

# 🌿 The Heart of the Matter

*New essential reading on parks, protected areas, and cultural sites*

---

***Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change.*** Edited by David N. Cole and Laurie Yung. Island Press, \$70.00 (hardcover), xiii + 287 pp.; ill.; index. ISBN: 978-1-597-26508-9. 2010.

*Reviewed by David Harmon*

I TAKE IT AS A MARK OF MATURITY when a movement, such as the conservation of parks and protected natural areas, not only tolerates but encourages the development of a critical self-consciousness. If one looks back at the tenor of the last 30 years in our profession, I think it is safe to say that it has indeed matured: from being a movement of more-or-less unabashed advocacy to one of advocacy tempered by reflection, by the acknowledgment that the proper way to manage parks is not nearly so simple as we first thought, and certainly not self-evident.

The third World Parks Congress, held in Indonesia in 1982, marked the first real sea change in park management philosophy by recognizing the needs of local communities as an important concern. It was the beginning of the move, which continues unabated today, away from insularity, away from the old idea that we can just leave nature be within the boundaries of a protected area and everything will take care of itself. The proceedings of that congress, edited by two long-time stalwarts of IUCN, Jeff McNeely and Kenton Miller, was, to my mind, the benchmark parks publication of the 1980s.

The trend toward broadening the remit of parks, and re-examining long-held management assumptions, surged in the 1990s. Publication after publication confirmed that the old ways of doing business were no longer effective—if they ever were. The full complexity of the social movement that is park conservation began to emerge: ecologists turned old assumptions on their head, managers saw that laissez-faire was not going to cut it, social scientists began to insist that their perspectives and those of the groups they advocate for be included in planning and management, and cultural heritage professionals helped usher in an efflorescence of diverse interpretations of the meaning of the past.

In terms of revisionism, the high-water mark of the decade was the publication in 1995 of William Cronon's edited volume *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, which contained his highly influential—and to many, disconcerting—essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” Cronon's call for our conception of wildness to “stop being (just) out there and start being (also) in here” struck what-

---

*The George Wright Forum*, vol. 27, no. 3, pp. 255–259 (2010).

© 2010 The George Wright Society. All rights reserved.

(No copyright is claimed for previously published material reprinted herein.)

ISSN 0732-4715. Please direct all permission requests to [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).

ever residual complacency as may have remained among park conservationists like an earthquake. The tremors are still being felt today.

So we continue to seek a way forward, and as we do, clear signposts are quite useful. One of these is provided to us in the form of David N. Cole and Laurie Yung's new book, *Beyond Naturalness: Rethinking Park and Wilderness Stewardship in an Era of Rapid Change*. If *Uncommon Ground* was the watershed book of the 1990s in North American park conservation, *Beyond Naturalness* is the game-changer of the first decade of the 21st century. I cannot think of a recent book that has probed so thoroughly and effectively the fundamental dilemmas facing parks and protected areas.

The point of attack is the observation, in an introductory chapter by Gregory H. Aplet and Cole, that “*natural* is a commonly used word with multiple meanings,” such that “different people use the term in very different ways and are often not conscious of how their definitions differ.” But the problem is not just a definitional one, with the pitfall of people talking past each other or working at cross-purposes; it is a matter of there being an overweening reliance on this one concept as the sole benchmark of successful park management. Aplet and Cole go on to assert that this stance has become untenable because “changes in science and society and the globalization of human influence have eroded the adequacy of naturalness as a guiding concept for protected area stewardship.” The changes in science of which they speak include the evolution of ecological understanding away from equilibrium to dynamism, the advent of restoration ecology, better understanding of the historical effects of indigenous people on the environment, and the emergence of the concept of biodiversity. As for the globalization of human influence, little really needs to be said: climate change changes everything.

What this means in management practice, say Aplet and Cole, is that

Global environmental change precludes the ideal stewardship option in parks and wilderness: that release from human control will increase historical fidelity and pristineness. Protected area managers [either] must choose to increase historical fidelity through restoration, accept the change that will result from less intervention and control, or transform ecosystems to future states that are not true to the past but will protect important values and be more resilient in the face of global change.

In other words, we can *resist change* via ecological restoration, *accept change* and allow matters to drift as they may, or *guide change* through proactive transformation of conditions in protected areas. What we cannot do is *prevent change* and cling exclusively to outdated and often confused ideals of naturalness.

That is provocative stuff. But note that I qualified the last sentence with the word “exclusively.” *Beyond Naturalness* is not saying that the concept of nature is obsolete; it simply is no longer sufficient. Rather, what we need now is “an expanded array of tools and concepts, framed in more clearly articulated policy.” The rest of the book explores what this might mean. There are context-setting chapters on the development of a more sophisticated ecological understanding, the challenges posed by an unprecedented and unpredictable future of global change, and the evolution of conservation policy and management practice.

This is followed by a set of chapters from across a spectrum of conservation approaches: hands-off, ecological integrity, historical fidelity, and resilience thinking. The final part of the book explores possible future management strategies, touching on invasive species, climate change, continental-scale matrix management, planning for uncertainty, and wild design, capped off by a synthesis chapter.

There are no weak chapters in the collection, so my highlighting of just a few is a matter of expediency, nothing more. The discussion of “Shifting Environmental Foundations” by Nathan L. Stephenson and colleagues is an admirably clear discussion of the range of challenges now facing protected area managers for which there is no analogue, no benchmark, to step off from. It helps set the stage for alternatives to naturalness, of which perhaps the most promising is Parks Canada’s ecological integrity approach, convincingly described here by Stephen Woodley. Peter Landres contributes a powerful “pushback” chapter in which he argues that we do need to let certain lands be, especially large, isolated areas within a bigger managed-for-conservation matrix. And I found the chapter by F. Stuart Chapin and colleagues on “Planning in the Context of Uncertainty,” with its focus on scenario-building, to be an especially valuable outline of a real-world strategy for planning in the face of overwhelming complexity.

Cole and Yung have taken great care to integrate the various chapters into a work that flows seamlessly. One of the big challenges of doing a book of contributed papers—and I can personally attest to this—is to weave the distinct voices of the chapter authors into a cohesive whole so the thing doesn’t read like a random conglomeration. *Beyond Naturalness* is exceptionally tightly edited in this regard, with almost every chapter cross-referencing others so that readers are continually reminded of how the ideas being presented relate to each other.

Good as it is, *Beyond Naturalness* is not above all criticism. There are two significant gaps in the book, as I see it, each related to the other. First, there is no representative of the emerging biocultural approach to conservation: one which regards the concepts of “nature” and “culture” as interpenetrating rather than rigidly distinct from one another. There is a growing literature on biocultural diversity, much of it centered on the perspectives of indigenous people, and it would have been valuable to have a chapter focused on this because it is an approach that is very different from Western science. Second, there is no chapter explicitly examining the meaning of values, and the social processes by which they are formed, as they relate to parks and protected areas. I find that this is a common oversight of books in our field: “naturalness” and the alternatives offered here—“ecological integrity,” “historical fidelity,” “resiliency,” “wild design”—are all values, not precisely definable end-states. It would have been good to have a chapter by a social scientist or an environmental philosopher that honed in on the distinction between facts and values (often blurry, actually!) and how people mediate between them.

And I have to say that, as compelling as the overall argument of the book is, I find that my innermost sympathies still lie with Landres and the admonitions of humility in his chapter “Let It Be: A Hands-off Approach to Preserving Wildness in Protected Areas.” Nature, I firmly believe, is real, not just a social construct; and even though it is often difficult to disentangle from humans and our cultural impacts (and, as I’ve just suggested, developing an awareness of how they interpenetrate is useful), it does exist as part of a continuum that runs

from wilderness to city. “Naturalness,” then, is not just a set of conflicting definitions of ecological conditions: it is itself a value, a value that coalesces around the proposition that there are forms of life that have autonomy, in that their life trajectories are not controlled or dominated by people. “This,” writes Landres, “is a long-term societal value and benefit that is at the heart of the direct interplay between people and the environment.”

He is here referencing an essay—an important one, I think—of the late Australian environmental philosopher Val Plumwood. I’d like to pull a couple of quotes from it to remind us, first, that words are important, and second, that as conservationists we downplay the concept of nature at our peril:

The deep contemporary suspicion and skepticism about the concept and term “nature” may play some role in the contemporary indifference to the destruction and decline of the natural world around us. If the category “nature” is seen as phony, if it can appear only when suitably surrounded by sneer quotes, we are hardly likely to be inspired by appeals to nature’s integrity in the case against genetic engineering or for the defense of nature in the case for stopping the current slaughter of the seas and the holocaust of animal life. The more nebulous and indeterminate such nature skepticism is, the more difficult to dispel is the general sense of unease the term “nature” seems to arouse in the modern and especially the postmodern mind. Even if that unease can be justified for some areas of usage, the danger is that it will contaminate perfectly defensible and useful, even indispensable, roles for the concepts of nature, in a way that will make important conservation causes very difficult to articulate convincingly. Should we then abandon “nature” as the banner term under which we might try to resolve the ecological crisis? I suggest the answer is “no” (Plumwood 2005, 25).

She concludes—and I am 100% with her—that “we have a long way to go in recognizing and consciously maintaining the ecological relationships on which human culture depends. The concept and experience of nature are needed to make these relationships more apparent to people living increasingly urbanized lives in what they think of as culture, a sphere often but mistakenly seen as of exclusively human construction and agency” (Plumwood 2005, 44). In short, the more we think we are divorced from nature and its qualities of naturalness, and the more we think we can be, the more we need them.

So—*beyond* naturalness? Not yet; and, I hope, not ever, if “beyond” is taken to mean leaving the idea of nature behind. But that, clearly, is not what the contributors to this splendid book mean. They want us to manage our parks and other protected areas with *more* than naturalness in mind, and with that goal I wholeheartedly agree.

## References

- Cronon, William, ed. 1995. *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- McNeely, Jeffrey A., and Kenton R. Miller, eds. 1984. *National Parks, Conservation, and Development: The Role of Protected Areas in Sustaining Society*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press.

Plumwood, Val. 2005. Toward a progressive naturalism. In *Recognizing the Autonomy of Nature: Theory and Practice*. Thomas Heyd, ed. New York: Columbia University Press, 25–53.

**David Harmon**, George Wright Society, P.O. Box 65, Hancock, Michigan 49930-0065;  
dharmon@georgewright.org

---

*Ed. note:* “The Heart of the Matter” is a new feature of *The George Wright Forum* that highlights books we think will be of lasting value to park professionals. Each installment focuses on a recently published book that, in some way, gets to the core of our work on behalf of parks, protected areas, and cultural sites. If you have read a recent book that you think should be profiled in “The Heart of the Matter,” we’d like to hear from you. Email us at [info@georgewright.org](mailto:info@georgewright.org).