

The Value of Parks in a Time of Sliding Baselines

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Introduction

PARKS AND OTHER PROTECTED PLACES ARE TAKING IT IN THE CHIN, as global warming strengthens its grip on the land. Because they are often created to save vulnerable ecosystems, protected places are often hit hard and first—the high airy mountaintops, the steep forests, the coastal marshes and Arctic edges, the last refuges of specialized species, places of high drama and deeply felt significance.

The sorry context for these challenges is a planet that has lost 40% of its plant and animal abundance since 1970, according to World Wildlife Fund estimates. Moreover, entire species are vanishing at a rate between a thousand and ten thousand times higher than background rates of extinction. Even in parks and protected places around the world, we're seeing both the impoverishment and the homogenization of ecosystems.

I imagine that when the sun sets, those charged with protecting special places fall into bed, exhausted and despondent, because they are mostly losing this battle to save the diversity of what theologian Thomas Berry called the “most lyrical period in Earth’s history.” And yet, as the sun rises, people rise again to the challenge of protecting what is flourishing and beautiful. On the rotating planet, there’s a great dawn chorus of committed people getting out of bed, rustling up coffee, and going off to do the good work of protecting places—their beauty and functionality and fullness of life.

Why? What is the special significance of national parks and other protected areas in this time of storms and extinction?

I will argue that in our radically anthropocentric culture and extractive economy, sliding ecological baselines have resulted in sliding moral baselines, sliding baselines of imagination, and finally sliding baselines of hope. It’s a disastrous, ongoing slippage in evolutionary and human possibility. I will argue that protected places, our beloved parks, have the power to block all of these slides, every one. The protected places are demonstration projects that model a human relationship to the natural world that is marked by restraint, respect, and spiritual and evolutionary kinship. And so they offer hope in the possibility of human and cultur-

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al transformation. The park boundary, where the extractive economy ends and the ethos of honoring begins, is where the paradigm shift to a sustainable culture can begin.

Sliding baselines

The sliding ecological baseline. How many people alive today have ever seen *any* ecosystem in its full and glorious complexity? Most of us live in a stripped-down, dammed-up, paved-over, desperately impoverished landscape. Over time, this becomes the norm, the standard against which we measure gain and loss, gratitude and grief. This, of course, is the problem that ecologists call the *sliding (or shifting) ecological baseline*.

The ecological baseline slides when three elements are present:

1. An ecosystem that is to some degree simplified, damaged, ransacked, and/or replaced.
2. The collective failure of memory of what once was.
3. The establishment of the damaged place as the standard of “normal” or “natural.”

Suddenly, the world slips a notch: diminished expectations, a shrunken sense of the possible. Like the unfolding process of grief, these losses end in a gradual acceptance that a diminished landscape is the norm—the way it must always be, as good as it is going to get.

The sliding moral baseline. And then what happens? It’s not just the landscape that is reduced, but our valuing of it. An ecological ethic is an ethos based on caring, and with each diminishment, we care less, until we couldn’t care less at all. Will people care about the Arctic ice once the polar bears have gone south? What is the allure of oceans without singing whales? What is left of a marsh, when it is barren of blackbirds? Who but salvage loggers care about wildland, when it has burned to the ground? The danger is a sliding *moral* baseline:



Coast Range, Oregon. Photo courtesy of M.O. Stevens, Wikimedia Commons.

we ask so little of ourselves, caught up in an astonishing disregard for the quietly vanishing creatures and landscapes. But who can grieve the loss of what they never knew? The measure of our obligation slips another notch.

And who is holding the line? The environmental movement can tell us what we are against. But it often fails to remind us what we are for. Worse: Over the years, many environmental actions have accepted an ethic of regulation in place of what once was an ethic of aspiration and love. An *ethic of regulation* asks, How far can I go, how much can I wreck, before somebody fines me? An *ethic of aspiration* asks, How can we achieve a great fullness of our collective humanity in a landscape of completeness and complexity?

Consider the Endangered Species Act, what some consider to be a great moral leap forward. As I see it, the ESA establishes as the norm, the stingiest, the most miserly and grudging, the most last-ditch of all possible ways to respect the natural world. Because it takes effect only when animals are on the absolute brink of extinction, it abandons the ideal of glorious plenty—great herds of buffalo, swirling flocks of trumpeter swans, monarch butterflies by the millions, schools of silver salmon—the great abundance of lives, the wonder of their numbers. We eat away, eat away, eat away at species until their members are almost gone, and then we congratulate ourselves as acting morally for saving the stragglers. It's a dramatically reduced understanding of what "acting morally" might mean.

Sliding baseline of the imagination. And then, almost unnoticed, comes the sliding baseline of the imagination. Who can imagine a truly healthy ecosystem, who lives in a landscape of loss? Children who have never seen an ancient forest climb onto a huge, crumbling, blood-red stump, look out through regular rows of 20-year-old Douglas-fir, and imagine they are in a forest. At that moment, another opening in the universe slams shut, another set of possibilities disappears forever.

Not knowing wild rivers, a dying child's request to the Make-a-Wish Foundation is to ride the Splash Mountain flume at Disneyland. Not knowing fields of wildflowers, a child gathers dandelions for her mother, and aren't they the most beautiful flowers that ever were?—on a planet that recently held 30,000 species of orchids. The simplification and homogenization of the imagination is even harder to bear when one stops to marvel at the extraordinary chance that we were born into a time of lavish and astonishing life. Thomas Berry again: "It's our generation that is witnessing the end of the era that we evolved in.... My generation has done what no previous generation could do, because they lacked the technological power, and what no future generation will be able to do, because the planet will never again be so beautiful or abundant." Which brings us to the sliding baseline of hope.

The sliding baseline of hope. At the end of the Cretaceous period, perhaps 80% of all species vanished, including most dinosaurs and many of the small creatures of the seas. Evidence suggests that we are on track for an extinction event of equal power. The cause? A way of life, a constantly growing, all-consuming planetary culture driven by extractive industries that have few moral or legal constraints.

It's madness, the trades we make. Unless something stops us, we will keep on converting living creatures into dead commodities. We trade deep mossy forests for uselessly large homes. We trade a singing marsh for another Kmart parking lot. It's madness, this consump-



Dallas County, Iowa. Photo courtesy of Lynn Betts, USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service.

tion, this eating up. We trade fence rows and goose sloughs for yet more golf courses. We trade spotted owls for typing paper and old oaks for turning-lanes. The most terrible trade is the transmogrification of plants and animals into 50 million tons of human flesh, in the last forty years. The baseline of our hoping drops a notch.

But maybe it's worse than that. Maybe we are witness to the disappearance of the baseline entirely, *the extinction of the normal*. All the years, we humans have been lifted by the assurance that birds would go and birds would return, that storms would come in season and storms would blow back to sea again, that fish would scatter eggs before they died. In Oregon, the first rufous hummingbirds returned in late February when the blueberries bloomed at the coast. Tree swallows returned to their ponds in early March, to meet the mayflies.

It was a great day in the swamps in early April, when American bitterns and yellow-headed blackbirds swooped in, grumping and hollering.

The humans and the birds slept and woke by this, lived and died by this faith in inevitable, unfolding harmony, the expectation and the arrival, the call and the response, the question and the answer, the world's promise of absolution and return. The weather comes now and goes, and who can make sense of it? Last year, drought dried the grassfields where insects and mice would have grown abundant, and the peregrine falcons, skinny or starved, produced no young. Last year the swallows came back to Oregon before winter was finished, and there were no insects in the wind. What is the standard of normal now? Now, what can we hope for?

Drawing the line

The planet reels under a pathology of greed and short-sightedness that is undermining our

very standards of ecosystem health, moral integrity, creative imagination, and hope itself. It is therefore a matter of no small significance that national parks and protected places are the very few places where all four of the sliding baselines are blocked. A protected landscape *draws the line*. And quite a line it is, this boundary between protected areas and areas that are without protection from the industrialized growth economy's war on the world.

Blocking the sliding ecological baseline. It's true that thousands of species are irretrievably gone. It's true that the greenhouse gas pollution already in the atmosphere is going to cause climate changes that will alter ecosystems for millennia. Given that, what we *have* to do is the one thing we *can* do: We have to stop making it worse.

Like a fence, the boundaries of a protected area contain a landscape; but, more importantly, they exclude a landscape. A wilderness or other protected area is testimony to the human will to say, No: the industrial growth economy will not cross this line. Reckless disdain for the natural world has no place here. Here, the landscape is valued in itself, for its own sake, not for the profit that might be wrung from it. Fracking pads must stop short of this red-rock canyon. Oil wells must stop short of this Arctic mountain range. Water-sucking mines must stop short of this desert spring.

Within this boundary, we will not gouge Earth's ancient carbon from the ground. We will not bulldoze forests into burn piles. We will not pave meadows. Within these boundaries, not another mountaintop, not another rainforest, not another estuary, not another prairie, not another mighty river will be traded away for cash. These are not industry's to take or sell. They belong to the future of the everlasting Earth. Here is a vision of what a desert, a marshland,



Hoh Rainforest, Olympic National Park, Washington. Photo courtesy of R.G. McKenna / National Park Service.

a forest can be if we don't wreck it, for god's sake, if we allow it to grow in its full beauty and ecological richness.

Blocking the sliding moral baseline. Parks and protected places are the one place you can go on this good Earth where you have little choice but to be your best self. It is simply against the law to be a greedy, reckless pig in the wilderness. It is simply against the law to steal or vandalize whatever you want in a national park. A sojourner is called to a kind of self-restraint that is rare in life—a generosity of spirit that takes only what is given and returns it in gratitude and care. This is a fact of great importance: a week in a protected area is proof that a human being is capable of being a good and decent citizen of the Earth.

The surprise is that when travelers cross a park boundary, they have the ability to slip from one level of being to another, from people surrounded and obsessed and dependent on multitudinous stuff torn from the Earth, to people whose greatest pleasures are simplicity and a close connection to something greater than they are, something older and more powerful. If there is not hope in this proof of the transmutability of human character, I don't know where it can be found.

Blocking the sliding baseline of the imagination. The boundary of the national park is a fault line between two worldviews, two ways of answering the foundational questions of the human condition: What is the world? What is the place of humans in the world? How then shall we act? Outside the park boundary, the viciously *anthropo*-centric worldview rules. Inside the boundary, a new *eco*-centric worldview is imagining itself into existence.

The tectonic time and place where one worldview grinds against another is unstable and dangerous. We should expect this and be warned. Feeling the ground shiver under it, the old anthropocentric worldview struggles more and more violently for control. The old worldview becomes bigger and more complicated and insistent, even as its foundations shake. This is a profoundly insecure time. It's a time of bullies. No wonder that the boundaries of parks are contentious places, places of rifle-fire and lawyers.

At some unforeseeable time, the opposing forces build to a breaking point, and the ground leaps forward. The old story falls away and the new story emerges to take its place. Philosophers call it a "paradigm shift," this avulsion, this sudden lurch from one foundational understanding to another. No one can know where it begins: Copernicus' workshop in Poland. Selma, Alabama. Tiananmen Square. The Berlin Wall. The national parks.

The national parks? I think maybe so. The culture outside the park boundary has taken the old story of human dominion and exceptionalism to its extreme edge. A culture that prides itself on accumulating wealth instead of sharing it, a culture that gobbles up the fecundity of the planet instead of nurturing it, any economy of infinite extraction, will kill off the sources of its sustenance. It is a *reductio ad absurdum* of human greed, to crush and squeeze the last drop of oil from the rocks, to take everything until there is nothing left to take, to wring out the washrag to drink the spilled wine – and to claim that this is right, this is smart, this is worthy of us as rational beings. To persist in the taking until the life-supporting systems of the Earth are destroyed? Suddenly, this is revealed as inconceivable. Literally that, unthinkable. Unthinkable, because it can only make sense inside a system of thought that is now being challenged from every direction.



Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore. Photo courtesy of Jeff Manuszak / National Park Service.

Inside the park boundary, a new worldview is taking shape, a story that matches what we now know about the way the world actually works, a story that validates what we most deeply value and answers the human yearning for connection to one another, to the astonishing Earth, and to an ongoing future. In many ways, it's the rediscovery of an ancient, ancestral story, now rooted in contemporary understandings of ecology and evolution. It's an ecological-ethical account of human kinship with a world that is interconnected, interdependent, finite, resilient, and beautiful. Like any worldview, it provides a measure of what is sensible and good.

The national parks and other protected places are demonstration projects, test-runs, of this new worldview. Here, people are invited to try out new lifeways of respect and restraint that work with, rather than against, the living, thriving Earth.

To be only one among many kindred creatures, to be called to restraint? Unimaginable? Well then, welcome to the national parks, where this exercise of the imagination is fully underway.

On a recent visit to the Galapagos Islands National Park in Ecuador, I was figuratively and literally put in my place among the wheeling lives. If I had ventured too close to a nest, a quick peck from a booby would have removed a divot from my calf, and a park ranger would have gently admonished me, "Stay on trail please." I was not in charge there. I had no right to rummage around or to take so much as a pebble, while the animals enjoyed full rights to live, to live freely, and to pursue happiness in their own lunatic ways. Before the day was out, a booby would walk right over my feet.

Never, but in this park, have I seen as complete a repudiation of the idea that human beings are separate from the rest of creation, that we are the pinnacle of creation, that we are in charge, that we are the point of the whole thing. Imagine this kinship. Imagine the joy.

Blocking the sliding baseline of hope. This means that although we may not be able to *find* hope in a chaotically warming world, there's no question that we can *create* it. The hope of the future will be *active hope*, as Joanna Macy calls it, hope that grows in the actions that we take in defense of a thriving world. The answer to the sliding baseline of hope is to shore the baseline up again, seedling by seedling, acre by acre, from what is left to us.

This is a given: Even if park legislation can bar the entry of extractive industry, nothing can protect any area from the effects of global warming. Hope will come from slowing global warming, which is to say, reducing the amount of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere. Healthy forests and soils can sequester huge amounts of carbon. Obviously, the more healthy ecosystems, the better the chance. So the more intact wilderness, tangled banks, heavily breathing forests, greening jungles, tundra, and dense black soil are present on the planet, the more carbon dioxide they will suck from the air. To the extent that protected areas save intact ecosystems, and so save carbon sinks, they are a great hope for the choking world. A sane policy would rapidly expand protected land, not asking, is it pristine? Is it untrammelled? But asking only, does it breathe?

This also is given: With cascading extinctions, the world is going through a biological bottleneck as brutal as one might imagine God's fury in Noah's story. Whatever species make it through—that's what the world will be made of. Noah knew this, that what survived the



El Rosario Monarch Sanctuary, Angangueo, Michoacán, Mexico. Photo courtesy of hspauldi, Wikimedia Commons.



Discovering dirt, Santa Monica Mountains National Recreation Area, California. Photo courtesy of National Park Service.

Great Flood would repopulate the world, the lions and the elephants two by two. But he protested—I'm old, I'm tired, why me o Lord? The answer is, it's got to be everybody, each asking, what ark can I build, what habitat can I save, that will carry living things? This is the work of active hope—to protect, restore, grow, preserve, in every possible way to hold on to what the world still has, fishing it out of the sloshing waves and bringing it to safety.

The world needs “flotillas of Arks, uncountable,” Portland author David Oates wrote. “Tiny handmade ones, and massive ones; science-arks like battleships, and garden-arks like rowboats, all set into the forward-river of time, to sail if possible through the narrow part of the hourglass of our era.... And then what? To touch, chancewise, on dry land. And start the world anew.” In the work of creating the world anew, parks and protected places are the workplaces of hope.

So. What do protected places protect? The list is long—landscapes of power and beauty, cultural legacies, seedbanks of genetic information and evolutionary potential, plants and animals of dazzling variety, night skies splattered with stars, silence, experience of a world healthy and whole, the lives of frogs and the songs of birds, the lives, all the lives. Lizards. Astonished children. Connection to something larger than ourselves. But something more, maybe something overriding.

Protected places protect and nourish raw-boned possibility. Possibility—the creative urgency of life unfurling in the dark folds of the land, the fertility of the human imagination and the expansive embrace of the human heart—the possibility of human transformation. We don't have to live as the grieving emperors of a broken land. Protected places show us a

different vision of the role of humans on the planet, an ecological–ethical–indigenous account of the kinship of humans with all of creation, who share the same beginnings and will share the same fate.

In the protected places, we are called to practice the virtues of an eco-centric worldview. We are called to practice an ethic of restraint and precaution, to replace a destructive ethos of excess. We are called to practice an ethic of gratitude, to replace an ethos of grabbing. Humility, rather than blinding arrogance; a long view through space and time. Here, in protected places, we are given the chance to recover a sense of awe, knowing that, for reasons we will never understand, we are fully part of a fertile, life-supporting, breathtakingly beautiful planet. As protected places nurture flourishing ecosystems, they also nurture the fullness of human potential.

[*Ed. note:* This essay is based on the author’s keynote address at the George Wright Society Conference on Parks, Protected Areas, and Cultural Sites in Oakland, California, March 2015.]

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