

## Life and the Nature of Life—in Parks

Parks are places for recreation, and that suggests play, leisure, sport. Many parks are of exactly that kind, and fortunately so; we need our city parks for softball games, our state parks for a family reunion. Recreation re-creates, rejuvenates people when they are worn from work. But outdoor, natural parks are much more, and more fortunately so. These grander parks in the greater outdoors provide dimensions of depth belied by their vacational and recreational settings. Parks are places so protected that we can simultaneously get “away from it all,” away from the workaday week, from the labors of town, factory, farm, and “back to it all,” encountering the park-protected reserves of elemental nature.

This is recreation, if you like, but this recreation is set within creation. Some of the recreation is relaxation, unwinding from daily labors; deeper down the re-creation is restoration of perspective on the nature of life, re-encounter with the creation. Parks recreation preserves human life by re-creating it. We figure out who we are and where we are. The last part of that question must be answered in culture, for human life is “by nature” cultural. But the first part, the fundamental ground, is answered in nature. “By nature,” too, we are embodied creatures, residents on landscapes, earthlings, placed in a more inclusive, more comprehensive community of life and life support. In that sense, parks protect a full answer to the question of human identity.

Parks are philosophical places; let’s play with that idea. “Know thyself.” Socrates insisted: “An unexamined life is not worth living” (Plato, *Apology*: 38). On that score he was quite right. Socrates also said, “You see, I am fond of learning. Now the country places and trees won’t teach me anything, and the people in the city do” (Plato, *Phaedrus*: 230d). So he loved his Athens, and we indeed ought to be good citizens. But Socrates was quite

wrong about learning nothing in nature. We correct him: “Life in an unexamined world is not worthy living, either.” Socrates could have used visits to national parks, to wilderness areas, and that would have protected him from such error. He missed too much of value; missing what parks have to offer, he did not have life as fully figured out as he thought. To know himself, he needed, a biologist would say, a better adapted fit. A philosopher might say: a more inclusive identity.

### Life and Death

Life and death is serious business. Living and dying is the business of life; and now, in contrast with the daily business workplace, in parks one is immediately confronted with life persisting in the midst of its perpetual perishing. True, one is on vacation; one doesn’t want to be too somber. But the seasons are evident: spring with its flowering, fall with its dieback. I am at leisure, but the struggle out there is perennial—eating and being eaten, survival through adapted fit. That is the ultimate “dialectic,” if we may use Socrates’ philosophical word: Life is a search with opposites in conflict becoming complements in resolu-

tion. Wild nature is a vast scene of sprouting, budding, flowering, fruiting, passing away, passing life on. Birth, death, rebirth, life forever regenerated—that is the law, the nature of life.

Of course—especially if this is ultimately the way the world is made—we cannot escape this in town. There also people age and perish, and reproduce and prosper, generation after generation. But something about taking “time out” on vacation or the weekend and immersing oneself in a “nature reserve” confronts us more directly and intensely than usual with this life struggle and life support in primordial nature. This is baseline nature. The trip starts out social, even political: We head for the park shown on the map as a legally mandated, legally designated area for preserving original nature. We pass the gate and pay the admission fee; we are inside the park’s official boundaries. But politics and society soon fade, and the natural history commands the scene. And the first commandment is: Survive. Adapt. Eat or be eaten. Life or death. Our first observation is: Life goes on—protected in the parks but on its own, wild and free.

### Sources and Resources

Parks are for recreation. Strip away the human presence, and there is no recreation in the wilderness. So it might seem that any associated value lies entirely in these human recreational experiences, no matter how greatly natural features in the park contribute to them. Perspectives shift, however, when the recreation turns to re-encounter the creation. Perhaps people in parks generate new levels of valued experiences—enjoying the sunset, for example, or bird watching—but

these are superimposed on spontaneous natural values, some kinds of which are not experiential. After all, the life-supporting ecosystems and the genetic information coding the know-how organisms in their species lines use to cope in these ecosystems operate in the wild regardless of whether humans are present or aware of these things. The life and death and life renewed were already going on, before we came as visitors. The trees were photosynthesizing, capturing solar energy, and the birds were feeding their nestlings, capturing caterpillars.

Forests and soil, sunshine and rain, rivers and sky, the everlasting hills, the rolling prairies, the cycling seasons—these are superficially just pleasant scenes in which to recreate. At depth they are the surrounding creation that supports life. If one insists on the word, they are *resources*, but now it seems inadequate to call them recreational resources. They are the *sources* that define life. They are the life support system, the ecosystems that humans inhabit. Here is life close to its origins.

Humans depend on air flow, water cycles, sunshine, photosynthesis, nitrogen fixation, decomposition bacteria, fungi, the ozone layer, food chains, insect pollination, soils, earthworms, climates, oceans, and genetic materials. These ecological values contribute positively to human experiences. But they also seem to be there apart from humans being here. Nature is an evolutionary ecosystem, with humans a late add-on.

True, the back-to nature ritual is largely symbolic: A camper’s groceries still come from the supermarket. But for precisely that reason many need at least the symbolism of the cook-out, the fish fry from the day’s catch, the

drink of water dipped from the spring, the dried bones strewn beside the trail, the warmth of a campfire, an eye on the growing twilight, possibly a thunderstorm, even swatting mosquitoes—all of which immerse persons in the natural order. We know the gutsy feeling that comes with returning to the basics, even if we stutter when we try to put it in words. Life support by the greater outdoors is not symbolism at all but literal and real. The park setting accentuates these touchstones, symbols set off from the everyday life of town and commerce, but quite genuine and authentic, primordially natural.

In that sense parks put people in their place. They take us out of culture into nature; we leave the city behind and go out into the country. The tourist's first impression is that this is not where I live; the whole idea of being a tourist is being somewhere else from where you live. And a tourist in wild nature is even farther from home in the city. But a second, and deeper impression, is that this is where we do live, our cultures superimposed on natural systems. First impressions may be that we have gone rustic, gone "back to" something past; we take the weekend off in a world that is unreal. But second impressions run deeper. We have not gotten away from it all; we have gotten back to it all. "Back to" metaphors, however, are always a little worrisome. We'd better say: "down to" it all. We reach a dimension of depth. We recontact the natural certainties.

We come to see forests, for example, as a characteristic expression of the creative process. In a forest, as on a desert or the tundra, the realities of nature cannot be ignored. This is true in all forests, but intensely true in big,

old forests protected in parks. The forest is both presence and symbol of forces in natural systems that transcend human powers and human utility. Like the sea or the sky, the forest is a kind of archetype of the foundations of the world. The central "goods" of the biosphere—forests and sky, sunshine and rain, rivers and earth, the everlasting hills, the cycling seasons, fauna and flora, hydrologic cycles, photosynthesis, soil fertility, food chains, genetic codes, speciation and reproduction, succession and its resetting, life and death and life renewed—were in place long before humans arrived, though they have lately become human economic and social resources.

Maybe this is a "national" forest, maybe a "state" forest. But the forests were here before the United States was a nation, before California was a state, before there ever was such a thing as a national or state park—and yes, in ancient forests even some of the trees were here before. Yes, we need to set aside these parkland forests, and people ought to visit "their" parks. But the dynamics and structures organizing the forest do not come out of the human mind; a wild forest is something wholly other than civilization. It is presence and symbol of the timeless natural givens that support everything else.

A pristine forest is prime natural history, a relic of the way the world was for almost forever. The forest as a tangible preserve in the midst of a culture contributes to the human sense of duration, antiquity, continuity, and identity. A visit there regenerates the sense of human novelty. We were listening to the latest news on the radio on the way in, but now that we are here, we are rather less convinced that

we need to concern ourselves only with what we human beings have said and done. Although park managers commonly think of nature as “natural resource,” we can soon go astray with this category, if we see nature as merely resource. A forest, a mountain, a prairie is more than resource, instrumental to civilization. It is primeval, wild, creative source—resource for the whole creation, we could say. Such values may be soft. They are also deep.

### Order and the Wild

In parks, we recontact the natural certainties? Yes, but, almost paradoxically, we recontact both certainty and uncertainty, the permanent and the changing, the stable and the spontaneous, the predictable and the novel. More philosophically put: We confront order and chaos. We go wild; we go where the Earth is still wild. True, order and chaos could be found had we stayed back in town—but order of a different order, so to speak, and chaos different from that in the wild. The meaning of *wild* in culture is different from the meaning of *wild* in nature. The waterfall will still be there, where we had the picnic five years ago on my birthday, and probably still some Parry’s primrose. But the coyote that made off with the leftovers, while we were lingering by the rocks below the falls—he will be gone. Maybe, if we are lucky, we will see an ouzel again.

The natural processes, confronted in the park, are regular, dependable: Gravity holds, the rains come, and oaks breed in kind. Nature is unified and intelligible, constant enough for life support, including our own. This geomorphological, meteorological, biochemical, ecological constancy is of great value, indeed vital. In the park,

partly because of the leisure, partly because we are taken out of our surroundings of artifacts, we confront this elemental nature.

But there is a polar value. In the park, yes, there are park managers, supervising the visitors, also looking out after the integrity of the park. But these managers are not managing the fauna and flora; this is not a botanical or zoological garden. Life is on its own, wild and free. Or if there is management, it is hands-off, in deliberate effort to let these animals be wild, to let nature take its course. The signs at the trailhead urge us not to feed the chipmunks, beg though they do at the picnic rock below the waterfall. They need to do their thing, get their own food—if they can. Only if on their own can they preserve their own integrity.

Nature in the wild is ever the same and never the same. True, there are the perennial natural givens, even when they are ever-changing. The day moves from dawn to dusk, the seasons pass, plants grow, rivers flow, winds blow, even the rocks erode; change is pervasive. On the scale of deep time, some processes continue on and on, almost forever. Mountains are reliably there generation after generation. The water cycles back, always moving. Parks give us this encounter, more intensely than we are likely to find it in town.

But it is equally true that parks give us nature in its spontaneous novelty. The mountains, reliably there, are just as reliably different in Yosemite and in Yellowstone. By making each location different, wildness makes a favorable difference. It makes each ecosystem historic, the more excellent because no two are alike. Landscapes are never twice the same; indeed, even the aspen leaves in Yellowstone are never twice

the same. In the laboratory, science abstracts out the regularly recurring components to attain predictive control. On the farm, in agricultural fields, science is applied to ensure (so we hope, at least) the farmer a predictable harvest. But in the park, “out in the field” (as we say), nature remains unique and particular, wild. What happens there is always something of a surprise, as whether it will rain before the picnic is over, or the way the ground squirrel evades the coyote, or just when the last of the aspen leaves will be gone.

The seasons come and go and average out. The conflict and resolution is statistically regular, we may say; over the years about one-third of the elk will not survive the winter. But this is rutting season now, and did you see that fight last night, when the new bull took over the harem? I wonder if the old bull had already bred the cows. Probably not, it is still early in the rut. I’ll bet that next year the calves will be his.

Yes, acorns make oaks, and oaks breed in kind. And that old giant must have made a million acorns. What a pity that a bolt of lightning destroyed it last summer; it must have been a dry storm, because the old oak burned badly—the bark is off all around the trunk. But the fire didn’t spread far. That osprey’s nest over there, not forty yards away, doesn’t seem to have been disturbed at all.

If we wish to be philosophical about this: There are natural possibilities in excess of what actually comes to pass, and the possible event that does happen can be selected by chance or by animal choice or by some intermediate, partial autonomy for which we hardly yet have an adequate model. Maybe the new bull took over

because he had better genes; good genetic luck, should we say? Maybe he was just lucky when the old one stumbled in the den hole. Maybe the oak got hit because it was a little taller than the others. Or maybe not, since there is another one that is taller still. Maybe it was just unlucky; but lucky for the osprey. Parks are proof that nature elevates law into history, natural history; that life, as it persists in the midst of its perpetual perishing, is always an adventure.

Wildness requires this creative mixing of the stable and the spontaneous or, technically put, the idiographic and the nomothetic. Parks give us direct experience with both these dimensions of nature. *Wild* refers to nature outside human control. Within that domain, the reference continues to nature outside simple lawlike patterns. The park managers do not control these events; neither are they completely controlled naturally. A “wild” place needs life on its own, each life defending its own self, its own kind, with order enough for the support of life, but also turbulence and ferment enough to make each life autonomous and particular.

Many processes may be determinate, but there will be the intersection of causally unrelated lines, producing novelty and unpredicted events. Individual events rattle around in the statistics. Stability is always a dynamic stability that leads to innovative change. The statistical trends develop into ongoing stories. Recent science accentuates genuine contingency, openness mixed with determinate laws. The result, on landscape scales, is idiographic places, beyond lawlike regularity. Yellowstone is not celebrated as a place where the laws of gravity are obeyed without exception or

because meiosis, mitosis, and photosynthesis take place predictably there, as they do everywhere else. Yellowstone is celebrated because it is like no place else on Earth, no place else in the universe.

Parks give us nature with a proper name, nature in its uniqueness. Yes, the waterfall will be reliably there again this year; but that waterfall is especially good in June when the primroses are flowering, tucked in those rocks on the far side. An early settler named Copeland loved these falls, and they are named for him. I have been here half a dozen times; the first time was with Daddy before he died. Parks locate us with embodied presence, mixing our own personal stories with these unique places.

### Nature and Culture

It is difficult to visit a large national park and not have a strong sense of “externality,” of my subject self being here, encountering an objective world out there. Yes, the trees were not green until I arrived, nor will they be after I am gone. But yes, more certainly, those trees were there (and photosynthesizing) before I came and will continue to do so after I am gone. It is difficult to be in a large modern city and not have a strong sense of “internality,” of myself emplaced in a world that humans have built—surrounded by artifacts, not here before humans came, and which would not long survive, were we gone. Visiting parks, one goes “outside.” One senses how much in the world was put in place without any human activity. In that sense, parks are the most “outlandish” of our recreational opportunities, or we could even say our most “outstanding” opportunity. There the world “stands out,” over against us, different;

and we cultural animals know we are momentary “stand outs” in the world.

We switch systems, from culture to nature. But then in dialectic we search for nested hierarchy, culture in nature, the nature in culture. Everything survives only with adapted fit—so the biologists insist. But the park visitor has a puzzling “fitness problem” (so to speak): how to fit one’s civilized being to this wild nature. Not only does the park visitor witness the dialectic of conflict and resolution in nature, the park per se has dialectical value. The park puts cultured humans in encounter with spontaneous wild nature. That, too, requires of the visitor conflict and resolution: How am I over against this wild nature? How am I in harmony with these elemental sources? Parks, we promised, confront us with the vital question of human identity.

Half of the answer lies in life support, culture superimposed on nature. Culture remains tethered to the biosystem and the options within built environments, however expanded, provide no release from nature. An ecology always lies in the background of culture, natural givens that support everything else. Some sort of inclusive environmental fitness is required of even the most advanced culture. Whatever their options, however their environments are rebuilt, humans remain residents in ecosystems. This is a truth for rural and urban people, but what better place to learn it than in parks, where we turn aside from our labors and take this wider, more ecological perspective? When we cross the park boundary, we cross over from the cultured environment to baseline nature, to the natural history on which human life is always founded.

The second half of the answer

seems to require a human discontinuity with spontaneous wild nature. Hiking back from the waterfall, I did spot an ouzel, admiring her skill dipping in and out of the cold water and also, beside the stream, a candy wrapper, which I packed out. The ouzel is natural; the wrapper is an artifact and doesn't belong here. But then my tent is artifact, too, and my cooking pots, and do I belong here? The critical distinguishing factor is the deliberated modification of nature that separates humans in their cultures from wild nature.

Expanding such examples into a metaphor, the whole of civilization is producing artifacts in contrast to the products of wild spontaneous nature. "Man is by nature a political animal" (Aristotle, *Politics*, I: 2.1253a). People are animals who build themselves a *polis*, a city. "Man is the animal for whom it is natural to be artificial" (Garvin 1953: 378). *Homo sapiens* is "the natural alien" (Evernden 1993). The really natural thing for humans to do is not to go natural but to build a culture differentiating (alienating) ourselves from nature.

Wild animals do not form cumulative, transmissible cultures. The determinants of animal and plant activity are never anthropological, political, economic, technological, scientific, philosophical, ethical, or religious. Any transmissible culture, and especially a high-technology culture, does need to be discriminated from nature. The workday week, I sit in an engineering office for Boeing, behind a computer. Boeings fly, as wild geese fly, using the laws of aerodynamics. The flight of wild geese is impressive. But, thinking it over by the campfire, I need insight into the differences between the ways humans fly in their

engineered, financed jets and the ways geese fly with their genetically constructed, metabolically powered wings. Most of their information is genetically coded and transmitted. So much of what I am is by acquired information, culturally transmitted. Figuring this out is all the more forceful a demand because I am building those Boeings within a hundred miles of old-growth forest that I as an environmentalist am concerned about saving.

Especially our moral life does not seem to get any authorizing in nature. Be just. Be charitable. Save the spotted owls, even if loggers lose their jobs—but is this either just or charitable? Also, those loggers cut the timbers for my suburban home—and was I not just thinking that humans by nature build their cities? One moment I seem part of nature and the next I seem apart from it. This question doesn't bother me in town, but in the park I cannot escape it. And maybe I should bother about this question in town, when I return, because I do want a culture in harmony with the nature from which it has also made exodus.

### Nature and Spirit

The park is demanding a dialogue between nature and spirit. Parks refresh our contact with life animated and rising up from the ground. That is the perennial "giving birth" at the etymological root of the word *nature* (in our word *native*, also in the cognate *pregnant*). Parks preserve opportunity for people to reconnect with this animating earth. Biologists, especially field biologists such as the park naturalists, are never too comfortable with the phenomenon of life viewed reductively as nothing but matter in motion. There is vitality, animation (recalling

the Latin *anima*: breath, spirit).

This spiritedness is evident in the animals. Animals hunt and howl, find shelter, seek out their habitats and mates, care for their young, flee from threats, grow hungry, thirsty, hot, tired, excited, sleepy. Our gaze is returned by an animal that itself has a concerned outlook. We enjoy organic form in spontaneous locomotion, on the loose. There is a never-ceasing hunt through the environment for food, an ever-alert hiding from predators. Human emotions are stimulated by animal bodily motions and drawn through these into animal emotions, invited to empathize with “somebody there” behind the fur and feathers. Television wildlife programs, art, and photography are hardly substitutes for the real thing. The autonomy and surprise, the spirit is gone.

But the most challenging spiritedness here is right behind my own eyes, my subjective self confronting this world from which I have evolved. I must figure out how and why I belong here; and now it seems that, self that I am, with my inwardness, maybe more intense than that in the animals, I am also some kind of overseer, looking out and maybe further out than the animals. *Humans* are cognate with the *humus*, made of dust, yet unique in their capacity to view the world they inhabit. They rise up from the earth and look over their world (Greek: *anthropos*, to rise up, look up). Animals have the capacity to see only from their niche; humans can take a view from no niche; they can look over the whole. Skeptics and relativists may say that humans just see from another niche; and certainly when humans appraise soil or timber as resources, they see from within their niche. But humans can do more, and the proof of

this is in parks.

Roger DiSilvestro finds something radically novel about humans setting aside their wildland parks:

Territorial boundaries are ancient; they are artifacts dating from a primordial world. They are, in essence, established for the exploitation of the earth.... Only in the past century has humanity begun to set the protection of wildlands as a broad social goal, creating national parks, national forests, wildlife refuges, even protected wilderness areas. This is something truly new under the sun, and every protected wild place is a monument to humanity's uniqueness. The greatest qualitative difference between us and nonhuman animals is not that we can change and modify our environment. Practically every living creature does that.... But we are the first living things, as far as we know, to make a choice about the extent to which we will apply our abilities to influence the environment. We not only *can* do, but we can choose *not to do*. Thus, what is unique about the boundaries we place around parks and other sanctuaries is that these boundaries are created to protect a region from our own actions.... No longer can we think of ourselves as masters of the natural world. Rather, we are partners with it (DiSilvestro 1993: xiv-xv).

So the park experience, though it starts recreational, culminates with this re-creating, deepening experience of the human spirit, at once setting ourselves apart from the park, posting these unprecedented territorial boundaries where we resolve to let life be in its spontaneous naturalness, and in so doing become what we uniquely are: *Homo sapiens*, the wise species, knowing ourselves (if we may say so) as “spectacular” (outstanding overseers) in this spectacular world we



inhabit. We are free in this world, free to celebrate it, and glad to be embodied and resident in this wonder-full

creation. In that sense, parks are outstanding opportunities to keep life wonderful.

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