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WILDERNESS AS AN AESTHETIC CONCEPT

By

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Texas at El Paso, El Paso, Texas, 2014

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Wilderness as an Aesthetic Concept

Chairperson: Matthew Strohl

In this paper I argue that many of the philosophical problems with the concept of wilderness can be mitigated by thinking of wilderness as an aesthetic concept rather than as a real feature of the world or a special metaphysical category. In Section 1, I respond to arguments for wilderness no longer being extant in the world as well as being conceptually contradictory by examining the ways in which people continue to experience wilderness in spite of these challenges. To resolve this tension, I offer an account of wilderness as an aesthetic concept, that is, as something that cannot be reduced to sufficient or necessary conditions and requires the exercise of taste to identify. I then offer examples of situations in which wilderness experience in an environment seems to be indicative of it being in line with aesthetic concepts. In Section 2 I explore what work an aesthetic concept of wilderness can do for environmental philosophy. Wilderness as an aesthetic concept allows for a greater degree of comparability with other aesthetic traditions that may yield useful solutions to environmental problems. I give an account of the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection and how it may be relevant to environmental philosophy as an example of this. Additionally, I argue that thinking of wilderness as an aesthetic concept allows it to be retained in a way that mitigates the extent to which it may be used in a harmful way while continuing to do the positive work of motivating interest in environmental issues.

Wilderness as an Aesthetic Concept

A central aim of environmental philosophy has been to locate the particular value in the natural world that we ought to cherish and protect. One form of value that has been found is 'wilderness.' The American tradition of environmentalism is rooted in wilderness appreciation, and the wilderness concept has even made a home for itself as the normative guide for environmental policy and legislation, as in the Wilderness Act of 1984. However, appealing to wilderness as a normative standard for environmental practice has become increasingly controversial in more recent years. Much of the more recent work on the wilderness concept aims to criticize the ways it is conceptually problematic or is unhelpful in dealing with the practical problems of environmental philosophy. Thinking of wilderness as an ontological category or as a real feature of the world brings along a bevy of philosophical problems, as critics have pointed out. In this thesis, I argue that we should not be so quick to abandon the wilderness concept. In spite of philosophical attacks on the wilderness concept, it is still common for people to think about, discuss, and even experience wilderness, and intuitively, this tracks something. Rather than discard the wilderness concept, I suggest we try and look at it in a different way, not as an ontological category or as an objectively fixed place on earth, but as an aesthetic concept. I argue that an aesthetic conception of wilderness does more to preserve our intuitions of wilderness while discarding much of the philosophical baggage that the traditional wilderness concept is weighed down by.

In Section 1, I look at some prominent wilderness critiques that focus on how there might no longer be a real world referent for the wilderness concept or that the wilderness concept itself relies on an unsupportable human/nature dualism. I argue that

these perspectives fail to account for the experience of wilderness that persists in spite of the ways that wilderness—either conceptually or in the real physical sense—is purported not to exist. I then explore socially constructed accounts of wilderness to establish a clear account of the social factors that are important for wilderness appreciation. After taking a close look at the conditions and circumstances in which we experience wilderness, I argue that our conception of wilderness is consistent with aesthetic concepts in that it is not reducible to sufficient or necessary conditions, and that taste plays a role in its application. To support this claim, I offer examples of places that empirically satisfy traditional definitions of wilderness but somehow fail to be intuitively accounted for as such. I argue that there is a gap between condition governed accounts of wilderness, that have been offered as definitions, and our experience of wilderness. This gap is explained by an aesthetic conception of wilderness.

In Section 2, I look at what work an aesthetic conception of wilderness can do for environmental philosophy. I begin by taking a second look at critiques focused on how wilderness may be conceptually invalid or no longer extant in the world. The problems outlined in these critiques are only relevant to conceptions of wilderness that assume the necessity of a human/nature dualism or wilderness' existence as a natural fact. I argue that an aesthetic conception of wilderness need not fall into either of these camps, and thus avoids their philosophical entanglements. I suggest that an aesthetic conception of wilderness allows us to look in novel directions that may be helpful for environmental philosophy. As an example, I offer a comparison between wilderness appreciation and the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection. The similarity between these two forms of aesthetic appreciation in both the social circumstances within which they developed, as well as

what is appreciated in the object, has resulted in similar philosophical problems. Looking to the tradition of Japanese aesthetics of imperfection may be a useful guide for how to approach certain philosophical problems related to wilderness, such as the dilemma of wilderness management. Turning to wilderness critiques that look at how the concept has been used to motivate environmental injustice, I argue that much of the tension between wilderness and inappropriate environmental practices can be explained as well as mitigated by embracing an aesthetic conception of wilderness. At the same time, wilderness as an aesthetic concept has the potential to be helpful to environmental efforts by serving as the initial link between one's own interests and environmental interests. Aesthetically appreciable aspects of the environment may be too limited to inform an environmental ethic as a whole, but they play an important introductory and motivational role with the general public. An aesthetic conception of wilderness allows it to perform this role while maintaining the benefits and minimizing the harms that the concept of wilderness has generated in the past. Lastly I look at the cultural cache that the term 'wilderness' has. I argue that a concept as resonant and recognizable as 'wilderness' is valuable, and that it may be more helpful to adjust our framing of the concept rather than discard it entirely.

To preface my discussion of wilderness I will first give a brief account of what I mean when I use the term as well as an explanation for why I have chosen to focus on wilderness in particular instead of a number of related concepts. Mark Woods characterizes the "received wilderness idea" that westerners have inherited from our cultural ancestors as "quintessential nonhuman nature," and it is this conception of wilderness that I will refer to as the traditional concept of wilderness.[1] If we think of the

traditional wilderness concept in this way, it follows that certain arguments made against nature are also arguments against wilderness. If wilderness is seen as something like the epitome of nature, then no nature would mean no wilderness. Throughout this paper I make use of several arguments against nature in particular as arguments against wilderness.

This may raise the question of why I have chosen to frame my argument around wilderness in particular rather than 'nature' or other related concepts, such as 'wildness.' A key reason for focusing on wilderness is the ambiguity and various shades of meaning that are entangled in the terms 'nature' and 'wildness.' John Stuart Mill famously draws attention to the ambiguity in the term 'nature' but pointing out that it is typically used in at least two ways. On one hand we use the word 'nature' to refer to "the sum of all phenomena" and the on the other hand we us it to refer to that which "takes place without the agency, or without the voluntary and intentional agency, of man."[2] There is a similar ambiguity in the concept of 'wildness' in that sometimes we use the term to refer to things specifically beyond human control, and other times we use the term to denote behavior that runs contrary to accepted norms and standards in a given situation. Much of what I have to say about wilderness may also be true of the concepts of nature and wildness, but wilderness offers a more precise target for my comments and brings less linguistic ambiguity as baggage to sort out. A further exploration of the extent to which my points about wilderness may also apply to the broader concepts of nature and wildness may be worth exploring in the future. Lastly, a separate reason for my focus on wilderness is that this concept in particular is seen to underwrite the American tradition of environmentalism, and it is this concept that critics have chosen to excoriate. In order

to firmly seat my view within the arena of wilderness debate, I make wilderness the particular locus of my discussion.

1. No Real Wilderness in the World

To begin, I look at critiques of wilderness concerned with the fact that the wilderness concept may no longer have any real world referent. The most well-known form of this type of critique comes from Bill McKibben's book, *The End of Nature*. McKibben's view can be summed up as follows: "We have changed the atmosphere, and thus we are changing the weather. By changing the weather, we make every spot on earth man-made and artificial. We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature's independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us."[3] In other words, human influence has proliferated to the point that there is nothing left on our planet that is entirely free from human impact, and so there is no longer anything like a pristine and pure nature to be found.

There is a similar line of thinking threaded through current discussions on how to divide geologic time scales. While the changes to the atmosphere, and thus the weather, represent one way in which human impacts have become universal, they do not stop there. Wide ranging human impacts also include the worldwide spread of microplastics and other novel materials like concrete, increased concentrations of nitrogen or phosphorous in soils, traces of nuclear fallout from bomb tests, and accelerating extinction rates. These types of impacts, either cumulatively or individually, have had such a robust effect on the planet that they have drawn a stratigraphically distinct line in the Holocene epoch.[4] Geological epochs represent periods of time that can be defined by pointing to specific strata in exposed rock faces that are distinct from those that sandwich

it. Human impacts have accumulated to such an extreme degree that we are now beginning to see the indelible marks of human activity being etched into the earth itself, identifiable to geologists as a departure from the stratigraphic conventions of the Holocene epoch. The Anthropocene is the proposed name for this new stratigraphical development, chosen to convey the human origin of the departure. The Anthropocene would be a scientific declaration of the same thesis that McKibben made the focus of his book: nature, as something independent from humans, no longer exists. Everything on planet earth, from now on, will always bear some scar of human impact somewhere in its history, because the long reach of our impacts has left no stone unturned.

Human impact in this case represents something like ‘anti-wilderness,’ a force that is able to unmake or transform wilderness through its presence alone. Once transformed, the stain of that human impact will remain, indelible, on the natural history of the object or place in question. If wilderness as a concept requires freedom from human impact, the amount of wilderness left can only ever ratchet downwards as human impacts creep steadily in from the edges. As human impact expands, in an equal and opposite reaction, wilderness shrinks. Wilderness preservationists can, at best, halt or slow the spread of human influence, they can never make up the ground that they have lost. McKibben argues that this war has already been lost, and we did not realize it until it was too late. In particular, the all-encompassing effects of human caused climate change have inscribed the signature of human interference on the natural history of every object and place on earth. As a result, there is no longer any wilderness left.

This revelation has spurred a veritable flurry of activity from environmentalists. On one end of the spectrum are those who welcome the end of ‘nature’ as the end of an

era of environmentalism that was bound by metaphysical rules and restrictions that prevented positive change. If 'nature' has been destroyed by the all-encompassing extent of human influence, then there is nothing left that might be a casualty in the implementation of environmental practices that intentionally proliferate the degree of human influence in the world around us. 'Wilderness' as a guide for environmental thinking can be discarded on account of there not being any wilderness left to protect. This opens up the potential to use methods or strategies for environmental practice that might have previously been considered too invasive or pervasive to be consistent with the goal of preserving wilderness. This perspective maintains a certain amount of hope and optimism. According to Emma Marris et al., "The Anthropocene does not represent the failure of environmentalism. It is the stage on which a new, more positive and forward-looking environmentalism can be built. This is the Earth we have created, and we have a duty, as a species, to protect it and manage it with love and intelligence. It is not ruined. It is beautiful still, and can be even more beautiful, if we work together and care for it."[5]

On the other end of the spectrum are those who are less optimistic. Paul Kingsnorth is one example. In his discussions of what he calls "The Rise of the Neo-greens," he makes the following comment:

> The neo-greens do not come to rejuvenate environmentalism; they come to bury it. They come to tell us that nature doesn't matter; that there is no such thing as nature anyway; that the interests of human beings should always be paramount; that the rational mind must always win out over the intuitive mind; and that the political and economic settlement we have come to know in the last twenty years as "globalization" is the only game in town, now and probably forever. All of the questions the greens have been raising for decades about the meaning of progress, about how we should live in relationship to other species, and about technology and political organization and human-scale development are to be thrown in the bin like children's toys.[6]

Another skeptic of enthusiastic Anthropocene optimism is Eileen Crist, who says "The strategy of creating and sustaining a human-ruled biosphere reaffirms the legitimacy of anthropocentrism, avoids interrogating our relationship with the biosphere and its whole ensemble of life as an ethical matter, and resolutely eschews confronting global civilization as a totalitarian system on Earth."[7] Regardless of which perspective might be more helpful or appropriate for informing our environmental practices in the Anthropocene, one must acknowledge the empirical evidence that human impacts have left a global footprint, and for some this knowledge is world-changing.

Even if one does not think that the relatively general impact of human caused climate change or various types of stratigraphical interference results in a completely artifactual earth where nature or wilderness is no more, there remains the problem of places that we call 'wilderness areas' relying heavily on human control and management. The problem is the way in which the traditional wilderness concept of quintessential nonhuman nature prevents humans from playing an active role in maintaining wilderness areas because such a role would be antithetical to the very thing they are trying to maintain. Here the wilderness concept itself seems to be at odds with other goals one might have for an environment, such as ecological health, by necessitating hands-off approaches to management. In the words of Wendell Berry, "The only thing we have to preserve nature with, is culture; the only thing we have to preserve wildness with is domesticity."[8]

In squaring off against threats to places we call wilderness areas, we often confront the reality that the most ecologically beneficial thing to do involves active human management, undermining the nonhuman status that is an important component of

what it means to be wilderness. According to Michael Rozenzweig, “Yes, we must at last admit the truth: Even in reserves people can and should be actively involved. That means active management…. It will almost be like admitting that wilderness itself is no more. Yet we must grit our teeth and do it. To do otherwise is to doom most of the very things we want to save.”[9] Roderick Nash also expresses a similar perspective on the deleterious effect that management can have on wilderness: “A designated, managed wilderness is, in a very important sense, a contradiction in terms. It could even be said that any area that is proclaimed wilderness and managed as such is not wilderness by these very acts! The problem is that the traditional meaning of *wilderness* is an environment that man does not influence, a place he does *not* control.”[10] If we must interfere directly, there is a sense in which these environments are transformed from independent wilderness into human artifacts, more akin to a garden than wild nature. These comments are concerned with the inherent contradiction present in the term “wilderness management.” One example would be the problem of dwindling herbaceous growth at Bandelier National Monument. David N. Cole and Laurie Yung give an account of how different environmental values pull us in opposite directions in this case:

> The ecosystem has been altered so fundamentally that eliminating the original cause of the problem, or simply leaving the system alone to restore itself, no longer resolves the situation. According to ecologists working at Bandelier, the solution is not less but more human intervention. Experiments have demonstrated that if small trees are cut down over large swaths of land, a more continuous ground cover of native herbs and grasses can be restored, which in turn will reduce erosion and the loss of cultural artifacts….Forest thinning may be a solution to environmental degradation, but at what cost? Isn't wilderness supposed to be a place where interventions such as cutting trees are not allowed—where nature decides what's best? After all, current problems are the direct result of earlier generations doing what they thought was best. Is further intervention just a perpetuation of this arrogance?[11]

There are certain kinds of human impact that are less controversial to prohibit, such as the building of roads or other obvious human artifacts, but it is more difficult to decide which human impacts are acceptable if they are introduced in the service of the environment itself.

This clash of values brings us to a cross-roads of options where one or the other must give. We might abandon the active maintenance of a wilderness area so as not violate its wilderness status through intentional human intervention. However, this may be an ecologically sub-optimal choice in some situations, and could be devastating to the health of the environment itself. On the other hand, we might discard 'wilderness' as a guide for environmentalism because of the ways that it finds itself at odds with ecological objectives. If one wishes to utilize intentional human impacts in order to preserve the non-wilderness aspects of an environment that are considered important, such as overall ecological health, then one might be tempted to say that goal of having 'wildernesses' in the first place should be abandoned. Emma Marris, in *Rambunctious Garden*, suggests that we shift our perspective from wilderness to something more compatible with intentional human impacts, "We are already running the whole Earth, whether we admit it or not. To run it consciously and effectively, we must admit our role and even embrace it. We must temper our romantic notion of untrammeled wilderness and find room next to it for the more nuanced notion of a global, half-wild rambunctious garden, tended by us."[12]

It is important to note that advocates for abandoning wilderness as an ideal for environmentalism do not necessarily extend their critiques all the way to the actual places of wilderness, but rather, they limit themselves to critiquing underlying philosophies and

practices that govern decision making within such areas. J. Baird Callicott, who argues that the wilderness idea is not helpful for informing our practices in 'wilderness areas,' is careful to stress that he does not consider himself an antagonist to those areas themselves, saying "I am as ardent an advocate of those patches of the planet called 'wilderness areas' as any other environmentalist.… Such areas serve the cause of biological conservation most importantly as refugia for species not tolerant of or tolerated by people."[13] Instead, Callicott argues that standards other than wilderness, such as ecological health, should be used to inform our practices. This motivates his interest in changing our terminology, replacing "Wilderness Areas" with "Biodiversity Reserves."[14] What constitutes something like 'ecological health' is a hard question to answer, perhaps no easier than the question of what constitutes a 'wilderness,' but Callicott sees this path as having more potential to inform effective environmentalism compared to the old tradition of wilderness appreciation.

From the arguments outlined above, we can see that wilderness as an actual thing in the world might no longer exist, and because of the particular character of the wilderness concept, in that it requires freedom from human impact, there is nothing we can do to actively recover what has been lost. When we eradicate wilderness through human impact, it is gone for good. As a result, critics of wilderness as a concept have deemed it unfit for informing our own practices, either because there is nothing we can do to help without violating what makes a wilderness a wilderness, or because there is no longer any of it left to protect.

1.2 Humans as Part of Nature

Beyond these claims that there is no longer any actual wilderness remaining in the world, or that our human attempts at saving or preserving wilderness undermines our own efforts, there is the larger conceptual claim that the wilderness concept relies on a dualistic perspective of humans and nature that is unsupportable. The idea of wilderness as quintessential nonhuman nature might not immediately strike one as being so controversial. The places we think of as wilderness share an apparent lack of human influence, so it would seem that one has only to apply the 'quintessential nonhuman nature' criteria and judge the place wilderness or not based on how closely it is able to adhere to this standard. The first problem with this concept of wilderness is that it relies on a dualistic view of humans and nature that has become passé. There are two main camps of critics that argue for wilderness being a flawed concept due to its reliance on this dualism. Marks Woods refers to these as the "naturalist" and "social constructivist" arguments, and offers this description:

> The conclusion of both the naturalist and social constructivist arguments is that the idea of wilderness is grounded in a metaphysically untenable dichotomy or dualism between human cultures and nonhuman nature. Although both of these arguments arrive at a similar conclusion, these two arguments taken together are actually inconsistent. Thoroughgoing naturalists (humans and human cultures are fully natural) will have trouble accepting wilderness as non-natural and socially constructed, and thoroughgoing constructivists (wilderness is thoroughly, socially constructed by people) will have trouble accepting the naturalness of humans and human cultures that precedes or underlies what we socially construct.[15]

This section will focus on the naturalist argument. The social constructivist position will be examined in Section 1.5.

The naturalist argument asserts that there is no way to meaningfully distinguish humans as being apart or separable from nature. The traditional wilderness perspective casts human impact as having the special ability to destroy wilderness as the result of

some special metaphysical significance that human actions have. Pre-Darwinian ideas about humans being special, set above and apart from the rest of nature, are pervasive in western culture. Many generations of western thinkers have felt that there must be some essential difference between humans and other types of creatures, and have made various attempts at formalizing that distinction. These roots stretch as far back as the ancient Greeks and early monotheistic religions, which declared humans as being exceptional due to our capacity for rationality or because of some divine gift. This type of thinking extends into the modern period with philosophers, such as René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, making their own contributions to what might make humans particularly special. The naturalist perspective sees humans as being just as natural as anything else, and that there is no meaningful way to say that humans exist as a special category over and above nature. Callicott summarizes this view as follows:

> Since Darwin's *Origin of Species* and *Descent of Man*, however, we have known that man is a part of nature. We are only a species among species, one among twenty or thirty million natural kinds.… If man is a natural, a wild, and evolving species, not essentially different in this respect from others.… then the works of man, however precocious, are as natural as those of beavers, or termites, or any of the other species that dramatically modify their habitats.[16]

From a post-Darwinian point of view, it is difficult to see how humans might be separated from the rest of nature in a non-arbitrary way. If one considers the evolutionary history of humans and the similar development path or initial conditions we share with other forms of life on earth, the line on human exceptionalism becomes blurred.

As the popularity of human exceptionalism rooted in divine favor has declined, it has become difficult for philosophers to agree on some property uniquely possessed by humans that makes us different in a meaningful way. There are, perhaps, things that we can claim to be uniquely human traits, but this is an empirical question with answers that

are not guaranteed to remain true as we make new discoveries. For example, tool use was once thought to be an exclusively human trait, but it has since been discovered that many nonhuman animals make use of tools, leaving us non-unique in this regard. Culture has also long been thought of as an exclusively human trait, but even this is something we may no longer have a unique claim to.[17]

Even if we are able to successfully locate some property or behavior that is in fact completely unique to humans, it is not clear that the existence of such a demarcating feature should imply that humans are special in a meaningful way. Just as some unique property or behavior of any other animal would not automatically grant them special status as existing over and above the rest of nature. This doubt about what it is that makes humans uniquely non-natural, and whether or not any uniqueness we may happen to have actually gives us the right to assign ourselves a special role in which we act as anti-nature, have made it difficult for some to maintain their faith in wilderness as a meaningful concept. If wilderness relies on the idea that humans and nature are separable and meaningfully distinct categories, and we have determined that such a meaningful distinction cannot in fact be made, then what use is the concept of wilderness? What is significant or important about an old-growth forest that has never felt the bite of an ax compared to a second-growth forest, or even a parking garage? A believer in a strong form of the naturalist position would have to say "nothing."

1.3 Wilderness We Experience

There is one problem that these critiques share. They do not sufficiently address the fact that wilderness is something that people continue to experience in spite of the ways it has been declared to be conceptually invalid or no longer extant in the world. Our

intuition of wilderness seems to be tracking something that is different from the traditional wilderness concept that has been pronounced "mortally wounded by the withering critique to which it has lately been subjected."[18] It may be difficult to find the bottom of a human/nature dualism, but it is easy to for people to intuit a distinction. Steven Vogel addresses our ability to distinguish a human/nature difference, as well as the ways that such distinctions fail to be ontologically significant, according to his view, in the following passage:

> Of course, we can distinguish between things that humans make and things they don't—they make toasters and shopping malls, they don't make rocks or mountains—and we can even distinguish among various "degrees'' of human-madeness—there's much more human work involved in the construction of a skyscraper than in the building of a hut in the Black Forest, and there may have been more involved in building the hut than there was in rendering habitable a Neolithic cave. But none of these distinctions has any ontological significance: there are doubtless occasions where it might be useful to draw them so as to indicate the relative role played by different organisms in an item's genesis, in the same way, for example, that one might want to distinguish soil that has been well fertilized and aerated by earthworms from soil that has not, but there is nothing ontologically fundamental implied by these distinctions.[19]

That a parking lot is different from an old-growth forest is not a difficult thing for people to intuit, and even if it is difficult or impossible to find a way in which there is something essential about these two things that make them significantly ontologically distinct from one another, we are still able to distinguish between them as 'natural' and 'artificial' in our everyday lives. Places in the world that we call 'wilderness' and have a natural history that contains some human impact may not be strict examples of wilderness—according to definitions of wilderness that rely on a freedom from human impact—but that does not prevent them from being perceived as wildernesses by people. Alex Weinberg draws attention to this aspect of wilderness:

> Wilderness is an experience and it must be felt: the air breathed, the rivers sipped from, the peaks climbed, the natural sounds attended to. Wilderness is an area to realize goals. It's a place for reflection, physical and mental challenge, and renewal. Wilderness is emotional. It's a place for jubilation, doubt, wonder, inspiration. Wilderness builds relationships. It's a place to know yourself, know your companions, and know your surroundings. Wilderness is a celebration. It's a place to celebrate America's foresight to preserve its special places, and to recognize 50 years of protection. Wilderness is a place one regrets leaving—even after five days of complete solitude, even after long miles and achy joints, even after living only off what you carry on your back, even while knowing a soft bed and four walls await.[20]

Every year, many people travel to designated wilderness areas—as well as many places that have not been officially designated as wilderness areas—and they share in this experience of wilderness. There seems to be some persistence to wilderness as something we experience in spite of the ways that it has been declared to be an ontologically insignificant designation or scrubbed off our world via global human impact. For wilderness lovers who continue to experience and enjoy wilderness, it may not be so "mortally wounded" after all.

Our ability to experience wilderness in spite of the presence of human impacts has even reached some surprising extremes. In writing about "Central Park Wilderness," Tom Grill says, "Walking through the wooded areas of Central Park it is easy to succumb to the interplay of light and shadow, and find yourself pleasantly intertwined with the composition of the landscape in a remotely mystical way."[21] While his description of a remote mysticism may seem more appropriate for some far-off place that has not felt the heavy hand of human civilization, he is in fact describing a park in the middle of New York City. It is difficult to imagine a more trammeled or human impacted place, and yet the feeling of wilderness is still tangible for those sensitive enough to feel it.

1.4 Social Conditions for Wilderness Appreciation

In this section I will look at some of the social factors that play a role in developing a sensitivity for wilderness appreciation. This sensitivity can of course differ in accordance with individual social circumstances. For residents of New York City, Central Park may offer itself up as a wilderness because they perceive it as a wild and natural place relative to the typical concrete and steel trappings of their everyday lives. It would be far more difficult for a person whose everyday context is a more typical example of wilderness, such as the Gila National Forest, to appreciate Central Park as a wilderness.

Wilderness appreciation can also depend on one's level of relevant knowledge or expertise. An example of this would be the difference between a well-studied botanist and a person with no special expertise in botany. The botanist might notice, over the course of an excursion in a 'wilderness area' that there are many non-native plants that must have been brought there by humans. This knowledge may intrude on the potential to see the area as a wilderness. A person uninhibited by knowledge that would betray the human hands of creation in a 'wilderness area' would not be so disturbed by the presence of non-native species, they would not know them as non-native. A more direct sign of human interference, such as empty cans or misplaced tent stakes, might remind one that humans had in fact been there before and that this was not a pristine and untouched environment. However, even these very direct reminders may not be enough to erase the experience of wilderness in such areas altogether. While most visitors would probably agree that it is regrettable that some people have left behind empty cans, these cans do not usually present a significant obstacle to one's wilderness experience.

In fact, there seems to be a significant degree to which we can motivate ourselves towards experiencing an environment as a wilderness in spite of our knowledge of that environment as having been subject to human impacts. For example, an observer ignorant of the different history between an old-growth forest and a second-growth forest might have some difficulty determining which of the two forests exhibits greater wilderness character, but once given knowledge of their history, it is likely that they would consider the old-growth forest to be more of a wilderness. When considering an old-growth forest, a second-growth forest, and a car park, a knowledgeable observer would likely put the old-growth forest and the car park at their respective ends of the scale, with the second-growth forest somewhere in-between. The second-growth forest may be nearly as much of a human artifact as the car park in terms of what it owes its existence to, according to some wilderness critics, but it is still able to offer something much closer to a wilderness experience than a car park.

While people living in the Anthropocene do not seem to have much trouble finding wilderness experiences in an environment that, by definition, should lack anything like a pristine wilderness, some people have argued that the destruction of 'wilderness' occurred long before our contemporary environmental problems with climate change and green-house gases. American Indian populations had significant impacts on their environment long before European settlers came and saw the American landscape as a wilderness. According to Charles C. Mann:

> Until Columbus, Indians were a keystone species in most of the hemisphere. Annually burning undergrowth, clearing and replanting forests, building canals and raising fields, hunting bison and netting salmon, growing maize, manioc, and the Eastern Agricultural Complex. Native Americans had been managing their environment for thousands of years. As Cahokia shows, they made mistakes. But by and large they modified their landscapes in stable, supple, resilient ways.

> Some…. areas have been farmed for thousands of years – time in which farmers in Mesopotamia and North Africa and parts of India ruined their land. Even the wholesale transformation seen in places like Peru, where irrigated terraces cover huge areas, were exceptionally well done. But all of these efforts required close, continual oversight. In the sixteenth century, epidemics removed the boss…Not only did invading endive and rats beset them, but native species, too, burst and blasted, freed from constraints by the disappearance of Native Americans.[22]

Besides the significant agricultural impacts that American Indians had on the environment, it has been argued that some of their largest impacts came from their use of fire. According to Shepard Krech III,

> Wilderness, as others have emphasized, is an artifact of a time and a place—the twentieth century United States—and untrammeled wilderness is a "state of mind." By the time Europeans arrived, North America was a manipulated continent. Indians had long since altered the landscape by burning or clearing woodland for farming and fuel. Despite European images of an untouched Eden, this nature was cultural not virgin, anthropogenic not primeval, and nowhere is this more evident than in the Indian use of fire.[23]

These types of impacts left the American continent with a special human history that some have argued undermines any sense in which it could be considered a pristine wilderness. However, that America did not have any pristine wilderness proper, according to this account, did not seem to impede the ability of the Europeans to experience it as such. Much of the discourse on wilderness as something wonderful that ought to be preserved and protected comes from Europeans who found America to be something of a wilderness wonderland. It is possible that their experience of wilderness rested on the false belief that they were actually experiencing a pristine environment, as a person might mistake a second-growth forest for an old-growth forest, but the fact remains that it was a powerful experience of wilderness nonetheless. Therefore, it seems that one's ability to experience an environment as a 'wilderness' does not depend on the actual lack of human impact in the natural history of that environment. This invites the

question of what it might depend on if not the nonhuman status of the environment. The next Section will explore this question.

1.5 Socially Constructed Wilderness

The idea that wilderness is a socially constructed concept is often raised as a way of exposing wilderness for not being the archetypal example of non-human nature it passes itself off to be. Vogel lays out the typical social constructivist agenda as follows:

> The point of social constructionist arguments….is a debunking one: they aim to show that that which appears to be a necessary fact of the world actually has a contingent social and historical origin….What is unmasked by this sort of argument is precisely the hidden processes of production—of social "construction"—through which the thing has come to be, processes that we had apparently forgotten in our too quick assumption that the thing was simply given, an unquestionable part of the universe's furniture.[24]

This style of argument functions to invite us to realize that the concept in question does not sit on the absolute bedrock of natural fact, but that it rests on scaffolding built by humans. With realizing that it is us who have propped it up in the first place comes the additional realization that we might have built things differently, or not at all. However, the claim that wilderness is socially constructed is especially poignant because wilderness is a concept that is explicitly intended to represent something nonhuman. William Cronon, in his essay "The Trouble With Wilderness," highlights the paradox of wilderness being socially constructed:

> The more one knows of its peculiar history, the more one realizes that wilderness is not quite what it seems. Far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation-indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history. It is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched, endangered, but still transcendent nature can for at least a little while longer be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization, and could hardly be contaminated by the very stuff of which it is made. Wilderness hides its unnaturalness behind a mask that is all the more beguiling because it seems so natural. As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for

> us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires.[25]

What exactly does Cronon mean by saying that wilderness is an unnatural human creation? To answer this question I will turn to a brief historical account of how the wilderness concept came to be a prominent fixture in environmental philosophy.

While contemporary associations with 'wilderness' may involve scenic post-card views, exhilarating personal encounters with the power and majesty of the natural world, or the soothing balm of some remote location far away from the stress and responsibilities of 'the real world,' it did not start that way. Wilderness originally referred to inhospitable or unruly nature, and it was more of a thorn in humanity's side than a salve for its soul. Nash summarizes this conception of wilderness in the following passage:

> European discoverers and settlers of the New World were familiar with wilderness even before they crossed the Atlantic. Some of this acquaintance was first-hand, since in the late Middle Ages a considerable amount of wild country still existed on the Continent. Far more important, however, was the deep resonance of wilderness as a concept in Western thought. It was instinctively understood as something alien to man—an insecure and uncomfortable environment against which civilization had waged an unceasing struggle. The Europeans knew the uninhabited forest as an important part of their folklore and mythology. Its dark, mysterious qualities made it a setting in which the prescientific imagination could place a swarm of demons and spirits. In addition, wilderness as fact and symbol permeated the Judeo-Christian tradition, Anyone with a Bible had available an extended lesson in the meaning of wild land.[26]

Wilderness here is portrayed as an adversary to humankind, an enemy to be conquered and destroyed as civilization worked to 'improve' the land that it claimed for itself. The establishment of agriculture marked an important victory for civilization in its battle against wilderness. More contemporary thinkers, particularly those involved with the deep ecology movement, trace the root of our environmental problems to this early battle

in which civilization was able to gain ground against wilderness. Dave Foreman, sums up this position as follows:

> Before agriculture was midwifed in the Middle East, humans were in the wilderness. We had no concept of "wilderness" because everything was wilderness and *we were a part of it*. But with irrigation ditches, crop surpluses, and permanent villages, we became *apart from* the natural world…. Between the wilderness that created us and the civilization created by us grew an ever-widening rift.[27]

Each of these little victories, with new advances in technology or societal organization, allowed civilization to slowly begin to turn the tide against wilderness. Eventually, what once seemed like an overwhelming struggle against an impossibly strong and invincible opponent was beginning to look winnable, and it was with this 'victory' in sight that we started to think we had made a mistake. It was at this turn that attitudes about wilderness began to change.

In the eighteenth century, burgeoning interest in the aesthetic concept of the sublime led to a new way of thinking about wilderness. Edmund Burke, an early contributor to the discourse on the sublime, offers this description: "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the *sublime*; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling."[28] As terror is typically invoked for its negative associations, this may not seem like the description of a positive aesthetic phenomenon. However, Burke acknowledges the prevailing attitude towards such negative ideas, and he goes on to offer some conditions that qualify his description of the sources of the sublime: "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may

be, and they are, delightful, as we everyday experience."[29] This distance that Burke talks about as being necessary to delight in terrors is one of the spoils of civilization's 'victories' against wilderness. With the dangers of wilderness having been put at a distance by the establishment of a foothold for civilization, humanity found itself in a position to appreciate the delight that such dangers have the power to inspire. As a result of this newfound appreciation for the heights of aesthetic pleasure that negative emotions like terror and pain had shown themselves to be gateways to, the traditional sources of these emotions in nature, such as savage mountains, harsh deserts, and crushingly dense woods, suddenly became desirable destinations. I should note that wilderness' pedigree of sublimity has not always been looked at uncritically. The concept of the sublime comes with baggage. As Christopher Hitt notes, some critics have claimed that "the sublime encounter with the wild otherness of nature has functioned to reinforce or ratify our estrangement from it."[30] However, it seems that it is precisely this estrangement that was a gateway to appreciation.

The appreciation of wilderness required considerable social engineering to arrive at a point where select members of society could begin to partake. There are two major senses, in this account, by which wilderness can be seen as a socially constructed thing. The first is the actual physical construction that drew lines between civilization and wilderness. A certain amount of differentiation was required for wilderness to manifest itself. Civilization was the contrasting feature that allowed for the appreciation of wilderness as its opposite. It was not until a certain amount of physical construction in pursuit of civilization's goals was accomplished that wilderness began to be appreciated for the ways in which it represented something different. Max Oelschlaeger argues that

the concept of wilderness could not even exist until there was something different enough to highlight it:

> Whereas the hunter-gatherer is at home anywhere in nature, the farmer creates a human settlement that is "home" as distinct from the "wilderness"; and "nature" or the "naturally existing" harbors threats to "home" and "field" as in the predations of "barbarians" or "wild men" who roam about nature, "wild animals" such as wolves and cats that prey on desirable domesticated animals such as sheep and goats, and "wild insects" such as locusts that eat grain. And, finally, the product of the agriculturist is no longer conceived as the fruit of the earth but rather won, at least in part, from nature through sweat and toil.[31]

Aside from this type of social construction, where the physical construction process of civilization gave people a way to see wilderness as something different from their own contexts and to appreciate it for the ways in which it was the antithesis of civilization, there is also the fact that wilderness appreciation requires a social context with a certain amount of distance or freedom from the inconveniences of wilderness. The shift in opinion about wilderness began with those situated furthest from the frustrations and dangers that wilderness was traditionally seen to harbor. Nash directly acknowledges the limited range of people who had access to this nascent appreciation for wilderness in stressing that it was a movement spurred on primarily by urban intellectuals: "Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities. The literary gentleman wielding a pen, not the pioneer with his axe, made the first gestures of resistance against the strong currents of antipathy."[32] The limited accessibility that certain classes had to a positive view of wilderness is especially apparent in looking at the different attitudes of early American settlers and European tourists in the New World. Nash describes the former in the following passage:

> Two components figured in the American pioneer's bias against wilderness. On the direct, physical level, it constituted a formidable threat to his very survival. The transatlantic journey and subsequent western advances stripped away

> centuries. Successive waves of frontiersmen had to contend with wilderness as uncontrolled and terrifying as that which primitive man confronted. Safety and comfort, even necessities like food and shelter, depended on overcoming the wild environment. For the first Americans, as for medieval Europeans, the forest's darkness hid savage men, wild beasts, and still stranger creatures of the imagination.… The pioneer, in short, lived too close to wilderness for appreciation. Understandably, his attitude was hostile and his dominant criteria utilitarian. The *conquest* of wilderness was his major concern.[33]

In Europe, on the other hand, the upper classes had achieved a degree of separation from wilderness sufficient for seeing its traditionally negative traits as keys to a powerful and enticing mode of aesthetic appreciation. As an example of this contrast between European and American perspectives on wilderness, Alexis de Tocqueville, a nineteenth century French aristocrat, writes "in Europe people talk a great deal of the wilds of America, but the Americans themselves never think about them; they are insensible to the wonders of inanimate nature and they may be said not to perceive the mighty forests that surround them till they fall beneath the hatchet."[34] Those who were still struggling to stabilize their way of life, and saw the wilderness as a thing to be overcome, lacked the distance to appreciate it as anything but an enemy and an inconvenience.

However, the appreciation of wilderness did not remain the sole property of European elites for long; it was soon inherited by their American counterparts as European-style civilization began to take root in the New World. John Muir's name is one of the most recognizable among these American converts and proselytes for wilderness appreciation. Muir encapsulates both the positive and negative wilderness perspectives in his account of a shepherd he worked with during his first summer in the Sierras. This shepherd was blind to "the sublime beauty of wilderness," and Muir endeavored to open his eyes: "I pressed Yosemite upon him like a missionary offering the gospel, but he would have none of it. 'Tourists that spend their money to see rocks and

falls are fools, that's all. You can't humbug me. I've been in this country too long for that.' Such souls I suppose, are asleep, or smothered and befogged beneath mean pleasures and cares."[35] This interaction is characteristic of the ways in which wilderness appreciation is limited to those with enough distance from it to be able to appreciate it for something other than the utilitarian value that it has. What Muir saw so clearly could not be seen by the shepherd, no matter how he entreated him to see.

While wilderness appreciation has become popular among larger groups of Americans since then, trickling down to various class levels, attempts at exporting this wilderness perspective to places that lack the social context for it have not always been successful. Ramachandra Guha has argued that wilderness philosophy is such a patently American concept that it does not transfer well to other communities and cultures. In his words, wilderness "is a distinctively American notion, borne out of a unique social and environmental history. The archetypal concerns of radical environmentalists in other cultural contexts are in fact quite different."[36] This points to the ways in which wilderness appreciation requires a specific social context, and that people who lack a social context that would allow them to see the American wilderness ideal as a good cannot grasp it. This all speaks to the fact that wilderness is not something in the world that we can point to and identify. Rather, one's ability to detect and experience wilderness plays a critical role in realizing it.

The trouble comes with this new form of appreciation being adopted as a normative goal for environmentalism. In order to have legislation intended to protect the particular wilderness quality that people enjoy in the environment, it becomes necessary to be precise about what exactly wilderness is. Being specific about defining wilderness

has proven to be an especially difficult task. Wilderness experiences are largely derived from places that lack apparent human impacts, which entices one to define it as something like the traditional concept of wilderness as "quintessential nonhuman nature." However, when trying to actually get down to the bottom of what does or does not count as wilderness according to this definition—and as many wilderness critics have pointed out, it is possible that nothing on earth qualifies—we cannot seem to come up with a satisfying answer. One reason for this is the relativity and flexibility that the concept seems to support. As Nash puts it:

> The Yukon trapper would consider a trip to northern Minnesota a return to civilization while for the vacationer from Chicago it is a wilderness adventure indeed. Moreover, the number of attributes of wild country is almost as great as the number of observers. And over time the general attitude toward wilderness has altered radically. Wilderness, in short, is so heavily freighted with meaning of a personal, symbolic, and changing kind as to resist easy definition.[37]

As critics have pointed out, wilderness does not seem stand up to scrutiny as a special metaphysical category that is ontologically separate from the human, and with human impacts having reached global proportions there may be nothing left on earth that could be considered a pristine wilderness. These difficulties, coupled with the fact that people continue to experience wilderness in the world in a way that is highly dependent on their particular social context, suggest that traditional accounts of wilderness fail to track something about how we experience it. In the next section I propose an account of wilderness that seems to do a better job of preserving our intuitions about it.

1.6 Wilderness as an Aesthetic Concept

Rather than being a concept that relies on the potential to support a dualistic account of humans and nature or on its existence as a real feature of the world, I suggest that it is more helpful to think of wilderness as an aesthetic concept. One way that such a

conception is helpful in ways that traditional conceptions are not is that it is able to navigate the gap between the apparent lack of a real world referent for wilderness and the fact that we continue to experience wilderness, even in places that seem very far removed from any standard definition of wilderness, like Central Park. These sorts of experiences seem to defy our attempts at formulating precise definitions. Nash points this out in the following passage:

> The difficulty is that while the word is a noun it acts like an adjective. There is no specific material object that is wilderness. The term designates a quality (as the "-ness" suggests) that produces a certain mood or feeling in a given individual and, as a consequence, may be assigned by that person to a specific place. Because of this subjectivity a universally acceptable definition of wilderness is elusive. One man's wilderness may be another's roadside picnic ground.[38]

The tighter we try to squeeze the concept of wilderness in order to nail it down, the faster it seems to slip out of our hands. This experience of wilderness that seems too slippery to capture with a single definition is consistent with how we experience and identify aesthetic concepts. Wilderness has been historically treated as if it were a thing in the world that we can point to or identify based on sufficient or necessary conditions, as if the word wilderness were analogous to something like “igneous rock” or “fir tree.” However, it turns out that wilderness isn’t a thing in the world in this sense because it is difficult or impossible to actually have a category of wilderness that consistently corresponds to anything specific in the world. This does not mean that the concept of wilderness is irrelevant, it only means that wilderness, as we experience it, is a different kind of thing. It is something that we cannot find in the world by following a formula.

How is it then that we have such a long history of treating wilderness as if it were a thing that we could identify based on particular criteria? Many people have attempted to describe wilderness in terms of qualifications. Most famously the Wilderness Act of 1964

reads, “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”[39] Robert Marshall, in giving his own definition, uses the word wilderness “to denote a region which contains no permanent inhabitants, possesses no possibility of conveyance by any mechanical means and is sufficiently spacious that a person in crossing it must have the experience of sleeping out.”[40] These sorts of definitions have often been given as criteria for wilderness, but I think that it may be more helpful to look at them as examples of the types of qualities that contribute to the wilderness character of an environment. These are justifications for a wilderness, not sufficient or necessary conditions. When looked at in this way, the word wilderness is used and applied in a manner that is very close, or identical, to the ways in which we use and apply aesthetic concepts. As an example of what I mean by “aesthetic concept,” I will lean on the account given by Frank Sibley:

> We say that a novel has a great number of characters and deals with life in a manufacturing town; that a painting uses pale colors, predominantly blues and greens, and has kneeling figures in the foreground; that the theme in a fugue is inverted at such a point and that there is a stretto at the close; that the action of a play takes place in the span of one day and that there is a reconciliation scene in the fifth act. Such remarks may be made by, and such features pointed out to, anyone with normal eyes, ears, and intelligence. On the other hand, we also say that a poem is tightly-knit or deeply moving; that a picture lacks balance, or has a certain serenity and repose, or that the grouping of the figures sets up an exciting tension; that the characters in a novel never really come to life, or that a certain episode strikes a false note. The making of such remarks as these requires the exercise of taste, perceptiveness, or sensitivity, of aesthetic discrimination or appreciation.[41]

Wilderness, according to my view, is a concept that fits in the latter category. To apply the term ‘wilderness’ to some environment is not a simple matter of perception that can be intersubjectively verified. It requires the exercise of one’s taste. This taste is the result

of particular social circumstances that have allowed it to develop and flourish. Someone who is improperly socially situated will not be able to appreciate wilderness, no matter how much you appeal to all the ways in which the environment lacks human impacts. The previous anecdote about Muir and the shepherd is characteristic of the ways in which wilderness appreciation is limited to those with enough distance from it to be able to appreciate it for something other than its utilitarian value.

Wilderness appreciation being limited in this way is the basis for another critique of wilderness as being inappropriate for an environmental ethic. The fact that taste for wilderness has historically been limited to those of a more elite social class has been identified as problematic. Cronon makes this the focus of one of his critiques, where he writes:

> … the decades following the Civil War saw more and more of the nation's wealthiest citizens seeking out wilderness for themselves. The elite passion for wild land took many forms: enormous estates in the Adirondacks and elsewhere (disingenuously called "camps" despite their many servants and amenities), cattle ranches for would-be rough riders on the Great Plains, guided big-game hunting trips in the Rockies, and luxurious resort hotels wherever railroads pushed their way into sublime landscapes. Wilderness suddenly emerged as the landscape of choice for elite tourists, who brought with them strikingly urban ideas of the countryside through which they traveled. For them wild land was not a site for productive labor and not a permanent home; rather, it was a place of recreation. One went to the wilderness not as a producer but as a consumer, hiring guides and other back country residents who could serve as romantic surrogates for the rough riders and hunters of the frontier if one was willing to overlook their new status as employees and servants of the rich.[42]

Cronon's main criticism here is that wilderness has often been treated as if it were an absolute and universal truth about certain environments when, in fact, its appreciation is something of an elite activity traditionally restricted to the upper echelons of society.

Pierre Bourdieu's account of aesthetic taste captures what is uncomfortable about relying on wilderness as a normative goal for environmentalism. For Bourdieu, aesthetic

tastes require social conditions to be met in order to have that taste developed and fostered, and this taste becomes a way of entrenching the class distinctions that allowed for a disparity to exist in the first place. One example of this would be taste for opera music. In order to develop taste for something like opera music, one must actually be able to attend operas and experience them. This taste can be further developed by having friends that attend the opera and have opinions about it, as well as being raised in a family that places a high value on operatic education. Bourdieu's account of taste is that it is a way for these higher tiers of society to distinguish themselves from the lower tiers, and through this enforcement of tastes that are appropriate for each level of society, the upper class maintains some level of cultural hegemony over the masses.

In addition to the ways that wilderness as an aesthetic concept accounts for the uneven development of a sensitivity for wilderness appreciation, it is also able to account for the apparent difficulty in nailing down a satisfying definition. Being irreducible to necessary or sufficient conditions is a key feature of aesthetic concepts themselves. According to Sibley's formulation, "There are no sufficient conditions, no non-aesthetic features such that the presence of some set or number of them will beyond question justify or warrant the application of an aesthetic term."[43] These aesthetic terms are things that we can recognize in an object, but there is no way to determine whether or not they will apply in any specific case given only the on-paper non-aesthetic features of the object. Following Sibley's account, application of an aesthetic term is justified by appealing to the non-aesthetic features of the object, but it is not the case that the non-aesthetic features will ever be enough to independently confirm the validity of an aesthetic term in being applied to the object in question:

> ...we cannot make any general statement of the form "If the vase is pale pink, somewhat curving, lightly mottled, and so forth, it will be delicate, cannot but be delicate." Nor again can one say any such things here as "Being tall and thin is not enough alone to ensure that a vase is delicate, but if it is, for example, slightly curving and pale colored (and so forth) as well, it cannot be denied that it is." Things may be described to us in non-aesthetic terms as fully as we please but we are not thereby put in the position of having to admit (or being unable to deny) that they are delicate or graceful or garish or exquisitely balanced.[44]

Much of the wilderness criticism project has concerned itself with showing this to be true of wilderness as well. In saying that a vase is delicate, we may appeal to its pale pink color, the way it curves somewhat, or is lightly mottled, and give these as reasons for the vase's delicacy. Similarly with wilderness, we appeal to the lack of human impact in an area and give this as a reason for our sense that it is in fact a wilderness. And just as it is true that these non-aesthetic features of the vase cannot independently require us to recognize it as being delicate, the lack of human interference in an environment is not an automatic admission of its status as a wilderness. First, as many critics have argued, there are no places left that actually have a total lack of human influence, and yet we continue to have wilderness experiences in spite of this. Conversely, there are in fact many places that lack any human interference in their natural history, and yet they have gone ignored as potential wildernesses.

1.7 Non-Human Nature that is not Wilderness

The nature devouring embrace of the human has, so far, only managed to completely envelop this singular planet that we call home, a mere "mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam."[45] Saying that nature or wilderness is no more because of what we have done to this particular planet implies a severely impoverished view of what parts of the universe are relevant. In the past, the fact that the universe beyond our own planet was 'natural' or a 'wilderness' would be true only in a very trivial way. Without the

ability to make significant impacts on these environments, the lack of human impacts in such places does not seem as special as it might back home. However, this limitation is quickly being stripped away. Humans are rapidly developing the potential to significantly impact environments other than Earth.

In the 1940's humans attained the technological prowess required to physically extend human impacts into space. In 1961, the first human in history traveled to outer space, and later that same year, a man walked on the surface of the moon for the first time. Such outer space excursions, while previously the domain of government agencies, have recently attracted the attention of commercial enterprise. This new industry typically takes the form of tourism or government contract work, but there has been increasing interest in the potential economic opportunities presented by asteroid and moon mining.[46] While these industries may still be in early stages, we have already managed to cause real environmental problems in space. One example of this would be the issue of space debris. A 2017 NASA report states that "More than 500,000 pieces of debris, or 'space junk,' are tracked as they orbit the Earth."[47] There are many very real concerns about human impacts on space and other worlds that often offer unique challenges in environmental ethics due to the novelty of these environments.

However, in spite of this example of extant quintessential nonhuman nature that is quickly becoming reachable, and therefore threatened, there has been little to no discussion of such places as extraterrestrial wildernesses and whether they ought to be preserved as such. The rush to accept the concept of wilderness as being outdated due to the lack of real-world referents implies that these environmentalists do not see other

planets, or the space in between, as wilderness at all, despite the fact that these are environments that have little to no history of human impact.

Aside from what might be examples of wilderness beyond earth, there are places back home that can inspire similar doubt about the wilderness status of an environment that represents a relatively strong example of quintessential nonhuman nature. One example is the Giant's Causeway in Northern Ireland. This is a small site, and is not a wilderness by most definitions (which typically include a clause concerning minimal size requirements), but what is important to note is that it is a natural formation that does not quite feel natural. This much is obvious enough from the name "Giant's Causeway." When happening upon this rock formation that has a regularity we have come to expect from human-made artifacts, it does not immediately strike one as natural. We associate the 'natural' with more chaos and variation than is immediately apparent at this site. While there are many examples of nature appearing to follow a kind of pattern, such as the many instances of symmetry or the golden ratio that we find in natural objects, too much regularity can strike one as distinctly human. This is true even if there have been no actual human hands in the creation of the object or place. The Giant's Causeway seems to be too regular to be natural, and so it has been named in such a way that implies that it was intentionally created, not by humans, but by giants. Without wading too deep into what the 'nature' status of a giant might be, if giants existed and were able to build something like roads, I do not think that most people would consider these roads to be natural objects in the way we think of a beaver dam or a spider web. A real history free from human impact or interference is not necessarily enough for a place to be a

wilderness. Our idea of wilderness is more selective than nonhuman conditions, that definitions of wilderness rely on, would lead one to believe.

Another example of this would be grasslands and wetlands. While there were once many areas in the United States of America that might have counted as wilderness areas given the criteria laid out by the Wilderness Act, some of these took longer to recognize than others. Wetlands are a prime example of this. It was not until wetlands and the ecological communities they contained were facing existential threats from developers that there was a push to recognize them as wilderness areas. The history of wilderness appreciation leans towards more majestic sites of sublime beauty. Mountains, forests, canyons, these were all easy to recognize as wildernesses, and so such places make up the bulk of all areas recognized as wildernesses in the United States, and all of the recognized wildernesses up until 1978, when the Everglades National Park was inducted.

While wetlands have come to be recognized as wilderness areas with the help of the Wilderness Act, grasslands have not fared so well. In the United States there are many grasslands that could qualify as wilderness areas given the requirements laid out by the Wilderness Act, and yet a grassland has never had the status of 'wilderness' conferred upon it via this legislation. The issue cannot be with the criteria, as many grasslands in the United States easily meet them, it is an issue with perception. Grasslands simply are not the kinds of things that people recognize as wildernesses. There is a certain tameness or simplicity in them that does not reflect the common intuition of wilderness. A wilderness, it seems, cannot merely be nonhuman nature in order to be considered a

wilderness. Grasslands seem to lack the gravitas of other more traditional wilderness areas, and so they have gone unacknowledged.

Our experience of an environment as a wilderness is not guaranteed by a lack of human impact. Conversely, the presence of human impact does not automatically disqualify an environment from being a wilderness. Rather, these determinations of wilderness are made by individuals who have developed an appreciation and a taste for wilderness. An aesthetic conception of wilderness accounts for the difficulty in nailing down a consistent definition for the concept by avoiding the necessity to do so. At the same time, the non-aesthetic features of an environment that have often been touted as necessary or sufficient conditions for wilderness need not be discarded. The roles that such features have in contributing to one's experience of an environment as a wilderness need not change. These features of an environment can be appealed to as justifications for why one experiences that environment as a wilderness, and they may contribute to one's ability to see such an area as a wilderness. The only difference is that no amount or lack of such non-aesthetic features can confirm or deny its status as a wilderness independent of an exercise of taste.

2. What Can an Aesthetic Concept of Wilderness Offer Environmentalism?

The question that remains is what work does an aesthetic conception of wilderness do for us? If wilderness is better thought of as an aesthetic concept, like delicacy or grace, and not a meaningful ontological concept or thing in the world as it has often been conceived, then some reevaluation of wilderness criticism is necessary. The conceptual arguments against wilderness attempt to undermine wilderness by exposing the human/nature dualism that it rests on as unsupportable. Wilderness as an aesthetic

concept would not rely on humans and nature being two separate, ontologically distinct, categories. These categories need only exist as separate and distinct insofar as we can perceive them as such. There need not be a deep ontological or metaphysical distinction between the humans and the natural, all that would matter for the appreciation of wilderness as an aesthetic concept is our ability to distinguish one from the other. Recognizable differences are what allows us to appreciate something aesthetically. Sibley points this out himself,

> Certain phenomena which are outstanding or remarkable or unusual catch the eye or ear, seize our attention and interest, and move us to surprise, admiration, delight, fear, or distaste. Children begin by reacting in these ways to spectacular sunsets, woods in autumn, roses, dandelions, and other striking and colorful objects, and it is in these circumstances that we find ourselves introducing general aesthetic words like "lovely," "pretty," and "ugly." It is not an accident that the first lessons in aesthetic appreciation consist in drawing the child's attention to roses rather than to grass; nor is it surprising that we remark to him on the autumn colors rather than on the subdued tints of winter. We all of us, not only children, pay aesthetic attention more readily and easily to such outstanding and easily noticeable things.[48]

The difference between the 'human' and the 'natural' is certainly distinct enough for us to detect an aesthetic difference, just as we appreciate the meaningful aesthetic difference between roses and grass. These differences may not add up to a distinction that critics like Vogel are satisfied with as being ontologically meaningful, but the fact that they are recognized by us as differences allows for us to make aesthetic distinctions. Vogel says that "When I take a piece of flint and shape it into an arrowhead, I do extinguish its "not-made-by-a-human"-ness, to be sure, but this is true merely by definition: there's nothing else, nothing ontologically deep¸ that I extinguish in addition."[49] There may be nothing ontologically significant about the presence of human impact in some object as opposed to the lack of it in another object, but that is not to say that there is no significance of any

kind to the distinction. If we as a culture have come to value the “not-made-by-human”-ness of objects as a matter of aesthetic preference, then there is a sense in which the distinction is in fact a meaningful one.

The criticism that wilderness is a socially-constructed thing, and thus fails at being the very thing it is meant to epitomize is true only in a very trivial sense. Anything that has been given the status of ‘wilderness’ has been in some way shaped by human perception as a prerequisite for that title to have been conferred in the first place. Furthermore, the ways in which civilization must have grown to a point that it could represent a threat to wilderness in order for the appreciation of wilderness as an aesthetic good to develop points to the ways in which it has been socially constructed. By drawing a circle around wilderness with our roads and cities we have set boundaries on it, yoked it, and tamed it. Such things should be antithetical to what wilderness refers to in the world, or so the criticism goes. This is only true if one believes that wilderness is meant to represent something completely free from human impact, but wilderness as an aesthetic category is much more flexible and able to endure some human infringement upon its natural sovereignty without being utterly destroyed.

The naturalist criticism also only holds against an understanding of wilderness as a meaningful ontological category. It is quite possible that humans are just as natural as everything else, and so it might be difficult or impossible to justify humans as having a special status as exceptions to nature. However, this conflation in no way interferes with our ability to distinguish between something with more or less of a human footprint. Or ability to detect something like wilderness depends not on the absolute lack of the human in its natural history, but on our taste for certain features that we have come to associate

with wilderness, such as a relative lack of human interference. Just as certain non-aesthetic features of a work of art will contribute to some aesthetic concept being present in the work, the lack of human interference in an object will add to the aesthetic experience of wilderness, but it will not automatically make an object or environment a wilderness one. The naturalist criticism of wilderness is focused purely on wilderness as an ontological category that relies on the ability to produce a meaningful distinction between humans and nature. This distinction may not actually exist, but wilderness as an aesthetic concept does not need to be a viable ontological category in the robust way that critics would like in order to be a meaningful signification, it only needs to be discernible to human perception.

Similarly the criticism that wilderness management is a contradiction is only possible if 'wilderness' is something that relies directly on its freedom from human intervention. An environment can have a natural history somewhat at odds with the traditional ideals of wilderness as quintessential nonhuman nature, and yet people may continue to have wilderness experiences there and think of it as a wilderness based on their aesthetic preferences. In wilderness criticism there is a cluster of critiques that all share a concern for the lack of a real world referent for the wilderness concept and argue that this undermines its usage and validity. As mentioned in Section 1, the reduction in wilderness that comes with the flowering of civilization has landed us in a situation where we have developed an interest in protecting wilderness from human impacts only after it has been effectively conquered. In trying to save those few extant wilderness spaces that are left, we are faced with the paradoxical task of managing and maintaining something that is unmade by management and maintenance. If we abandon the idea that

wilderness relies on the actual lack of human impact present, the human impact that is the result of maintaining wilderness areas is no longer an existential threat to the place as a wilderness. This is reflected in European definitions of wilderness that do not require the same stringent lack of human impact that the Wilderness Act of 1964 requires.[50]

2.1 Wilderness and the Japanese Aesthetics of Imperfection

Another way that an aesthetic conception of wilderness might be helpful is that it can more easily be compared to other aesthetic traditions that may be able to offer novel solutions to problems in environmental philosophy. The Japanese aesthetic tradition of appreciating imperfection offers one particularly strong parallel. The development of a taste for wilderness is surprisingly similar to the development of an aesthetics of imperfection in Heian era Japan. Wilderness, as has been noted, was not always a positive concept. Initially it was a baleful threat to mankind's civilization, something to be opposed and resisted. This was later transformed into something that could be appreciated by those with a certain amount of security against it. The Japanese aesthetics of imperfection does not have the same stakes as wilderness, there are no life and death struggles here, and yet the process of transforming the negative concept of imperfection into a positive one, through distance, remains the same.

Imperfection is typically seen as mitigating, rather than enhancing, the aesthetic value of an object that it manifests in. This is intuitive for us in the west, but it was also seen as a default point of view in Japan. Yoshida Kenkō, a thirteenth century monk and advocate for the aesthetic appeal of the imperfect, acknowledges this tendency himself in saying, "People commonly regret that the cherry blossoms scatter or that the moon sinks in the sky, and this is natural; but only an exceptionally insensitive man would say, 'This

branch and that branch have lost their blossoms. There is nothing worth seeing now.'"[51] While Kenkō alludes to some of the particular ways that imperfection can affect our aesthetic appreciation of a thing, there is an almost unlimited number of ways that imperfection can manifest. To constrain this concept of imperfection, I will turn to a few examples of the particular objects and types of imperfection that were of interest to some Japanese aesthetes.

Early examples come from Sei Shōnagon's eleventh century work, *The Pillow Book,* in which she writes how she is repulsed by "a new cloth screen with a colorful and cluttered painting of many cherry blossoms," and prefers instead the excitement from "notic(ing) that one's elegant Chinese mirror has become a little cloudy."[52] Here we can see a shift towards an appreciation of properties that would normally be considered aesthetically damaging, such as the imperfection represented by decay and degradation. Kenkō offers a perspective that is particularly characteristic of Japanese aesthetics: "Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless? To long for the moon while looking on the rain, to lower the blinds and be unaware of the passing of the spring—these are even more deeply moving. Branches about to blossom or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration."[53] Kenkō acknowledges the states that are typically seen as most desirable—such as the cherry blossoms in full bloom, or the moon in a clear sky—and goes on to defend states that are conventionally considered less worthy of appreciation as actually being aesthetically superior. For a further look at specific instances of imperfection that came to be appreciated by some Japanese aesthetes, Yuriko Saito offers the following:

> By far the most conspicuous examples can be found in tea wares and utensils for the ceremony. Impoverished-looking and irregularly shaped Korean peasants'

> bowls, often with chips and cracks, were highly esteemed for use in the tea ceremony. The accidental damages to tea wares or signs of their age did not stop their use; either the bowls were left unrepaired or the trace of repair was left visible. Furthermore, many tea wares were cherished precisely because of these seeming defects.[54]

As we can see from these examples, there are a wide range of objects and circumstances that the Japanese aesthetic appreciation for imperfection applies to. From one's experience viewing natural phenomena to the particular form and shape of everyday objects, it is not hard to see that the ways in which these fell short of perfection would have been customarily regarded as aesthetically damaging.

This Japanese example of imperfection and the western wilderness concept both represent particularly poignant accounts aesthetic taste in their consistency with Bourdieu's account of taste as social distinction. Japanese aesthetic taste for imperfection was primarily the domain of the more elite strata of society, as with the early appreciation of wilderness. According to Saito:

> It is noteworthy that the proponents of this aesthetics of imperfection and insufficiency came from the position of social privilege and cultural sophistication. For example, Sei Shōnagon, born into a family of noted poets, belonged to the cultural elite of her time by serving an empress. Similarly Kenkō, coming from a family of noted diviners serving emperors, tutored a young prince and enjoyed easy access to the nobility…. Neither of them was underprivileged with no choice but to deal daily with simple materials, defective objects, and old, worn-out items. Rather, their privileged position afforded them the luxury of adopting a purely aesthetic attitude toward the signs of insufficiency and impoverishment.[55]

Not only were the holders of aesthetic appreciation in the cases of both wilderness and imperfection alike, but the disconnect between classes in their opinions on the subject was similarly vast. Take, for example, this seventeenth century record of tea master Sen no Rikyū's teachings and note the resemblance it bears to Tocqueville's invective against the American settlers and their inability to appreciate wilderness. "Concerning the tea

utensils for the small tea room…. It is recommended that they should, in every aspect, fall rather short of perfection. There are people who find it repugnant to have a tiniest defect in them. This I do not understand."[56] Muir's proselytizing with the shepherd in the Sierras shows a similar level of disconnection, their social circumstances prevented them from seeing eye to eye on the subject of appreciating wilderness.

A critique of the aesthetics of imperfection by Dazai Shundai, an eighteenth-century Confucian scholar, seems to explain some of the shepherd's exasperation against Muir: "Whatever tea dilettantes do is a copy of the poor and humble. It may be that the rich and noble have a reason to find pleasure in copying the poor and humble. But why would those who are, from the outset, poor and humble find pleasure in further copying the poor and humble?"[57] Here the shepherd and the poor and humble from Shundai's critique find themselves in a similar condition. The shepherd, who lives and works in a wilderness environment, can only see the elites' willingness to spend money to experience some aspect of his everyday life as foolishness. Similarly, the poor and humble, who may use whatever rough or broken tea ware they have available, would see little sense in exulting in these imperfections that are common in their everyday lives. They lack the distance of the tea dilettantes which allows them to appreciate their aesthetic value. Even if this distance does not constitute an escape from a life or death struggle, as may be the case in wilderness appreciation, an escape from the ordinary or typical features of one's own life seem to be important aspects of these modes of aesthetic appreciation.

Each of these is an interesting example of Bourdieu's social distinction theory of taste because the actual object of appreciation is not out of reach of the lower classes, but

it is this closeness itself which ensures that the aesthetic appreciation of the object remains limited to the social elite. Japanese aesthetic appreciation of imperfection and western appreciation of wilderness requires distance from the object in order to appreciate it aesthetically. This is an aesthetic appreciation that is restricted to an elite class in a much more severe way than typical modes of aesthetic appreciation, where the difficulty is in restricted access to the object. Instead, these modes of aesthetic appreciation require a certain level of social distinction as an innate precondition, making them particularly strong examples of Bourdieu's theory of taste. According to Bourdieu, "nothing is more distinctive, more distinguished, than the capacity to confer aesthetic status on objects that are banal or even 'common' (because the 'common' people make them their own, especially for aesthetic purposes), or the ability to apply the principles of a 'pure' aesthetic to the most everyday choices of everyday life, e.g., in cooking, clothing or decoration."[58] This limitation is one of the reasons that critics have argued against wilderness, saying that it is an inappropriate guide for environmental practice.

While wilderness appreciation may have started out as being restricted to only the highest rungs of society, it need not remain so exclusive. Japanese appreciation for imperfection has permeated their society at large, throughout the various ranks of social hierarchy. This is due, in part, to a concentrated effort to educate the public about traditional Japanese modes of aesthetic appreciation. The appreciation of imperfection in Japan is a unique cultural asset that people take pride in, and it is thanks, in part, to this outreach that it has been able to transcend the class limits that it was once bound to. Wilderness in the west has followed a similar trajectory. Appreciation of wilderness is now more common than ever throughout the various class levels of society, but we might

extend it even further through active efforts to embrace this mode of aesthetic appreciation as an American cultural tradition.

To turn to a specific way that the Japanese aesthetics of imperfection may be able to offer solutions to a philosophical problem I would like to address certain comparisons between art and wilderness. In particular, Robert Elliot argues that the practice of human restoration of nature is similar to art forgery, and that even if we attain a superficial similarity with the end product, there is something important about the original that is not reproduced in the forgery.[59] Part of the reason that an exact replica of a work of art loses value in comparison to the original, according to Elliot, is that the special history, or the genesis of the object in question, is different. An example that Elliot gives is as follows:

> Imagine that I have a piece of sculpture in my garden that is too fragile to be moved. The sculpture is a fine work and I judge it to be of considerable aesthetic merit. The local government authority, however, intends to lay drainage pipes just where the sculpture happens to be. Despite my protests they refuse to relent. The pipes, they insist, must go exactly where my sculpture is and consequently it will be destroyed. However, I am then told that really I have no cause to despair, no cause to lament the prospective loss of aesthetic value, because the destroyed sculpture will be replaced with an exactly similar artefact, with something identical in all its intrinsic properties to the original. I am assured, moreover, that not even experts could tell the replacement was not the original, at least not without very carefully tracing the history of the object before them. Maybe I should doubt these assurances, but assume that I do not. Do I still have reason to be concerned? Do I still have reason to think intrinsic aesthetic value will be lost?[60]

Elliot's conclusion is that there is an intrinsic aesthetic value in the original artwork that is built partially on its unique genesis and history. Even a perfect replica would only be an exact copy in a temporally limited way, and would fail to replicate the particular history of the object in question. For Elliot, this particular history is an important source of aesthetic value.

The tradition of aesthetic appreciation of imperfect or broken objects in Japan puts a similar value on genesis and history. According to Saito, “A broken ware, for example, intrigues our imagination by making us wonder about the history behind the object: What was its optimal condition like? How did the damage occur? What aesthetic value was found in it by the tea master who decided to keep using it?”[61] As part of the interest in an imperfect object is the history it hints at with its scars, the actual history of the object can have an effect on its aesthetic appeal to those who know or are able to detect it. This is important because some of these objects had a history that marked them as the result of human artifice rather than the serendipitous and accidental forces of nature, just as in a managed or restored wilderness and a hypothetical pristine wilderness. Saito writes, “One of the accomplishments of the tea masters was to go beyond merely appreciating these signs of imperfection by actually creating the appearance of imperfection and impoverishment. For example. In pursuit of domestically produced tea bowls, tea masters commissioned potters to emulate the plain rusticity of Korean wares.”[62] This interest in imperfection, even if the imperfection was intentional and artificial, was carried beyond the point of having wares crafted from the ground up to be rustic, and to extremes where objects were actively marred in order to make them more aesthetically pleasing. Saito includes an example of this:

> Or consider another anecdote of a tea master and his disciple who found a perfectly formed flower vase with symmetrical handles. The master purchased the vase and the disciple was invited to the tea ceremony the following day. The disciple hid a hammer in his sleeve, hoping to make the vase even more appealing by breaking one of its handles. To his surprise, the disciple found that the master had already broken a handle to diminish the well formed appearance of the vase.[63]

Such a practice would have appeared absurd to those members of the population that lacked the required distance for this mode of aesthetic appreciation, and some of these tea

masters were mocked for their aesthetic proclivities. For example, sixteenth century tea master, Furuta Oribe, was ridiculed by a contemporary who said, "This man destroys treasures. He trims a scroll to improve its shape, and he breaks an unblemished tea bowl or a tea caddy and then repairs it to make it more amusing."[64] For these tea masters, the aesthetic value of the imperfect did not depend entirely on the serendipitous nature of its blemishes, they could achieve the effect through artifice and intentional human interference.

Some Japanese commentators also acknowledge the important distinctions between an object whose imperfections were truly the result of natural chance, and an object whose imperfections were the result of an intentional design. Yanagi Sōetsu, a twentieth century Japanese art critic, recognizes the naturally imperfect object as the superior one, stating that the difference is "between things born and things made."[65] Such an inclination is reflected in Elliot's anxiety about having his sculpture replaced with a replica:

> While I may concede that the replica sculpture would be better than nothing at all, it is utterly improbable that I would accept it as full compensation for the loss of aesthetic value resulting from the destruction of the original. Nor is my reluctance entirely explained by the monetary value of the original work. Indeed we can imagine that I am offered appropriate monetary compensation as well as the replacement sculpture. My reluctance springs, rather, from the fact that I value the original sculpture as an aesthetic object, which means that, among other things, I value it for its specific genesis and history.[66]

This is further reflected in frustrations about the disappearance of wilderness. It is something that cannot be replaced or restored, and so we are losing something in a final and absolute way. Consider this passage from McKibben:

> A child born today might swim in a stream free of toxic waste, but he won't ever see a natural stream. If the waves crash up against the beach, eroding the dunes and destroying homes, it is not the awesome power of Mother Nature. It is the

> awesome power of Mother Nature as altered by the awesome power of man who has overpowered in a century the processes that have been slowly evolving and changing of their own accord since the earth was born.[67]

It is not enough, it would seem, to have streams free of toxic waste. Even if we manage to achieve the monumental goal of cleaning our planet and restoring it to some mythical ecologically optimal condition, we seem to have lost something in the process. McKibben claims that what has been lost is nature itself.

However, in spite of the aesthetic advantage that pristine wilderness or naturally imperfect objects have when compared with managed wilderness or objects designed or intentionally modified to be imperfect, the latter maintain their own aesthetic advantage over the more thoroughgoing human artifacts. The Japanese tea masters made the choice to mar certain objects in order to aesthetically enhance them. These tea masters would have full knowledge of the history and origin of those imperfections, and knew them for what they were, the result of intentional human intervention. In spite of this hurdle, they still preferred these artificially imperfect objects to perfect ones, and so chose to apply their hammers. Wilderness areas that some would claim are not really wilderness due to the significant amount of human interference involved in their existence and maintenance are not unlike these artificially broken objects. Despite being the result of human action, they can still be aesthetically closer to a 'real' wilderness than a distinctly human environment, such as a shopping mall or a car park. While there may be no place left on earth that we can consider a pristine wilderness free from any human stain, there are places that are closer to this condition than others. Many of these places exist only because of the work that humans have done to protect them, maintain them, and manage them. They may not be completely free of human influence, but they offer an experience

of wilderness not unlike the vase that was broken by the tea master's hammer, a place that offers guests the illusion of aesthetic beauty, and an object that its creators would acknowledge as superior to a completely humanized environment. Elliot might not be satisfied with his statue being replaced by an aesthetically inferior one, but the option of retaining the original seems to have long been off the table. We must now choose between a statue that is superficially similar, or one that might be horrifying to the senses.

2.2 Wilderness and Normative Burdens

One of the important features of wilderness as an aesthetic concept is that it does not carry the same normative weight that traditional conceptions of wilderness may have had. If we begin to think about wilderness as an aesthetic feature of an environment, we are less likely to wield it as a normative excuse for unjust behavior. One example, given by Cronon, is as follows:

> The movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas followed hard on the heels of the final Indian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations. The myth of the wilderness as "virgin," uninhabited land had always been especially cruel when seen from the perspective of the Indians who had once called that land home. Now they were forced to move elsewhere, with the result that tourists could safely enjoy the illusion that they were seeing their nation in its pristine, original state, in the new morning of God's own creation.[68]

Aesthetic concepts are typically seen as being less normatively important than concepts of justice, and acknowledging our predilection for wilderness areas as being rooted in aesthetic value rather than in some deeper intrinsic moral value could contribute towards a weaker concept of wilderness that is less permissive of these sorts of actions.

Another criticism of wilderness is that it focuses the efforts of environmentalists on environmental problems that are unjustly limited in scope. Environmentalism, ostensibly, should include concern for urban environments and the problems that arise

there, particularly because it is these sorts of environments that actually *environ* significant portions of the population. However, environmentalism has been largely focused on the exact opposite; environments that lack the presence of humans altogether. This criticism of wilderness addresses both the concept as a guide for environmental thinking and the actual practices of environmentalists, which are both preoccupied with a thin slice of what environmentalism ought to be concerned with. By lowering the normative significance of wilderness by thinking of it as an aesthetic concept, there is a chance that the weightier problems of justice that are associated with urban environments can more easily come to the forefront of environmental concern.

Part of the reason that this might be possible is that an explicit acknowledgment of wilderness as an aesthetic concept implicitly acknowledges the ways in which it is seductive. Positive aesthetic concepts, by definition, are the sorts of things that we are attracted to. If we consciously acknowledge this attraction, we are in a better position to actively work against our biases where appropriate. In situations where aesthetic concepts are able to masquerade as other sorts of values, it is easy for them to motivate us in ways that we might not have considered had they been acknowledged as aesthetic concepts from the outset.

As an example, the preference for aesthetic concepts like simplicity in the sciences can manifest in epistemically damaging ways. When new evidence or theories point us in a direction away from some aesthetic ideal, we might offer resistance to this change in spite of the ways in which this new theory represents a higher level of understanding. The Copernican model of the heliocentric universe that used perfect circles to represent the orbits described by the planets is one example. Over time, these

perfect circles were replaced by ellipses as a result of Kepler's developments and the predictive success that this model had over the Copernican model. In spite of this predictive success, which should have resulted in the quick adoption of the predictively superior model, Kepler's model with its elliptical orbits was slow to be accepted. According to Milena Ivanova, "This transition was not quick, since the community was reluctant to deviate from the established aesthetic canon, and endorse what was considered an imperfect geometrical shape to describe planetary motion."[69] Over time the overwhelming amount of empirical support for Kepler's model resulted in its adoption over the Copernican model, but the magnetic pull that the more aesthetically pleasing model had on the minds of the community, in spite of empirical evidence that contradicted it, should serve as a warning about the seductive nature of aesthetic concepts. Tania Lombrozo, in a psychological study, draws our attention to how simplicity can be cognitively bewitching even when we are given empirical evidence that should point us in another direction:

> In one set of studies, participants selected between explanations for an individual's symptoms that appealed to either a single common cause (simple) or to two independent causes (complex), and they were additionally provided with information about the base rate of each disease. Under these conditions, explanation choices were sensitive to both simplicity and probability. When two candidate explanations were equally likely, a majority of participants selected the simpler explanation. It was not until the complex explanation was 10-fold more likely than the simpler alternative that a majority of participants selected it as the most satisfying explanation for the symptoms. It thus appears that, when the probability of an explanation is uncertain, the relative simplicity of an explanation has a significant effect on its perceived quality.[70]

This preference for the more aesthetically appealing option even in the face of a more likely explanation is not limited to laymen. Certain scientists have even been so entranced by the appeal of aesthetic concepts that they believe the discovery of aesthetic

goods in nature is the ultimate goal of science itself. For example, Subrahmanyan Chandrasekhar, a Nobel laureate, says "in the arts as in the sciences, the quest is for the very same elusive quality: beauty."[71] Some have gone even further, and suggest that beauty is a special mark of truth in a theory. One such person is Paul Dirac, who states that "one has great confidence in a theory arising from its great beauty, quite independently of its detailed successes.[72] He even goes so far as to say that "one has an overpowering belief that [the theory's] foundations must be correct quite independently of its agreement with observation."[73] Another example of this sort of sentiment from within the scientific community comes from Werner Heisenberg, an important figure in the development of quantum mechanics and another Nobel laureate, who says that "if nature leads us to mathematical forms of great simplicity and beauty we cannot help thinking that they are 'true,' that they reveal a genuine feature of nature."[74] On the surface, these kinds of comments seem like they might have originated in the arts rather than the sciences with their similarities to Keats' "Beauty is truth, and truth beauty,—that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."[75]All these accounts by scientists who believe in the truth bearing properties of beauty might simply be expressions of the seductive power that aesthetic goods have over us.

The power that aesthetic virtues have over human cognition seems dangerous to underestimate, and so we should not hesitate to use this label in cases where it might be applicable so as to better gauge what our specific interest in the object or place in question might actually be. Recognizing the preservation of wilderness as an aesthetic attraction rather than a moral calling represents a significant constraint on the kinds of

practices or actions we are willing to adopt in pursuit of preserving or protecting wilderness.

This is particularly important given the history of wilderness as a sacred thing. There is little that people will not do in pursuit of some ideal that they have determined to be holy or virtuous. If the preservation of wilderness is a divine calling, the displacement of one or two Indian tribes may seem like a small price to pay. An aesthetic conception of wilderness may help prevent this conceit by directly acknowledging what kind of value wilderness represents. According to Kevin DeLuca and Anne Demo, "The struggle to preserve wilderness must not center on issuing proclamations of divine revelations of wilderness as sacred spaces and denouncements of the unimpressed as maleficent or ignorant. Instead, preservation must rest on the recognition that wilderness is not a divine text but a significant social achievement."[76] Wilderness as an aesthetic concept seems to fit this requirement.

A possible concern about the lack of normative weight that an aesthetic concept of wilderness carries compared to traditional wilderness conceptions is that it might work against current legislative options for environmental protection that use wilderness as their key normative guide, such as the Wilderness Act of 1964. While an aesthetic conception of wilderness might force us to question whether or not our current legislative options are truly as appropriate as they could be, I do not think that this represents a threat to them that is any more significant than thoroughgoing criticisms of wilderness that wish to throw out the concept of wilderness altogether. More traditional wilderness criticisms ought to be a much more direct and obvious attack on these mechanisms, and

yet they have not managed to significantly negatively impact those areas that we call wilderness and protect as such via legislation.

2.3 Aesthetic Wilderness as a way to Initiate Moral Concern for the Environment

This seductive aspect of wilderness can also be seen as a positive thing within the context of environmentalism. One major issue in environmentalism is generating public interest in environmental concerns and goals. To initially motivate people to care about something as vague, wide reaching, and amorphous as the environment or global warming is a daunting task. Aesthetic values play a significant role in introducing people to environmental problems. One example of this would be how public knowledge of humpback whale singing helped launch public awareness of their plight, and ultimately helped save them from extinction. Carl Safina writes in his book *Becoming Wild* that,

> The first thing the recordings [of humpback whale songs] did was to save the whales from total annihilation. Propelled largely by the beauty humans perceived in these recordings, the "Save the Whales" movement hit full stride. Humans learned that whales are not things but, rather, neighbors living with us in the world. And so astonished were we by this realization that whales went from being ingredients of margarine in the 1960s to spiritual icons of the 1970s' emerging environmental movement.[77]

Of course it is also important to recognize the limitations that such aesthetic motivation for environmental concern has. An aesthetic concept of wilderness cannot be expected to shoulder the entire burden of motivating concern for various aspects of the environment, as its scope will obviously be limited to those things it can be reasonably applied to. Some philosophers think of this surface level aesthetic appreciation of wilderness or nature as a potentially negative thing. Ned Hettinger, in his essay "Evaluating Positive Aesthetics," says that cultivating a wider appreciation of the beauty

of nature through Positive Aesthetics (the idea that all the wild world is on-balance beautiful) is useful for

> combating a prevalent and harmful tendency in nature appreciation toward easy beauty, a lazy type of nature appreciation that limits itself to "nature's show pieces" (for example, the Grand Canyon) and finds "the scenically-challenged" parts of nature (for example, plains and deserts) boring. The insistence on easy beauty is manifest in a preference for cute animals like panda bears and a dislike for superficially unattractive species like bats. Subtle natural beauty—as in a drab tundra plant or the monotonous prairie—gets ignored because it is more difficult to appreciate.[78]

However, I would argue that this type of "easy beauty" aesthetic appreciation is important for motivating initial interest in some aspect of the environment, and as a result of this utility, should not always be considered harmful. There is certainly the potential to focus on the aesthetically appreciable aspects of the environment, such as wilderness, to the detriment of other less aesthetically appreciable features, such as ecological health, but acknowledging these preferences as aesthetic in the first place can help mitigate the extent to which we rely on them exclusively.

Aesthetic concepts like wilderness that resonate with people can help them to see something in the environment that they care about. As is often pointed out by ecologists, animals, plants, and other features of the environment do not exist in a vacuum. One may develop an interest in the wolves of Yellowstone because these animals, as charismatic megafauna, have a certain amount of aesthetic appeal or gravitas. However, the health of the wolf population in Yellowstone depends on the health of the populations of animals that wolves eat. These populations, in turn, depend on the health of their own sources of food. What may have started as a singular interest in an aesthetically appealing animal has the potential to morph into a broader concern for the ecological health of their environment due to the innate complexity of ecological systems. In the words of Arne

Naess, "Organisms, ways of life, and interactions in the biosphere in general, exhibit complexity of such an astoundingly high level as to colour the general outlook of ecologists. Such complexity makes thinking in terms of vast systems inevitable."[79] The complexity of ecosystems will eventually expand a burgeoning environmentalist's interests as a result of the interconnected and interdependent nature of ecosystem composition. It is possible that with this new level of attention and care, someone aesthetically interested in some particular aspect of the environment may come to appreciate other aspects that they might not have found aesthetically appreciable initially, but the attention and interest that was offered may give way to appreciation and moral concern.

Lastly, there is one further way that an aesthetic conception of wilderness can be helpful to environmentalism. The word 'wilderness,' carries a significant amount of cultural cache and resonance. Callicott, in arguing for replacing the term "wilderness areas" with "biodiversity reserves" says:

> What's in a name? Shakespeare asked. Rather a lot. Names are fraught with all sorts of associations—baggage. The name 'zoo' conjures up images of animals in cages—there to be stared at, fed Crackerjacks and other snacks, teased, and such. 'Biological conservation park' puts patrons on notice that the place they are visiting has a higher calling than some site for public amusement on the same scurrilous level as a circus tent or dog track. I suggest we rename wilderness areas 'biodiversity reserves.' That would put patrons on notice that the back country in the national parks and forests doesn't exist primarily for the enjoyment of trekkers, climbers, canoers, campers, and solitude seekers—as wilderness advocates argued from the mid nineteenth to the mid twentieth century—but for the nonhuman inhabitants of such places.[80]

I agree with Callicott that a name is important, and it is precisely because of this importance that we ought not do away with the word 'wilderness' entirely. Wilderness is a word that resonates with people in a particular way, they may have come to associate it

with trekking, camping, climbing, and all the other recreational activities that people love wilderness for, but this does not have to be at the expense of the nonhuman inhabitants of such places. People who often travel to a wilderness area to enjoy it are putting themselves in a position to develop an appreciation for aspects of the environment that may have not appeared on their itinerary. A chance encounter with some wildlife can be a changing experience. Wilderness plays an important role in generating an initial line of interest that may then divide and multiply given the opportunity. This potential to build moral consideration for an environment using aesthetic interest as the initial motivation should not be tossed aside so easily.

Conclusion

Thinking about wilderness as an aesthetic concept has the potential to capture more of our intuitive understanding of wilderness that people experience as opposed to wilderness as a special metaphysical or ontological category or thing in the world. This interpretation of wilderness as a concept does not only respond better to how we think about wilderness, but it also allows for a greater flexibility in the work it is expected to do. Thinking of wilderness as an aesthetic concept helps us to put up safeguards against improper use as a motivational tool for action, as well as concentrate our use of the concept to those areas where it has the greatest potential to be beneficial to environmental work. Wilderness is a concept that resonates with people and retains a significant amount of cultural cache. As a result we should not discard the concept, but rather, search for ways that it can be an appropriate tool to use. Adjusting our framework to accommodate an aesthetic concept of wilderness is perhaps one way that the concept can be retained

and continue to do positive work while shedding many of the practical and philosophical concerns that have motivated much of the criticism against it.

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