

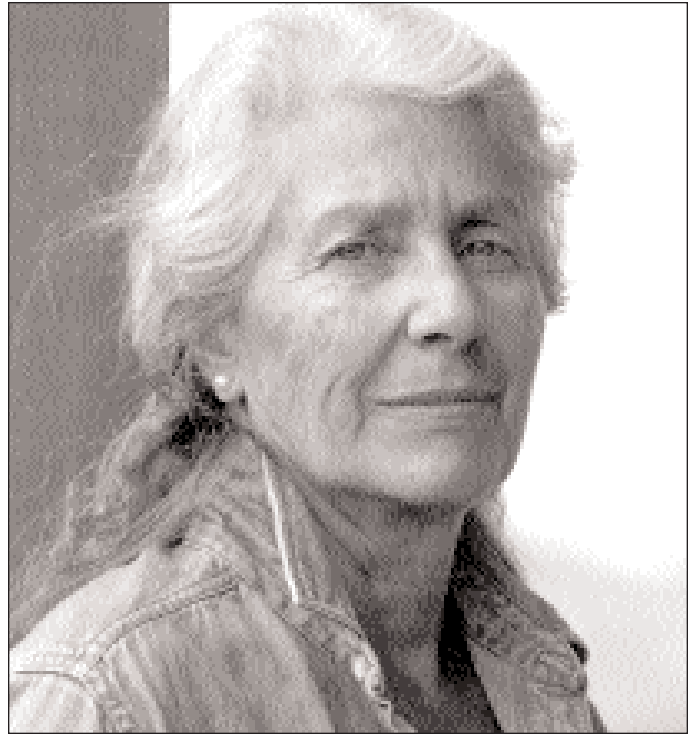
# WILDerness

**W**ILDerness. I borrow this enunciation from an activist at the last World Wilderness Congress in India who passionately protested the exclusionary policies in recently designated wilderness areas, which unjustly restricted the traditional foraging practices of indigenous people and, in some cases, drove them from their homelands. I use this intonation, however, for a different, but not opposing reason: Social justice will never be achieved if the Earth's ecosystems are not healthy and self-sustaining. Or, perhaps better said, social justice in an ecological wasteland is a social justice we would not choose to imagine. By emphasizing the WILD in wilderness, I call our attention to the truth and reality of wild nature and the truth and reality of our dependence upon it. It is time to dedicate our efforts to the devastation before all of us and to work harder than ever to preserve wild nature wherever it still exists.

Unfortunately, the "great wilderness debate" of the last decade has almost thoroughly obscured the truth and reality of WILD. Is wild nature a social construction? Throughout the decade, a postmodern discourse of "deconstructing" traditionally endowed significance for all aspects of life, including wilderness, has frequently played into the hands of adversaries whose tactics to obscure, divide, and redirect attention are well known. Yet, while wilderness advocates mend their rifts and regroup, the ongoing destruction of pristine lands continues at alarming rates, especially in unglamorous areas with little scenic or cultural value that nonetheless harbor irreplaceable and diverse webs of life. Close to my home on the sage brush-bunch grass steppe of western Wyoming, human intrusion, primarily from intensive oil and gas exploration, is presently affecting the once abundant sage grouse, whose numbers are in dangerous decline.

My late husband Paul Shepard, a human ecologist, worked most of his life to uncover the sources of ecological madness, particularly as it occurs in large-scale societies disconnected from experience in the natural world. Philosopher Holmes Rolston III has also consistently identified many flaws in the contemporary wilderness debate. Both are joined by a diverse group of "environmentalists" whose strength and commitment to wild nature is unflinching. My question here is to wonder how those of us in the environmental community—grassroots activists, scientists, scholars, and writers as well as the majority of concerned citizens—will move forward together on the work before us.

Today polyphonic voices circle each other in a vortex of multiple meanings. As in the past, *wilderness*, *wild*, *wildness*, and *wild nature*, continue to take on various meanings in various cultural contexts. In our discussions we rely on language to clarify our differences, but it often fails us when



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our experiences vary as widely as they do in our wild, rural, and urban lives. If we had more specific words such as *iyu žšo*, a Lakota verb, meaning "when a man rides through water and gets wet in spite of lifting his legs," mentioned by Ian Frazier in his book *On the Rez*, we might better express ourselves, and if all people knew what that expression meant from experience on a horse and in a river, literally and metaphorically, we would certainly understand one another better. Or if we had the ability of the original Kalahari Bushmen (possibly some of the most sentient humans existing in recent history), who used a magnificent range of inflections and variations in their voices coupled with the art of mimicry, and could convey meaning even to those who did not understand their language, perhaps, we could communicate more effectively. As it is, we must not



sidestep the inadequacy of our words or get mired in semantics but must try our best to clarify what it is we mean.

So, how do we communicate? Contemporary theorists tell us that we must first tear down language barriers that privilege some, exclude others, and keep us from seeing all sides of a problem. Language, it has been pointed out, inherently favors those who control the resources. Thus, we must “deconstruct” recognizably “privileged” meanings to see the impenetrable barriers they erect to the freedom and fulfillment of any sentient being. This insight has been an enlightenment all of its own. Words are mere reflections of reality as it is perceived from different, and often conflicting, points of view. We can be thankful for the astute wisdom of those who question authority and hallowed suppositions and who allow us to see the all too-habitual and mistaken reduction of human and nonhuman life experiences. This is a valid democratic process.

However, such emphasis is not all good news. The effort to give equal voice to all meanings has created a relativism that permeates all aspects of our lives and is one of a host of misrepresentations in the ongoing dialogue on wilderness. At the beginning of the 20th century, anthropologists pointed out that differences in cultures do not imply a superiority/inferiority dichotomy in people. We humans are all equally endowed. As a result, it has become “politically incorrect” to identify cultural practices as “flawed,” since such criticism would demean members of that group taking part in them. Instead, cultural practices are seen as context-dependent and accepted without judgment. Yet cultural practices are not of equal consequence. Some are not moral or wise. Genocide and ethnic cleansing permeate many contemporary cultures, and so-called development ravages the natural world. None of these practices sustains the integrity of culture or biotic communities, and they are not good practices no matter who is doing them and what their context is.

The problems within the wilderness debate are not, however, limited to linguistic failures or values-relativism. In his essay “Nature for Real: Is Nature a Social Construction?” (*The Philosophy of the Environment*, ed. T.D.F. Chappell), Holmes Rolston astutely analyzes some of the recent thinking behind critiques of wilderness. Consider the following quotations for their content, perhaps, as a mental experiment, judging them from the point of view of a bristle-cone pine tree that has been alive for thousands of years:

“Humans and nature construct each other.”  
—Alexander Wilson

“Persons and environment are continuous.”  
—Arnold Berleant

“Wilderness is a state of mind.”—Roderick Nash

“Civilization created wilderness.”—Roderick Nash

“What we know as nature . . . is the social creation of nature.” —Neil Everndon

“The wilderness is a social construct.” —David Graber

“There is no such thing as a pure, wild nature, empty of human conception.” —David Rothenberg

And to these I add:

“Wilderness is a place where an idea is expressed—the idea of wildness.”—Gregory H. Aplet,

“On the Nature of Wildness: Exploring What Wilderness Really Protects,” *Denver University Law Review*

“I think we must surrender the idea of wilderness. . . and invest our care and hope in civilization.”

—Marilynne Robinson, “Wilderness,” *The Death of Adam*

Rolston sorts through the problems in these kinds of statements by pointing out that a very critical confusion is afoot: the confusion of meaning with being. To illustrate his point, I shall use my own being as an example. I speak or write my words before you and others. As each of you looks, listens to, or reads my words, my being takes on different meanings for each of you. Yet what I mean to you and what I actually am are two separate things. It would be impossible for you, even after studying my long life and experiences, to know my reality fully, even though you could try and you might come close. This dilemma tends to plague us with existential angst, even if it need not do so. How can we know anything beyond our own perceptions? Are we consigned to perpetual questioning? My reality, however, does exist. I am me, and I am separate from any ideas you might have about me. So it is with wilderness. Here then is a key point: We must ask not only what wilderness is but what wilderness means to us, with the understanding that what wilderness means to us does not negate nor signify what wilderness is “for real.” Here we have two different domains, two different questions, and two different explanations.

Understanding the confusion of these two domains of meaning and being, however, still doesn’t fully clarify the problem in some of the statements above; for example, “There is no such thing as a pure, wild nature, empty of human conception.” Here, the problem is that meaning is all that is considered and being is denied. Just because we can access wilderness only through our senses does not mean that what we perceive is all that exists. We can broaden and deepen our interpretations of wilderness by including factual data collected through scientific studies, by considering other persons’ perceptions, and by acknowledging its numinous quality through firsthand experience. As Paul Shepard explains, wildness is the complex, living web of organisms in spontaneous, wild nature and is found in a place we call wilderness. Wilderness and wildness are realities as well as something we perceive through our instru-





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ments and senses. These realities are not just a web of words, social constructs, or perceptions. Although scientific evidence does not comprise the whole picture and can be used to bureaucratize language or obfuscate meaning (as anyone who has studied Environmental Impact Reports or Statements can attest), it also gives us empirical evidence that brings us a persistent reminder of what we do know about life on earth. In a world where shared meanings are of paramount importance, these kinds of truths (that must always be under revision) are either denied or flattened by the din of voices in contest for meaning.

Now we arrive at a troublesome place. The idea that nature is merely a reflection of our shared meanings is seductive and empowering because, for the many people who live their daily lives in artificial environments, acknowledging that there are a multitude of “others” and laws of nature that profoundly shape and constrain human lives appears irrelevant and/or threatening. Thus, while the goal for wilderness advocates may be to work toward an all-inclusive, shared value and reality for wilderness, many persons do not have access to wilderness areas, have not experienced wilderness directly, and do not understand either its value or its reality. The solution to this dilemma, it has been proposed, is to suggest that wildness can be found anywhere and everywhere, from large cities to the Arctic wilderness. According to Aplet, wildness is an experience on a continuum.

Although the continuum paradigm has some truth in it, it is misleading at best, underscores complacency, and ignores entirely the reality of wilderness as Paul Shepard and others recognize it. It is true that wild species can be found anywhere. These organisms, also called native or indigenous species, are plants or animals that have not had their genetic make-up altered through direct human intervention. Our own human genome can be considered wild, as Shepard pointed out, and is today much as it was 10,000 years ago. Native plants with intact wild genes can be transplanted and survive in suitable habitats and may be used to restore lands that have been degraded. Wild animals may

be raised in captivity and introduced in habitats where they have become extinct. But no matter how successful and valid our purposes, none of these efforts can replicate inviolate, self-willed, self-regulating, self-generating, numinous, wild nature.

I can dig up a penstamen from a wilderness area and plant it in my garden, but that does not mean that I now have a wild garden. What I have is a cultivated garden with a wild plant in it. And that organism will not retain its wild state for long because to be truly wild it must remain in wild nature where it evolved. Look at our animals in zoos and their neurotic and degenerate states. As Jane Goodall has so faithfully told all who will listen, it is next to impossible to rehabilitate a domesticated chimp back into the wild. In order to retain its wildness, an organism must be free of constraints and human intervention in a habitat whose bio-physical processes have not been interfered with—ever.

Making wilderness a continuum and supposedly more understandable to everyone is a non-exclusionary, non-elitist, postmodern distortion of the problem. To deconstruct the exclusionary and privileged elitist perceptions of wilderness is important but does not make the idea of wilderness wrong or the reality of wilderness nonexistent. Wild nature means wild species and wild land. If all we are interested in is the dynamics of language, where does that leave the animals and plants? Like feminists who have insisted that their bodies are texts that can be read and misread, wild creatures take us beyond description to the inscription of their lives upon the land, the same sort of language that appeared on the walls of prehistoric caves. In the wild animal body, its beauty, its congruence with place, its inherent knowledge, its dance with other creatures may be an unwritten language wherein meaning and being, in fact, are one.

There are additional problems with the postmodern language of wilderness. Denying that anything essential exists is joined by pronouncements against preservation. We are told that ecosystems, like the universe, are constant-





ly in flux. Here we come down to something essential after all—change is the only constant on Earth. Change is not news to ecologists, who have always recognized that it is an inherent component of life. Natural catastrophic events—fire, flood, wind, volcanism, earthquakes—occur daily throughout the world. Processes of regeneration, which take place over a long period of time, begin immediately to restore the over-arching balance. Neither destruction nor creation is static in time and space. Studies of the events and aftermath of the Mt. St. Helen’s eruption and the Yellowstone fire constantly amaze and inform us in these ways of the world. What wilderness advocates are proposing is not an unchanging state, but the protection of untrammeled ecosystems from devastatingly rapid changes incurred by mindless human intrusion. But the faulty conclusion of the adversaries of wilderness is that since nothing can be kept from change, preservation is an impossibility.

Related to this anti-preservation argument concerning change is the claim that pollutants, exotic plants, and over-grazing have defiled wild lands, making preservation futile. Yet if a person is suffering from an environmental disease such as asthma or allergies, do we say that this person has been altered to the extent that he or she is no longer human? Likewise, if an ecosystem (which we can also view as a whole entity) has not been completely disrupted, that is, has not had its soil and complex relationships of microorganisms disrupted, its stream habitats wasted, or its flora and fauna drastically altered or exterminated, it is still wilderness. It is still ecologically intact and, in most cases, can go through natural restoration if the sources of contamination and disruption are removed. We must not give in to the idea that wilderness no longer exists or is not possible except perhaps in Alaska. Instead, we must focus on the circumstances of exploitation that allow a few to reap unprecedented profits by ravaging the environment and

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leaving behind their wastes at the expense of the rest of the living world. The cause of habitat degradation, not the result, is the more critical problem before all of us.

A similar anti-preservation argument proposes that because indigenous peoples altered landscapes long before settlers began arriving, there is no original or existing wilderness to consider working toward. Although many indigenous peoples did alter their habitats, mostly by use of fire, it is also likely that the threshold of impact was minimal because the scale of their numbers and kinds of technologies did not interfere substantially with wild processes. Indigenous peoples did not, for example, plant thousands of acres with transgenic species or set up hatcheries with transgenic fish.

As noted at the start, there is also an associated anti-preservation, anti-wilderness argument made in the name of social justice that places indigenous peoples and wilderness in opposition. There are special cases where indigenous peoples are living in critical wilderness areas. And social justice does demand that the rights of native inhabitants to lands and cultural practices be acknowledged and supported. But special cases should not set precedence for general policies used to establish wilderness. Nor should these cases be identified as problems for “environmentalists” alone, which then creates another excuse to divert attention from the social and economic causes of the victimization of poor and indigenous peoples everywhere.

We live in a world where there is a tremendously uneven distribution of wealth, with the vast majority of it going to those who have access to and use up most of the Earth’s resources. It is perfectly understandable that people who struggle each day to eat, drink, find shelter, protect their children, and avoid death by violence or disease would not take on the fight for wilderness. Quite the opposite. It should be an embarrassment to those of us who exploit resources to expect those who suffer exploitation to surrender the only terms they have for survival—land and animals and water and hiding places. At the same time, social justice for all people cannot be addressed unless the health of this planet is maintained, for the lives of all creatures depend on the vitality and sustainability of wild nature. When the biological base of existence is destroyed, people die of starvation or in conflict with each other over resources. Thus, we cannot afford to construe the wilderness issue as one in conflict with indigenous peoples and social justice, for doing so deflects attention away from the real injustice of unfettered greed. We who advocate the protection of every last vestige of wild nature must do so to protect the continuing cycles of change according to the laws of nature, not according to the impulses of erroneously motivated, short-sighted modern humans.

I was raised on a sheep ranch in southwestern Wyoming, playing in fecund sloughs and along river banks, and occasionally, while shepherding, I scuffed around under sandstone overhangs in cold charcoal and shiny lithic chips left by the Shoshones long before. But it was only in mid-life as a biology teacher, during an ecology course in the



Wind River Mountains of Wyoming, that I came face to face with wild nature. Here was a place I had never known before and for which I was totally unprepared. My responses to numinous, sacred wilderness, and my feelings of mystery and awe, of peace and humility, and of exquisite perfection and incomprehensible connectedness touched a wild chord that was still within me. I knew I had come home.

The intrinsic forces that guide the natural systems of this home can be traced, although very incompletely, through the processes of evolution. But many of us who know of this process, and with all that we understand about the universe beyond our planet as well, respond additionally to a perceived presencing, in time and space, that many call spirit and that may be a wild process of both source and scheme. As self-conscious and mindful humans, we must, I

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believe, not only use our cognition to look at the world in a discerning way but also acknowledge and trust our deepest intuitions regarding the numinous aspect, our being within the being of wild nature.

In this light, using terms such as “urban wilderness” to promote the idea that wilderness exists and can be experienced as such in an urban setting thoroughly obscures both meaning and being. Paul Shepard saw quite early in his work that the opposite of wilderness is not civilization; the opposite of wildness is domestication, the process by which gene combinations in living organisms have been interrupted and re-designed for cultural purposes. Civilization, on

the other hand, is a condition of society including arts and sciences and the accoutrements of a culture. These are two different categories that cannot be collapsed into a term like “urban wilderness.” Urban refers to a life lived within the constructs and designs of people. Wilderness refers to genetically intact wildness, untamed.

This year I lived in a cabin in the Hoback Basin, a part of the Greater Yellowstone Bioregion in the northern Rocky Mountains about 35 miles southeast of Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Although it is a good place to write and live for about six months or so of each year, it is a very difficult environment in the winter or even in spring, for that matter. As spring approached this year, there were still over three feet of snow on the level. The fences and sagebrush

were covered, the gullies and swales filled in, and the wind had sculpted a new landscape, one that was all soft contours and ridge-line serpentine curls. After clear, cold days, the huge, cup-shaped crystals that grew on the surface of the snow acted as prisms that picked up the long rays of afternoon sun and created a shimmering iridescent landscape of opal-like jewels. On snowy or cloudy days, it was all pure white and pearl gray. Sometimes, out there snowshoeing, its extraordinary beauty was so expansive and primal and deep that, standing in its splendor, I could only stop for a minute and weep. But I’d best not sidetrack my main emphasis here. This is not about scenery or aesthetics, although beauty does creep in.

My cabin is built in an old meadow in a tiny basin surrounded by high mountains where wilderness areas have been designated. Last winter I found great comfort in the thought of the plants and animals up there in their niveous element, the voles, pine martens, the bears and squirrels, the winter resident birds, the trees and plants that, like me, were waiting for spring. In order to make it through the winter, my civilized body needed the amenities of back-up electric heat set at 50 degrees, an efficient wood stove, a good supply of wood and groceries, a well-insulated cabin that took advantage of the sun’s radiation, a computer and telephone that kept me in touch with the outside world, and snowshoes that got me to my car. But my inability to see them or hold discourse with them did not mean that the animals and plants and elements were not really there. In that crystalline, unforgiving landscape they were making it on their own, and together, because of the innate knowledge in their cells synchronized to the harsh environmental conditions in which they evolved. My perception or someone’s counterperception of their circumstances did not affect their reality one iota. They really do exist; they really are wild. And whatever wildness remains in our genes is rooted in theirs, for in the very beginning we evolved in conjunction with them.

On a warm afternoon last spring, Nancy Shea, the executive director of The Murie Center, (a foundation dedicated to the value of wild nature and its connection to the human spirit), and I, discussing wildness all the way, drove north along the edge of the Tetons to visit Mardy Murie at her cabin in Teton National Park. Mardy is the recipient of the prestigious Audubon Medal and the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her lifelong dedication to the preservation of wilderness. Her cabin sits in the midst of pristine land where moose wander by, pine martens play, and comical porcupines with bad hair days come snooping. We sat on either side of Mardy who at 97 drew us to her magnificent matriarchal presence.

In the course of our conversation, Nancy asked, “Mardy, how do you define wilderness?”

“Do you know the answer?” Mardy replied.

“No, we don’t. There is much confusion about it today.”

“Well, that’s a good question that I’ll have to think about for a minute,” she said, looking out the window at the Stellar’s jays at the feeder on the porch.



“Is it out there?” Nancy persisted, pointing out the window.

“No,” Mardy responded without hesitation, “that is not wilderness.”

“What would you say wilderness is, Mardy?”

“I would say it is a place where man’s hand has not lingered.”

Thinking a moment about Mardy’s wise words, let’s imagine a world without WILDerness. Think of this Earth interfered with at a deep structural level of genes and molecules, its high pristine goat rock excavated for minerals, no free-flowing rivers, no ancient forests, seas that have been plundered, good lands turned to desert wastes—in Nancy’s words, “a virtual, highly controlled, synthetically made world.” In such a place, what would our metaphors be for the good life? In such a landscape, what words would we use instead of wilderness, wild, and wild nature, and what would their referents be? Without primal examples, how could we carry on restoration? If the source of our being were plundered, how would we know who we are?



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