

♥ The Heart of the Matter

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

Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth (2014), and *Protecting the Wild: Parks and Wilderness, the Foundation for Conservation (2015)*, both edited by George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler. Washington, DC: Island Press.

Reviewed by David Harmon

OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, the conservation community has been roiled by a debate over whether our planet's supposed entry into a new geological era—one utterly dominated by human impacts—calls for abandonment of traditional protected area goals. So it is that the term “Anthropocene” has expanded from its technical origins (the current meaning of the term dates back to the 1980s, although it was coined earlier) to become the watchword for a very well-organized and stoutly financed group of self-described “ecomodernists.” They contend that we should not worry much about human-caused extinctions and the spread of invasive species, that “nature” itself is over and we should just get over it, leaving us free to “love our monsters” and, without apology or self-reproach, hurry up and get good at being the gods of creation that we have made ourselves into. Through their policy and publicity center, a think tank called the Breakthrough Institute, they are doing their best to challenge the core assumptions of practical conservation.

Although it seems to have cooled down somewhat in recent months, the debate ran white-hot for awhile. To the most passionate defenders of protected area conservation as it has been developed over the past century and half, the Anthropocene-boosters are nothing but a bunch of heretical surrender monkeys, bought off by the corporate donor class, content to repose in a warm bath of ignorant hubris, and totally undeserving of the mantle of “environmentalist,” which they insist upon claiming.

I'm exaggerating for effect, of course. To their credit, most of the contributors to the companion volumes *Keeping the Wild* and *Protecting the Wild* are not content to simply indulge themselves in such lazy invective. They realize that ecomodernist critiques of environmentalism deserve serious responses, and they deliver them. But there's a parallel problem: it's hard to separate the truth-value of the critiques from the revolutionary claims of those who level them. As Paul Kingsnorth, writing in *Keeping the Wild*, puts it, the ecomodernists are “keen to continue to define themselves as radicals, and as environmentalists, while acting and talking in a way that makes it clear that they are precisely the opposite.” In short, he says, they “do not come rejuvenate environmentalism; they come to bury it.”

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So the argument over the Anthropocene is nearly as much about who controls the mantle of environmentalism as it is about disagreements over goals and tactics. The two books under review here cover both aspects exhaustively. Each volume is edited by a trio of indefatigable conservationists who have long-held ties to the Foundation for Deep Ecology: George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler. All were key contributors to the now-defunct journal *Wild Earth*, and those of us who fondly remember that publication (its heyday was the 1990s) will recognize its editorial legacy in these two books.

The first to appear, *Keeping the Wild*, is an unabashed counterattack on the Anthropocene promoters and the human-centered values they champion. There are chapters from old and respected hands who have fought many a pitched battle, both on the ground and on the page: names like Dave Foreman, Roderick Frazier Nash, David Ehrenfeld (whose book *The Arrogance of Humanism* was a landmark when it came out in the late 1970s), Michael Soulé (a recent keynoter at the GWS conference), Terry Tempest Williams. All of them, as you'd expect, make effective arguments for the continuing value of wilderness preservation and the intrinsic value of nature.

But the chapter I want to call out here, titled "Resistance," is by Lisi Krall, a professor of economics. It's an elegy for the Wyoming she knew growing up, a time when the state "was infinite and wild" and she could smell the sagebrush, endless sagebrush, riding in the back of her father's pickup on a rainy June morning. That Wyoming has been replaced by one where a different, more ominous kind of truck—the white ones you seem to see everywhere nowadays in fracking country, the ones belonging to Halliburton and kindred companies—are on every back road, no matter how obscure, relentlessly searching for commodities to take out of the land. It makes her sick at heart. The basic question, she says, is not whether humans should manipulate nature; we always have, and have had to. Rather, it's whether we should allow ourselves to throw out all pretense of a land-ethic so that we can utterly "colonize the forms and rhythms of the natural world." For her, "the answer to this question is a thousand times no." The other authors in *Keeping the Wild* join her in that insistent chorus.

The companion volume, *Protecting the Wild*, came out last year. Its thesis is stated in the subtitle, "Parks and Wilderness, the Foundation for Conservation." And the case is made, fairly thoroughly if not exhaustively. While both books contain chapters that look beyond the United States, *Protecting the Wild* is significantly more internationalist, with chapters on protected areas in Latin America, Africa, the Carpathians, Mongolia, and Australia. That adds ecumenical value to the defense—despite many problems, it is in fact true that at least some protected areas are working reasonably well under all kinds of economic situations and under all kinds of governments.

Some of the most inspirational chapters come at the beginning, in a section on "bold thinking." Readers of this journal will already have seen a version of Harvey Locke's "Nature Needs Half" argument (a well-developed call that came long before the attention being paid to the idea in E.O. Wilson's new book *Half-Earth*). His essay is joined by a plea headlined by Reed Noss for conservationists to fight for whatever protected area targets are dictated by the best science, not just those that we think our socially palatable. These chapters are buoying and effective. Unfortunately, the afterword to the book has now taken on a poignant pall

because its author, Doug Tompkins, who founded the North Face clothing line and went on to work for years in Patagonia creating one of the world's largest private protected areas, died in a paddling accident in December 2015.

Overall, *Protecting the Wild* is a wide-ranging summary of the current arguments for standard protected areas. It does not, however, delve much into alternative models, such as community-based conservation, so it cannot stand as a complete overview of the current state of play in protected areas as a whole. Nonetheless, together these two books are a formidable response to the purveyors of a conservation ideology that favors instrumental over intrinsic values.

You may be wondering: haven't we had this big brawling argument before? Indeed we have, back in the day when Muir and Pinchot were gathering their very different sets of apostles unto their sides.

Just so we don't lose track of the real meaning of the term being argued over today, keep in mind that the relevant professional bodies, the International Commission on Stratigraphy and the International Union of Geological Sciences, have not yet decided whether to declare the end of the current geological epoch, the Holocene, in favor of the Anthropocene. Even if they do (and a recent high-profile article in *Science* suggested that it would be justified), the debate over the implications for conservation practice is far from over.