

John Westlund
ENV360 Environmental Ethics
Term Paper Assignment
1 February 2004

Against Wilderness

The term “wilderness” is detrimental as a tool for the conservation movement of the 21st century. That is not to say that lands considered wilderness are not important to the conservation movement but that there is no notion of wilderness that is appropriate for the conservation movement of the 21st century. It is my contention that the notion of wilderness should be removed as central to the movement of conservation and replaced with a notion of respect and my hope that this notion will be acceptable regardless of culture or ethnicity.

Why not wilderness? The major strength of wilderness is the plethora of connotations that it can evoke when used. With a single word one can appeal to a majority of people on an indefinite number of levels. Small cute animals? Sure. Majestic and fearsome predators? Of course. Powerful landscapes? Yes! And the list continues until it can satisfy a meaningful desire for everyone. This is where the fatal weakness of wilderness also finds its home. Wilderness is so expansive in its meanings that it becomes self-contradictory. Wilderness is its own worst enemy. Even when strictly and fully stipulated that baggage that wilderness brings with it makes it a volatile tool.

If wilderness is a place untrammelled by humans, where we find ourselves visitors and do not remain then doesn't that run contrary to all the wonders that wilderness also begs the masses to protect for their enjoyment. Sure it is possible to argue that we can temper our enjoyment with protective intentions, but wilderness is rife with these contradictions and the line becomes tricky to walk. The wilderness is supposed to be fearsome yet inviting, terrifying yet peaceful. Apparently it is a place that deserves the highest attention of our conservation efforts and yet it is also a place where we don't belong. With so much head spinning one is left wondering why one should care at all about a place with such an identity crisis and a place that is definitionally removed from daily experience. No wonder the average person is more concerned about their credit card statement, it seems more immediate in its impact on one's life, and it doesn't contradict itself.

The internal structure of wilderness that makes wilderness such a barrel of contradictions begins to undermine wilderness's strength. The use of any of wilderness's contradictions allows one to logically assert anything. Furthermore, even when one doesn't consciously make use of the overt contradictions, wilderness's baggage lies just beneath the surface to provide counterargument using the exact same terms. Wilderness is a mess of equivocation and self-contradiction. There should be a fallacy coined for the use of wilderness: The Fallacy of Wilderness, seemingly making any argument stronger while opening it up to endless debate and eventual death all while leaving that which it is supposed to be caring for shoddily protected. No wonder Cronon feels a “deep ambivalence” towards wilderness; perhaps those are the roots of what will become a deep resentment for the concept of wilderness. (Callicott, p492)

So if we avoid the concept of wilderness in the 21st century conservation movement where should we turn? I don't think we need reject wilderness outright, at least in the sense of disrespectfully dismissing it as unimportant and outdated. The

reason wilderness remains such a central influence is because it is an effective tool despite all its shortcomings. As such we would be wise to at least inform our new notion by the use of wilderness both on what we should look to include as well as what to avoid. First and foremost we must refrain from identifying our new notion with wilderness. Otherwise we invite baggage we may not intend to connote with our new term. Half of wilderness's problems are rooted in the fact that each time the concept is reinvented it is still called wilderness leading to the messy hodge-podge of baggage we are trying to clean up.

Second, wilderness is not only a notion but identified with a place, the wilderness. We should pause for a moment before committing our new notion to particular areas. Giving our notion a sense of place gives us the advantage of having concrete instances which inspire and bring our notion to life. Places we can point to and say, "That is that I am fighting for!" As in wilderness, I can go to a wilderness area and get the full and rich sense of what wilderness means through that experience. However such a position commits us to some consequences we may wish to avoid. The one which is the most worrisome is that these areas are outside of human design, and by definition lose their quality as wilderness with human intervention. My very being corrupts that which I would define by giving this notion a place that exemplifies it. Wilderness must therefore remain a place where I don't belong, and if I don't belong there why should I show concern? Furthermore it undermines any possibility of valuing for the same reasons lands where humans work with the non-human ecosystem, such as Aldo Leopold and his sand county property. In defining this new notion I would like to be able to point to both recognized wilderness areas and places like Leopold's property and say that its good and right not for distinct reasons but because both represent something similar to me, because both embody a sense of the 21st century conservation movement. Ideally our notion would allow the conditions for the possibility of being environmentally aware to be anywhere and everywhere, without need of a particular place. I wouldn't require inspiration from a memory of temperate rainforest I've been to or a tropical rainforest I've never seen to be inspired to recycle, something about wherever I am should inspire that impulse. I'd like 21st century conservation movement to be able to point to an oak grove on a college campus as well as the tropical rainforest and say that that's what inspires the movement to fight.

Third, there is also a belief that wilderness benefits us, and may be essential for being human in the fullest sense. Cronon refers to this as the sense of the frontier, Thoreau referred to the tonic of the wilderness, and Roosevelt attributed his rough-riding life to it. There are two elements that are worth addressing out of this claim. The first is that wilderness is the only, or at least the best, source of these benefits. The second is that these benefits are incredibly ethnocentric in as far as they have been used to define what it is to be American. There seems to be a tautological comfort in wilderness as frontier or tonic. The reason wilderness is so beneficial is because it allows for the individual to strike out on his or her own, to be a true individual who overcomes the many hardships of the environment and is better for it. It also drives humans to cooperation, so that through working together they can overcome whatever obstacle wilderness throws their way. And why are these hardships to overcome and spaces to be free so much better than any other that might be encountered or perhaps the only place we might encounter them? Because these benefits are of the wilderness variety, of

course. There are ways of addressing this tautology to make it more palatable, but we must first ask ourselves whether wilderness really is the sole or best source of so called wilderness benefits. While Muir may contend that city folk are only half-sane the truth is unless sanity is stipulated to be only available to those who experience wilderness there is no reason and there appears to be plenty of evidence that people are perfectly capable of not only being sane but thriving in all the ways that wilderness is supposed to benefit them without wilderness. In fact this is a major problem for wilderness because as humans we seem perfectly capable of detaching ourselves entirely from wilderness without any serious side effects. Again we see that ideally our notion would allow the conditions for the possibility of being environmentally aware to be anywhere and everywhere, without need of a particular place so that the benefits from our notion, while clearly possible in wilderness, are not limited exclusively to wilderness. The average metropolitan is capable of not confronting the notion of wilderness in his or her everyday life. The possibility of confronting our new notion should still arise under the conditions that anyone, even the average metropolitan, might find themselves. This carries into the notion of wilderness as ethnocentric. Wilderness has very American undertones. It is tied up with notions of the Wild West, and of conquering the New World. If our notion is to be applicable regardless of location it can not be a primarily American ideal. What we would hope is that his notion would appeal to the higher nature of any culture without the possible stigma of “import” and “export.”

Fourth, wilderness includes under its umbrella notions of the aesthetic, the spiritual, the sublime, etc. It is tempting to say the more that merrier. That our new notion should get as much bang for its intellectual buck as possible. If we can maintain our notion as well as several supporting theories under a single term we'd have a veritable environmental juggernaut. I like to think of this argument as the Frankenstein's monster argument because this is a huge if, and such a decision could easily come back to haunt us. We've already pointed out that part of the problem with wilderness is that it is just too complicated to be effectively handled. There is no way of knowing what's going to happen with our Franken-notion if we start including complimentary theories. They may begin to contradict or interact in other undesirable ways. The Franken-notion may end up with an aesthetic liver that it rejects, or its new spiritual hands may have the habit of banging it over the head for no apparent reason. People will likely argue over what really constitutes the beauty of the landscape or which biomes connect us best to the supernatural thereby placing our notion unduly in the battlefield and not where it can be doing the most good. If one part of our notion is under fire then the whole notion is in jeopardy. The safest bet is to keep it simple. If we need an aesthetic theory later on we can coin it its own term, and we can assess how well it plays with our new conservation notion without it being joined with our notion. Furthermore, if our term does need to be debated the discussion can more easily be kept on topic.

Fifth, wilderness is often considered ahistorical, or at least it is received as being ahistorical. When one hikes in the wilderness one is supposed to feel a sense of timelessness, that this is the way it is always been and should always be. Despite one of the more interesting applications of the naturalistic fallacy, that this is a place that doesn't have history and therefore we should not introduce history through human influence, this argument seems to be as easily for the value of wilderness as against. Any personal form of value that one attaches to wilderness can arguably be said to be based on a history.

That the reason any of us personally cares about a wilderness area is because of some form of history we directly or indirectly have *with* the wilderness. That it is my love of puppies and kittens that inspires my interest in wilderness and all the cute animals it harbors. That the summers spent hiking the wilderness's terrain inspires my interest. Or that the photographs or stories someone has shown or told me of a place inspire my interest. History is what makes these places so important, and therefore the ahistorical quality of wilderness somehow undermines that sense. It is possible to say that what is important is the sense of timelessness while there but the history when one returns to where one belongs, but that is a tough and contradictory line to keep. This is partly because the sense of timelessness rests on a place not belonging to humans who would give it a sense of time, but such a place was created artificially by humans by removing native inhabitants, and then ignoring the history. This being said I think it best if we include history one way or another in our new notion.

Sixth, there is a sense in which we should consider wilderness as finished and complete. This in many ways relates to the previous argument that wilderness is ahistorical. There is no need for history in a place that has reached its finished end. However, if we maintain our above conviction that our new notion should include a sense of history and encompass wilderness areas and beyond then we cannot maintain that wilderness areas should be considered finished. Wilderness is arguably a living entity with which we interact, it grows and changes just as we grow and change, hence why when we say something or someone is finished we are connoting a sense of death. So if we don't want to say that wilderness is dead should we consider it unfinished? Here I think lays the reason we want to call wilderness finished. There are normative undertones to something being unfinished. If it is unfinished then we should finish it. Something unfinished isn't as valuable as something which is finished, which has achieved the end that it was designed for. What this usually implies in regards to human's relationship with wilderness areas is that we should go and build a dam, improve drainage, whatever it takes to maximize or finish the land and claim its resources for human consumption. So our notion cannot imply that these lands are unfinished, nor can it imply that they are finished. What do we want to imply then? Clearly we want to avoid the understanding that these areas are dead which follows from a static conception of being finished, as well as avoid implying that just because an area needs to change we need to actively orchestrate that change. In this sense we want to imply a sense of becoming, that these areas are a process which will tend to perpetuate itself in the midst of change, that they are the golden mean between static order and dynamic chaos.

Let us take a moment to recap what we have gleaned from our exploration of the concept of wilderness towards the foundation of a new conservation concept. It needs to be a word other than wilderness so that we can avoid the confusing and contradictory baggage that even stipulation cannot always handle. Our new concept is not to be identified with any particular place, while it will likely be beneficial in arguing for the preservation of current wilderness areas its scope stretches beyond them. Furthermore, the new notion should not strictly limit its benefits to a particular place. If the conditions for the possibility of our notion are without place so our its benefits, and that our notion should do its best to not be an American invention for export to other cultures but be applicable as widely, without detriment, as possible. We also are going to do our best to keep it simple and include no more than we have to, leaving any other supporting notions

to be attached externally. We also would like to see our notion have a relationship with history in one way or another. There should also be a sense of process involved if possible that captures the full depth of how an ecosystem, as well as our relationship to it, evolves and sustains itself. We now find ourselves at a crossroads. Either the new notion should be assigned an entirely new word so that it might avoid all but phonetic baggage. Phonetic baggage being the baggage that allows Jabberwocky to make sense even when it is composed of nonsense, in some ways related to onomatopoeia. Or the new notion is applied to a pre-existing word that is carefully chosen in order to capitalize upon the words other meanings or baggage. I lean more towards the later. It not only makes the process easier, which is not always better as we have seen since sticking with wilderness would have been the easiest option, it also allows us to integrate a history or richness immediately making the new notion more appealing and familiar. My candidate for the new term is “respect.”

Allow me to defend my choice of “respect” in relation to the above criteria and show how it impacts our current and future relations with the environment and in doing so hopefully begin installing our new notion under the heading of respect. Respect has the connotations of honor, esteem, consideration and regard. None these carry with them a sense a particular place in which they hold sway. The condition for the possibility of being respectful is available in any relationship. I believe this is the heart of what most environmentalists are attempting to inspire by the use of wilderness, that these areas should inspire our respect for them. So why not be blunt about it? Furthermore, by sticking with respect one is just as capable of respecting the ecosystem of one’s backyard, or one’s neighborhood as one is of a wilderness. The application may vary, but the notion of respect makes sense in each instance of the relationship. Furthermore, respect includes an internal sense of self-limitation both positively and negatively. There is a sense in which when you respect something you allow it a level of autonomy, and possibly help, but there is also a sense in which respect is no longer deserved in particular instances. For example, I might respectfully leave an anthill alone, but at the same time respect does not necessarily need to be extended to the carpenter ants which are consuming my house. Respect also has relatively universal cultural implication. All cultures that I am aware have some notion with analogues to respect. Likewise the benefits of respect are not limited to any particular application or place. In as far as I respect I am inferred at least the benefit of gaining the reputation of being respectable. Of course herein lays an interesting point that must be addressed. What if in my various applications of respecting I encounter a conflict? The most notable example would probably be respect for human interests and respect for wilderness interests. I think the answer might lie in a modified application of the philosophy of Josiah Royce. That we ought to choose to respect that which respects Respect. I think in doing so we will find concessions needing to be made on both side, perhaps in the current climate more on the side of human interests than on the side of wilderness since recent history has taken such aggregations advantage of wilderness.

Respect is relatively simple and straightforward in the ways we were looking for. Someone may later write about the aesthetics of respect or the spirituality of respect, but the term does not inherently connote these other senses. Furthermore, the reverse is already in many ways true, that if something is valuable in an aesthetic or spiritual sense it deserves some level of respect. So if a landscape has particularly spectacular scenic

value a degree of preservation seems appropriate in light of a respectful relationship. Respect in many ways is quintessentially historical. In a strictly human to human application respect is like a sediment that builds through the relationship, through the history that people have together. Respect also has indirect historical implications over and above the direct ones. Friends of friends deserve a certain amount of respect through the chain of relationships, and likewise one doesn't need direct experience or history with a particular place to have respect for it.

The sense of process may be the most difficult to install in respect. Much of western thinking is steeped in an ontology of being, and much of the meaning that is derived from our language reflects that state of affairs. However, we've already built some helpful groundwork. The notion that respect implies a level of autonomy works to our advantage in this regard. In as far as I respect another human being I allow him or her to make his or her own choices, in essence become what they wish. Furthermore, respect obligates me to be open to any requests for assistance they might have, allowing me to be involved in their becoming. Likewise, when I respect an ecosystem I allow it a level of autonomy to evolve and sustain itself as it will, and perhaps if we better attune ourselves to the needs of ecosystems we can respectfully involve ourselves in their processes.

Where does respect fall in terms of traditional categories of conservation and preservation. Is respect biocentric or anthropocentric? This is a difficult question, partly because it's not entirely appropriate. It's possible to describe respect biocentrically and anthropocentrically but respect is inherently a concept that is not centered in a particular framework. Respect bridges frameworks, so while one is capable of capturing part of respect from a biocentric or anthropocentric viewpoint the whole picture is richer than the two and involves moving beyond the need for a particular center or starting point. In a similar way respect doesn't have a simple straightforward answer for biodiversity. It's not possible to say that more biodiversity is better or that we should do all that is within our power to prevent extinction. We should respect biodiversity in as far as it helps sustain the development and evolution of an ecosystem, furthermore we need to respect the needs of an ecosystem that has become dependent upon us. If there is a desert ecosystem which sustains itself with less biodiversity we should respect that arrangement just as we should respect the rainforest which sustains itself with more biodiversity. There is also a level at which artificially sustaining an ecosystem or species becomes an attack on respect. When we artificially sustain something at some point we begin to make a mockery of its being a living entity. All the characteristics which define it as living become extensions of our ability to imbue those qualities and we disrespect its ability to do so. This carries into one of the major ideological shifts that needs take place when operating with respect for the ecosystem. We currently have the tendency to be destructive in relationships ecosystems, to create artificial *tabula rasa* type environments before reconstructing the environment in our image. To be respectful we need to shift to a tendency to be constructive with the environment, to work with the ecosystem not make it work for us. This involves building around redwoods and not through them, using as much of an animal we kill as possible, and the list goes on in ways that are both subtle and obvious.

I hope that you agree that respect is a far more appropriate term for the 21st century conservation movement than wilderness. That in an informed sense it can be

applied in the way that environmentalists would like to use wilderness without the mess that accompanies wilderness. Respect not only allows us to value traditional wilderness lands but any place that we might or might not find ourselves regardless of culture.

References –

Barnhart, Clarence L., ed. The World Book Dictionary. Chicago: Thorndike-Barnhart Dictionary, 1970.

Callicott, J. Baird, Nelson, Michael P., eds. The Great New Wilderness Debate. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998.

Leopold, Aldo. A Sand County Almanac. New York: Ballantine Books, 1966.