverse life, we will be unable to perpetuate them as spiritual sanctuaries, as scientific baselines, as new and restored ecological preserves.

Of course we’re losing the battle at this point! Deprived and suffering people at home

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and abroad get little vision from those who can afford to visit parks, refuges, and wild rivers with all their equipage in tow, but with little love. We must deliver that vision, by education and a stern management regime that makes our point: that these priceless places are the archives of evolution and the seedbeds

for a livable future on Earth, for all its passengers. They are our last touchstones with the natural world that are reasonably healthy and whole and unaltered by human interventions. Their continued degradation for trivial pursuits is simply unacceptable.

