

Between Wilderness and the Middle Landscape: A Rocky Road

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The spiritual effect of the wilderness runs deeper than any other encounter in nature. Great distances and vast empty spaces, impenetrable forests and mighty waves suggest the power and omniscience of the supernatural, a presence ultimate and final, somehow more real than small-scale places, closed yards with apple trees and sparrows. To those who sit by the lone sea breakers come the heart-breaking terror and the mantle of prophecy, the ecstasy of divine fear, and the sudden, awful awareness of self in space and time. (Shepard 1996a: 238)

Introduction

Wilderness preservation, as one branch of conservation, demonstrates a decidedly different cultural ethos than the utilitarian branch. Thus, preservation and utilitarian conservation represent different habits of thought fermenting in the cask of 19th century economic evolution. More specifically, the utilitarian branch of conservation can easily be viewed as an extension and adaptation of the agrarian habit of thought. The agrarian ethos is an attitude of the middle landscape, a place of pastoral and agrarian harmony—a place not industrialized, but not wild, where humans have been able to control nature and reach a seemingly harmonious relationship with the natural world under millennia of domestication. It found new validation and definition in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries, specifically in the utilitarian branch of conservation.

Wilderness preservation as an ethos, on the other hand, depends on a post-agrarian society to fully develop. Preservation, as setting aside, is a distinctly 19th and early 20th century approach. If wilderness is to survive we must acknowledge that this approach is inadequate for the material conditions of the 21st century. Significant changes in society will be necessary, but we will be able to entertain them only if we understand that achieving the full potential of our humanity depends on the presence of wilderness.

Reinventing the Middle Landscape

Day to day experience and cultural “embeddedness” of wilderness had long been vanquished in Europeans who

entered the “new” world with a long history of domestication and its attitudes. The virgin land they encountered, with its physically demanding problems, reinforced these attitudes. Nash (1967: 27, 42) tells us that, “On every frontier obtaining cleared land, the symbol of civilization, demanded tremendous effort” and explains further that, “subjugation of wilderness was the chief source of pioneer pride.”

Thomas Jefferson’s agrarian vision became the ideal for this “subjugation,” which was inherited from Europe. The United States provided fertile ground for extending the pastoral illusion of harmony. Smith (1950: 123) describes it thus: “The image of this vast and constantly growing agricultural society in the interior of the continent became one of the dominant symbols of the nineteenth-century American society—a collective representation, a poetic idea that defined the promise of American life.” The middle landscape found a fertile place to take root in 18th and early 19th century America. The agrarian ideal gave economic direction to democratic principles. The doubts held by leaders about the masses were assuaged by the possibility of people living self-sufficiently on land where reactionary tendencies could be contained and channeled. Moreover, agricultural specialization provided a niche for the United States in the emerging economic order, especially with the loss of soil fertility in Europe.

As the industrial revolution developed, the ideological predisposition for market capitalism as the natural order of society merged with the notion that wilderness needed to be tamed and formed a virulent attitude of domination over the natural world. Specifically, the framework of laissez faire capitalism created a qualitative change in the manipulation and use of the natural world. It was not simply a matter of utilizing the natural world to create use value, it was (and is) a matter of using the natural world to create exchange value. The purpose of the former is to provide useful items required for our material existence; the latter identifies profit as the primary purpose and the material existence of society as ancillary. With the imperative of profit as a goal there were (are) no limits to the utilization of the natural world as resource.

Smith (1950: 124) points out: “When the new economic and technological forces, especially the power of steam

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working through river boats and locomotives, had done their work, the garden was no longer a garden.” Nonetheless, as middle landscape disappeared, attitudes and beliefs grounded therein continued. This was partly a matter of inertia because conditions changed so rapidly that it was difficult to wrap our collective heads around the new world. More importantly, the ethos of the middle landscape was reinforced and reinvented under the force of economic growth. Self-sufficiency in agriculture found economic purpose in the fluctuations of the market economy with westward expansion and reinforced the agrarian ideal. Farmers could hold on by at least feeding themselves when market conditions were problematic for economic survival. Moreover, the ideal agrarian middle landscape, a place where man could create harmony with the natural world in the face of the necessity of using it, became an adaptive ethos as demonstrated by the rise of the utilitarian branch of conservation in the wake of 19th century market capitalism.

A natural world that initially appeared unlimited and sufficient to create an idealized society of mostly farmers changed dramatically as manufacturing eclipsed farming. The natural world began to show the strains and problems of misuse early on as the pace of expansion proceeded at warp speed. It took only 30 years to destroy the primeval forests of the Adirondacks. Very quickly it became apparent that the relationship between man and nature in the United States in the 19th century was not going to result in any pastoral dream.

Over the course of the century and with the expansion of ecological thinking, it became clear that unfettered capitalism would be untenable without intervention to protect watersheds and renewable resources and apply restraint in the cause of ecological balance. The attitudes of Gifford Pinchot, the first head of the United States Forest Service, clearly reflected this realization. Callicott (1998: 341) portrays Pinchot’s views in this way: He “formulated a novel conservation philosophy that reflected the general tenets of the Progressive era in American history. Notoriously, the country’s vast biological capital had been plundered and squandered for the benefit, not of all its citizens, but for the profit of a few.”

Pinchot believed that development required an adaptive economic system and a sustained natural resource base, but he didn’t fully appreciate the distinction between the utilization of resources for purposes of creating use value and the use of resources for the purpose of creating exchange value. He also didn’t understand that the plundering of the resources by a few was the result of a much larger dynamic. In his call for government intervention, his conservation was an example of Karl Polanyi’s “Great Transformation” applied to the land; that is, the formulation of necessary institutional responses to unfettered capitalism. This was a response to maintain the conditions of production amidst the tremendous forces of economic expansion (O’Connor 1996).

This utilitarian branch of conservation, which placed great faith in the ability and right of humankind to manage the natural world, was not opposed to the purpose of producing profit. However, it recognized that biophysical limits imposed by the natural world could not be ignored. Deforestation, soil erosion, watershed protection, and reclamation were all

problems in the United States in the latter 19th and early 20th centuries that demanded management.

Ecological understanding and the realization that man could negatively impact the natural world in a way that would undercut his ability to utilize it emerged. For example, George Perkins Marsh (1965) in his book “*Man and Nature*,” enumerated the history of environmental disasters created by civilization.

The arid West, with its need for reclamation, also tapped into and extended utilitarian conservation attitudes. John Wesley Powell was cut from the same instrumental mold as Pinchot. He recognized the necessity of reclamation, had appreciation for the complexity of water allocation, and believed in man’s engineering and scientific abilities. Powell was mindful of the necessary institutional arrangements, particularly in the arid West, to enable “progress” to continue its undaunted course.

Thus, ecological awareness resulted in a response that became institutionalized in the United States Forest Service, the Bureau of Reclamation, and other government agencies. These institutions tempered the excesses of expansion with ecological insight that informed management practices and are analogous to New Deal legislation that extended workers’ rights and provided a necessary social safety net. The policies were not revolutionary, but simply created and transformed social institutions to respond to ecological problems. In the mid 20th century these utilitarian attitudes were extended as the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and other legislation to protect ecological health.

While utilitarian conservation clearly reflected an agrarian ethos, wilderness preservation was a post-industrial, post-agrarian ethos. It ran in contradiction to the utilitarian inclination of the agrarian ideal and the Pinchot variety of the conservation movement.

Wilderness Preservation: A Different Ethos

The 19th century was a watershed in the development and maturation of the market economy. The pace of change was dramatic. As the world became increasingly manmade and responsive to the imperative to create exchange value, wilderness disappeared. The duality between civilization and wilderness that had emerged with settled agriculture vanished rapidly. Although the agrarian ideal, extended to utilitarian conservation, helped create a sense of harmony between man and nature during the 19th century, the loss of wilderness evoked a distinctively different response. Wilderness preservation was not amenable to the ethos of the middle landscape.

Subjugation was not the only attitude toward the natural world to emerge in the face of an unsettled continent. Nash (1967: 67, 16) points out that eventually the unique presence of wilderness in the United States became a source of national pride distinguishing us from Europe. “If wilderness was the medium in which God spoke most clearly then America had a distinct moral advantage over Europe.” Moreover, Judeo-Christianity had an alternative tradition of seeing wilderness as “a sanctuary from a sinful and persecuting

society.” Even so, a distinctive wilderness ethos arose out of the unique conditions in the United States at the time.

The frenzied encroachment of civilization on the natural world was a preoccupation of the likes of Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and Aldo Leopold, who underwent ecological epiphanies. Worster (1992: 66) tells us: “Thoreau confronted an ecological system that was being radically remade by the invading species of civilized man.” Worster (1973: 197) also points out that Muir referred to those who wanted to dam Hetch Hetchy as “temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism.” Leopold (1966: 254) clearly identified this force: “Man’s invention of tools has enabled him to make changes of unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope.” He connects these changes directly to the economy and to the processes of economic globalization: “For the first time in the history of the human species, two changes are now impending. One is the exhaustion of wilderness in the more habitable portions of the globe. The other is the world-wide hybridization of cultures through modern transport and industrialization” (Leopold 1966: 254). Thus, a preservation sensibility emerged in the United States in the 19th century because wilderness was still present but was rapidly disappearing in the face of economic expansion. The tapping of fossil fuels as a source of energy had fueled the industrial revolution and under the organization of the market economy the result was a fundamental alteration in the material dynamic of civilization.

This is not to say that growth and ecological insensitivity and disaster cannot be embodied in other forms of economic organization. Centrally planned economies can direct production and consumption, with or without attention to ecological problems. In the case of a market economy, however, growth is part of the logic and internal dynamic of the system and does not depend on government planning.

The nature of work itself changed under the forces of the industrial revolution and private enterprise. The production of exchange value for the purpose of profit led to a degradation of work and class conflict emerged as a reality of economic life. The day-to-day interaction of the working class with nature was increasingly adulterated as workers were alienated from the product of their labor and the creative experience of work. Increasingly work was rationalized for the sake of greater control over the production process. Moreover, the living conditions created by the market economy were similarly altered. People moved out of the middle landscape and into urban enclaves, where most wage labor took place. These were places of poverty, disease, lack of sanitation, and pollution.

Given these conditions, it is not surprising that nature in its pure form, unadulterated by the imperatives of profit and wage labor, was increasingly looked upon as a palliative for the travails of economic life. An appreciation for the soothing effect of nature arose out of these harsh conditions. Leopold (1966: 264-265) discerned the meaning of nature to the worker: “To the laborer in the sweat of his labor, the raw stuff on his anvil is an adversary to be conquered. So was wilderness an adversary to the pioneer. But to the laborer in repose, able for the moment to cast a philosophical eye on his world, that same raw stuff is something to be loved and cherished because it gives definition and meaning to his life.”

Nature as palliative was introduced to the working class in ways that were consistent with 19th century economic arrangements. Absentee owners were not at liberty to make the workplace less alienating; rather they concentrated their energies on the creation of escape valves like urban parks. Talbot (1998: 328) points out that the bourgeoisie created “parks and sylvan ‘model’ towns and villages where the myth of romanticized nature could be played out...[where the] ‘facts of production’ that entail alienation from nature are concealed by romantic mystification of nature, which banishes any imaginary opportunity for an unalienating relation to nature to the realm of leisure, so that the alienating relation to nature implicit in capitalist production remains unchallenged.” Thus, interjection of nature as leisure into the sphere of consumption does not question or threaten the relationship of production to society or the purpose of that production.

Class structure was a significant ingredient in the emergence of wilderness sensibilities, though it obviously did not manifest itself with the working class. The plain and simple reality was that workers could not access wilderness and didn’t have much opportunity for philosophy and contemplation. It was the upper classes, with the means and time to opt out of work and the ability to access wilderness and contemplate their relationship to nature, who pushed for preservation. Not until the post-World War II era, when a middle class with automobile transportation emerged, did contact with wilderness extend beyond the upper classes to the middle classes.

Since access to wilderness was not available to the working class, the preservation branch of conservation was accused of being an elitist indulgence. Callicott (1998: 341) observed that in the tradition of John Muir “some of the human satisfactions that nature affords are morally superior to others” and this “may only reflect aristocratic biases and class privilege.” It is primarily the privileged who are able to indulge in wilderness and who impute the value of it on those who haven’t the same luxury. Thus, critics of wilderness preservation claim it is “undemocratic and un-American.”

It is not surprising that today developing nations accuse the United States environmental movement, which calls for preservation, of indulging their middle class sensibilities. They have a point. Legitimate class dimensions of wilderness preservation as an elitist indulgence, complicate but should not discount the need for wilderness preservation.

During the latter 19th and early 20th centuries, the upper classes had the freedom both in terms of time and lack of economic constraints to indulge their curiosities about the natural world. They could engage both intellectually and physically with wild nature. This unique position of privilege, in addition to the rapid pace of economic development and its encroachment on unadulterated nature, nurtured the preservation ethic. Preservation began first with national parks. Yellowstone National Park, established in 1872, was followed in the 1880s by the Forever Wild designation in the Adirondack Park and the establishment of Yosemite National Park in 1890. Later, in the designation of primitive areas and eventually in the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, this attitude of preservation, as setting aside, was more broadly institutionalized.

This ethic of setting aside was reflected in the language of the Wilderness Act of 1964: "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas with the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition (Wilderness Act 1964)." The presumption that setting aside is an adequate counter force to the growth dynamic of the economy becomes more problematic by the latter 20th century. Before the ink from the Wilderness Act was barely dry, wilderness had become increasingly fragile and scarce as encroaching civilization pushed up against it. And presently preservation, as setting aside, is increasingly threatened in the face of increased gas and oil exploration and development in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, the Rocky Mountain Front Range, and the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

The act of setting aside wilderness areas, without questioning the underlying growth dynamic in our society allowed 19th and 20th century preservationists to have their cake and eat it too. Since more wild lands were still available, proponents could respond to the immediate assault on wilderness while avoiding the underlying long-term dynamic of the market economy. Leopold (1966: 265), in a prescient moment, makes a "plea for the preservation of some tag-ends of wilderness, as museum pieces, for the edification of those who may one day wish to see, feel, or study the origins of their cultural inheritance." But that is precisely what preservation had done. One could advocate for wilderness and not question the wisdom of challenging "modern transport and industrialization."

Thus, institutionalized wilderness preservation gave us the sense that the act of setting aside wilderness was sufficient to guarantee its survival. But it must now be viewed as an incomplete and inadequate response to wilderness preservation given the changing material conditions of the 21st century. Preserving wilderness on the one hand and partaking in unending economic growth are incommensurable.

The proponents of wilderness, because of their class position, did not question the prerogatives of property owners to create exchange value nor the conditions and dynamics of accumulation. Preservation of wilderness in the 21st century, forces us to directly confront economic reform. The will to alter our economic institutions hinges on the value we attach to wilderness, which is difficult to evaluate in economic terms because it is not a commodity bought and sold nor is it something utilized by all who value it. The preservation ethos uncovers an underlying anxiety and sensibility, a troublesome awareness about the irrevocable changes we're making.

The Imperative of Post-Industrial Society: Wilderness Preservation

If wilderness preservation is a desirable goal for post-industrial society, we must move beyond post-industrial attitudes in our attempt to save wilderness. We are confronted with vast poverty and famine in the world due in part to

environmental degradation where pollution is inadequately controlled and production has not been in tune with biophysical limits. We confront a world where it is impossible to extend first world standards of living to the third world. We confront a world where renewable resources are often harvested in an unsustainable manner threatening fisheries, aquifers, and forests. We are confronted by a world of mass extinction and disregard for non-human forms of life. We side-step the problem of global climate change with little idea of what it means and great inertia to act to mitigate it. In short, we confront a post-industrial world where we have failed to manage our post-industrial problems. Loss of wilderness should be placed first on this list.

The problem with wilderness preservation is a unique one. Most of our post-industrial environmental problems can be framed as a problem pertaining to the "conditions of production" (O'Connor 1996). Maintaining conditions of production is essential for the functioning of our present economy. If, for the sake of production and profit, social and environmental conditions are severely impaired, these deficiencies will lead to economic crisis. But wilderness and its preservation lie outside the purview of such a framework because we can't make the argument that lack of wilderness threatens the conditions of production and economic growth. The extinction of wilderness simply does not present the same threat to a market economy as global climate change might.

While the solution for many environmental problems in the neoclassical economic paradigm is to place a price tag on them, we know that for a host of environmental amenities, like wilderness, there is simply no way to assess their value. We are left at the mercy and inadequacy of cost/benefit analysis and computations of "existence value." The value of wilderness simply lies outside the domain of economics and to try to put it into an efficiency framework will always be inadequate (Ackerman and Heinzerling 2004).

In order to speak to the necessity of preservation of wilderness, which will require questioning and altering our present economic institutions, we must look outside the purview of economics. We must expand the discourse to philosophical/spiritual discussions and categories, based on a more complete and fundamental understanding of human ecology and sustainability, and our obligation to future generations. Ontologically, wilderness exists as the absence of the hand of man, which varies over the course of our history depending on the state of culture and technological development. Therefore, wilderness comes to exist for us in a variety of ways. Rolston (1998: 370) tells us "any real wilderness needs to be evaluated on the basis of degree... Early hunter/gatherers with transmittable culture were not much different in their ecological effects from predators and wild omnivores among whom they moved." Foreman (1998: 403) reminds us that, "vast tracts uninhabited by humans was a familiar concept to many primal cultures." Thus, even for hunters and gatherers there was the perception of an essence, which we call wilderness.

With the transition to settled agriculture the relationship to the natural world and to wilderness changed dramatically. People lived in a world mostly of their making fostering a duality that had not been present for pre-agricultural people. Shepard (1996b: 193) states: "The virtual collapse of hunting

and gathering, the central activity of the ancient culture, would surely have affected the very heart of human existence. The great mystery of domestication is therefore not so much how men achieved control of plants and animals, but how human consciousness was reorganized when cynegetic life was shattered—that is, the mental, social, and ecological complex based on hunting.”

Jaynes (2000) wrote about the ‘bicameral mind’ leaving us to ponder the plasticity of the brain and the ways in which consciousness is organized and influenced by civilization. It isn’t clear what consciousness was to early hunters and gatherers but what is clear from the work of both Jaynes and Shepard is that civilization/culture influenced consciousness and our perception of self and our place in the world. The plasticity inherent in the human brain is tapped in different ways by different forms of social organization bringing forth different potentialities and possibilities and different pathologies. Shepard (1996c: 164-165) speculates that, “Changes in thought, in perceptions of the outer and inner world, and in premises and assumptions about reality probably occurred...” with the move from hunting and gathering. He elaborates on how the shift to domestication influences “the quality of attention, the significance of place...and the theme of duality...and the subtler influences...on the ways people saw themselves and the land...”

The gestalt of sedentary life, different from that of hunters and gathers, has surrounded us for millennia. But for a long stretch of human history, sedentary life and its technological advances did not threaten the existence of wilderness, which was bounded by sedentary life but nonetheless still “out there.” While we might argue about whether the duality we’ve created is good or bad for human development and existence, as long as wilderness exists we are presented with a material world that brings meaning to that discussion. Even in that duality, wilderness provides the possibility of a path to more completely explore our humanity as a point of reference, a way to reflect more fully on the interface between civilization/ biology/nature, and a way to understand our “prehistoric unconscious...for the creation of a new history” (Shepard 1998: 17). Whereas the duality between civilization and wilderness marked the transition to domestication, the hallmark of post-industrial society may very well be the end of wilderness and with it the end of that duality, not out of reconciliation and understanding and reconnection, but because of extermination.

Although in this post-industrial society we must manipulate the material world in order to live, it is important that we understand the complex and profound relationship our humanity shares with the natural world. “The source of our genetic material has been passed onto us not only through our parents and generations of humans, but from archaic ancestors: primate mammalian, reptilian, amphibian, ichthyian, and down to bacterial forebears of like on earth” (Shepard 1998: 19). Historical materialism might well have expanded under the weight of the knowledge of our genome when Marx would have been forced to consider seriously our prehistory.

Mumford (1966: 36) also spoke to the importance of our pre-history. “Man’s own nature has been constantly fed and formed by the complex activities and interchanges and self-transformations that go on within all organisms; and neither his nature nor his culture can be abstracted from

the great diversity of habitats he has explored...Man’s life would be profoundly different if mammals and plants had not evolved together, if trees and grasses had not taken possession of the surface of the earth, if flowering plants and plumed birds, tumbling clouds and vivid sunsets, towering mountains, boundless oceans, starry skies had not captivated his imagination and awakened his mind.” Shepard (1998: 143) echoes and extends Mumford’s inclination: “Wildness, pushed to the perimeters of human settlement during most of the ten millennia since the Pleistocene, has now begun to disappear from the earth, taking the world’s otherness of free plants and animals with it. The loss is usually spoken of in terms of ecosystem or beauty of the world, but for humans, spiritually and psychologically, the true loss is internal. It is our own otherness within.” Clearly, both Mumford and Shepard identify a profound connection of humans to the natural world. It is not only through manipulation of the natural world in production that our nature is fed and nourished, but through the many subtle forms of connection that are a part of our human condition, experience, and consciousness.

We can “mind” nature and its interface with culture in a multitude of ways. While domestication, manipulation, and dominance of the natural world are one interface, observation, mimicry, reverence, and fostering connectedness are others. Abrahms (1996: 262) points out: “The human mind is not some otherly essence that comes to house itself in our physiology. Rather it is instilled and provoked by the sensorial field itself induced by the tensions and participations between the human body and the animate earth...By acknowledging such links between the inner, psychological world and the perpetual terrain that surrounds us, we begin to turn inside-out, loosening the psyche from its confinement within a strictly human sphere, freeing sentience to return to the sensible world that contains it. Intelligence is no longer ours alone but it is a property of the earth...” We are not preordained to completely supplant the natural world with human artifacts nor is this something desirable. The plasticity and intentionality of culture and the human mind allow for other outcomes.

Sahlins (1972) in his seminal work “Stone Age Economics” aptly demonstrated that material security is always a relative matter. Sahlins labeled the hunter or gatherer “uneconomic man” because his wants are few and his resources are plenty. Nonetheless, I do recognize that it is important to be freed from fears of material want and discomfort; since without freedom from these, full exploration and development of our humanity is impossible. Despite the possibility that capitalism presents for us freedom from material want, the vast majority of humans on this planet live in absolute or relative deprivation. But even if we are somehow able to redistribute the benefits of capitalistic society to free those impoverished from material want and discomfort, under present economic arrangements we would do so at the cost of wilderness, leaving the full potential of our humanity inchoate.

It is ironic and contradictory that the unique circumstances of 19th century capitalism nurtured a wilderness ethos at the same time it threatened the existence of wilderness. To say that a wilderness preservation ethos emerges out of post-industrial, post-agrarian society, is not to say that economic growth fosters wilderness preservation. Czech

(2000) makes this argument as the “fighting fire fallacy.” He explains, “One may fallaciously argue that the cause of a disastrous fire can be traced to the lack of a promptly employed backfire, without acknowledging that the backfire would have never been needed were it not for the original fire. Neither economic growth nor anything else would be necessary to protect wilderness, were it not for the threat to wilderness originally posed by economic growth” (Czech 2000: 194). For a short time in our history, setting aside was a viable option for wilderness preservation but we have now come to a point where this is no longer true. In order for preservation to mean anything it must now challenge our existing economic wisdom.

Post-industrial society has offered many opportunities for enriching humanity. At this point in our history our humanity might be as well served by looking back. I am not advocating a return to the world of the noble savage. Rather, I believe, the question of wilderness is about how we construct post-industrial society with a mind to all that makes us human. Almost 30 years ago, Mishan (1977: 29) commented: “Even if it would be said of economic growth that it expands unambiguously the options open to the consumer, it would not follow that men should be regarded as being better off. For one thing these options refer only to the amounts and varieties of goods available to the average person in his capacity of consumer. In other roles... the individual may not be faced with more options as a result of continuing economic growth.”

With its bent for unlimited economic growth, post-industrial society has failed to improve our lives in many ways. It offers increasing crowds, reduced space, more of life spent negotiating the complexity of too many and too much, and greater demands to resolve problems that are often removed from our day-to-day lives. It offers us more possibilities for reflection but less time to reflect. And for most women and many men, it demands the endless and frustrating imperative of multitasking. In the name of economic freedom, at any given moment numerous possibilities for consumption are available. But a higher standard of living is traded for alienating work. Thoreau's words (Thoreau 1982: 263), “The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation,” are a reminder of getting what we wished for. Clearly, life in post-industrial society is a mixed bag, even for those of us with the good fortune of having been born privileged, by world standards.

Wilderness preservation is an ethical matter involving our obligation to future generations. But it is not a necessary condition for maintaining the material conditions of our society. The Nobel laureate Robert Solow (1991:181) provides us with an interesting discussion of sustainability, which bears on the issue of wilderness preservation. He tells us that “it [sustainability] is an obligation to conduct ourselves so that we leave to the future the option or the capacity to be as well off as we are...There is no specific object that the goal of sustainability, the obligation of sustainability, requires us to leave untouched.” Solow then speaks directly to the issue of wilderness and states: “What about wilderness or unspoiled nature? I think we ought, in our policy choices, to embody our desire for unspoiled nature as a component of well-being. But we have to recognize that different amenities really are, to some extent, substitutable for one another, and we should be as inclusive as possible in our calculations.” I would argue that what Solow treats

as an amenity is something essential for the full exploration of our humanity. In the case of wilderness, there is no substitute. It is not fungible, therefore, according to Solow's criteria for sustainability, we are, in fact, required to leave future generations something specific, that is, wilderness. Otherwise, we cannot guarantee that their lives will be as fulfilled as ours.

With the threat to wilderness imminent, we stand in the shadow of its sublimity and wisdom and contemplate whether we have traded “the good life” for deeper alienation. We are called on to move beyond our present ideology and deadlock. The agrarian ethos can no longer provide the blueprint for our relationship to the natural world. The wilderness ethos is a more appropriate attitude for the 21st century, but in its 19th century cloak, it is rendered impotent. Setting aside wilderness while the engines of progress and profit move us to ever increasing domestication is simply oxymoronic. We must persist in our efforts to set aside wilderness, but we must also develop an economy that does not threaten its continuity.

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