

Letter from Gustavus

The One Sure Line

October 17, 1994

GEORGE BUSH HAS COMPLAINED that if we adopt Al Gore's environmental notions "We'll be up to our neck in owls." A gubernatorial candidate in Idaho runs on a platform that would prohibit even one more acre of wilderness in her state. It's trees and animals over people and jobs. Wilderness is elitism. The favored few with their fancy gear and waffle boots versus the working man and his hungry family.

On the other side stands the argument "In wildness is the preservation of the world"—in all its philosophical and biological variations.

We know, too, that wilderness is a cultural concept. There are different perceptions of wild lands. Not too long ago they were the enemy—to be conquered and made productive. Today, they are seen by many as the remaining reservoirs of exploitable resources in a world running out of resources. For indigenes, what we call wild lands are homelands, sacred and functional, known in exquisite detail, source of life and way of life. Wordsworth captured the romantic sense of wilderness: "Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers [and patrimony]. Little we see in Nature that is ours—We have given our hearts away, a sordid boon."

The Wilderness Act of 1964—another product of the Great Society, now blamed for all our ills—combines the aesthetic and the functional: Wide places void of human clutter; biological and watershed sanctuaries; places of retreat, adventure, and discovery where modern, urban people can "make contact with their not-so-remote past" and "escape from a world of artifice and manipulation."

Robert Marshall, philosopher of wilderness and proponent of its preservation, bought wholly that latter notion, infusing wilderness with human values. He wanted the essence of wild lands experience to be generally available for all who needed it. This was far from an exclusivist, elitist mission. Wilderness was not to be preserved from people, but for them. In his rambles in northern Alaska he saw wilderness as a key to a saner and more civilized world, as had his predecessor on the outskirts of Concord. Will we come to understand this lovely irony—the wild and uncontrolled as solvent for a sane and civil society?

Marshall and many others have preached the need for continuing human adventure and discovery. Without this outflow of quest and energy we turn inward, get mean and selfish. We see this in the frantic seeking for edges, for beyonds in a world where the margins keep disappearing. We see this in the crowded rat-cage crucibles of ancient hatreds and conflicts. We miss (even if we know it not, in our urban prisons), the walkabout, the vision quest, the anchorite's communion with sunrise or storm.

Marshall proved his point about wilderness on a high ledge of Mount Doonerak far up the North Fork of the Koyukuk River, gazing into the heart of the Brooks Range. Sense his exhalation:

I realized that though the field for geographical exploration was giving out, the realm of mental exploration—aesthetic, philosophical, scientific—was limitless. Nevertheless, I still maintained a suppressed yearning for geographical discovery which I never seriously hoped to realize. And then I found myself here, at the very headwaters of the mightiest river of the north, at a place where only three other human beings aside from myself had ever been and with dozens of never-visited valleys, hundreds of unscaled summits still as virgin as during their Paleozoic creation.

The fact is that the crossroads of mountains and rivers that Marshall surveyed as he wrote these words in his notebook had been traversed and hunted for thousands of years by Eskimo and Indian people. Scores of moss-covered sites prove this long traffic. And they prove the value of wilderness—that each generation can still adventure and discover a new world, the world at creation.



The Wilderness Act has made us act. It's the one sure line we've drawn to hold the line. Maybe we will have to give a little over time for overriding social purposes, and de-designate particular wilderness lands. But we'll have to think about it, debate it, and get an act of Congress. Wilderness designation preserves the commons in a world where tragedies of the commons are all too common.

From the battles that the Wilderness Act has spawned, we now know how hard it will be to go sustainable across the board. Wilderness is the cutting edge of human carrying capacity on this Earth. Each victory in holding that line gives some faint promise that we will rein ourselves in. And expand our humanity to include our descendants.

