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Beyond the Campfire's Light: Historical Roots of the Wilderness Concept

ABSTRACT

Because wilderness holds a variety of culturally imbued meanings, it is necessary to understand its cultural origins. The Judeo-Christian origins of western society generally are credited with portraying wilderness as a synonym for desolate, wild, and uninhabited lands manifesting God's displeasure. But wilderness also served an important function in Christianity as a place where one could prepare for contact with God. Such contrasting perspectives created an ambivalence that still prevails. Yet despite the ambivalence, early European and North American societies perceived wilderness as a threat. A gradual rise in scientific understanding was a major force in promoting a change in this perspective. But not until the intellectual shifts prompted by Romanticism and transcendentalism, along with an increasing scarcity of wilderness, did efforts to protect wilderness gain support.

INTRODUCTION

At one time, all the earth was wild. The natural forces of fire, wind, and rain operated freely, carving and shaping the face of the planet. The ebb and flow of environmental change took place unfettered by any human influence. Earth was a global wilderness.

Or was it? It was a place absent of any human impact, to be sure, but the very absence of human presence also meant there was no cultural system within which the values of naturalness or the distinctiveness of the environment as a contrast to civilization could be appreciated. Even as the early aboriginal tribes appeared and began the first tentative alteration of their environment to facilitate survival, the idea of wilderness as a distinctive environment, let alone an area deserving special attention, was beyond comprehension. Just as the iron ore of the Mesabi Range of northern Minnesota would hold no special value to the Chippewa Indians centuries later, untrammelled nature was of no special significance to the world's first human settlers.¹ At the dawn of human society, the world was simply a miscellaneous assemblage of biological conditions.

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1. Burch. *In Praise of Humility: The Human Nature of Nature*. XLV APPALACHIA 66 (1984).

Today, the issue of wilderness—what it is, how much should be preserved, and how it should be managed—clings tenaciously to the environmental agenda. In the United States, wilderness is protected by federal statute; many states have also adopted legislation for its protection. Worldwide, other countries are moving to protect wilderness lands; other papers in this issue detail the progress and controversy such efforts have yielded. In addition to governmental activity, numerous citizen organizations work to expand wilderness preservation efforts, often with remarkable success. Wilderness has achieved the status of a highly valued and valuable resource.

The evolution depicted in the above description reflects how resources are defined. From the “neutral stuff” that undeveloped nature represented to pre-historic society, wilderness has come to hold great utility for many societies today. It is a utility gained not through normal market place mechanisms, as was the case with the iron ore of the Mesabi Range but through shifting perceptions of value, expressed through the political process. These perceptions are rooted in social attitudes and beliefs formed and evolved over many generations.

In this paper I will explore the cultural traditions out of which many of our modern conceptions of wilderness arose. A basic proposition of this paper is that wilderness is a cultural construct rather than an intrinsic biophysical reality. In order to understand the meanings and values associated with wilderness today, it is necessary to understand the cultural context within which the concept originally was imbedded. As we shall see, this largely involves an examination of western religious traditions and the effect these traditions have had on society’s view of nature.

BIBLICAL CONCEPTIONS OF WILDERNESS

Wilderness is commonly used in the Biblical scriptures; Nash² reports the term appears nearly 300 times in the Old and New Testaments. Typically, it was used as a synonym for “desert” and “waste” often with the same Hebrew or Greek root. Lands described as wilderness generally had three physical characteristics: (1) they were virtually uninhabited. (2) they were desolate and arid (annual rainfall was less than 4 inches, a condition characterizing much of the ancient Near East); and (3) they were vast. In the wilderness human survival was difficult.

Beyond these physical characteristics, wilderness also had a major symbolic significance in the Scriptures. Frequently, wilderness was used to describe areas where God’s blessing was absent; paradise and wilderness were antithetical conditions. The story of Adam and Eve in the

Garden of Eden captures this theme explicitly. In the Garden of Eden (Eden is Hebrew for “delight”), water and food were bountiful and work was unnecessary. Nor was there any fear, because all the creatures of the Garden were peaceable and helpful, save one—the serpent. When Adam and Eve broke faith with God and ate the forbidden fruit, they were driven from the Garden to “cursed ground,” overgrown with thorns and thistles.³ In the wilderness they now inhabited, life was a struggle and survival uncertain. The antipodal nature of the Garden and the wilderness are made clear in the writings of Joel: “The land is like the garden of Eden before them, but after them a desolate wilderness.” “The story of the Garden and its loss,” Nash writes, “imbedded into Western thought the idea that wilderness and paradise were both physical and spiritual opposites.”⁴

The Book of Genesis reveals other important aspects of early Christian conceptions of the relationship between man and nature. Man named all the animals, thereby establishing dominance over them. All that was on the earth was placed there by God for man’s benefit; nothing had any purpose other than to serve his needs. Finally, as the ultimate expression of man’s separateness from nature, he was made not simply a part of nature but in God’s image.

These qualities of the relationship between man and nature led White⁵ to conclude that Christianity was the most anthropocentric religion the world had ever seen. “Man shares,” White argues, “in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. . . . Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia’s religions . . . not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also insisted that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”⁶

The image of nature and wilderness created by such a perspective was necessarily negative and exploitative. But Christianity also fostered a counter perspective and it is from this that much of the ambivalence found in our modern views of the wilderness may have originated. This alternative perspective saw wild nature as the setting in which one could prepare for communicating with Deity. Jesus’ 40 days in the wilderness, fasting and resisting the temptations of Satan, was a preparation for speaking to God.⁷ The wilderness was not only the setting for the 40-year wanderings of the Israelites, inflicted as a punishment imposed by the Lord for their misdeeds, but it was also a place where they could

3. YI-FU TUAN, *TOPOPHILIA: A STUDY OF ENVIRONMENTAL PERCEPTION, ATTITUDES, AND VALUES* 260 (1974).

4. R. NASH, *supra* note 2, at 15.

5. White, *The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis*, 155 *SCIENCE* 1203 (1967).

6. *Id.* at 1205.

7. R. NASH, *supra* note 2.

prove themselves worthy of God and, subsequently, the Promised Land. This experience helped establish a tradition of going to the wilderness for freedom and a purification of spirit-values that would become embodied in the present-day legislative definition of wilderness. Wilderness thus acquired an image as a place where one could purge and cleanse the soul and as a place of refuge and contemplation.⁹

Tuan cites further evidence of this ambivalence toward the meaning of wilderness. "For the ascetics," he writes, "the desert was in effect at once the haunt of demons and the realm of bliss in harmony with the creaturely world." Wilderness, as portrayed in the Bible, is a Janus-like construct; on the one hand, a place of desolation, frequented by demons and condemned by God. "Their lands become a wilderness . . . , because of (Yahweh's) wrath" Jeremiah 25:38 tells us. Yet, on the other hand the Book of Revelations tells the reader that the wilderness enables the contemplative Christian to see the Divine more clearly, unencumbered by the world.¹⁰ This bivalent view set the tone for an ambivalence toward wilderness that persists today.

From the above analysis, much of modern day perceptions would appear to be rooted in teleology. White's oft-cited paper exploring the historical roots of modern ecological problems rests substantially on such a position: "The whole concept of the sacred grove (i.e., unfettered nature) is alien to Christianity and to the ethos of the West."¹¹ Although White acknowledges that it was the combination of technology and science along with Christian dogma that helped produce the environmental crisis we face today, his view that religion is the primary conditioner of human behavior toward the environment has been challenged as overly simplistic. Moncrief,¹² for instance, cites the French revolution which sparked widespread democratization, along with the scientific and technological revolution in 19th century England, as variables in an equation that explains the basis of environmental degradation. In addition, Moncrief argues that the capitalization resulting from the development of science and technology, and the advent of democracy contributed to urbanization and population growth, accumulated wealth, and individual resource ownership. Collectively, these factors, in addition to the Judeo-Christian traditions that underlay the cultural system within which they occurred, help explain modern views of nature and society's relationship to it.

A second criticism of the conventional argument that Christianity has

fostered an antagonistic relationship between human society and wilderness contends that this posited relationship results from a misinterpretation of scriptural references. Strachan, for instance, argues, "The Church was wrong ever to suggest that these texts (for example, 'Fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over it') were typical of the biblical position as a whole." Such texts, he contends, were few in number compared with the many that speak of God as the creator of and carer for all things, that describe how nature itself revealed the divine character of its Maker, and of the numerous injunctions to live in harmony with the land and to treat it as a potential Garden of Eden. Stewardship, not subjugation, is the message revealed in the Scriptures."

Likewise, Bratton¹⁴ argues that the portrayal of Biblical scripture as the basis for an anti-wilderness or anti-conservation philosophy is unfounded. Her position is based on an analysis of the association between three different environmental settings (wild nature, agricultural and settled regions, and developed sites, including cities, towns, and buildings) and a description of the events occurring at that site, such as the appearance of Christ or Satan, the initiation of ministry, or the presence of threats to life or obstruction to ministry. Because of problems associated with alterations in meaning as a result of the translation from Greek to English, she used the original Greek words for settings as listed in the New Revised Standard Accordance.

Bratton concludes, "Although demons and Satan appeared in wild nature in the Gospels, this association is hardly exclusive. Confrontation with evil spirits also occurred in houses and synagogues. . . . I also conclude that the Gospel writers found the synagogue, temple and praetorium to be the preferred habitation of evil."¹⁵ Bratton's analysis confirms the dualistic fashion to which wilderness is treated in the Bible. Although the wilderness is the setting for confrontations with evil, it is also the place where themes of prayer, rest, and visionary experiences occurred. Wilderness served as an unfavorable spiritual environment no more than did the garden or developed site.

The analysis and discussion by Strachan and Bratton further confirm the dualistic quality of Christianity's view of nature and wilderness. Early Judeo-Christian traditions provided a context within which those living in the technological era to follow generations later could point to as a Biblically founded justification in their quest to subdue nature. But as

a. Yi-Fu TUAN, *supra* note 3.

9. Yi-Fu TUAN, *supra* note 3, at I IO.

10. Yi-Fu TUAN, *supra* note 3.

11. White, *supra* note 5, at 1206.

12. Moncrief, *The Cultural Basis for Our Environmental Crisis*. 170 SCIENCE 508 (I 970).

13. Strachan, *The Bible: An Ecological Perspective*, WILDERNESS THE WAY AHEAD, 195 (1984).

14. Bratton, *Battling Satan in the Wilderness: Antagonism, Spirituality, and Wild Nature in the Four Gospels*, Proc.--NATIONAL WILDERNESS RESEARCH CONFERENCE: CURRENT RESEARCH 406 (1986).

15. Id. at 409.

the previous discussion suggests, there was an alternative interpretation of nature rooted in the Scriptures; the two postures formed the basis of an ambivalence toward nature that persists today.

NATURE AND WILDERNESS IN EARLY EUROPE

Wilderness played a major role in European folklore and mythology. The strictures against wilderness perceived to be contained in the Bible fostered a general bias against wild country. The wilderness was commonly perceived to be the home of supernatural beings. As Nash¹⁶ relates myths and stories could be found in most parts of Europe that portrayed wilderness as the home of horrific beasts and monsters. Beyond the light of the campfire, the dark forests harbored many threats to medieval man. The general impression such stories conveyed was one of fear and repulsion.

Among Anglo-Saxons, the Beowulf epic incorporated many of the common conceptions of the wilderness. The uninhabited woodlands, home of two blood-drinking monsters, are portrayed as dark, gloomy and foreboding. Beowulf enters this wilderness to slay the monster; the symbolism contained in this metaphor in which man conquers the wilderness is readily apparent.

But the history of the relationship between human society and wild nature in Europe is also complex. To be sure, the backdrop of Judeo-Christian tradition remained in place. But with it began to appear the influence of a variety of other factors; Glacken¹⁷ contends that many ideas began to acquire a more secular character because they emerged from conditions created by technology and by practical knowledge acquired from direct experience with agriculture and other sectors of that present-day society. In other words, the view of the world around man possessed meaning and explanation that transcended a solely teleological basis. Direct experience with farming, for instance, had revealed reasons for human intervention unrelated to spiritual purposes. Albert the Great a theologian, argued that nature could be improved-or worsened-by art and culture. Wild grains and vegetables became larger, softer, and wilder-tasting when domesticated, a result of an improved understanding of agricultural technology, not theology.

The birth of science and technology in Europe is generally associated with the publication of the works of Copernicus and Vesalius in the mid-1500s. although White points out that from as early as the 11th century,

the West had begun to seize scientific leadership from the Islamic and Greek world.¹⁸ Up until this point, nature was perceived as a symbolic system through which God spoke to men; such a perspective formed the basis of natural theology. But beginning around the 13th century, the focus shifted to an effort to understand nature as a means of understanding God's mind. White¹⁹ contends that from the 13th century on, every major scientist explained his motivation in religious terms; not until five centuries later did the hypothesis of God become unnecessary for many scientists.

Nevertheless, the awakening of scientific interest in the environment helped set the stage for a gradual shift, or at least a broadening, in attitudes about the wilderness. The growth in scientific understanding helped generate an appreciation of how nature in general, and wilderness in particular revealed the glories of God; it contributed to a major shift from the traditional view in which such areas were seen as indicative of an absence of holy influence.²⁰ "As scientists revealed a universe that was at once vast, complex, and harmonious," Nash writes, "they strengthened the belief that this majestic and marvelous creation had a divine source."²¹ Through science, new explanations for the world around man were uncovered. Moreover, the explanations rested on physical and biological laws that governed the world rather than the whims of a petulant Deity. To perceive mountains as the result of a buildup of deposits in a sea bed millions of years ago, followed by slow uplift and gradual erosion, is not as frightening as the thought that the mountain peaks were hurled into place-by a wrathful God.²²

Growth in the scientific understanding of earth and nature was bound up with a variety of other social changes that characterized Europe beginning in the 1600s. The increasing urbanization of the continent, coupled with the rise of industrial production and increasing concentration of wealth, helped foster a society that was at once removed from nature and made more appreciative of it. The Age of Romanticism was in its formative years, and with it came a growing appreciation of wild nature.

Nash²³ argues that one of the most important elements of the Romantic tradition was the concept of sublimity. The essence of this concept contended that natural beauty was found not only in the ordered, structured environment, but in the chaotic disarray of wild nature as well. The

18. White, *supra* note 5.

19. *Id.*

20. H. HUTH, *NATURE AND THE AMERICAN: THREE CENTURIES OF CHANGING ATTITUDES* 250 (1957).

21. R. NASH, *supra* note 2, at 45.

22. R. Lucas, *Natural Amenities, Outdoor Recreation, and Wilderness*, *ECOLOGY, ECONOMICS, ENVIRONMENT* 131 (1971).

23. R. NASH, *supra* note 2.

16. R. NASH, *supra* note 2.

17. C. Glacken, *TRACES ON THE RHODIAN Shore: Nature and Culture in, WESTERN THOUGHT* 763 (1967).

writings of Burke, Kant, and Gilpin all contended that aesthetic enjoyment could be derived through uncivilized nature. As the 18th century unfolded the Romantic tradition gained strength. Not only was the appreciation of unkempt nature increased, but there was also a rejection of carefully crafted landscapes, such as the gardens at Versailles, that formerly had been favored. And whereas the dominant tendency of medieval literature had been to treat nature in a moralistic, negative manner²⁴ Romanticism introduced a new, more favorable tone in the way in which nature was represented in literature.

The Age of Romanticism bred a variety of schools of thought about the environment that helped restructure much of the thinking about nature and its role relative to civilized society. Of these, primitivism was one of the most important. This theme held that society's happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to its degree of civilization or to its removal from nature. The notion of the "noble savage" was central to primitivism. Lesser-developed contemporary cultures and former times were represented as an ideal state for society. Primitivism contained both a rejection of the ills of civilized society and an affinity for the benefits of wild nature and a primitive life. Moreover, it accommodated the traditional religious concerns about unfettered nature by arguing that it was in the wilderness that the power and goodness of God could best be witnessed, free of the contaminating influence of civilization and the city. The Romantic and primitivist traditions, coupled with other socio-cultural changes, helped create an increasingly positive public perception of wilderness. Wilderness, rather than a barrier to civilization and progress came to be seen as a positive and necessary adjunct to civilization. Moreover, the commodity of wild nature came to be highly valued as its relative scarcity increased. The demand for wilderness environments, *now largely* gone from the European continent, focused on the New World, where a virtual continent of wild land could be found.

WILDERNESS IN THE NEW WORLD

The conceptions and images of wilderness brought to the New World by the early colonialists were strongly influenced by the religious dogma that had dominated European society for generations. In many ways, the worst of the fears of these early settlers were home out when they first came in contact with the North American wilderness. The sheer immensity of it was beyond anything they could imagine. The few remnants of wild country remaining in Europe were restricted to small, discrete tracts-a

24. M. NICOLSON, *MOUNTAIN GLOOM AND MOUNTAIN GLORY: THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AESTHETICS OF THE INFINITE* 403 (1959).

peak or a valley. In America, it stretched on endlessly. Not only was it a physical barrier to movement, but it also harbored threats-wild animals Indians-to civilization. It was easy to imagine that the foreboding, dark forests contained beasts, monsters, and supernatural beings like those rumored to inhabit undeveloped portions of Europe. In many ways, the American wilderness fit to perfection the mental construct fabricated over generations in Europe of a place harboring anti-Christian forces. Perhaps even more serious than its role as a barrier to progress was its capacity to lead man to succumb to the wildness of his surroundings.²⁵ Although many European immigrants had come to the New World to escape the oppressive laws and traditions of their homelands, the unbridled freedom found in the American wilderness was seen to represent the opposite extreme. Unless constant vigil was maintained, the thin veneer of civilization could be lost, reducing man to a condition "no better than carnivorous animals of a superior rank."²⁶

Romanticist traditions in Europe had helped promote an enthusiasm for the discovery of the New World. The new land conjured up images of an earthly paradise, complete with material riches, beneficent soils and climate, and scenic beauty. Such images were quickly dashed on the new country's shores as the early settlers confronted the realities of a harsh and hostile environment. The wilderness of the New World was not a paradise; it would become one only if man so transformed it.

The Puritans, in particular, held strongly antagonistic views toward the wilderness. Nash provides an account of how Puritan society in the New World viewed the wilderness. Although they had fled to it, they were not drawn to it because of any of its inherent qualities other than that it was the opposite of corrupting civilization. The first order of business for the Puritans upon settling in the New World was to "carve a garden-from the wilds." Such a task was an inseparable part of the greater responsibility which the Puritans had undertaken to redeem the world from its wilderness state. And the submission of wilderness was a genuine source of pride for it represented ready evidence of success in overcoming the environment in which evil resided as well as the environment that restricted material advance. Paradoxically, as Nash observes, and probably unnoticed by the Puritans, the sanctuary to which they fled and the enemy they strove to conquer were one and the same.²⁷

But there remained a powerful ambivalence toward the wilderness. The somberness of Puritan theology, the generations of animosity toward wild

25. L. GRABER, *WILDERNESS AS SACRED SPACE* 124 (Association of American Geographers Monograph Series No. 8, 1976).

26. R. NASH, *supra* note 2, at 30.

27. *Id.* at 35.

nature rooted in European history, and the stark realities and harshness of the land were tempered by an attitude that simultaneously recognized certain virtues. At the same time that Cotton Mather described the wilderness as the empire of the Antichrist, filled with frightful hazards, demons, and monsters, he also held that this new land was ordained by Providence to be the protective refuge of the reformed Church.²⁸ This was a continuation of a theme found in the European experience in which the dualistic nature of the wilderness provided, on the one hand, a threatening challenge to the integrity of the Church, and on the other, a place of refuge and sanctity in which the Church could operate and where the Church's influence could recreate something of the paradisiacal innocence in the surrounding wild nature.

Traditionally, wilderness and civilization had been perceived as antipodal concepts. Increasingly, however, a tri-level distinction came to be recognized: the wilderness, the town (civilization), and the garden (the agrarian, pastoral landscape). Much of the drive to subdue the wilderness was not motivated by the desire to convert it into civilization as it was to capture the values it held—its timber, its minerals, its soils. This effort was consistent with Jeffersonian appeals to be “husbandmen”; because agriculture was seen as the nation's primary source of wealth, there were strong reasons, founded in both religion as well as economics, to work toward the conversion of the wilderness.²⁹ Additionally, Jefferson viewed widespread land ownership by small agriculturalists as a means to a political end, which was to form a stable republican form of government. He believed that those who owned their own means of production, with farmers being the prime example, would be self-sufficient and politically independent, and have a stake in civil order.³⁰ Only these people, he reasoned, could assume the responsibilities and freedoms of this new government.

Moreover, the rural landscape satisfied the aesthetic sensibilities of many of the recent immigrants who recalled with pleasure the cultivated orderly landscapes of Europe. This “middle region”—the land between the chaos of the wilderness and the chaos of the city—achieved the symbolic status of the idealized landscape toward which American energies should be expended. And the raw material from which such landscapes would be derived was the wilderness.

One feature of the Jeffersonian philosophy is that the push to subdue the wilderness began to take on more of a secular rather than religious

character. This did not change the pressure on the wilderness. It remained a barrier to expansion and development and, consequently, required removal. Such a shift, however, did provide settlers and frontier people with a clearly defined role as the spearhead of civilization. It was their duty and responsibility to head up the effort to push the wilderness aside and replace it with the benefits of a civilized landscape; that is, a rural setting populated by farms and agricultural enterprises to foster the nation's progress.

The agrarian ideal and the image of the American as farmer helped serve as the rationale for the active intervention of the government into the process of vanquishing the wilderness. Up to now, this process had been driven by religious imperative and economic rationalization. Now, however the drive to subdue the wilderness took on the added muscle of public policy. In order to facilitate westward movement and agricultural development, Federal policies were enacted to encourage, and reward removal of the wilderness frontier. A variety of specific policies were employed in this effort. In the late 1700s, the shortage of cash, coupled with increasing demands for public improvements, helped promote the idea of using land, an abundant commodity at the time, as a means of financing the construction of needed improvements. The Ordinances of 1785 and 1787, for instance, provided for conveyance of title to one section of land in each township for the purpose of supporting local public schools. At a time when illiteracy was high, such a policy provided an attractive basis for settlement in an area. Huge grants of land were made to the railroads in partial payment for the extension of access into the heretofore undeveloped western wilderness. Beginning in the early 1800s, efforts were under way to convey the vast public land holdings to private ownership and settlers were scrambling to acquire land. The Pre-Emption Act of 1841³¹ was the first in a series of laws passed to facilitate the transfer of land from public to private ownership. Later in the 19th century, other laws, including a series of Homestead Acts, beginning in 1862 were enacted, along with similar laws for the disposition of the public domain, including the Timber Culture Act of 1873 and Desert Land Act of 1878.³²

Paralleling the developmental thrust to the West, however, was a rising concern with the pace and costs of such a public policy. It was the recurring theme of the dual, almost schizophrenic, relationship between society and the wilderness. Powerful secular and religious motivations underlay

28. YI-FU TUAN, *supra* note 3, at 110.

29. YI-FU TUAN, *MAN AND NATURE* 49 (Association of American Geographers, Commission on College Geography Resource Paper No. 10, 1971).

30. W. SCOTT, *IN PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS: AMERICAN CONCEPTIONS OF PROPERTY FROM THE SEVENTEENTH TO THE TWENTIETH CENTURY* 57 (1977).

31. Preemption Act of 1841, ch. 16, 5 Stat. 453 (repealed 1891).

32. Homestead Act of 1862, 43 U.S.C. §§ 161-302 (repealed 1976); Timber Culture Acts, ch. 277, 17 Stat. 605 (1873) ch. 55, 18 Stat. 21 (1874), amended by ch. 190, 20 Stat. 113 (1878), repealed by Timber Culture Repeal Act, 43 U.S.C. § 1181 (1982); Desert Land Act of 1877, ch. 107, 19 Stat. 377 (codified as amended at 43 U.S.C. §§ 321-339 (1982)).

the drive to subdue the wilderness, but there were also strong, articulate expressions of concern that the wilderness possessed values beyond the material that warranted protection. Perhaps this ambivalence is shown best in the relationship between the emerging American culture and wilderness. On the one hand, the rapid and efficient conquest of the vast continent of wilderness could be pointed to as an example of how the new country had established its independence and demonstrated its claim to equal status with the other nations of the world. On the other hand America's cultural development at this time was meager compared to that of Europe, and the lack of such accomplishments could not be fully offset by the new nation's flourishing economy or stable government. But ironically, the art and literature of the Romanticists, much of it created by Europeans, helped awaken an appreciative attitude toward nature in the New World. In the absence of ancient cultural artifacts, Americans dismissed history to embrace pre-history.³³ Increasingly, Americans came to realize that a distinctive aspect of their culture was one not only absent from Europe but one not even capable of being created there. vast unfettered nature, represented in the wilderness of North America. The magnificent geological features of the continent were a source of national pride and celebration,³⁴ as were the vast forests, great open plains, and the native peoples that occupied them.

It was in the 1800s that America's attitudes toward wilderness began to undergo change. This shifting orientation turned on two fronts. First there was a continuing growth in the intellectual conceptualization of wilderness and its relationship to society. Romanticism played a key role in this development. The thrust of Romanticism was on wilderness as the sublime and on the immediate benefits of wilderness's physical reality to society. In the Romantic tradition, wilderness lost much of its former repulsiveness. As Nash notes, however, Romanticism never seriously challenged the dominant pioneer attitudes toward wilderness; it merely provided a momentary respite from the general antipathy toward such areas.³⁵ Romanticism did not require a rejection of man's long-term dominating stance toward wild nature; it required only a recognition of a broadened symbolic representation of wilderness in which the beauty of such areas and their strengthening qualities for the human spirit were admitted. And much of the advocacy for this view, at least initially arose from European Romanticists, whose view of wild nature, it must be admitted, was tempered by distance.

33. Lowenthal, *The American Scene*, LVIII THE GEOGRAPHICAL REVIEW 78 (1968).

34. Dearden & Sewell, *From Gloom to Glory and Beyond: The North American Mountain Recreation Experience*, THE ECOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF OUTDOOR RECREATION ON MOUNTAIN AREAS IN EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA I (Recreation Ecology Research Group, Report No. 9, n.d.).

35. R. NASH, *supra* note 2, at 65.

Belief in a more fundamental function of wilderness vis-a-vis society contributed to a rise in the transcendentalist view. Transcendentalism implied that a higher realm of spiritual truth paralleled the plane at which material reality existed and that it was possible, through intuition or imagination, for an individual to achieve this higher plane of consciousness. The more unfettered and uncontaminated the natural setting, the better it could facilitate achievement of spiritual insight and moral improvement. In this sense, transcendentalism represented a modern restatement of some of the views previously described in early Christianity.

Thoreau encapsulated the philosophical stance of transcendentalism when he pronounced, in 1851, that "in wildness is the preservation of the world." Wilderness and its physical manifestation as wilderness, in the view of the transcendentalists, were essential to society's understanding of its relationship to God. In a reversal of earlier Puritan views, the inherent goodness of mankind could only be realized through the presence of wild nature.

Thus, the first major development in the 19th century that set the stage for a societal shift in attitude toward wilderness was the formulation of a philosophical framework within which such areas could be defined as contributing to human welfare. Although such a framework did not enjoy universal acceptance, it nevertheless provided an alternative perspective on human-nature relationships that would serve as the basis for later, more profound alterations in America's view of preservation.

The second major activity in the 1800s involved the first calls for action to preserve wilderness. Twenty years prior to Thoreau's famous pronouncement, George Catlin, a lawyer, painter, and student of the American Indian, had introduced the concept of "a nation's Park, containing man and beast, in all the wildness and freshness of their nature's beauty." Catlin's remarks were motivated by both his observation of the rapid disappearance of the wilderness as well as by his concern with the contaminating influences of civilization on the wilderness.

Such pronouncements raised the issue of the protection of wilderness values to a public, and therefore, political level. Calls for protection began to find realization in the second half of the 19th century. In 1864, the Federal government granted the State of California lands in Yosemite Valley for the purpose of preservation. In 1872, Yellowstone National Park was established as the world's first such reserve. It was followed in 1885 with creation of the Adirondack Forest Preserve by the State of New York, and in 1890, by Yosemite National Park, the first park consciously designed to preserve wilderness.³⁶

But wilderness protection was not the primary motivating factor for

36. *Id.* at 132.

most of the early steps taken to protect areas. Yellowstone was designated a park to prevent the area's "curiosities" from being taken up in private ownership; the Adirondacks were set aside mainly to protect valuable watersheds. Even in the case of Yosemite, the enabling legislation did not contain specific language citing wilderness preservation as an objective.

Much of this early action focused on the protection of areas with special qualities, such as the thermal features of Yellowstone, rather than on the protection of large tracts of undeveloped land which lacked any distinguishing values other than their naturalness. Even when protection was provided, support in the form of Congressional appropriations was often lacking. Without the intervention of the U.S. Cavalry several National Parks, including Yellowstone, Yosemite, and Sequoia, would have been exploited in the latter part of the 19th century.³⁷

Nonetheless, these actions provide evidence of a major revamping of social values, a shift of amazing proportions, given that only a few decades earlier, such actions likely would not even have been considered, let alone undertaken. What are some of the factors that explain this dramatic change?

Several developments can be cited that probably underlay the changes in social attitudes and policies toward wilderness that took form in the middle to late 1900s. First, there was the continuing, incipient ambivalence toward wilderness fostered by the nation's religious origins. Well imbedded within the country's religious traditions was the conception of wilderness as a place of purification and cleansing and as a site of religious freedom, away from the temptations and strife of civilization. The shifting American posture toward the wilderness had a long-established religious foundation from which to operate.

Second, there was a gradual reduction in the image of wilderness as a fearful place. In part, this was fed by advances in science and technology and by the improved understanding of the environment. As the capacity to shape and control the environment grew, the threat it represented to human survival correspondingly diminished. And as the wilderness took on an altered posture in its relationship to society, and was seen as less of an antagonist, it was possible for society to hold a more benevolent view of wilderness and to express a more tolerant, accommodating view of it.

Third, wilderness was rapidly becoming a scarce resource. In the census of 1890, America passed from a rural to an urban nation reporting for the first time in its history that more people resided in the cities than in the countryside. The frontier that Frederick Jackson Turner hypothesized as the crucible from which the American character was forged had passed.

37. H. D. HAMPTON, HOW THE U.S. CAVALRY SAVED OUR NATIONAL PARKS 246 (1971).

McCloskey has observed that one of the necessary conditions for the recognition of the value of wilderness by a society is that it must be relatively scarce;³⁸ the great paradox of wilderness preservation in the world today is that where wilderness (in the sense of large undeveloped tracts of land in a generally natural condition) is the most abundant, it is the least valued and, conversely, where most scarce, it is most valued. As the vast continent of wilderness faded before the advances of civilization, its value as a component of the American landscape grew.

Fourth, growth in the sophistication of the various philosophical stances describing the relationship between man and nature provided an intellectual framework within which wilderness could be valued. A variety of specific notions about the value of wilderness were expressed; wilderness as a setting for improvement of the human character, as an antidote to the ills of civilization, as a symbol of the nation's rich natural and historic heritage—all helped lend the protection and preservation of wilderness an intellectual basis of support.

Finally, as the absolute and perceived distance between society and wilderness grew, the ability of society to hold an appreciative attitude toward wild nature also expanded. It was the rise of the city that marked the turning point in much of our attitude toward wilderness. As one observer has noted, "[t]he positive sense (about wilderness) was acquired when wilderness had lost some of its threat and could be viewed sentimentally from safe and civilized oases which time and experience had robbed of glamor."³⁹ Even today, rural residents display a more utilitarian disposition toward nature than do their urban counterparts.⁴⁰ The nation's trend toward urbanization also reflected the growing economic and political vitality, conditions described as necessary for the successful protection of wilderness by McCloskey.⁴¹

By the mid- to late-1800s, American attitudes toward wilderness had evolved into a transitional phase. This period represented a gradual reconceptualization of the relationship between wilderness and society, characterized then, as well as now, by conflicting interests and competing values about the worth of wilderness. What was significant in this realignment was the emerging view that the struggle between wilderness and civilization was not a conflict between good and evil but rather a debate over two goods, with eventual resolution based on a judgment of the relative priorities associated with each.

38. McCloskey, *The Wilderness Act of 1964: Its Background and Meaning*, 45 OREGON L. REV. 288 (1966).

39. YI-FU TUAN, *supra* note 29, at 34.

40. Hendee, *Rural-Urban Differences Reflected in Outdoor Recreation Participation*, 1 JOURNAL OF LEISURE RESEARCH 4 (1969).

41. McCloskey, *supra* note 38, at 288.

Between the middle of the 19th century and today, much has happened with regard to wilderness. Other papers in this volume discuss these developments in detail. Manning, in particular, traces the development of the wilderness idea into modern times and discusses how the roots and origins of wilderness portrayed in this discussion have affected modern conceptions of preservation and management.

CONCLUSION

This review of the historical origins of our attitudes toward wilderness has suggested that an ambivalence, rooted in our nation's religious heritage, has characterized those views. Throughout history, the conception of wilderness as the locus of evil has been countered, if not offset, by the conception of wilderness as sanctuary. The underlying Christian ideology of western civilization, coupled with folklore and mythology, have helped reinforce and buttress these images. And although a variety of factors, including increased scientific understanding of nature and the growing scarcity of wild country, have contributed to a greater appreciation of the value of wilderness, there still remain deep-seated emotions about wilderness. As the antonym of civilization, wilderness retains an image for many people as a place of fear and foreboding and as an active challenge to civilization's survival. Perhaps deeply scored on the genetic code of humans are the fears of our ancestors as they huddled around the fire, listening to the sounds of the night around them, ever mindful of their precarious status and vulnerability. Today, it is civilization and society that surround the wilderness, its survival dependent upon our capacity to recognize the values it possesses and our willingness to ensure its preservation.