

in Callicott & Nelson  
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The Great New

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Debate

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Dave Foreman

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**F**OR A QUARTER CENTURY, I've been neck-deep (and sometimes over my head) in the Wilderness preservation donnybrook. We conservationists have faced well-heeled timber barons, big ranchers, mining magnates, and other politically powerful captains of industry. Arguing with a friend like J. Baird Callicott over the modern viability of the Wilderness Idea is a curious and often frustrating tussle off to the side.

We have faced off over his criticism of the Wilderness Idea before (*Wild Earth*, Winter 94/95), and I've taken on the general "progressive" critique of Wilderness Areas in "Where Man Is a Visitor" in David Clarke Burks's *Place of the Wild* (Island Press, 1994). Here I will try to respond more specifically to Callicott's approach in "The Wilderness Idea Revisited"; but, since I'm a good little environmentalist, I'll recycle many of the arguments I've used in previous papers. Callicott's criticisms of Wilderness are often roundups of ideas more fully developed by himself and others elsewhere; in such cases, I will contend with the broader criticism of Wilderness. (I'll not respond to Callicott on those points where Holmes Rolston III, in "The Wilderness Idea Reaffirmed," has effectively whacked him about the head and shoulders.)

Scattered through "The Wilderness Idea Revisited," I find eight general

areas where I have bones to pick with Callicott. Instead of a point/counterpoint debate, I will use these areas as springboards for a general discussion of the ideas he raises.

WILDERNESS AREAS ARE OKAY,  
THE WILDERNESS IDEA IS NOT

Callicott says he wants only to criticize the idea of Wilderness but not on-the-ground Wilderness Areas. He even says that Wilderness Areas need to be multiplied and expanded. Why then, criticize them for what they are? Philosophers might call this a logical inconsistency, or some other silver-plated term.

Callicott also says he does not want to discredit Wilderness Areas or make them more vulnerable to development. But this is exactly what he is doing! He is discrediting them by attacking the idea behind them, and others will reap the whirlwind he is sowing to try to open existing Wilderness Areas to clear-cutting, roads, motorized vehicles, and "ecosystem management," and, more dangerously, to argue against the designation of new Wilderness Areas.

Although Callicott criticizes the Wilderness Idea for creating a dualism of Man and Nature, in truth, throughout "The Wilderness Idea Revisited" he creates dualisms. Sustainable development (at least in its ideal form, not in the common land mismanagement that calls itself sustainable) is not an alternative to Wilderness Areas. Indeed, Wilderness Areas and sustainable-use zones are complementary as different regions on a land spectrum running from those places where "man is a visitor who does not remain" to those places where men, women, and children are piled on top of each other by the thousands per square mile. What most frustrates me with Callicott's criticism of Wilderness is the way he characterizes his sustainable development alternative. He does not need to criticize the Wilderness Idea at all. He could simply say, "We need to protect existing Wilderness Areas and expand their size and number; we also need to manage the matrix around them in a way informed by ecology and based on maintaining biodiversity and sustainable human communities." (This, by the way, is the approach of The Wildlands Project.) In other words, Callicott's argument could be entirely positive and not negative—and would not, then, carry the potential for mischief that makes his critique so risky.

ALDO LEOPOLD: WILDERNESS DEFENDER OR  
ADVOCATE FOR SUSTAINABLE HUMAN USE?

Callicott presents Aldo Leopold as a complex figure, which he was. Aldo Leopold was a big man. He thought deeply, and he thought about a lot of things. His ideas changed during his life as his experience and wisdom grew<sup>1</sup> (we should all be so fortunate). So I just can't understand why Callicott and Susan Flader take a dualistic approach to Leopold. Aldo Leopold advocated the protection of Wilderness Areas. But Aldo Leopold also advocated sustainable agricultural practices that could improve abused land and provide habitat for some wildlife. Which one was the real Aldo Leopold? They both were! There is nothing contradictory between wanting Wilderness Areas and wanting ecologically managed farms, between wanting reserves where no one lives and wanting places where people learn to live in harmony with Nature. True, Leopold's approach to the land blended the approaches of Muir and Pinchot and created a new synthesis. There is nothing new about this way of seeing Leopold, nor is there anything in it that disparages the Wilderness Idea. Why is it necessary for Callicott to make it seem that Leopold was not as supportive of Wilderness as we think he was? There does not need to be a Cartesian dualism here at all; we do not have to pick one or the other. Good lord, I've made a life of defending Wilderness Areas, but I also like four-dollar cigars, good red Bordeaux, French cuisine, and classical music. Do I have to worry that after I'm gone, revisionist historians will come along to argue that Dave Foreman wasn't really a wilderness fanatic at all but was more into refined decadence?

WILDERNESS AREAS AND SACRIFICE ZONES,  
OR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In supposing wilderness proponents favor an "either/or dichotomy" (zone the land as protected Wilderness Areas, or zone it as sacrifice zones where industrialism can run rampant), Callicott misunderstands the work of the conservation movement. We have fought for Wilderness Areas, yes; we have also fought like hell for sensible, sensitive, sustainable management of other lands. We have fought to protect wild rivers from dams; we've also fought to protect agricultural valleys from dams. We have tried to bring

scientific timber-harvesting practices to the National Forests. We have tried to bring scientific livestock management to the public lands. *We have fought for good management of the matrix.* The conservation movement that Callicott criticizes for being totally fixated on Wilderness Areas actually has worked to pass the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), the Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), the National Forest Management Act (NFMA), the Resource Planning Act (RPA), and the Endangered Species Act (ESA)—all of which deal mostly with sustainable management of non-Wilderness Area lands. For decades, we have been doing what Callicott now urges us to do.

The reason we keep going back to Wilderness is because every reform measure, from NEPA to NFMA to RPA to FLPMA, gets gutted in practice by agencies controlled by extractive industries. We have tried, god, we have tried to get good management on the land. The reforms usually end up like a Bosnian caught by a bunch of Serbs.

To appreciate why Wilderness Areas must be the centerpiece of conservation strategy, one really needs to spend time in the trenches, fighting Forest Service timber sales, going toe-to-toe with ranchers and loggers and snowmobilers, filing appeals and lawsuits against agency “development” schemes, and lobbying members of Congress to protect a place (and trying to figure out which arguments will work with them).

The Wilderness Act was not so much reform legislation as a monkey wrench in the gears. It says, “We know you (Forest Service, Park Service other agencies) are incapable of voluntarily protecting these values on the lands you manage. Therefore we are taking the prerogative away from you. We are tying your hands in these ways: no roads, no motorized vehicles or equipment, no logging.” Through long years of hard work, experience and bitter disappointment, effective conservationists have become realists: after starting out as idealists who believed their civics textbook’s model of how democracy is supposed to work.

I agree we should continue to work for better management of the matrix, and to integrate the Biosphere Reserve idea with Wilderness Areas and National Parks. But I am far less hopeful than Callicott as to the results, for the reasons above. In “The Wilderness Idea Revisited” and elsewhere, he argues that alternatives to industrial agriculture should be encouraged through policy changes; that urban sprawl should be controlled by planning and zoning; that National Forests should be harvested ecologi-

cally and sustainably. All that has been the agenda of the conservation movement for decades. We've gotten our faces bloodied from running into swinging ax handles. You think Wilderness is controversial? Try talking zoning, planning, and "alternatives to industrial agriculture" to the property rights militia and agribiz plowboys if you want controversy.

We've been through all this a thousand times before; we're still there as a conservation movement; we'll keep trying in the future. But sustainability is not a new idea, and it sure as hell ain't easy. Through all this, conservation activists have learned that Wilderness Areas, however pared back and compromised they've been, work better than anything else at protecting biodiversity. The fault for abuse of public lands is not with Wilderness; it is with the perversion of Pinchot's progressive utilitarian brand of conservation.

#### A THIRD WORLD CRITIQUE OF CONSERVATION VIA WILDERNESS PRESERVATION

I fear that Ramachandra Guha and other vociferous critics of American-style Wilderness and National Parks are suffering from Third World jingoism. Guha's critique is "sobering" in the way Pat Buchanan's bombast is sobering. Wilderness is a victim of chronic anti-Americanism. Everything from the United States is bad to some folks. North America and Europe are to blame for all the world's problems.

Some from the United States who approvingly quote Guha are expiating white liberal guilt. (I'm lucky. I come from, at best, a lower middle-class family of Scotch-Irish hillbillies. I have more than my share of moral failings, and one of these days I reckon I should get around to atoning for some of them; but guilt for being pampered I have not.)

Western Civilization, imperialism, and the United States of America deserve plenty of criticism. And I think the United States should be held to higher standards than any other country or society because we have claimed from the beginning to be engaged in a superior social experiment.

But the United States is not wholly evil. We are not the sole source of injustice in the world. The anti-Americanism inherent in Third World criticism of Wilderness and Parks ignores the venality of elites in those countries. To blame white males for all the world's problems is—dare I say it?—racist. Furthermore, the leading Third World critics of Wilderness

are Western-educated members of the economic/social elite in their own countries.

None of this is to argue that we should ignore issues of international economic justice. Europe, Japan, and the United States, in cahoots with the robber barons of the Third World, wage conscious economic imperialism against other nations. Certainly we need to safeguard land for use by indigenous peoples and peasants, and to recognize and celebrate their knowledge and stewardship of the land. Wilderness Areas and National Parks need not conflict with the needs and rights of the downtrodden.

Unfortunately, some international social justice proponents who criticize National Parks and Wilderness Areas are just as anthropocentric and development-driven as are fast-buck businessmen and growth-worshipping economists. They merely want to see the supposed economic benefits from the destruction of wilderness go to the poor and socially disenfranchised instead of to the wealthy and politically connected.

To argue that Wilderness is a uniquely American idea and is not internationally universalizable begs the question of whether any single land-management approach is suitable throughout a culturally diverse world. But those who think the Wilderness Idea of places where humans are visitors who do not remain is uniquely American are being ethnocentric or ignorant. Despite Guha's pawing the ground and snorting about imperialism, Wilderness Areas are not a uniquely twentieth-century idea of Americans, Canadians, and Australians. Open-minded research in geography, history, and anthropology shows us that wilderness areas where humans are visitors who do not remain were once widespread throughout the world. (More about this later.)

Can people outside the English frontier colonies appreciate Wilderness for its own sake? I know Native Americans and have met folks in Mexico and Belize who are just as supportive of Wilderness as I am and who believe in the intrinsic value of other species. At an international wilderness mapping conference a few years ago, I met South American biologists as intransigent in their defense of Wilderness as Reed Noss. Jim Tolisano, an ecologist who has worked for the United Nations in many countries, tells of colleagues in Sri Lanka, several African countries, Costa Rica, and the Caribbean who make me look like an old softy.

It is also false to argue that wilderness conservationists have not considered native peoples. Callicott ignores how Wilderness Areas and National

Parks designated by the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act sixteen years ago allowed for subsistence use by Alaskan natives. Today, many tribal peoples in Alaska are among the strongest supporters of Wilderness. We didn't have to throw out the idea of Wilderness Areas and National Parks and replace it with an untested concept like Biosphere Reserves. Conservationists and the Wilderness Idea were dynamic enough to make Wilderness work in the special circumstances of Alaska. Conservationists in Canada are working out similar arrangements there with First Nations.

### WILDERNESS IS ETHNOCENTRIC (OR, THE NOBLE SAVAGE)

Callicott argues against the myth of a pristine North America: the America European colonists encountered was heavily managed and modified by Native Americans; indeed, they had "improved" the land and caused the "incredible abundance of wildlife." Other critics of Wilderness have also played variations on this theme.

Anthropology is like the Bible. You can use it to support any claim about humans and Nature you wish. We can argue until we're blue in the face about the level of impact indigenous people had in the Americas. The wisdom until recently was that Native Americans had very little effect on the landscape. New England's Puritans argued so to justify their taking of "unused" land from the Indians. The pendulum has swung the other way in recent years, with crackpots like Alston Chase as well as serious scholars like Callicott claiming that even small populations significantly altered pre-Columbian ecosystems—especially through burning. The "myth of pristine America" is in disrepute. Worshippers of the Noble Savage argue this impact was positive. Some even place the bloody Aztecs, Incas, and Mayans on the ecological pedestal, too.

Many researchers, however, see evidence of ecological collapse in archaeology. Did the Hohokam and Anasazi of the American Southwest overshoot carrying capacity and cause ecosystem failure? Newly mobilized with Spanish mustangs, would the Plains Indians have caused near extinction of the Bison had they been left alone for another hundred years? Did the civilizations of MesoAmerica and the Andes scalp their lands as terribly as did the Assyrians and Greeks? Was the extinction

of the Pleistocene megafauna caused by stone-age hunters entering virgin territory?

Deeper questions follow. Is the land ethic of the Hopi a result of a new covenant with the land following the Anasazi ecological collapse seven hundred years ago? Could the hunting ethics of tribes in America (and elsewhere) have been a reaction to Pleistocene overkill?

Where foraging and shifting human horticulture reputedly increase local species diversity, dare we ask about the quality of that increased diversity? Are the additional species common, weedy ones? Are many of these invasive exotics that supplant native species? All biodiversity is not equal. Rare, sensitive, native species are more important than weeds which do well in human-disturbed areas. (Rolston does a fine job of sorting out the Quitobaquito/Quitovac muddle.)

In certain areas of the Americas, high human population density and intensive agriculture led to severely degraded ecosystems. Paul Martin and many other scientists now believe the first wave of skilled hunters entering North America 12,000 years ago caused the extinction of dozens of species of large mammals inexperienced with such a weapon-wielding predator. The "overkill hypothesis" looks to me virtually indisputable, but I question Callicott's suggestion that the North American forests and prairies flourished by the first European explorers and colonists were primarily the result of burning by native tribes. Certainly, in localized areas North American tribes had an impact on vegetation because of anthropogenic burning. But how extensive could this manipulation have been with a population of only four to eight million<sup>2</sup> north of the Rio Grande in 1500? Reed Noss points out that lightning-caused fires better explain the presence of fire-adapted vegetation than do Indian fires.<sup>3</sup> I do not raise these questions to oppose the legitimate land claims of Native Americans and other First Nations. In some cases, tribes are better caretakers of the land than are government agencies. Despite the opposition of some other conservationists in New Mexico supported the transfer of Carson National Forest's Blue Lake area to Taos Pueblo in the 1970s. Historically it was their land, and they have done a far better job of protecting its wilderness than the Forest Service would have. However, we must be intellectually honest in investigating human relationships with the land, and we must not pander to the Noble Savage myth and then hold primal peoples up to impossible standards.

Notwithstanding the seesawing over preindustrial societies' role

changing the face of the Earth, there is much evidence that wilderness areas—vast tracts uninhabited by humans—are a familiar concept to many primal cultures. The Gwich'in of the American Arctic talk about going into the bear's or the caribou's home when they go on a hunting expedition away from their villages. Native Hawaiians tell me that before American conquest, some mountains were forbidden to human entry—on pain of death. Jim Tolisano reports that the tribes of Papua New Guinea zone large areas off-limits to villages, horticulture, hunting, and even visitation. "You don't go there. That mountain belongs to the spirits." Like the Papuans, the Yanomami of the Amazon engage in fierce blood feuds (my hill-billy ancestors in eastern Kentucky and earlier in the highlands of Scotland were a lot like them). Between villages is a death zone where one risks one's life by entering. As a result, large areas are left uncultivated, un hunted, and seldom visited. Wildlife thrives. These borderlands are refugia for the animals intensively hunted near settlements.<sup>4</sup> Some anthropologists think that the permanent state of war between some tribes is an adaptation to prevent overshooting carrying capacity, which would result in ecological collapse. (These unused areas on territorial borders are uncannily similar to the places where the territories of wolf packs abut one another and deer occur in higher densities.) My forebears were able to follow Dan'l Boone into the "dark and bloody ground" of Kaintuck because it was uninhabited by Native Americans. The Shawnee north of the Ohio River and the Cherokee from the Tennessee Valley hunted and fought in Kentucky. But none lived there. Wasn't it a Wilderness Area until the Scotch-Irish from Shenandoah invaded?

Geographers, anthropologists, historians, and ecologists need to research these tantalizing threads and others to show that wilderness areas—where humans are visitors who do not remain—were once widespread throughout the world. Wilderness as reality and idea is neither uniquely American nor especially modern. It is widespread and it is ancient. Conservationists have failed to make that point, and we have failed to gather and offer examples of it. (Wilderness needs a few good anthropologists!)

#### WILDERNESS SEPARATES HUMANS FROM NATURE

I'm sorry that Callicott lends credibility to the old humbug that Wilderness Areas perpetuate a Nature-human dualism. Indeed, other species besides

*Homo sapiens* can damage their habitats, as Callicott writes. He's right—if there were five billion elephants they would do considerable damage to the Earth; but the important point here is that there are *not* five billion elephants on the planet. There *are* more than five billion humans on the planet, because civilization, modern medicine, agribusiness, and industrial science have allowed us to escape the natural checks on our numbers—*have allowed us to temporarily divorce ourselves from Nature*. The consequences of this are disastrous to all life on Earth, including present and future generations of humans.

It is civilization that has caused a Nature-human dualism. Wilderness Areas are the best idea we've had for healing that breach, for reintegrating people back into Nature in a humble and respectful way. We must realize that we can love something to death, that in possessing a place we destroy it. Wilderness Areas, where we are visitors who do not remain, bring us back into Nature, Nature back into us, without the destruction that permanent habitation would cause. Most of the Earth's surface has been without permanent human habitation for most of our time here. There is nothing dualistic about this, nothing misanthropic. It is normal. It is even—why not say it?—*natural*.

I have spent many, many days and nights in Wilderness Areas from Alaska to Central America. I have not found that these landscapes where I am only a visitor separate me from Nature. When I am backpacking or canoeing, hunting or fishing in a Wilderness, I am home.

Wilderness Areas where humans are visitors who do not remain test us as nothing else can. No other places teach us humility so well—whether we go to them or not. Wilderness asks: Can we show the self-restraint to leave some places alone? Can we consciously choose to share the land with those species who do not tolerate us well? Can we develop the generosity of spirit, the greatness of heart to not be everywhere?

No other challenge calls for self-restraint, generosity, and humility more than Wilderness preservation.

#### THE WILDERNESS IDEA IS ABOUT STATIC, STABLE LANDSCAPES

Reed Noss, former editor of *Conservation Biology* and the leading theorist of designing nature reserves (including Wilderness Areas) to protect biodi-

versity, writes, "Callicott erects a straw man of wilderness . . . that is 30 years out of date. No one I know today thinks of wilderness in the way Callicott depicts it."<sup>5</sup>

Callicott claims that Wilderness Areas were established to protect climax communities. Ecology today pooh-poohs the idea of climax communities; ergo, Wilderness Areas are bogus, he believes. In reality, Wilderness Areas are entirely consistent with ecological theories of unstable and changing assemblages of species and seral stages. Wilderness Areas and National Parks, after all, were where modern ideas of fire ecology—that natural fire is a fundamental and vital part of many forest, woodland, and grassland ecosystems—were first translated into "let burn" management policies.

The root for "wilderness" in Old English is *wil-deor-ness*: self-willed land. Self-willed land has fire, storm, and ecosystem change. It has wild beasts who don't cotton to being pushed around by puny hominids. Those who want "snapshot-in-time" Parks are generally the same folks who argue against Wilderness Areas. As our ecological understanding advances, so does our Wilderness philosophy. We conservationists now know that because of profound human-induced ecological changes, we must intervene with science-based management in certain cases, particularly in smaller, isolated areas—as Reed Noss points out.

#### SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND GAME RANCHING

Callicott proposes importing the Third World model of extractive reserves to the western rangelands of the United States and the Third World model of Biosphere Reserves for remaining old-growth forests in the United States. And he says sustainable development is the "new idea in conservation today." Let's look at each of these.

In an optimistic view, sustainable development is unproven; in my cynical view, sustainable development is a fraud—a recorking of the same old vinegar of multiple-use/sustained yield in a new bottle. It's a new guise for multinational corporations and wealthy Third World elites to wring more marks, yen, and dollars out of the land and out of the people.

Something like biosphere reserves were used in President Clinton's plan to protect the ancient forests of the Pacific Northwest. But these "old-

growth reserves" (they ain't Wilderness Areas!) are falling to the chain saws, because of a law Clinton signed. Despite all the carping about the "failure" of Wilderness Areas (and National Parks), they have a track record unmatched by any other land designation anywhere in the world. Designated Wilderness Areas have been around for seventy years and they have succeeded in protecting ecological processes and some of the most sensitive species in North America. As conservation activists, scientists, and agency managers develop greater ecological understanding, the concept of Wilderness Areas and their design and management also change. Just as ecosystems are dynamic, the notion of Wilderness is dynamic. It may be a sad commentary on modern humans, but the fact is that only carefully protected core reserves like Wilderness Areas can really maintain the diversity of life. Leading research biologists with experience from the Amazon to the Himalaya have told me that buffer zones, extractive reserves, "sustainable" use zones, and other Biosphere Reserve approaches cannot adequately protect biodiversity without fully protected core reserves. Biosphere Reserves are a fine concept; we will see how they do in practice.

I like Callicott's idea to turn the Western range back over to wildlife and kick out the cattle and sheep. In fact, Howie Wolke and I proposed such an approach in 1980. Game ranching and professional market hunting have grave problems, though. Market hunting is what decimated wildlife populations 100 years ago. Game ranching spins traditional American wildlife philosophy on its head—in the United States you do not own the wildlife that lives on your land. Callicott is correct—there are serious political and economic obstacles to his scheme. To find a workable approach requires us to understand the history of wildlife law and the hunting tradition in the United States and to tease a new "range utopia" out of it.

J. Baird Callicott has done a service to the conservation movement; he has made us think and he has made us better defend our traditional ideas. Some of his suggestions are good and are workable; too many, however, are theoretical and idealistic instead of practical and realistic and ignore human nature, political reality, and the true history of the conservation movement. Aldo Leopold said it best:

"The richest values of wilderness lie not in the days of Daniel Boone, nor even in the present, but rather in the future."

NOTES

1. I am glad Susan Flader and J. Baird Callicott included Aldo Leopold's "The Popular Wilderness Fallacy" in their Leopold anthology, *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays by Aldo Leopold* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991). Leopold, more than any other conservation figure, shows how philosophy and action can mature. This essay underscores Leopold's wonderful ability to grow intellectually.
2. The best recent estimates of serious demographers.
3. Reed F. Noss, "Wilderness—Now More Than Ever" in *Wild Earth* 4(4) (Winter 1994/95): 60–63.
4. George Schaller reports that when Amazonian tribes were armed only with blowguns and bows, monkeys could be found half a mile from villages. Now, with the advent of the shotgun, monkeys are not found within five miles of settlements. Jim Tolisano reports similar changes in Papua New Guinea.
5. Noss, "Wilderness—Now More Than Ever," p. 60.