
THREE VIEWS OF THE WILD ON THE 30TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE WILDERNESS ACT

The Wildlands Project: A Vision for Life

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I FIND MYSELF ONCE AGAIN IN A DARKENED AUDITORIUM listening to another noted biologist recite the now familiar predictions about the unprecedented human-induced worldwide decline and extinction of species. Slide after slide, the audience politely watches as the speaker reviews the charts and tables describing our current knowledge of the state of life on planet Earth. One sits hoping the projections for the ever-degrading state of the world's biological richness and the condition of the wild is somehow being overestimated. What would an Earth be like a decade away with 15-35% of all its existing life forms gone forever? What would the world be like with only relicts of wilderness scattered across a sea of human-dominated landscape? The evidence is compelling and the message sobering. Finally, images of some of these doomed world treasures are projected, filling the larger-than-normal auditorium screen. There are images of both the great and the small, the furred, feathered, finned, scaled, slimy, and green. It appears that no group has escaped, and what little rustling there was in the audience of scientists and non-scientists alike now ceases. It's quiet, and coldness fills the room. This clear winter evening in central Ohio has nothing to do with the coldness in the auditorium—this cold originates from within. The talk ends, the lights come up, and the audience applauds.

Discussion develops around the various details of *what* needs to be done to halt the current extinction crisis, and *how* some conservation goals might be accomplished through applied science. The numerous points raised are necessary and interesting to me as an ecologist, but I increasingly feel the discussion is flawed. The symposium was entitled "Evolution, Biological

Diversity, and Environmental Ethics." Increasingly agitated, I wonder when the ethics are going to be examined. Over the next hour, not a word is mentioned. The evening's meeting comes to an end with nothing said about the *why* questions—more specifically, why we humans care that species are exterminated and wild places tamed. While sound utilitarian responses to

this question can be readily stated—everything from the economic value of harvested floral and faunal species to the more general ecosystem services arguments—these are not the reasons which drew the large audience to this symposium or produced the cold silence. The reasons why we care are numerous, but at the heart of each one lies a moral commitment and emotional attachment to all life: what E. O. Wilson (1984) calls “biophilia.”

I left the auditorium that night saddened and disappointed. Perhaps I was disappointed in the speaker and moderator for not attempting to move the discussion to the moral and ethical considerations of the extinction crisis, or maybe I was disappointed in science as a discipline for not allowing its members to explore their souls in such a forum, or maybe I was simply disappointed in the human family as a whole for losing our way in the first place. Sadly, the experience was a vivid reminder to me of how far the separation of humans from the rest of nature has grown in our modern age. Even biologists seem to find it nearly impossible to discuss their love for life in any professional, public platform, as evidenced that cold winter night in Ohio. This experience illustrated for me the disturbing social context in which we find ourselves with regard to the human-induced extinction episode the world faces today.

Stephen J. Gould (1991) wrote that “we cannot win this battle to save species and environments without forging an emotional bond between ourselves and nature as well—for we will not fight to save what we do not love.” Gould argued that cold rationality, fearless objectivity, and bit of technology (the instruments of modern science) will not be enough to solve the extinction crisis. He wrote, “If this were true, we would be a lot further than we presently find ourselves.” Paradoxically, the individuals most

likely to know how to begin to physically heal the planet (possessing some answers to the *what* and *how* questions) are the scientists. Unfortunately, the vast majority of us are largely conditioned by our belief in Cartesian dualism which serves to imprison our moral knowledge. Orr (1992) eloquently argues that scientific fundamentalism has grossly mistaken the relationship between passion, emotion, and good science. He wrote, “Science, at its best, is driven by passion and emotion.” Perhaps the stakes have become so high that it may finally be possible to explore scientific inquiry and problem-solving in the context of the many human questions previously left to philosophers and theologians. The fundamental questions Gould and others have raised are only beginning to penetrate the well-seasoned armor of the scientific institutions and their membership, but progress is being made. Perhaps the growing ranks of scientists who call themselves “conservation biologists” is one indication of another way of thinking separate from modern scientific dogma formalized centuries ago during the European Renaissance. Conservation biology, as Soulé (1986) put it, “began when a critical mass of people agreed that they were conservation biologists.” This rapidly growing body of scientists, who are coming together from a variety of traditional disciplines, share a common purpose: protecting, and where necessary restoring, the structure and function of natural biological communities throughout the world.

In recent decades, frustration with existing institutions, including science, has moved many to take action to help protect native biodiversity and wild places from the negative impact of modern societies. Driven largely by their love for nature, environmental activists have contributed fundamentally to the conservation debate. Whether acting singly or as well-organized bod-

ies, environmental activism has played a major role in the protection of life in North America. Over time, the roles and strategies of the various activist groups and individuals have evolved, becoming better informed and more effective, but throughout all of these changes, the extinction crisis has continued to unfold before us.

Some have fought tough environmental battles for so long against such staggering odds that they have become largely embittered toward their fellow humans. This state is perceived by some as another type of dysfunctionality, equally caustic to the human spirit as our modern alienation from non-human nature (Gore 1992). The interaction between humans and the rest of nature has been an elemental topic for philosophers and theologians to debate throughout the ages. It should not be surprising to learn, therefore, that many view the extinction crisis as not just one of science, but one of the human spirit. According to Rockefeller (1992), the environmental crisis can best be described as a crisis in our understanding of and commitment to community, and in order to understand the sense of community, one must first understand the Self (feeling, thought, and will of mind, body, and soul). Like many inspirational writers and visionaries such as John Muir and ancient earth cultures both past and present, this community includes the soil, the rocks, the water, the plants, and the animals. In the last few thousand years, dominant human societies have narrowed the concept of community until it has almost disappeared. In recent years, there are hopeful signs of turning this around (Nash 1989). Feeling stunned by what our narrow notions have helped rationalize, many are intensively examining Self and community in an attempt to redefine their place in a world where all things are treated as sacred (see Nollman 1990).

The Wildlands Project was born three years ago when a core of scientists and activists came together to forge a common strategy for protecting and restoring the ecological richness and native biodiversity of North America. By embracing the biocentric position that all life is intrinsically priceless, the project hopes to blend the best science, the most effective activism, and selfless wisdom to reconnect all the threads of life on Earth which have been frayed from a long history of human selfishness. As Murray Bookchin (1981) wrote:

Indeed, there is a level at which our consciousness must be neither poetry nor science, but a transcendence of both into a new realm of theory and practice, an artfulness that combines fancy with reason, imagination with logic, vision with technique.... Poetry and imagination must be integrated with science and technology, for we have evolved beyond an innocence that can be nourished exclusively by myths and dreams.

The Wildlands Project was founded to give organizational expression to this integration. Project participants have come together at this critical time in our history to ask the difficult questions while reaching out to all who can and should contribute to finding long-term solutions. Our intention is to make what appears impossible today, possible tomorrow; what appears unrealistic today, realistic tomorrow. By engaging and confronting what E. O. Wilson calls "the folly our descendants are least likely to forgive us," we hope to protect and restore the stage upon which the evolutionary drama—including our own—can continue. As our quest for knowledge reaches into the future, we are all called upon to do our part toward the continuation of life on planet Earth.

As we seek the critical answers to assure a healthy, functioning biosphere, we must concurrently pursue the wisdom of the ages so we will never lose sight of *why* we fight for life. To do less is to betray our rightful inheritance of goodness of heart and generosity of spirit for which we continually thirst. Our vision is nothing short of the transformation of human interaction with ourselves and all life, and it is wisdom that forms the basis for our ability to live with understanding

and compassion. The following article by Reed Noss is our current prescription for beginning the process of returning the continent to an ecologically healthy state. The article provides an indispensable contribution to addressing the *what* and *how* questions to biodiversity protection and the "re-wilding" of representative segments of North America. It is my hope that this article has provided at least some insight into *why* we share a vision for life.

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