

Beyond Preservationism

Without defending the point, it is fair to claim that America's national parks have been legitimated by and managed within the framework of preservationist philosophy (cf. e.g., Sax 1980). Whatever the merits of preservationism, I wonder if this philosophy is adequate today? Does it enable a bridge from where we are now, living in a world (including the national parks) that is being swallowed by a tidal wave of human beings, to a world where "carrying capacity" has become an operational principle? Does it exhaust the cultural potential of the national parks, which on the preservationist account are little more than islands of exotic flora and fauna set in unhumanized terrain, psychic refuges for citizens seeking respite from the "quiet desperation" of ordinary life, and ecological anachronisms in a world headed for total domestication? Does the preservationist philosophy also create an illusion that a few set-asides are enough to protect wilderness values and check the process of humanization? Is preservationism, generally, too limited a philosophy for these difficult times?

Perhaps preservationism is no longer entirely adequate, because the relative scale of culture and nature has changed. Nature once seemed limitless, infinitely resilient to human insult. No longer. Popular writers declaim the end of nature. And scientists have coined a new term, "the anthropogenic biosphere." No longer is the human species merely one among many, loosely coupled with the flora and fauna. We are closely coupled: the sheer mass of humanity, some conservation biologists contend, is an ecological aberration. We perch on the precipice of an anthropogenic mass extinction (Wilson 1992). And we are replacing natural ecosystems evolved over thousands, even millions of years with artificial schemes. In a phrase,

time is out of joint. This reality calls the adequacy of the preservationist philosophy into question, and all the more so as a guide to the management of the parks.

If time is out of joint, then what functions might the national parks play in restoring synchronicity? Is it enough simply to have set-asides open to all Americans to pursue recreational ends? To simply claim that the national parks are crucially important to America's sense of itself seems ingenuous: no other nation has so many. Yet no other nation contributes more to the malaise of the earth. Further, is there any reason to think that the national parks themselves escape the insufficiencies of the modern world? And how is it that I can justify my belief that the men and

women who manage the national parks are in a position to resist, to overcome those insufficiencies, and through their leadership help the parks become part of the means by which culture heals itself?

Time is Out of Joint

I begin with some criticisms of the national parks. No doubt the readers of THE GEORGE WRIGHT FORUM are aware of the ecological shortsightedness of yesterday's management policies, the hordes of visitors that overrun even the largest parks, the commercial interests outside park boundaries whose activities adversely affect habitat inside, and the budgetary shortfalls created by a Congress that further squeezes a park system already in dire financial straits. So I will be brief. The dominant strain of criticism goes roughly like this: whatever the illusion of naturalness and wildness created for visitors to the national parks, and whatever the veneer of legitimacy created by preservationism, the stark reality is that they have become little more than playgrounds, farms, and prisons. Thus national parks represent simply an extension of the idea that nature is nothing more than a stockpile of resources for exploitation by Man.

As *farms*, our national parks are placed under the control of an agricultural elite, trained in the ways of resource management, including wildlife and forestry. The ideas that our national parks might yet be self-sustaining enterprises, that their pro-

cesses are not inherently linear and predictable, and that nature knows best are concealed behind the managerial impulse. As *playgrounds*, parks become a resource for a multi-billion dollar industry that first creates and then satisfies the demand for "wilderness experience." Again, these lands must be placed under the control of an elite trained in tourism and recreation. These individuals must devise operating plans so that the national parks deliver wilderness experiences, including scenery, to the consumerist masses who come *incognito* as tourists. As *prisons*, the national parks are constrained within the ideological walls of Man. Just as walls of concrete and cells of steel hold human miscreants not fitting within the domestic domain, so park preserves fence in the not-yet-totally-domesticated, the rough lands and wild animals outside civilization.

Viewed as farms, playgrounds, or prisons the national parks represent a kind of bad faith at the ideological heart of modern culture—a discourse of power hidden within preservationist ideology. So framed, the national parks are hyper-realities that deceive us into thinking that we are conserving the land and wild creatures when in fact they conceal the gesture of continued domination. Such simulacra displace the possibility of truly wild, chthonian beings and wild ecosystems not subject to human constraint. As farms, playgrounds, or prisons the national parks conceal the awesome reality of life, a nature subject to its own imperatives, rather

than an object, subject only to human control.

These criticisms do not imply that the national parks are intrinsically flawed so much as suggest that they have not escaped modernity. Gadamer (1976) argues that modern society "clings with bewildered obedience to scientific expertise, and the ideal of conscious planning and smoothly functioning administration dominates every sphere of life even down to the level of molding public opinion." By contextualizing the national parks as farms, playgrounds, and prisons, critics raise questions about the legitimacy of managerial authority. The manager's stock in trade, of course, is conjuring the illusion that "I am in control." Ed Abbey (1988) observes that we are "coming so close to the end [of the process of humanization] that we can easily foresee an American state, inhabited by our children, in which swamp and forest, desert, seashore, and mountain are nothing but recreational parks for organized tourism." Managed farms that guarantee a continuing supply of animals and plants that constitute scenery; managed recreational areas that entertain, amuse, and otherwise provide a spectacle for consumers; managed prisons that constrain unruly animal Others who, if not totally domesticated, are rendered into harmless simulacra, mere resemblances of wild animals.

Beyond Preservationism

Almost 90 years ago, when the American national parks were still

feeling the pangs of birth, John Muir wrote that

like everything else worth while, however sacred and precious and well-guarded, they [the national parks] have always been subject to attack, mostly by despoiling gain-seekers—mischievous-makers of every degree from Satan to supervisors, lumbermen, cattlemen, farmers, eagerly trying to make everything dollarable, often thinly disguised in smiling philanthropy, calling pocket-filling plunder "Utilization of beneficent natural resources, that man and beast may be fed and the dear Nation grow great."

Is it possible that today's criticisms are merely refinements of the criticism that Muir made of strong anthropocentrism? Lord Man, as Muir named strong anthropocentrists, through a combination of religiously inspired arrogance, economic greed, and sheer ignorance, was grandly indifferent to the web of life. Strong anthropocentrism, to make a complicated story too simple, draws a metaphysical dividing line between Culture and Nature, between the province of Human Meaning and Goodness and Reason and all the rest of Creation, which exists only to serve Man. This characteristic attitude was and remains among the strongest of our cultural narratives.

Insofar as this thesis is plausible, then there is little reason to think that park managers should escape strong anthropocentrism, for they are first and foremost members of Western

culture. The wonder and terror of the human predicament, as sages remind us, is that we are almost inextricably caught in the grip of Mother Culture. Can there be any surprise, then, that the national parks have too often become farms, playgrounds, and prisons? For Lord Man controls all. Or does he? Does the stark reality that time is out of joint, that our very cultural success now threatens to destroy the biogeophysical processes with which our existence is fundamentally entwined, call into question such a notion of control?

For Muir, "control" was an illusion dispelled by biocentrism, a perspective rooted partly in science and partly in wilderness experience. Biocentrism challenges strong anthropocentrism: when Muir (1901) writes that "going to the woods is going home; for I suppose we came from the woods originally," he is affirming that whatever humankind might be, our essential human beingness remains tied to the rest of creation (see Oelschlaeger 1991). Such a biocentric orientation erases metaphysical boundaries between Nature and Culture. It also challenges us to reconceptualize the cultural significance of the national parks. From this radical perspective, the notion of national parks as set-asides—to be managed on the basis of preservationist philosophy—is tenuous. For Muir, the flowing whole is the ultimate reality: life and death and all other human conceptualizations are ultimately and only comprehensible in the larger context part of everything

else.

Even while recognizing Muir's challenge to strong anthropocentrism, we must bear in mind that we human beings can never be other than what we are. We can only have a human perspective—the recognition of which is "weak anthropocentrism." But weak anthropocentrism denies any metaphysical dividing lines between a wild Nature or ecology that is "out there," apart from Culture, and a civilization that humans are "inside," apart from the "out there." Golley (1993) catches the point precisely.

It is not clear to me where ecology ends and the study of the ethics of nature begins, nor is it clear to me where biological ecology ends and human ecology begins. These divisions become less and less useful. Clearly, the ecosystem, for some at least, has provided a basis for moving beyond strictly scientific questions to deeper questions of how humans should live with each other and the environment.

Which is to say, then, that Muir's biocentrism (and other ecophilosophies, such as land ethics) remain human points of view; there is no alternative. But such a philosophy challenges any *human-centered viewpoint*. And it also provides the beginnings of an answer to the critics who have charged that the national parks are nothing more than farms, playgrounds, and prisons. The nub of the criticism of the management of the national parks is that whatever our intentions, we have remained

enframed within the dominant world view of strong anthropocentrism, a human-centered way of thinking which inevitably succumbs to hubris.

Conclusion

In this age of ecosocial crisis where time is out of joint, park managers are not accorded the luxury of doing nothing while contemplating their navels in hopes of achieving a mystical union with all of nature. Manage we must, but from the deeply grounded realization that we humans in all our cultural guises remain attached to and embedded within ongoing biogeophysical processes. But it is an illusion to think that we are in control, as if by setting aside and managing some of nature we have met our responsibilities. Or acted intelligently.

Muir points us in a new direction, where we can cease acting as if the national parks were farms, playgrounds, and prisons. Biocentrism reminds us that our human schemes are not the only schemes of significance on this planet. True, the national parks conform with lines drawn by human beings. In this sense the parks find their definition within and only within a culturally conceived space. But in claiming that we have reduced the parks to farms, playgrounds, and prisons the critics are not objecting to the bounding of the land and creatures within a human scheme of things per se. Rather, it is the attitude that in establishing metes and bounds we have set the land in order, tamed, and put to good

purpose what would have otherwise remained wild, unmanaged, chaotic.

We have thought of the parks in the preservationist frame, as if they were something "out there," apart from our kind and purposes. No doubt, much good was accomplished through preservationism. Yet it remains a part of the modernist frame and the socially prevailing idea of wilderness, construed as unhumanized ecosystems and species, something that is other than civilization. Our national parks should remind us of the artifice of civilization, for the boundaries we establish within the human scheme are too small to contain the magnificence of the biogeophysical processes that created the land and all the creatures over thousands, tens of thousands, and millions of years. More than anything else the critics remind us that the human species does not exist apart from the land and the floral and faunal domains: we are of and about earth.

I have asserted that time is out of joint. But the parks can offer the visitor the opportunity for a wilderness experience that begins to heal the wounds, to close our sense of national history and purpose with the longer and deeper resonances of biogeophysical process, and to heal the rupture between nature and culture, spirit and matter, psyche and soma. No where else is there better opportunity for Americans to cross over the facile boundary between wilderness and civilization, to step outside the frame of ordinary life, to reveal the illusion that we are somehow sepa-

rate from and above the rest of nature. In this perilous time, as industrial civilization verges on a mass extinction of life, a doubling of human population within one hundred years, and global climate change, such an affirmative vision of the role the national parks might play is crucially important. Thus, beyond any role in conservation and preservation, which I might term their ecolog-

ical function, our national parks must serve an educational, even philosophical, function. As Roger Kennedy (1994) recently remarked, "Wilderness is that which lies beyond our anxious self-assertion as humans. It is the present, proximate metaphor for that wider universe which, when we pray, we acknowledge to be beyond even our understanding."

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