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The Wilderness Debate Rages On: Continuing the Great New Wilderness Debate

Michael P. Nelson and J. Baird Callicott, editors. 2008. Athens: University of Georgia Press. Paper, \$34.95. ISBN: 978-0-8203-3171-3. 704 pages.

The Wilderness Debate Rages On is a collection of mostly previously published papers about the meaning, value, and role of wilderness and continues the discussion that was propelled by the editors' previous book *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (also a collection of papers) published in 1998. The editors state that this sequel to their previous book is mandated because "this debate over the concept of wilderness continues to rage" (p. 4). The "debate" in both titles is between those who think that the idea of wilderness is an anachronism that is no longer valid or appropriate in today's world and those who continue to defend the idea of wilderness.

The book is divided into four major sections. Part One, "The unreceived wilderness idea: the road not taken," makes the case that protected areas are important for their ecological value (the "unreceived" idea) and not merely recreation (the "received" idea). This section is composed of 13 papers, most published before 1963, from the deans of ecology when it was a young science such as Joseph Grinnell, Charles Adams, George Wright, Victor Shelford, and Aldo Leopold. This section also includes James Morton Turner's 2002 insightful analysis of the recreational history of wilderness, and two new papers written for this book, including Julianne Lutz Warren's historical and political account of Aldo Leopold's involvement with the Ecological Society of America and The Wilderness Society in developing the concept of wilderness.

Part Two, "Race, class, culture, and wilderness," reinforces the editors' earlier critique of the received wilderness idea, with perspectives from North America, China, Brazil, and Africa. This section is composed of eight papers, all published previously between 1996 and 2008. In contrast to the highly critical tone of most of the papers in this section, Kimberly K. Smith offers a hauntingly rich and insightful essay on the contribution of black American thought, philosophy, and psychology to American (indeed world) conservation. Part Three, "The wilderness idea roundly criticized and defended . . . again," presents selected papers that defend the idea of wilderness after publication of the editors' first book, and papers that offer additional criticisms. This section is composed of 11 papers published from 1996 to 2008 (three of these were published in 2000 and revised for this current book) and is the longest of the book at 249 pages.

Part Four, "Thinking through the wilderness idea," offers ways to "rethink, remedy, rehabilitate, or move beyond the received wilderness idea." In contrast to the editors' stated purpose of this section, I couldn't discern a single rationale behind this collection of papers. The section includes two

broad commentaries on society and the environment, an eloquent plea to consider wilderness as a sabbath that reminds us of our place and role in nature, a history of how ecological thought affects conservation goals, two excellent case studies illustrating the poignant dilemma of managing wilderness to include human stories from the land and introducing wolves, the role of ecological theory in proposing conservation goals, and an evocative personal reflection from Kathleen Dean Moore about how “the wild forest” offers a vision to strive for and a reminder of what we have lost. This section is the shortest of the book and is composed of nine papers published between 1995 and 2008.

I was excited to read on the back cover that “the book gathers both critiques and defenses of the idea of wilderness from a wide variety of perspectives and voices.” The editors’ first book certainly precipitated an outpouring of thoughtful papers from which to choose. I assumed, incorrectly it turns out, that this current book would pull together a coherent body of literature to examine key concepts in what up until now has been sometimes a rancorous debate. Instead, from the second page of the introduction on, the book seems designed to strengthen the editors’ critique of the wilderness idea rather than offering full and fair voice to other views or seeking to forge new insight that advances our understanding of wilderness and ourselves.

The editors’ introduction, their brief descriptions that lead to the first nine papers, and their selection of papers seem intended to keep this debate in “either-or” terms: wilderness is either an idea or a place (but not both), and wilderness is preserved either for recreational or ecological values (but not both). The editors criticize what they call the “received” idea of wilderness, that is, “the idea of wilderness we have inherited . . . from its framers, going back now at least several centuries, but shaped most fully during the first half of the 21st century” (p. 356) and take pains to separate this idea of wilderness from the places that are wilderness. For example, in the introduction the editors state, “we suggest no criticism of the places thought of as wilderness; rather it is the wilderness *idea* that is problematic” (emphasis in original, p. 4). In his individual paper, editor J. Baird Callicott quotes himself and coeditor Nelson from the introduction of their book *The Great New Wilderness Debate* that the wilderness idea is “alleged to be ethnocentric, androcentric, phallogocentric, unscientific, unphilosophic, impolitic, outmoded, even genocidal” but then goes on to state, “I hasten to say that *we* are not necessarily the ones who allege that the received wilderness idea is all these bad things, just that such things have been alleged” (emphasis in original, p. 356). After a vigorous and detailed explanation of all these bad things, Callicott concludes by stating “I have criticized a name, ‘wilderness,’ not the places—wilderness areas—that bear that name” because “the baggage that freights the received wilderness idea, in my opinion, makes it an unsuitable conceptual tool

to meet the challenge of the biodiversity crisis” (p. 373). Finally, the editors conclude the introduction by stating that the word “wilderness” has become “desiccated fruit” that should be “abandoned as hopelessly tainted and confused” (p. 15).

Despite these strong and direct criticisms of the wilderness idea and name, the editors coyly state that “We are not necessarily ‘for’ or ‘against’ the wilderness idea” and instead frame their criticisms as intellectual inquiry: “We are most certainly ‘for’ critical thinking and the clarification of concepts and most certainly ‘against’ muddled or flawed thinking” (p. 15). I agree that rigorous intellectual inquiry should be embraced by all sides to this debate. In my opinion, however, the editors do not offer such an inquiry. Instead, their introduction is more a fusillade against the idea of wilderness than an introduction to the divergent views and rationale behind this debate. The selection of papers also primarily supports the editors’ view rather than offering a balanced representation of this debate—by my tally, 30 papers criticize the wilderness idea and 6 papers support it (I couldn’t categorize 5 of the papers as either criticizing or supporting). Of the 6 supporting papers, 5 directly defend the idea of wilderness against the criticisms offered in the editors’ previous book. Yet the editors dismiss these defenses with little or no explanation: Dave Foreman’s defense is dismissed with the single statement that “Sometimes good-old-time-wilderness-religion zealots draw suspect analogies premised upon sophomoric logical fallacies” (p. 2); Wayne Ouderkirk’s defense is dismissed because he “occasionally lapses into confusing the wilderness *idea* with the *places* we now associate with that idea” (emphasis in original, p. 12); Eileen Christ’s defense “cleverly subjects the deconstruction of the received wilderness idea by scholars such as Callicott and Cronon to a deconstruction of her own” (p. 12); and parts of Gary Synder’s, Foreman’s, and David W. Orr’s defense are dismissed as fear mongering (p. 3). The quotes I’ve given here constitute almost the entirety of the discussion given to the defense of the wilderness idea in the editors’ introduction. This is neither balanced nor critical intellectual inquiry.

The “either-or” framing is also clear when the editors assert that one of the problems of wilderness preservation is that it is “first and foremost . . . for human recreational purposes” (p. 5). Most of the papers in Part One support their contention that early writers wanted to move from a recreational purpose of protected areas to an ecological purpose. The editors, however, seem to focus on only selected sentences and ignore content that contradicts their view. For example, in their brief description that leads the first paper by authors Grinnell and Storer, the editors state, “this essay . . . represents a move from a recreational rationale for the preservation of wilderness (or protected area) to an emphasis on the preservation of wilderness for wildlife and science” (p. 21). In fact, the first paragraph of this paper states, “The argument most frequently urged

in favor of national parks” is a utilitarian one to provide municipal water and “refuges for wild life—particularly where the animals to be conserved are useful for game and food” (p. 21). The rest of this paragraph explains how “the national parks have other less generally recognized advantages, and among these we consider their potential uses as places for recreation and for the study of natural history [as] especially worthy of notice” (p. 22). The authors conclude that national parks have value “as places for recreation and scientific research” (p. 29), directly contradicting the view the editors express in their leading description of this paper.

Similarly, in their description preceding Aldo Leopold’s paper, “Wilderness as a land laboratory,” the editors state that Leopold’s “justification for wilderness preservation generally moved from more utilitarian arguments focused on the recreational values . . . to a focus on the value of wilderness for science” (p. 93). Leopold clearly makes the case that the scientific value of wilderness is important, but not at the sake of its recreational value as implied by the editors. In his typical eloquence, Leopold concludes this essay by writing, “in fact, the boundary between recreation and science, like the boundaries between park and forest, animal and plant, tame and wild, exists only in the imperfections of the human mind” (p. 96). This coherence and bridging is reinforced in Julianne Lutz Warren’s essay that discusses how Leopold wanted to merge the recreational and scientific study rationales for preserving wilderness. Here again, the content of the papers contradicts the editors’ assertion.

In their introduction, the editors claim that if we had only listened to these early ecologists whose papers appear in Part One, then we wouldn’t need to “rethink” the idea of wilderness today and that “this rethinking suggests that what we currently want in a concept of wilderness is not principally land suitable for manly recreation, higher spiritual or aesthetic uses, and inspiring landscape art” (p. 7–8), but instead what Callicot calls “biodiversity reserves.” But again the editors seem to ignore the authors’ conclusions from these papers that don’t fit their assertion. For example, Adams writes in his 1929 essay that “the value of the wilderness must be judged ultimately by its contribution to social welfare” (p. 59) and that “we may briefly summarize the value of natural conditions under the following heads: artistic, scientific, educational, recreational and economic, bearing in mind, of course, that these groups grade imperceptibly into one another in various directions” (p. 60). Similarly, Spurr’s 1963 essay, which the editors describe as an “amazing” summary of early ecologists’ thinking (p. 7), states that “in conclusion . . . the concept of wilderness itself is basically a sociological concept and not a biotic concept. It involves values of high importance to man’s spiritual, mental, and physical well being and [these are] values which we certainly must encourage and develop. These values, however, are anthropocentric and have little relevance to the forest ecosystem itself. From a biocentric

viewpoint there is really no such thing as a true forest primeval, a virgin forest or a wilderness. Instead there is an infinite range of ecosystems constantly varying in time and space” (p. 134). In contrast to the editors’ interpretation that wilderness should only be preserved for its ecological values, these two classic papers show a high degree of inclusiveness and forging of common ground across the many values of wilderness.

Certainly the editors may interpret the papers included in this book however they wish. But following from the editors’ professed desire for intellectual inquiry, I would expect interpretations based not on select sentences but on overall content. Marilynne Robinson’s paper in the last section of the book provides a final example of how the editors reinforce their ideas by drawing only on select sentences. The editors devote more space in the introduction to discussing Robinson’s paper than most of the other papers, based on her statement that “I think we must surrender the idea of wilderness” (p. 13 in the introduction; the full sentence is on p. 570 in her paper), perfectly fitting with the editors’ view. In fact, Robinson’s paper is a wide-ranging and profound essay on many of the ills that society places on the environment and people, focusing on the social injustice of weapons production, slavery, and global environmental governance, among others. It appears that she is using the term wilderness not in reference to congressionally designated protected areas but to rural areas of several western U.S. states where nuclear weapons are produced: “Wilderness is where things can be hidden, from foreign enemies, perhaps, but certainly from domestic critics. This effect is enhanced by the fact that wilderness dwellers everywhere are typically rather poor and scattered, not much in the public mind, not significant as voters. Wilderness is where things can be done that would be intolerable in a populous landscape. The relative absence of human populations obscures the nature and effect of programs which have no other object than to be capable of the most profound injury to human populations” (p. 564). That the editors ignore this context and instead frame Robinson’s paper only in terms of her rejection of wilderness is, at best, disconcerting.

Personally, I don’t understand how framing complex issues in either-or terms helps us as a society forge a clearer or better understanding of ourselves in the context of nature in general and wilderness in particular—or helps us understand the right questions to ask to help us move in this direction. Fortunately, the editors did include two papers that are remarkable for their coherent and novel syntheses. In a paper that is revised for this book from an earlier publication, Jill M. Belsky forges common understanding across what she describes as the “idealist” and “materialist” approaches of those who criticize the wilderness idea and those who defend it, respectively. Importantly, she crafts this melding firmly within a social and cultural context, and offers five highly useful “consequences” of

this integrated perspective for wilderness management and policy. The other paper, by Wayne Ouderkirk, sets a new standard for insight and integration of wilderness as an idea and place, concluding that “we need a wilderness concept that acknowledges both the connections and the differences between wild nature and us. Emphasizing only the differences has given us a dualism alienating us from non-human nature and resulting in environmental destruction. Emphasizing only the connections ignores important differences and undermines the valid reasons for limiting human interference with non-human nature. Only by acknowledging both the differences and connections will we develop an accurate, workable ontology and maintain a livable planet” (p. 454). A different book of collected papers on wilderness could begin with Belsky’s and Ouderkirk’s papers to serve as the inspiration and organizing structure for the rest of the book that explores the meaning, role, and value of wilderness as an idea and place within our society.

Oddly, Howard Zahniser, principal author of the 1964 Wilderness Act, is not mentioned in the introduction when the editors discuss the idea of wilderness, and in his individual paper, Callicott refers to Zahniser as “the ghostwriter of the Wilderness Act” (p. 373). Given the highly critical tone of Callicott’s paper, the term “ghostwriter” seems pejorative, which if it is the case ignores the direct role that Zahniser played in developing the ideas and content of the Wilderness Act as documented in his many published papers, Doug Scott’s 2004 *Enduring Wilderness: Protecting Our Natural Heritage through the Wilderness Act* (Golden CO: Fulcrum Publishing) and most notably in Mark Harvey’s 2007 *Wilderness Forever: Howard Zahniser and the Path to the Wilderness Act* (Seattle: University of Washington Press).

In addition to the concerns expressed above, the book has some very frustrating editorial quirks. Who is the intended audience? The editors never say and it’s not at all clear from the selected papers. In my opinion, the book is too long and unfocused to be useful for students; the collection of papers doesn’t offer a diverse and fair selection across the debate about the wilderness idea, so I don’t think it would be especially useful for academics; and managers will find little of practical use in this collection.

Who are the authors? There is no section of author biographies, and for some, but not all of the authors, the editors offer in the introduction a single word or terse description, such as “environmental sociologist Eileen Crist and philosopher John O’Neill” (p. 12). If readers are interested in trying to understand a little about who the author is, they will have to find this out on their own.

Where are the citations for these papers? None of the papers in the book include the original source citation on the page where the paper begins. Instead, the citation is provided in the acknowledgments at the beginning of the book. This organization forces readers to rifle through the acknowledgments if they want to know where the paper

comes from. But even here it’s hard to find individual citations because they are not arranged alphabetically, chronologically, or even in the order they appear in the book; instead they appear to be arranged by approximate order in the book and by publisher.

Why is each paper included in this collection? Rather than providing text that leads each section to explain the purpose of the section and each of the papers within that section, the editors provide these explanations in the introduction. In a simpler and shorter book this might work, but in a book of this length and complexity, this structure forces the reader to repeatedly go and find the explanation and context for each section and paper. Reading every paper for this review became a ritual of first finding the source citation of the paper in the acknowledgments (not an easy task, as explained in the preceding paragraph), then hunting through the introduction for an explanation about why the editors included it. For many of the papers, this explanation was merely a single sentence or part of a sentence.

Why are there brief author biographies and summaries written by the editors for the first nine papers but none thereafter? The editors offer no explanation, but it appears they do so only for authors that are deceased (although I’m not sure about this since I didn’t do Internet searches on all the other authors). It’s unfortunate the editors didn’t provide a similar short biography and a summary for every paper to help orient the reader.

In summary, I was disappointed that *The Wilderness Debate Rages On* doesn’t offer what I would consider a balanced set of papers that examine the depths and nuances of the debate over the idea of wilderness. Similarly, the either-or framing of central issues doesn’t help us understand the value and role of wilderness in our world today or move us towards asking better questions about these relationships. In contrast, the papers by Adams, Lutz Warren, Turner, Smith, Belsky, and Ouderkirk were gems that deserve to be widely read by anyone interested in understanding our complex and vital relationship to the idea and place of wilderness.

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