

Chapter 5

Wilderness Recognized: Environments Free from Human Control

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5.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I argue for an alternative conception of wilderness to the so-called “received wilderness idea”. I begin by agreeing with Callicott and others that the received wilderness idea fails to reflect the reality of natural environments, and is even harmful in some of its applications. I next argue that the criticisms raised against the received wilderness idea do not necessarily have to lead to the conclusion that the concept of wilderness should be abandoned altogether. I then present an alternative concept for the received wilderness idea, in which wilderness is defined as an environment’s freedom from human activity as its dominant shaping factor. I finally show how this alternative concept avoids the problems of the received wilderness idea.

5.2 The Received Wilderness Idea

In recent times the very idea of wilderness has come under intense criticism. This occurs at a time when a significant political struggle to protect environments identified as wilderness continues across the globe. The main claims against the idea of wilderness, as made by J. Baird Callicott, William Cronon, J. B. Jackson, Ramachandra Guha, David Harmon and Sahotra Sarkar amongst others, are the following:

- (A) That the idea of wilderness can be destructive to human populations and even result in acts of genocide;
- (B) That in many cases, the idea of wilderness can even be harmful to biodiversity preservation;

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- (C) That the idea of wilderness does not accurately represent actual landscapes or their history and is ultimately nothing but a cultural construction, a myth; and
- (D) That even if other, less destructive notions of wilderness exist, the concept should be abandoned because these more benign notions are too easily confused with the more destructive concept, which is the dominant one that holds sway in public institutions and decision-making, and people's emotions.¹

Callicott and Michael Nelson refer to the dominant concept of wilderness as “the received wilderness idea”. The basis of this idea is that to be a wilderness, an environment must be free from human habitation and significant human modification. This more or less resembles what is now found, for example, as a common usage listed in the Oxford English Dictionary definition of wilderness. In the (US) Wilderness Act of 1964, this definition became legally binding, and has become influential across the globe through this precedent. Unfortunately, there is plenty of evidence for claims A, B, and C being true of this “received wilderness idea”.

5.2.1 Evidence for Claim (A)

Evidence for claim (A), *that the idea of wilderness can be destructive for human populations*, is presented in numerous studies which have found destructive impacts on human populations to be the result of the designation of areas as wilderness and their protection as national parks on that basis, as summarized by Guha (1998) and Harmon (1998). An example is Colin Turnbull's 1972 study of the impact of the formation of the Kidepo National Park in Uganda on the indigenous Ik population. The Ik were removed from their lands and suffered such a degree of cultural disintegration as a result that they became what has been described as “a travesty of humanity”. The many examples given by these writers of people being removed from their lands, sometimes by force, in the name of wilderness suffice as evidence for the destructive impact the idea has had and might continue to have in practice. It is not that this idea is necessarily, intrinsically destructive to human populations. Rather, too often the idea of pristine, untouched nature is given such a high value that the human inhabitants of real environments designated as representing this ideal, despite already contradicting this definition by their very presence, become an inconvenience to be removed in the name of political and commercial expediency.

5.2.2 Evidence for Claim (B)

Evidence for claim (B), *that the wilderness idea can be destructive to biodiversity*, is to be found in the work of Sarkar (2008), who cites Vijayan's 1987 study of the Keoladeo National Park in Rajasthan, India. When this area became a National Park

¹ Collected in Callicott and Nelson (1998), and the follow-up volume, Nelson and Callicott (2008).

to protect the extraordinary diversity of its birdlife, local farmers were banned from allowing their cattle to graze on its grasses. As a result, the grasses swamped the wetland, making it uninteresting to birds, which vanished from the area. In this and a number of other cases, for example in Costa Rica and the United States, wilderness designation has been shown to have a detrimental effect on biodiversity preservation for a number of different reasons. A significant factor seems to be, once again, as we see in the example above, the practice of ignoring the real human-environment relationship present, specifically in these cases the possible contribution of human habitation and activity to the preservation of biodiversity. As Sarkar argues, biodiversity and wilderness preservation are often equated when they are in fact quite distinct and divergent practices.

A common belief is that wilderness environments are the environments with the greatest biodiversity on the planet, and so should be protected for that reason. However, according to R. A. Mittermeier et al., most of the world's wilderness areas, which together cover 44 % of the planet's land, are *not* high in biodiversity, and the areas with the highest and most endangered biodiversity, referred to as biodiversity "hotspots", do not exist in wilderness regions at all. They define wilderness as regions with less than five people per km² that have retained at least 70 % of their "historical habitat extent (500 years ago)" (Mittermeier et al. 2003, 10309). So even where wilderness preservation does not *harm* biodiversity, by such definitions, it cannot do much to preserve it, either. According to Sarkar (2008, 243), in some cases, designation of wilderness in places that contain significant biodiversity outside the designated areas, such as Costa Rica, have given the human population free reign to destroy the regions of greatest biodiversity. This has caused a catastrophic loss to that diversity just as people celebrate that it and the wilderness, which they fail to distinguish between, have been protected (25 % of Costa Rica is national parks and reserves).

5.2.3 Evidence for Claim (C)

Evidence for claim (C), *that the idea of wilderness does not accurately represent actual landscapes or their history and is ultimately a cultural construction, a myth*, is found in studies showing the extraordinary extent of human modification and habitation of so-called wilderness areas, particularly of indigenous impact on the American and Australian continents, for example those of Pyne (1997) and Denevan (1998). Walking Tasmania's Cradle-Mountain to Lake St Clair Overland Track, one encounters a diversity of environments, including extensive button grass plains shifting in and out of savannah-like patches between mountains with their alpine vegetation, narrow river valleys of dense rainforest, lakes, streams and swamps. This diversity is partly a result of thousands of years of aboriginal land practices of burning, hunting, and habitation, nothing like the pristine idea of nature untouched by human devices. Yet the received wilderness idea seems to be so frequently misapplied to environments such as these (like those of Amazonia and New Guinea, for example)

and the possibility of finding environments properly fitting this description so limited, that it seems that at least in practice, the received wilderness idea is blind to the realities of human and natural history. When this is ignored and the pristine concept of wilderness is applied to human inhabited regions, the kinds of disasters addressed by claims A and B above have often been the result.

According to environmental historian William Cronon (1996), this received idea of Wilderness developed from a fusion of European romanticism with the rise of the culturally and racially elitist myth of the rugged individual forging his own and simultaneously America's (national) identity and destiny from the conquest of the wild frontier. As such, he argues, until this time wilderness was only thought of in negative terms, as wasteland or desert, and was certainly not something to be highly valued or protected. Kevin Deluca and Anne Demo (2001) also argue that wilderness is nothing but an elitist nineteenth century cultural construction of predominantly white, Anglo-Saxon middle and upper class males, and this line of argument stretches back to the work of nineteenth century historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1894), whose work Cronon cites.

According to J. B. Jackson (1994), the concept of wilderness arose from historical events like the Roman conquest of Europe, signifying land on the margins of and between settlements shaped by human beings in conflict and negotiation that played the role of marking out the boundaries of dominion. These became aristocratic hunting grounds. Jackson argues that this idea eventually transformed into that of the recreational domains of American elitist culture, and came to represent an idealization of landscape that denied the crucial role human beings play in giving it and more humanized landscapes shape and meaning. In Jackson's view these wilderness areas are ultimately less important than and a mere function of the human made landscapes being devalued in this idea of wild and pure non-human nature. Recently in a Tasmanian context Jeff Malpas (2011) has used Jackson's arguments to argue against the idealized aesthetic of non-human wilderness landscapes in favour of an understanding of place as a primary ontological condition already entailing a shaping, being shaped by and dwelling within landscape.

Cronon and others enquire into the cultural and psychological origins of the idea of wilderness. However their interpretations of the received wilderness idea by no means equate with all experiences of or beliefs in the idea of pristine, untouched wilderness. There are as many potential beliefs about and experiences of the environments thought to resemble this as there are individuals who might have them, multiplied by the different possible perspectives any one individual might experience it from. Nor are these necessarily restricted to the cultural baggage of a particular culture such as the American elite, even if they are influenced by it. Yet whatever its origin, it seems that strictly speaking, the received wilderness idea does not really correspond with any actual environments existing on the planet today. This is due to the long history of human habitation and modification belonging to all of the world's land masses save Antarctica. Furthermore, natural environments have been impacted and modified not only by direct human incursions, but also by pollution like acid rain and contamination of water tables and food chains, not to mention the effects of human caused climate change. Pristine, pure, untouched nature in

some special primordial form free from all human history and influence can nowhere be found. There is no such thing as wilderness when it is conceived in these terms. It is a myth.

5.2.4 Rejection of Claim (D)

It seems that claims A, B, and C are significantly true of the received wilderness idea. I myself agree with Callicott and others that this particular concept of wilderness needs to be abandoned altogether, for these reasons. I do not agree, however, with claim D, that the received wilderness idea is so heavily entrenched in tradition and the hearts and minds of its proponents that alternative notions of wilderness will always be confused with them and never be able to be properly distinguished from or prevail over them. There are a number of other concepts of wilderness already in use by scientists and non-scientists alike, some with a much greater historical precedent than that envisioned by the likes of Cronon, to which charges A, B, and C simply do not apply. If, and only if these ideas are sufficiently deepened, adjusted, extended, and clarified can they supersede the received wilderness idea and stand to disprove claim D. If there really is such a thing called wilderness, we need to find out how to identify it, and what its value might be to us. I argue that the most effective and significant way of doing this is to develop a coherent definition of wilderness that is immediately capable of demonstrating its identifying qualities. I attempt to draw from meanings and values that have already been assigned to the idea of wilderness throughout its history which remain relevant to us today (beyond the *so-called* received wilderness idea), whilst clarifying and extending them. That is what the following section will attempt. What also will be shown is that these ideas already have both sufficient credibility in the worlds of environmental science and policy and are in fact potentially more compatible with many of the experiences of those who value wilderness most highly and seek to protect it than the received wilderness idea. Not only can such a conception of wilderness replace the received idea, it needs to.

5.3 An Alternative Conception of Wilderness

To pave the way for a sensible alternative for the received wilderness idea, I will first clarify the conceptual ambiguities of wilderness definitions that are currently under discussion, in particular the definitions of wilderness as freedom from habitat loss, and as freedom from disturbance of modern industrial society. I will next present my alternative definition of wilderness as an environment's freedom from human activity as its dominant shaping factor, and finally argue that in this definition wilderness does not stand in opposition to civilization.

5.3.1 *Conceptual Ambiguities*

“Because the concept of wilderness has been primarily a cultural one, the scientific foundation for wilderness is still being established,” argues Julie McGuiness (1999) in her article on the webpage for The (Australian) Wilderness Society entitled, “What is Wilderness?” James E. Watson et al. (2009) define wilderness as “large areas that have experienced minimal habitat loss”. This is similar to the definition of Mittermeier et al. (2003) of wilderness as large regions with less than five people per km² that have retained at least 70 % of their “historical habitat extent (500 years ago)”. But can freedom from habitat loss alone really be an indicator of whether an environment ought to be thought of as wilderness or not? What if habitat loss has resulted not from human activity and presence, but simply from natural forces? Is a desert that was once a savannah not a wilderness because of this? This seems not to be what is meant here, as implicit in most concepts of wilderness is the idea of a freedom from habitat losses caused not by natural forces, but by human beings.

Brendan G. Mackey et al. (1999) distinguish between wilderness *quality* and wilderness *areas*. They define wilderness quality as the extent to which any specified area is remote from and undisturbed by the impacts of modern industrial civilization. Wilderness areas, on the other hand, are areas where wilderness value is recognized and valued by society but which are defined by arbitrary thresholds of remoteness, naturalness and total area. This is a somewhat confusing double definition, as it implies that wilderness areas are merely cultural constructions, and at the same time that there are some geographic areas that actually do have a more or less empirically measurable wilderness quality. It appears the authors needed to make this distinction because publically wilderness seems to frequently be identified in such arbitrary ways. It is this kind of disparity between the possible reality of wilderness and false ideas about wilderness as it plays out in policy and cultural practice that my argument seeks to redress. The “received” wilderness idea, as has already been amply shown, can be extremely destructive, whilst understanding the possible reality of wilderness in unequivocally public terms of policy and cultural practice might just have great benefits yet to be recognized, which I will attempt to sketch out. First, however, these alternative conceptions of wilderness need to be further examined and clarified.

Mackey et al. (1999) work with definitions and measures of wilderness that have actually become part of Australian Government policy. It is therefore important that conceptual ambiguities as to exactly what a wilderness area is be ironed out, to avoid the creation of policies and practices that are either dangerously misguided or that use the conceptual pliability inherent in such ambiguities for the ends of mere political and economic expediency, at the expense of human beings and the natural environment. At the present time, even though scientists have been developing the working definitions of wilderness currently under discussion and these definitions have become part of Australian Government policy, there is still much disagreement as to what wilderness actually is. Respected scientists like Tim Flannery, until recently in charge of the Government’s response to climate change, are still writing

influential and popular articles arguing that there is no such thing as wilderness, because they are under the impression that the so-called received idea of wilderness is the only idea of wilderness there is.

One of the principle measures Australian Government scientists (following the work of Lesslie et al.) use to empirically identify wilderness areas in contrast to the arbitrary boundaries that may be constructed by popular ideas of wilderness is that of “biophysical naturalness”, which is defined as “the degree to which the natural environment is free from biophysical disturbance caused by the influence of modern technological society” (Lesslie et al. 2013). This echoes the definition of naturalness in the US 1964 Wilderness Act, which means “untrammelled,” that is, “not subject to human controls and manipulations that hamper the free play of natural forces.”

So far we have definitions of wilderness in terms of freedom from habitat loss, and in terms of freedom from the human disturbance of modern technological societies. Yet as we have seen, habitat loss may be caused by natural forces, yet the desert which was once a forest we could still call a wilderness in terms of its lack of human impact. Freedom from habitat loss ought to only become a measure of wilderness when that loss is a direct result of human activity. What makes a wilderness wild is the freedom of its species from human domestication and cultivation, amongst other things, according to perhaps the most common meaning of the word “wild”.

The problem with the definition of wilderness as land free from the disturbances of modern industrial society is that it accidentally implies that pre-modern or pre-industrial societies were wildernesses. However if we think of the societies of Ancient Egypt or medieval Britain we can hardly think of them as wilderness civilizations, and it seems their very presence in fact allowed for the first time a distinction between wilderness and civilization *as opposites* (though as we shall see, they need not necessarily be so). We find the first written uses of the term wilderness in the English language in the middle ages. But how do these earlier human habitations and their activities signify a loss of wilderness, and what does this have in common with the impact of modern industrial societies upon it? What is it about these human habitations and activities that also sets them apart from wilderness, and so defines it in opposition to them? As already argued, freedom from habitat loss needs to be understood strictly in the terms where such habitat loss might be caused by human activity for a definition of wilderness along these lines to make sense. What kind of human activity and habitation that may cause significant habitat loss are wilderness environments free from?

5.3.2 *Freedom from Human Control*

Forest scientist Gregory H. Aplet and colleagues at the American Wilderness Society conducted a survey of over a century of wilderness literature, and concluded that:

‘wildness’ is the essence of wilderness, and it is composed of two essential qualities—naturalness and freedom from human control. Naturalness refers to the degree to which land functions without the influence of people. (Aplet et al. 2005, 92)

In this definition, “naturalness” is simply the degree to which land is independent of human intervention to sustain its ecosystems, and this independence together with freedom from human control constitutes wildness. This is closer to a definition of wilderness that might have a wide range of applicability to natural environments in unequivocally empirical terms. The crucial question is what do we mean by human control?

How can human beings control an environment? The answer is by transforming it to such a degree that its main physical qualities are actually a direct and continuing result of human activity. Control in this sense implies a level of biophysical disturbance that not only *affects* an environment, but actually dominates it. It is the kind of human environmental control that has sufficient transformative power over these environments to become their dominant shaping feature. It requires a conscious human ordering of what is present. Human beings consciously order the state of urban environments by first building and then maintaining roads. They consciously construct and maintain cars to drive upon these roads. All of this is done in such a way that allows such driving to continue largely uninterrupted. They further order such environments by planning, building, maintaining and inhabiting them using materials extracted from non-human environments. They order one another in these spaces and their extractive and transformative disruptions of the wild with employment, trade, education, recreation, welfare, laws, police, courts, prisons, politics and wars. Animals are domesticated and exploited, and where they interfere with this ordering, exterminated. Land is cleared of vegetation and plants are cultivated only for human use. What is wild is that which is free from this kind of human control.

Having identified the kind of human activity and presence that stops an environment from being wild, I now define wilderness as the kind of environment that is free from human control in the sense that it does not have human activity as its dominant shaping feature.

This definition owes a lot to that of Aplet et al. (2005), and is in accord with the other alternative definitions discussed so far, but is just a little clearer—and radically different from the received wilderness idea, as will now be shown. But first it should be clarified what is intended by this form of definition.

In much contemporary philosophical thought, the traditional philosophical goal of finding correct definitions that get to the essence of a concept has fallen out of favour. There is often recognition that the meaning and significance of a conceptual definition is not so much a question of its ultimate truth, but of how its truth or expressive power functions in the pragmatics of usage and interpretation. As such, my definition is intended as a pragmatic one that can most beneficially and intelligibly apply to the widest number of cases and experiences, with the clearest possible empirical measures.

The question of wilderness is conceived here as the question of an environment’s freedom from human control of the majority of its physical features and processes. Such a definition raises questions such as whether a previously human dominated environment can become a wilderness again (I argue they can) and whether wilderness should only include living systems or also environments like the moon or the planet Mars (I argue the latter), whether wilderness can only be of a certain scale

(I argue it needn't be) and whether the world's biodiversity hotspots can be thought of as wilderness after all (I argue they can). These questions I deal with elsewhere are somewhat beyond the scope of the current argument (Scotney 2013). But with this question of freedom from control more questions arise which must presently be addressed: how much human habitation and modification of an environment is *too* much? Are there degrees to which human habitation and modification of environments do *not* constitute a dominant shaping human control of these environments? If this is the case, then human beings *can* live in *and* modify wilderness environments—in stark contrast to the received wilderness idea. How might this different idea of wilderness and human habitation and modification make sense to us?

5.3.3 *Wilderness Civilizations*

Already, in the Australian policy oriented definitions of wilderness grounded in the ecological science of Watson et al. (2009) and others, we find the following qualification: “many wilderness areas may have had a long history of human occupation, as is the case in Australia, and the term does not preclude (or ignore) human presence” (Lesslie et al. 2013). Part of the reason for Mackey et al. (1999) defining wilderness *quality* in terms of the disturbance of modern industrial society in particular, and differentiating it from (perhaps we might read *dominant* in a negative colonial sense) cultural ideas of wilderness *areas* seems to become clear in the following statement: “*Wilderness quality* can thus be defined as a function of levels of disturbance associated with modern technological society and, as such, does not deny the reality of Indigenous Australia”. It has already been argued that there are many more historical forms of human habitation and activity that have had the effect of annihilating and contrasting with wilderness environments than anything we might call modern industrial society. What is encouraging in this view of wilderness, however, is that it allows for at least the level of human activity and modification of the environment (however drastic it may at times have been in forms such as fire regimes and overhunting to the point of extinction) that was present in Indigenous Australia at the time of the British colonial invasion. Such a definition might allow radical and even destructive transformations of the environment so long as human activities do not remain its dominant shaping feature. At the same time, it reveals ways of interacting with environments free from human processes that become their dominant shaping feature.

In recognizing Australia's indigenous history of human environmental relations, is effectively the recognition that the degree of habitation and modification of the environment in terms of this history (at least to this fateful point of cultural collision) has not been one where the level of human control over the environment has become its dominant shaping feature. The landscapes of Aboriginal Australia, free from colonial or modern incursions, are or were wild landscapes in that they were significantly free from human control, shaped only in part by human beings, and by

no means entirely dependent on them for their distinctive forms or features. There is no doubt that indigenous Australians played a key role in the formative processes of these wild environments, but it was not one of total domination so much as of a self-aware custodial participation, as contemporary inheritors and proponents of Aboriginal cultural traditions such as Jim Everett (1999) are keen to remind us.

Civilization does not *just* mean large scale built environments and the kinds of technologies that have led to modern industrial society and does not necessarily have to stand in opposition to wilderness. Is it wrong to speak of Aboriginal civilization, or of wilderness civilizations? The original Middle French meaning of the word “civilization” is simply that which is civilized, made civil, where civil means relations in the legal sense between ordinary members of a society, and to civilize means to further develop those social relationships, to progress and advance them. The contemporary meaning remains essentially the same. But there are more ways to progress and advance the social relations within a society than the great achievements of the world’s dominant civilizations, for whilst these global dominators know how to keep growing, they still do not know how to properly sustain themselves and the environments they depend on for survival. Contemporary Australian practices of wilderness identification and respect and recognition for indigenous history and culture show ways in which human beings can harmoniously inhabit and interact with natural environments without destroying their wildness or the natural resource base they rely on. These are practices woven into the very fabric and history of these societies, despite significant and ongoing cultural losses and geographic displacements. Their history and contemporary manifestations betray just as many serious problems as any other forms of social organisation, and should not be romanticised. However, they still might teach the world valuable things about how we can relate to our environments and each other that other kinds of societies might not have knowledge of or expertise with. Not all the world, however, has quite caught up with this practice of recognizing and respecting the rights and roles of indigenous cultures in wild environments, despite some promising signs. Furthermore, in Australia such respect and recognition is still tenuous and disputed, often more talk and confused action resulting rather than real progress.

The International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) defines wilderness as “large unmodified or slightly modified areas, retaining their natural character and influence, without permanent or significant human habitation”. It identifies the primary objective of wilderness conservation as being to protect the long term ecological integrity of these areas, whilst at the same time identifying “Other Objectives” which include enabling indigenous communities to “maintain their traditional wilderness-based lifestyle and customs” at low population densities (Dudley 2008, 14). What is problematic here is the equivocation between speaking of traditional wilderness-based populations and lifestyles as part of wilderness conservation, on the one hand, and speaking of wilderness as being without permanent or significant human habitation on the other. This becomes still more problematic when the status of indigenous wilderness populations becomes part of “Other” objectives separate from the Primary objective of wilderness conservation, which implies that they are secondary—which takes us back to the supposed absence of

significant human populations. The implication is that indigenous populations are considered of secondary importance and are in fact insignificant. Whilst we may say that significance is meant to refer merely to significant size in the relative terms of global population density, and that permanent human habitation means permanent *built* human habitation, this is by no means clear. Definitions containing such deep ambiguities risk manipulation and appropriation for the ends of political and commercial expediency. Until it is properly acknowledged on a global level that wilderness can actually include *significant* and *permanent* human habitation (whether semi-nomadic or not), indigenous populations in places that may also be designated wilderness risk being judged either as insignificant or disruptive to those environments. Yet these are civilizations in their own right that are not being adequately acknowledged as such. The same kinds of human disasters caused by misapplications of the received wilderness idea discussed earlier could result. Furthermore, other areas where the indigenous or other human habitation is significant and transformative of their natural features without being the dominant shaping factor of them risk being dismissed as of less than wilderness value. Defining wilderness as environments free from human control as their dominant shaping factor can allow us recognize and respect the rights and place of indigenous and other human populations amidst wild environments, and may also help protect these environments precisely by allowing for such forms of human habitation and custodianship.

5.4 How the Alternative Conception Avoids the Problems of the Received Idea

To answer the question how the idea of wilderness as environments free from human control as their dominant shaping feature does stand up to the criticisms so effectively raised against the received wilderness idea I will again go over the four claims discussed in Sect. 5.2.

5.4.1 Claim (A)

Claim (A) was that *the idea of wilderness can be destructive to human populations and even result in genocide*. This occurs when the idea that wilderness must be devoid of human habitation and modification is perversely enforced on inhabited areas. In such cases, on the one hand inhabitants are thought significant enough to make it difficult to call the environment wild in these terms and therefore put it to the kinds of cultural uses required. On the other hand, they are not deemed significant enough for their loss to be noticed or questioned. However, when we define wilderness in terms of freedom from human control as the dominant shaping factor of the environments in question, wilderness-based cultures can be recognized and respected, rather than ignored and forcibly removed from their homelands. Certainly, if wilderness is still to be protected, restraints must be put on population and infrastructural

development within these cultures, and questions of rights of habitation and land use will still come into play. What is crucial, however, is that these stakeholders living in the midst of wilderness are not ignored or harmed, but respected and negotiated with. When indigenous habitation and land use of wilderness areas is recognized and the limits and meaning of wilderness properly identified, it seems far less likely that the kinds of forced removals and conflicts that have resulted in the past could continue to occur. Claim A no longer holds for such definitions of wilderness when paired with such compatible recognitions, and only applies to the received wilderness idea.

5.4.2 *Claim (B)*

Claim (B) was *that in many cases the idea of wilderness can even be harmful to biodiversity preservation*, like in Sarkar's example of Vijayan's study of the Keoladeo wetlands in Rajasthan, where the removal of humans and their livestock meant a major disappearance of birdlife due to the grasses no longer being grazed and so choking the wetland for the birds. The conflation of wilderness and biodiversity preservation is seen to be an error when wilderness is measured in the terms proposed by Mittermeier et al. (2003), where none of the world's large scale wilderness areas contain the greatest areas of biological diversity or most critically endangered species on the planet. Even if all the world's wilderness areas as measured by Mittermeier et al. (land of significant size with less than 5 people per km² and retaining 70 % of the habitat extent it had 500 years ago, a measure which I argue is unnecessarily exclusive beyond the limits of such a study) were protected, the world's greatest and most endangered areas of biodiversity could still be destroyed. This is exactly what has happened, as we saw, in Costa Rica, where wilderness protection gave developers licence to destroy the country's most biologically diverse areas. Even if we think of the biodiversity hotspots as smaller scale wilderness areas on the fringes of human settlements, the majority of the world's wilderness remains comparatively lower in biodiversity (and not critically endangered), and so should not be confused with them.

There is no reason why, if we define wilderness the way I am suggesting, the idea of wilderness or the practices of wilderness conservation should be detrimental to biodiversity, so long as they are not conflated with the idea of biodiversity conservation or prioritized over it. Only the received wilderness idea, with its impossible ideal of pristine, untouched landscapes free from human habitation and modification presented as the ultimate goal of *all* environmental conservation, has been harmful to biodiversity and human populations when put into practice.

5.4.3 *Claim (C)*

Claim (C), *that the idea of wilderness does not accurately represent actual landscapes or their history and is ultimately nothing but a myth, a cultural construction*, is based on three main ideas. The first is that the idea of wilderness denies the long

indigenous history of human habitation and modification of the environments generally identified as wilderness, like those of the American West. Yet this argument only applies to the “received” idea that wilderness must be free from significant human habitation and modification, not to the idea that wilderness signifies environments *relatively* free from human control that can include the significant but not dominant human habitation and modification associated with certain kinds of indigenous societies. For the lands usually identified as wilderness have histories of and have been (partly and significantly but not wholly) shaped by such habitations and activities. These histories are *not* denied when wilderness is defined in this way, as is already acknowledged in Australia and to some extent, internationally.

The second idea that informs claim C is that the contemporary idea of wilderness as the kind of environment worthy of preservation is a culturally specific one, born in nineteenth century America, under the influence of European romanticism. Cronon (1996) and others argue that before the nineteenth century, wilderness was thought of simply as undesirable, dangerous, barren wastelands or desert. This idea however simply does not stand up to the historical evidence. Roderick Nash (1967, 2) identifies the first instance of the term wilderness in English in Layamon’s *Brut*, a thirteenth century Middle English epic, also known as the *Chronicle of Britain*. *Brut* is a historiography that identifies the founder of Britain as the mythical Brutus of Troy. In this text, the terms ‘wilderness’ and ‘wild’ are featured frequently throughout the narrative. Wilderness is frequently paired with forest, in the frequently repeated phrase form, “the wood, the wilderness,” and sometimes also with “heath and fern.” Throughout the poem, the wilderness is both a place of danger and adventure and one of refuge where heroic forces can gather strength and even build a castle. Furthermore, wilderness is included as a part of the land that a king rules over, rather than signifying the antithesis of this dominion. In fact, in *Brut* we find individual human *wildness* described in both negative and positive terms: as a fatal lack of self-restraint on the one hand, and as that ferocious power capable of winning the battles, overthrowing the dominion of and attempted domination by others, on the other.

Another major source of Western historical ideas about wilderness is the Bible, where in the New Testament it comes to represent abandoned places that do not always equate with deserts or wastelands. According to Janet Poindexter Sholty (1997), from the Biblical wilderness “the wilderness as a landscape of personal crisis becomes in the Middle Ages a significant part of the representation of interior experience in painting and literature”. Wilderness became a symbol of spiritual transformation, not just in the English language, but throughout Europe, from *Beowulf* to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, through Chaucer, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, the Corpus Christi cycle plays, the Robin Hood ballads, and Thomas Mallory’s *Le Morte D’Arthur*. In these stories, argues Sholty, wilderness landscapes “reflect the passages from one stage of life to the next and from life through death to eternity”.

From the very beginnings of its history, the idea of wilderness has represented both danger and refuge; a range of landscapes between forest and desert, the possibility of winning a great victory and forging a civilization in a contested land, and a

place of spiritual turmoil and transformation representing life, death and eternity. Effectively, then, the *romance* and reality of wilderness, together with its symbolism as a place of essential spiritual transformation have played a central role throughout the history of European civilization. It does not *come* from the romantics, or from aristocratic hunting traditions or the American frontier, but is part of the very fabric of Western Civilization. Nor in these ideas must wilderness ever be totally uninhabited or unmodified by human beings. Even Thoreau saw wilderness as something civilization ought to be forged from, to be celebrated even as it is turned into farmland. John Muir had no problem talking of venturing into the wilderness of Alaska and visiting Indian settlements there. If anything, the so-called received wilderness idea is not *received* at all, or received only from the wording of the 1964 Wilderness Act and the ideals of some American environmental activists and thinkers from the 1960s and 1970s. The idea that wilderness is simply land free from a human control as its dominant shaping factor that humans may or may not dwell within and alter within these limits is much older and more established in historical usage. It is this kind of environment that has conjured within human beings the ideas of danger, adventure, refuge and inner transformation we find in many of the great literary, artistic and spiritual works of Western culture. Psychologically it has often symbolized the potential for individual human beings to gain freedom by overcoming the dominating control of other human beings and the limitations of even one's own humanity, in both positive and negative terms.

The third idea informing claim C is J. B. Jackson's argument, taken up by Jeff Malpas, that the idea of wilderness and the landscapes designated in its name have actually become human constructions ignoring the most significant human-landscape relationships that shape our lives and the spaces we live in. Jackson argues they have falsely come to represent an independent landscape of pure nature that has a higher value for humans than any others. Once again, however, this critique only really applies to the received wilderness idea of a pure, primordial, pristine nature totally untouched by human beings, a raw state of wild nature that almost seems to imply a metaphysical essence of nature's presence within it that humanized landscapes lack, and to the conservation practices it informs. The idea of environments out of human control as the dominant shaping factor is not a hard one to find empirical correspondences with in actual landscapes. One might argue that since these environments have part of their boundaries and extent shaped by human beings, they are controlled by human beings, but they are only controlled in the sense of being limited at the perimeter, not dominantly shaped by human beings *within* their area. To recognize them is not to deny the value of the activities and situations they are defined in contrast to any more than it is to deny those which can belong to them.

Wilderness environments are not cultural constructions, they are physical realities. With this idea arises the possibility of meaningful human cultures which inhabit and transform these environments at levels that do not destroy their wildness. At the same time, the value we might find in them is not a denial of the value of human dominated landscapes, but a recognition of the importance of actively working with and protecting the kinds of natural environments upon which these depend on

to survive. For if there is one consistent value that wilderness gives us, it is the ability of self-sustaining ecosystems to provide a global life-support function for our survival which our own technologies and infrastructure are not yet capable of reproducing and sustaining so effortlessly or comprehensively.

U.S. Forest scientist H. Ken Cordell and colleagues argue that “Native life support is the ecological value of wilderness”. They argue that wilderness provides this life support through the health of its ecosystems. They define ecosystem health as “the set of natural conditions needing to exist to support native life forms”. In a comparative analysis with other landforms, they conclude Wilderness areas are more natural—that is, free from human influence – and at the same time have the highest levels of ecological health” and point out the importance of this for the future of life on this planet. Wilderness is no myth, but a vital reality on which we depend.

5.4.4 *Claim (D)*

Thus far, claims A, B, and C have been shown to apply to the received wilderness idea, but not to the idea of wilderness as environments out of human control as their dominant shaping factor. It is time now to properly address claim (D): *even if other, less destructive notions of wilderness exist, the concept should be abandoned because these more benign notions are too easily confused with the more destructive concept, which is the dominant one that holds sway in public institutions, decision-making, and people’s emotions.* The received wilderness idea is certainly influential, provoking a great deal of debate amongst environmental thinkers and policy makers for the past 40 years, including the critiques this essay addresses. It is enshrined in law in the 1964 Wilderness Act of the United States, and is still popular in dictionary definitions and amongst environmental activists and philosophers like Holmes Rolston III. Yet as we have seen, this idea is nowhere nearly as entrenched in American or global tradition as Callicott, who calls it “that Old-Time wilderness religion”. The wilderness romanticism of the past, celebrating it as a place of perilous adventure, refuge and spiritual transformation, and a place to get back to the wildness from which great civilizations were forged, by no means insists on an absence of human habitation or transformation of it. What is it then, in more recent times, that has made this idea so much more compelling? Could it be that thing wilderness is often measured against, the impact of modern industrial society—not just upon the landscape, but upon human beings? The impact in this case might just be the effect of making people *forget* that on this planet, wilderness and civilization are part of the same biosphere system, and depend on each other for survival.

The idea that wild environments or environmental factors free from human control do not penetrate, shape or interact with human experience or landscapes, and cannot themselves be modified and to some extent shaped by these things without losing their wildness is false. Our very bodies have emerged from them and continue to depend for their very make-up on the inputs of these wild ecosystems

combined with those of human cultivation and domestication, which also depend on such non-human controlled physical processes. We do not control our heartbeats or make plants grow, we simply do our best to move such processes towards goals we cannot help but have. However, the contrast between the experience of modern urban life and that of a wild environment can be so great that it seems that the degree non-human created phenomena are banished from human environments defines their humanity as utterly independent from and antithetical to them.

5.5 Conclusion

When dominating and self-deluding practices become the exclusive way humanity is defined, then the only way it seems environments free from such domination and solipsistic reflection can be defined is to say that there can be no part of this humanity within them. Yet these very behaviours have not only emerged, in evolutionary terms, directly from such wild environments, but continue to depend on them. Despite illusions to the contrary, these behaviours remain to this day wild, *out* of our control in their very capacity to dominate and humanize landscapes to such a degree that they now threaten global wellbeing and survival. Yet these are not the only behaviours that have evolved from the wild systems upon which we depend, for as we have seen, for thousands of years indigenous communities have developed ways of living in wild environments that adapt and adapt to rather than destroy their wildness. Those of us living in the cultures of domination together consciously control our environments, but have not yet learnt to control *how*, *when* or *where* we consciously control them, or to recognize either what we do not control, or what it might benefit us *not* to control. Our controlling itself is still significantly *out* of our control, that is, wild, in the sense that we have insufficient collective *self*-control over our behaviours of environmental domination. Individuals and small groups who have enough self-discipline, inherited privilege and lust for power to seize control of the means of such domination, but insufficient awareness or self-control to stop their activities from destroying the world's most vulnerable environments (and people), are *allowed* to set the rules of political economy as though they were natural or scientific facts. When we have no self-control, or allow others' lack of awareness and self-restraint to control us, we have no freedom. Only by recognizing and mediating our own (in this sense) *negative* wildness together can we properly understand our relationship to the wild environments we depend on, sometimes most highly value, and have not quite learned not to destroy. Only then can it clearly be seen that wilderness is not some primordial form of pure nature antithetical to human civilization, but the very source of it and the freedom it can bring. This freedom is not ultimately the power to dominate, but in fact the power to be free from all human practices of blind domination—a *positive* wildness within resembling what is most valued in the wild Other—the freedom *not* to destroy, but discover.

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