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Wilderness 2.0: what does wilderness mean to the Millennials?

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Abstract Several prominent culture critics (including Bill McKibben and Richard Louv) worry that with the emergence of anthropogenic climate change and decline of direct experience with the out-of-doors, the idea of wilderness may no longer have meaning to twenty-first century Americans. Are they right? Does the wilderness tradition still speak to Millennials? To investigate this question, we organized an essay contest, inviting anyone born after 1980 to submit an essay on the meaning of wilderness. We analyze the 41 contest entries and the invited essays to determine common themes, identifying continuities and discontinuities with the inherited wilderness tradition. We conclude that the wilderness tradition remains vital and powerful, but we should expect it to evolve in new directions as social and environmental conditions change.

Keywords Wilderness · Millennials · Nature writing · Wilderness politics

Introduction

It is nearly 25 years since Bill McKibben declared "the end of nature." What he really meant was the end of wilderness—the *idea* of wilderness. In the era of climate change, he claimed, we can no longer conceive of a natural world that is free of human influence—a pristine wilderness where our spirits can awaken to authentic nature. Generations Y, Z, and beyond will never know that pristine wilderness; they will know only what humans have created. And, the outlook has only gotten worse: in 2005, Richard Louv warned us that "nature deficit disorder" was on the rise. Today's children, he worried, spend far more time in front of screens than they spend in the woods and end up radically disconnected from the natural world. They may care about biodiversity, sustainability, and environmental justice—but do they care about wilderness?

This paper aims to investigate that hypothesis by posing the question, what does wilderness mean to the Millennial generation? More specifically, does the idea of wilderness have relevance for Millennial generation environmentalists? Is there still a case to be made for wilderness? If so, how can we make that case[1]?

To answer that question, we organized a national essay contest on the theme of wilderness. Using the common definition of "Millennial" as individuals born between 1980 and 2000, we restricted the contest to people born after 1979.[2] We also identified prominent environmental activists born after 1980 and invited them to write longer essays on our question. We then analyzed the 41 contest entries and the invited essays to determine common themes, identifying continuities and discontinuities with the inherited wilderness tradition. Our analysis concludes that the idea of wilderness still resonates for these Millennials, that certain key themes in that tradition seem to remain vital and relevant, and that the tradition is

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[2] We did not restrict entries from people born after 2000 but only received one such entry.

evolving to adapt to the new concerns and experiences of twenty-first-century Americans.

Background

The "American wilderness tradition" hardly needs extensive definition. We refer to the tradition ably documented by Roderick Nash in his 1967 classic, *Wilderness and the American Mind*. This intellectual, literary, and political tradition originated in the nineteenth century and was developed and passed down by a small group of highly engaged twentieth-century wilderness advocates. Representatives include such familiar figures as John Muir, Aldo Leopold, Robert Marshall, and Wallace Stegner. Also central to developing the tradition were organizations such as the Sierra Club, which sponsored our essay contest. Founded in 1892 by John Muir, the Sierra Club has been integral to forming the modern conception of wilderness as well as advocating for its protection. The organization was one of the earlier large-scale preservation organizations in the country and counted, among its early victories, the creation of Yosemite National Park and the National Park Service itself. In the mid-twentieth century, the organization played an important role in framing the idea of wilderness as a legislative tool by helping to draft and pass the landmark Wilderness Act. In 1960, Wallace Stegner sent a copy of his now famous "Wilderness Letter" to David Brower, then Executive Director of the Sierra Club. Brower, recognizing the power of the letter, published it in a Sierra Club book, *Wilderness*: *America's Living Heritage*. This book was pivotal in popularizing the wilderness tradition to a wider audience. Sierra Club remains the largest and possibly most influential wilderness advocacy organization in the USA, with more than two million members and supporters.

What exactly is the wilderness concept that the Sierra Club and other advocates are trying to protect? As William Cronon summarizes, wilderness in this tradition is "the natural, unfallen antithesis of an unnatural civilization that has lost its soul. It is a place of freedom in which we can recover the true selves we have lost to the corrupting influence of our artificial lives. Most of all, it is the ultimate landscape of authenticity. Combining the sacred grandeur of the sublime with the primitive simplicity of the frontier, it is the place where we can see the world as it really is, and so know ourselves as we really are—or ought to be" (Cronon 1996, p. 80).

Of course, Cronon was describing the tradition only to critique it. The trouble with the idea of wilderness, according to Cronon, is that it sets up a romantic myth of purity that masks the all-too-real impacts that humans have even on "wild" landscapes. It encourages people to escape from social problems rather than take responsibility for them. But, he noted his own ambivalence; the tradition also serves as an important vehicle for expressing deep moral values regarding our relationship to the natural world. His essay famously sparked an on-going debate over the value of the wilderness tradition. But, that is not the debate that we are engaging here—at least, not directly.

Both Cronon and his critics seem confident that the wilderness tradition, for good or ill, is a pretty robust one. Indeed, the wilderness ideal seems like one of the more enduring and powerful of American traditions. The book of Roderick Nash is now in its fourth edition, and it describes a still-vital movement led by the Baby Boom generation (usually defined as Americans born between 1946 and 1964). For Nash, the chief challenge of the wilderness tradition is its very success: How do we continue to preserve wilderness with increasing numbers of Americans flooding into the most isolated and remote areas, seeking the spiritual, aesthetic, and recreational experiences promised by Muir and others?(Nash 2001, pp. 316-344).

But, the baby boomers themselves are not so sanguine about the vitality of the wilderness tradition. While every generation has expressed concern about the loss of the American wilderness, the baby boomers seem to be the first to worry about the loss of the wilderness *value*. Will the Millennials—the post-1980 generation, growing up in the midst of the sixth great extinction, witness to anthropogenic global ecological transformation, and seemingly glued to computer screens from infancy—continue to value the experience of wilderness? What, indeed, does "wilderness" mean in the anthropocene?

Bill McKibben raised that question in his 1990 book, *The End of Nature*. This was, to our knowledge, the first book to grapple with the implications of climate change for the wilderness tradition. McKibben argued that the change that humans have worked on the global climate system—the hole in the ozone layer, the global warming effect created by increasing levels of greenhouse gases—is eroding "our sense of nature as eternal and separate" (End of Nature 8). Anthropogenic influences on the natural world are so pervasive, he worried, that it is becoming harder "to get caught up in the timeless meaning of the forest." Traces of human presence "drive away the feeling that you are in another, separate, timeless, wild sphere." Even the temperature and rainfall can no longer be considered the work of some separate force—"nature"—but must now be considered "in part a product of our habits, our economies, our ways of life" (McKibben 1990, p. 47). His point was not just that wilderness itself was disappearing—although that is a big part of the problem—but rather that our idea of wilderness is disappearing. Future generations, he warned, may not be able to conceive of a place outside of human intention and history. It would be several years before the term "anthropocene" would come into widespread use, but McKibben captured the unease generated by this concept: in an age of human domination of biological, chemical, and geological processes on Earth, where can the values associated with wilderness find safekeeping?

Anthropogenic climate change is not the only factor threatening those wilderness values. The 2005 book of Richard Louv , *Last Child in the Woods*, articulates a concern that resonates broadly with American audiences. "Within the space of a few decades," he argues, "the way children understand and experience nature has changed radically…. Today, kids are aware of the global threats to the environment—but their physical contact, their intimacy with nature, is fading" (Louv 2005, p. 1). He sees this as a post-baby boom development, affecting Generation X (born from the mid-1960s to 1980) but more intensely the Millennials (born from 1980 to 2000). "For a new generation, nature is more abstraction than reality. Increasingly, nature is something to watch, to consume, to wear—to ignore" (Ibid., p. 2). Louv argued, and produced some empirical evidence, that this disconnection could lead to nature deficit disorder: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses (ibid, p. 34). Those are hard claims to substantiate, but the narrower claim has met with little dissent: Americans (and increasingly other members of industrialized societies) are spending less time outside, interacting with environments that are not predominately concrete. He attributed those changing lifestyles to economic and social trends (time poverty, workplace pressures, technological changes) rather than a decline in the value of wilderness. But, they bode ill for the wilderness tradition, which seems to require at least a small, devoted group of enthusiasts willing to go outside and play.

Louv and McKibben point to a number of broad cultural and environmental factors that might shape the Millennial generation, including biodiversity loss and climate change, widening economic inequality in the USA (which plays into analysis of Louv), changes in the nature of work, increasing urbanization, and changing communications technology. All of these intersecting cultural trends may affect how and whether Millennials experience the natural world, thus raising the question: What does the wilderness tradition mean in twenty-first-century America? Is the concept of wilderness being adapted so that it remains relevant, and if so, how?

Methods

There has been a good deal of public opinion and psychological research on Millennials. Among the most well known is a study by Twenge et al. published in 2012. Their research describes the Millennials as more concerned than previous generations about goals related to extrinsic values (money, image, fame) than with goals related to intrinsic values (self-acceptance, affiliation, community). In particular, Twenge et al. identified declines in community values and political activism, with the steepest declines in environmental concern and activism (Twenge et al. 2012; Pew Research Feb (2014). This kind of research has been criticized on methodological grounds; researchers question whether age or generational cohort has a strong independent effect on attitudes about the environment (Trzesniewski and Donnellan 2010; Wiernik et al. 2013; Arnett 2013). Others have found that environmental attitudes are also influenced by gender, race, and political ideology as well as generational cohort (Liu et al. 2014). However, the most careful critiques generally acknowledge that generational differences do exist, although Twenge et al. may overstate them. And, few scholars have challenged the finding that environmental activism has declined among Millennials. That trend continues the long-term decline from the high levels of political concern and civic engagement characteristic of the baby boom generation. But, the recent steep decline in environmental concern is striking and may provide some support for the McKibbens/Louv hypothesis—although another important factor may be the growing partisan divide and rise of an anti-environmental discourse in political culture (that partisan trend may of course also be related to the cultural, environmental, and technological trends identified by Louv and McKibben). Whatever the causes, these public opinion and psychological studies do suggest that the Millennials constitute a generation with distinctive characteristics.

This kind of research is an important foundation for our project, since it provides support for the view that there is a "Millennial generation" that may differ from previous generations in their attitudes about the environment. But, our study differs from this kind of research in important respects. We are not attempting to understand or explain the distribution of wilderness values across the Millennial generation. Rather, we are interested in the wilderness *tradition*, and a tradition is not the same as public opinion or individual attitudes. We define "tradition" as a collectively held phenomenon rather than an individual characteristic. A tradition is an evolving collection of ideas and rhetorical strategies that tend to cluster together and to be associated with certain political goals. They are not static, philosophically coherent systems. Rather, they are useful assemblages of values, concepts, and linguistic and political practices that evolved within a community in order to deal with concrete problems. As they are passed down from one generation to the next, they are reworked to apply to new conditions.

The carriers of the wilderness tradition have always been a small group of highly engaged individuals who (1) articulate, in particularly compelling and resonant ways, a set of values and concepts that tend to congregate together around the idea of wilderness and (2) organize action in service of those values. To understand how a tradition is evolving, we must investigate how this small group of environmental leaders and advocates is engaging with and interpreting the traditional idea of wilderness.

Public opinion polls are of little value to us because polls are not well suited to investigating how a tradition is being reinterpreted; that project calls for more interpretive methods

(as discussed below). Moreover, we do not expect the carriers of the wilderness tradition to be typical of other Millennials. While they will be responding to the same broad cultural trends affecting other Millennials, they will be different in at least one important respect: They will be unusually interested in wilderness. Like Roderick Nash, we aim to focus on people who seem to be providing intellectual leadership to the wilderness movement. But, because the Millennials are still young (mostly under 30), they have not yet produced a substantial amount of published works that we can turn to. So, we instead identified several environmental leaders born after 1980 and invited them to write essays in response to the following prompt:

> It is nearly 25 years since Bill McKibben declared "the end of nature." What he really meant was the end of wilderness—the idea of wilderness. In the era of climate change, he claimed, we can no longer conceive of a natural world that is free of human influence—a pristine wilderness where our spirits can awaken to authentic nature. Generations Y, Z, and beyond will never know that pristine wilderness; they will know only what humans have created. And, the outlook has only gotten worse: in 2005, Richard Louv warned us that nature deficit disorder was on the rise. Today's children, he worried, spend far more time in front of screens than they spend in the woods and end up radically disconnected from the natural world. They may care about biodiversity, sustainability, and environmental justice—but do they care about wilderness?
> So, we pose the question: What does wilderness mean to the Millennial generation? Does the idea of wilderness have any relevance for twenty-first-century environmentalists? Is there still a case to be made for wilderness? If so, how can we make that case?

We received three completed essays (from Jessica Goad (Center for American Progress), Jacob Glass (Podesta Group), and Elizabeth Shephard (Director, LifeCity), hardly enough for in-depth analysis. But, we also gathered a more substantial body of data by organizing an essay contest. Sponsored by the Sierra Club, the contest invited anyone born after 1980 to submit an essay of no more than 750 words on the meaning of wilderness (using the same prompt as above). This method allowed individuals to nominate themselves as carriers of the wilderness tradition. The winning essay was published in Sierra Online, and some of the finalists are publicly available on here: https://sites.google.com/a/carleton.edu/wilderness-2-0/home (the full collection of essays is available from the authors).

We received 41 contest entries. Again, we do not claim that this group is representative in any statistical sense—any more than the works of Thoreau or Muir were representative of their generation. We were most successful getting contributions from people close to us. For example, two of the invited essays and one of the contest entries come from students of Kim Smith, and two of the invited essays come from colleagues of Matt Kirby. The essay contest probably did not reach a very diverse audience in terms of race and class, although 24 of the entries did come from women (which is interesting in light of the historic underrepresentation of female voices in the wilderness tradition). We did not collect additional demographic data on the entrants, because we wanted to make participation in the contest as easy as possible. However, we note that the contest was advertised to the Sierra Club's 63 chapters, the Sierra Club online, and the listserve for the Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences. While the Sierra Club has taken significant strides in recent years to diversify their base, it is still predominantly White, well educated, and middle-upper class in terms of membership. The readership for Sierra Club Online magazine is 44 % college-educated, and slightly more than 50 % have annual incomes of more than $50,000 (Sierra Club Media 2015; Taylor 2014). The Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences listserve consists mostly of people teaching environmental studies at the college level. Thus, notice of the contest probably reached an audience that was predominantly middle-class, college-educated Americans.

We therefore caution against assuming that this sample represents values widely shared among Millennials in general. But, we believe that the essays that we collected are sufficient for our more limited purposes: We aim to understand the various ways that Millennials can draw on the wilderness tradition and make it meaningful. We were looking to identify the possibilities inherent in the tradition. The body of texts that we collected reveals some of those possibilities.

Our sample is therefore more like a focus group than a public opinion survey. Focus group research aims to study how people define, discuss, and contest issues. They are used to explore different perspectives on a topic rather than access representative or generalizable views about it. Therefore, participants in focus groups are usually chosen because they have a significant relationship to the topic (Tonkiss 2012, pp. 228–244). Our study follows a similar logic of inquiry: We aim to study how highly engaged wilderness lovers define, discuss, and contest the inherited meaning of wilderness.

Having collected our sample, we subjected the essays to literary analysis, in keeping with the majority of scholarship on the wilderness tradition. Unlike content analysis (a reductive approach commonly used in the social sciences to analyze qualitative data), literary analysis approaches a work as an example of a genre and focuses on how the author(s) is interpreting, responding to, and extending the conventions of that genre. Literary analysis is often described as a hermeneutic process, in which meaning of the text as a whole is established by reference to the individual parts but the

meaning of the individual parts must also be established by reference to the text as a whole. Interpreting the text requires not just identifying phrases or words, or even concepts, but deciphering the subtle shades of meaning that the author is creating out of creative deployment of literary devices. In short, we are not studying these writers' opinions about wilderness. Rather, we are studying how these writers are engaging with the inherited wilderness tradition: what language, ideas, and themes do they draw on? Which ones do they transform or discard? Are they able to find meaning in the idea of wilderness?

Results

Our analysis centers on the four major thematic elements that we found in the submitted and solicited essays. The most notable aspect of these themes is that they are not new or necessarily specific to the Millennial generation. While we find some differences between these contemporary essays and those of earlier wilderness advocates—differences that we will discuss in greater detail—many of the fundamental ideas about the nature and purpose of wilderness remain unchanged. We tackle these four themes individually, beginning with the one that remains the most continuous with early environmental thought: beauty and solitude. The other themes can broadly be defined as (1) wilderness as an illusion (2), the dichotomy between wilderness and technology, and (3) finding wilderness locally (small wilderness). These last three themes, while having roots in the works of traditional nature writers, also illustrate some important complexities in and discontinuities with that tradition.

Solitude and beauty

This theme ran through the majority of the essays, even those that more directly challenge the received definition of wilderness. The writers clearly realize that areas devoid of obvious signs of human interference can hold a unique kind of moral and aesthetic value. Such places allow a person to find him or herself; they offer a place to think without the interference of a hyperkinetic world, a place to escape, and a place to find beauty and wonder. It seems that there is still something essential to the human experience to be found in those wild places free of signs of humanity.

Essayist Elizabeth Shephard sums up this sentiment in "Finding Our Way Home" when she writes, "wilderness is a place to escape and find refuge in the harmony of nature" and "it is a place full of chaos, danger, and testing." We test our humanity by putting ourselves in a place free from modern conveniences. Killian Sump, in reflecting on her time as wilderness guide in the fjords of Alaska, writes, "the prospect of adventure, coupled with the beauty of wilderness, allows people to open up and learn more about the world or themselves." These sentiments echo those of classic American nature writers such as Henry David Thoreau, who wrote, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately." He wanted to "live deep and suck all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that was not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms" (Thoreau 1854, p. 135).

What is the value of this escape from society? Like generations before her, essayist Christina Alvarez found solace in the wild. In "Montezuma Baldcypress," she treasures "the gush of wind against my face that dried my tears, the touch of a lily flower against my cheek when I did not have a hand to touch me and tell me that everything was going to be okay, and the feel of the earth beneath me as the world caught me when I thought everything was falling apart." Gwendolyn Murtha in "The Gray Shenandoah" echoes that theme, explaining that wilderness offers an antidote to the loneliness of crowds—a chance to be alone instead of lonely. Those sentiments would be understood by earlier nature writers such as Barry Lopez. Lopez, a victim of sexual abuse as a child, also sought solace in nature:

> I know this: That when I was so compromised as a child that there was no zone of safety for me, no place was safe and especially adults weren't safe for me, the thing that felt safe in the sense that I felt that surge towards lyricism when… I saw something outside myself, the world beyond the self… and I felt this surge of lyrical pleasure in the way the wind sounded, for example, in eucalyptus trees. I knew that I could carry that with me. I could carry it as a memory, and I could carry it as a structure to help me build a safe place in the world (Lopez 2013).

Others identified the moral value of being alone in the wilderness as a certain kind of humility. As essayist Taylor Bolinger put it in "Heart of the Formless," "If we do not preserve [wilderness], if our only access to it is in boxed up and packaged form, then your youngest will never struggle up the overwhelming face of that sand hill so far from the sound of cars that there is naught but stillness and perceive that the world neither works as we believe it to nor as we would like for it to." Meg O'Connor in "Recalculating" explained that "conserving wilderness is an act of respect to a community that is not one's own—a community that is not always inviting, welcoming, or hospitable." Again, we hear continuities with earlier writers like Wendell Berry: "If we are to have a culture as resilient and competent in the face of necessity as it needs to be, then it must somehow involve within itself a ceremonious generosity toward the wilderness of natural force and instinct. The farm must yield a place to the forest, not as a wood lot, or even as a necessary agricultural principle but as a sacred grove—a place

where the Creation is let alone, to serve as instruction, example, refuge; a place for people to go, free of work and presumption, to let themselves alone" (Berry 2002, p. 125).

But, wilderness is not only a place to test and find yourself in your solitude, but also a place to find aesthetic beauty. That value continues to resonate. Many of our writers shared the nature aesthetic of nineteenth century landscape painters such as Albert Bierstadt of the Hudson River School. Bierstadt gave us lavish, awe-inspiring paintings of the wild places in the West that captured the American imagination in the second half of the nineteenth century. This aesthetic values the sense of awe and grandeur most easily found in wild places: the power and terror one feels standing at the base of enormous waterfall or the wonder experienced by a quiet moment in the forest. As Ralph Waldo Emerson reportedly said (of giant sequoias), "The greatest wonder is that we can see these trees and not wonder more" (quoted in Thayer (1884 (1971), p. 108).

These values of beauty and awe continue to inspire and clearly inform the essays. As Ben Thurau writes in "On Aesthetic Education," "The challenge of wilderness today, as a tenet of environmentalism and as a value in our lives, is to hear again the language of beauty." Our essayists wrote movingly of "a mother wolf spider carrying her hundreds of babies on her back" and "a skilled and patient blue heron catch a large fish only to have it stolen away by a bald eagle" (Lauren DePerna, "Wild Life Support"). Essayist Nicole Crescimanno shared "the awe that bubbles and fills you up when you realize you are standing on a glacier that is also home to steaming lava coals" and the moment when "when the sun kisses the earth at 5:00 am at the most eastern point of the country,… including you on a secret that will bathe you in a warm orange, red, and yellow hued bath." ("Escaping to Wilderness"). Chelsea Batavia succinctly captures all these meanings of wilderness in her essay "This Wild World" and, in doing so, links herself with an intellectual movement more than 200 years old: "Stand in a snowy aspen grove, immersed in space, silence, and light; feel your thoughts break in muted echoes; reach for the truth and watch it slip through your fingers, dissolving into open air. Gasp in awe, collapse in terror, bow in humility, and weep in a world indifferent to your presence. Marvel, cower, entreat, pray. Then stand, and walk on, face forward into the unknown."

Wilderness as an illusion

While not as universal a theme as beauty and solitude, an important idea running through many essays was that of wilderness as a social construct or, for some, an illusion. This theme complicates the received wilderness tradition. While many earlier nature writers recognized that wilderness was an abstract idea, that fact was not usually their focus. Rather, they focused on making the case *for* that wilderness idea. For example, when European Americans first visited the area that would later become Yosemite National Park, the Ahwahnechee Native Americans lived in Yosemite Valley. The area had been populated, shaped, and reshaped by human impact on the land for over 3000 years. John Muir, who would become the most famous advocate to protect the area as National Park, was very well aware of this influence. Yet, it did not discourage him from viewing the park as wild and natural and worthy of protection. He aimed to create a place that would be protected from *future* influence—and in doing so, he helped to create the problematic idea of wilderness as a place free of human impacts.

This essay project shows that our Millennial writers struggle with that idea of the wilderness. Many are all too aware that the wilderness idea is a social construction and that far from being independent of human influence, wild landscapes are the product of complex political, economic, and technological processes. Jacob Glass's essay on the politics surrounding the creating of the Scotchman Peaks Wilderness Area captures that reality, as does Jeff Jenkins' essay on the technological infrastructure surrounding the Clark Mountain in the Mojave Wilderness: "this wilderness enclave exists in perpetuity due to conservation efforts afforded by the surrounding technologically developed landscape." Indeed, many of the essayists are willing to challenge the received conception of wilderness—a willingness that may reflect this generation's weaker connection to the natural world or merely their increased awareness of the complexities of wilderness preservation.

No essay better encapsulates this theme than the aptly titled "The Illusion of Wilderness" by Kate Leary. She begins with a direct challenge to Thoreau: "I went to the woods not because I wished to live deliberately, but because I wished to live imaginatively." She went into the wild as a "dreamer fed by stories of exploration," seeking the illusion of wilderness, "however faint." Her essay emphasizes that wilderness as we have come to define it—a place untrammeled by humans—exists in very few places in the world, if at all:

> So much of the world has already been shaped and reshaped by human hands that it would be difficult to know whether any given patch is truly in a "natural" state. On some level, the idea of pristine-ness belongs to museum specimens and landscape paintings, an Eden-like world that we can't reclaim, if indeed it ever existed.

She worries that by focusing on potentially mythical pristine places, we risk devaluing those less-pristine landscapes. Her favorite wilderness, a scrap of second-growth woods behind her suburban house, was far from pristine, but "things don't stop having value when they become chipped, flawed, scarred or stained." She explains

> The well-used and well-worn items are often the most cherished, because they are survivors, with a vivid history that is plain for the world to see. A forest that has been cut and re-grown, with its jumble of different sized trees, interspersed with brambles, bushes and straggling weeds can have a beauty all its own.

Katie is not alone in this sentiment. In "Living with Wilderness," Lara Brenner describes her childhood growing up in a city, reporting that she felt connected to nature despite never going camping or having the opportunities to explore those remote areas usually defined as wilderness. She writes that "to disregard urban nature is to deny the experiences of millions of children. Our generation's relationship to nature is not impoverished, merely different than those that came before it." And here, Brenner gets to the crux of the issue for some in this generation. Defining wilderness as what is "out there," distant from human habitations, we neglect those who have no access to those distant places—as well as rendering invisible the humans who actually inhabit those "pristine" landscapes. And, to Millennials, this may present a problematic tension between preserving wilderness and serving humans.

Some of our essayists questioned prioritizing wilderness preservation in the face of other, more pressing issues. Justin Welch, in "Rethinking Wilderness," insists that "environmentalists in the twenty-first century and beyond must look inward, to densely populated built environments, with the aim to make these places as efficient and sustainable as possible." Brandon Jordan agrees "Environmentalists should hold other factors, such as economic equity, as important while discussing the state of nature with others" ("Do the Evolution").

Others, however, suggested that we simply need to adjust our idea of wilderness. Nicholas Robinson suggests in "A New Wilderness" that "there is a case to be made for… a different kind of wilderness; a new "wilderness", accessible to everyone. …Trails and signs may soon scatter what are now untouched wilderness backcountry areas. Although no longer as wild, these places can still offer a retreat for many who have never been to a wild place, the majority of the population." Shan Kothari argues in "Reclaiming Wilderness" that in addition to large-scale, relatively pristine landscapes, "we may also think of wilderness as whatever attunes us to perceive more clearly the delicate interplay of natural processes through which living organisms have become what they are, and to understand their value." Perhaps, the most sophisticated view was offered by Elizabeth Shephard: "Reconciling our interconnectedness and not our isolation from wilderness is the task of the 21st Century. It is important for not just our survival, but for a revival of ecological health and biodiversity we seek today primarily in protected parks or on vacation. The wilderness is truly an entire global system, made of smaller subsystems that help the entire planet to stay alive."

Wilderness and technology

Wilderness is traditionally defined by what it is not: it is not man-made, and it is not governed by human intentions—in short, it is not technology. The dichotomy, even hostility, between wilderness and technology is a long-standing theme in wilderness writing and politics. The early stirrings of the modern environmental movement began in Britain as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Smoke and pollution increased dramatically with the rise in coal consumption and the creation of large-scale factories in urban and industrial areas. As a result, Britain passed the Alkali Act of 1863 to regulate gaseous hydrochloric acid, one of the first major modern environmental laws in the world. Outside the urban core, wilder areas of the countryside became the refuge away from the soot and unhealthy conditions of modern industrialism. The Romantics celebrated these places, and they quickly became a national resource to be protected against encroaching industrial development.

Similar sentiments drove the environmental movement in the USA. By 1890, the West was open for business, and settlement and industrial development rapidly transformed the vast western landscape. Ironically, the very development—from agriculture to railroads and dams—that was threatening the American wilderness was also making it ever more accessible. Preserves like Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and Yosemite National Park in 1892 were created to be accessible by means of but still untouched by modern technology.

This relationship between wilderness and technology persists and has expanded in our contributed and solicited essays. The complexities of that relationship are explored in detail in "A Technological Wilderness" by Jeffrey Jenkins. Jenkins recounts a journey that takes "the same route that Muir originally walked in 1869 when he first arrived in San Francisco and headed over Pacheco Pass towards the Sierra." He is headed for Clark Mountain, where he hopes to escape modern society, much like Thoreau on his trek to Mt. Katahdin. But, unlike Muir and Thoreau, Jenkins travels through a highly developed landscape, "past the oil fields in the Central Valley near Bakersfield and over Tehachapi Pass where continual gusts are ideal for turbine-driven wind power." Traveling by car, he is soon "ensnared by a wolf pack of Priuses"—"the most abundant rare earth consumer product on the market." His route takes him past Edwards Air Force Base"—a landscape pockmarked with radar facilities and test sites"—the US Borax mine, and the Mountain Pass rare earth mine.

But, even on top of Clark Mountain, he does not escape modern technology: "I pass a cell phone tower on my ascent and continue on the shared federal lands trail to walk under successive power line corridors where a helicopter hovers overhead, ostensibly inspecting." Those signs of modernity are oddly juxtaposed to a juniper forest that "dominates the sky island ecosystem of juniper and piñon at the top; a

remnant of Pleistocene climate." He does find wilderness—but he finds it deeply dependent on the surrounding technological infrastructure. He concludes, somewhat ironically, with a quote from Muir: "I realize the trouble in searching for a wilderness deplete of technological influence…. 'When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe.'"

Jenkins' essay highlights one of the more striking differences between the older wilderness writings and the essays that we received: a chief threat to wilderness is now communications technology. No matter how remote you are, you can no longer escape the trappings of modern civilization—even if those changes are not fundamentally altering the landscape. Jenkins realizes this the moment that he has gotten into officially designated wilderness and his smartphone vibrates with an incoming text. What does wilderness really mean when "when frontiers are inverted, innovation is all around us and infrastructure connects the flow of materials and people"?

The ubiquity of communications technology was a dominant theme in the essays; six of them defined wilderness as a place without cell phone service. Of course, the threat to wilderness has always been an evolving one, different to every generation. It was the construction of large-scale dams across the American West in the mid-twentieth century that helped spawn the contemporary environmental movement. This, in turn, gave way to high-profile fights against old-growth logging in the 1980s–1990s. However, the threat now seems more existential: that no matter what remote corner you retreat to, soon it will still be within reach and interconnected with the world you sought to escape. While the early fights against industrialization were localized threats to specific landscapes, modern challenges are global in nature. Between climate change and your internet connection, there is no piece of the planet free of human influence.

This technological interconnectedness challenges the traditional definition of wilderness. Indeed, it seems that McKibben may have been right; perhaps, Millennials can no longer think of wilderness as a separate reality untouched by humankind. But, that may make preserving wilderness more important than ever. Ben Cosgrove muses in "Realer Places" that "I don't think we're misguided in placing such a high value on interpersonal connection or access to information, but there's something that doesn't feel right about trading the real world for the virtual one." He worries that Facebook and Twitter have simplified our mental landscape much like suburban development has simplified the physical landscape (noting that his smartphone is organized in flashy, satisfying gridline patterns just like a commercial strip). This hyperconnectivity "has challenged the importance of place… [I]t's now dangerously easy for us to lose sight of where we are, and even of *who* we are." But, Cosgrove sees wilderness areas as an antidote: "Our greatest defense against this ambivalence may lie in the power of wilderness to demonstrate both the value of real places and the incompleteness of virtual ones." In wilderness, "we wander through places that are bigger than we are, that don't cater to us, that do what they will do no matter what we ask of them. Wilderness forces us to look at what's really there, and so pushes back against our inclination to engage only with the things we want to see, the way we want to see them, in the flashing moment that they occur to us."

Finding wilderness locally

The final theme that we found woven through a number of essays was the value of finding wilderness locally. Our authors were as concerned with small-scale wilderness—any place wild enough to immerse you in the natural world—as they were with large-scale, legally designated areas with no visible human presence on the landscape. This theme is obviously connected to the earlier "Wilderness as an illusion" theme. Once one accepts that wilderness is a social construct, one can broaden one's definition of wilderness to encompass a greater variety of places.

This willingness to find wilderness even in degraded or developed landscapes is perhaps the most striking discontinuity between the Millennial writers and the received tradition. As discussed above, while earlier writers sometimes recognized that even the wildest places had been shaped by humans, the wilderness ideal valorized places where humans were not the predominant force on the landscape. Our writers, however, seem to have internalized the concept that no place on the planet is untouched by modern society, even the most remote corners. While wilderness has not disappeared, the essayists often find it in unexpected places. Lara Brenner found "a frontier of my own to explore in the vacant lots and steel culverts of my neighborhood, and discovered there a web of ecosystems originated by humans but that had taken on a life of their own. I was inspired not by the vast, primeval forest but by the endlessly complex microcosm found in a bucketful of pond water" (Living with Wilderness). For Mike Galgay, wilderness is "present in areas and places that retain their own characteristics and flavor apart from what man has colored them with. This can be Yosemite Valley of course, but it can also be the humble woods in my backyard that I explore and the stand of hemlock trees that grows there." Preserving wilderness, for him, means interacting with the land in a way that respects the wild element in the forest behind one's house, one's garden, or in the fire burning in the fireplace. Shan Kothari writes

> Naturalists in New York City may delight in the abundance of warblers and finches that find refuge of the green cathedral of Central Park, though it is surrounded on all sides by roads and skyscrapers. In the trail-crossed woods behind my dormitory at Michigan State University, I learned to love the ephemeral trilliums that would

> carpet the ground and disappear within weeks. It is in these places that people can observe the patterns and cycles that govern nature, learn the rituals of the animals, and begin to see them as more than just natural resources to be exploited for business.

This theme fundamentally questions the dichotomy between humans and wilderness and the exclusion of the human from the wild. Elizabeth Shephard in her essay "Find Our Way Home" writes that we need to "shift our definition and perspective of 'the wilderness' from being something separate from ourselves, to something that is everywhere and within us." These writers suggest that if we are truly to engage and connect people with the natural world, we must value landscapes that are accessible—even if degraded—as much as those landscapes that are pristine but remote. Their very remoteness makes traditional wilderness unreachable to much of the world—and if it is unreachable, how is one expected to care about it?

It should be noted that these writers are not necessarily advocating for changing the legal designation of wilderness, nor are they saying that those areas do not have value. Shephard still values wilderness that allows one "to escape and find refuge in the harmony of nature." Similarly, Ben Cosgrove writes, "In places where the impact of humans is minimal, you can find yourself alone with a cacophony of smells, images, and sounds—an overwhelming flood of information relating exclusively to the place you're in." These experiences are real, valuable, and worthy of protecting. But, our writers, raised with a global ethic, value experiences of nature that are available to a wider array of people. They want to expand the scope of wilderness preservation to encompass "drainage ditches and alpine streams, on sidewalks and salt flats, from skyscrapers to mountaintops" (Brenner, Living with Wilderness).

Conclusion

Obviously, our conclusions are limited to the small number of essays that we received Further research is needed to determine whether our set of wilderness lovers is idiosyncratic or whether these themes resonate more widely among the Millennial generation.

With that caveat in mind, we can draw some tentative conclusions about the continuing vitality of the wilderness tradition. Not surprisingly, our main conclusion is that worries about the death of the idea of wilderness seem to be overstated. The rhetoric of traditional wilderness politics is still powerful. Judging by the essays discussed in the "Solitude and beauty" section, the experience of wilderness holds profound experiences for those who are able to visit those places. However, these writers do believe that Millennials are increasingly disconnected from the outdoors and more connected with technology. Of course, even the earliest American nature writers worried that their own generations were too enamored of and distracted by technological marvels. But, the intrusion of sophisticated technology into our lives may make this theme, if not new, at least newly urgent.

Second, the Millennials who participated in our contest do not necessarily believe that a landscape has to be completely free from human influence to carry many of the traditional values of wilderness. They seem comfortable expanding the scope of lands worthy of protection to encompass smaller and more highly managed or restored landscapes. Wilderness as it is currently defined and as legally protected—"big wilderness"—may become less relevant to this generation than those natural places closer to home. This is not to suggest, however, that big wilderness is not also important and worthy of protection. The ability to achieve solitude and a sense of humility depend, in part, on the scale of the wilderness. We merely suggest (along with William Cronon 1996) that small wilderness may increasingly come within the ambit of wilderness advocacy. Nor should this surprise us; after all, one of the greatest contributors to the wilderness tradition—Henry David Thoreau—is best known for his celebration of the relatively small wilderness of Walden Pond.

Third, our writers are also eager to know how human needs can be served by or accommodated within wilderness policy. The Millennial generation is (or at least sees itself as) more focused on social justice, more tolerant, and more diverse than previous generations (Pew Research Feb (2014). This is reflected in our writers' willingness to connect the case for wilderness preservation to other social and environmental causes. Our essays suggest that discussions of the ecosystem services provided by wilderness, the human health benefits associated with outdoor recreation and protected public land, the need to preserve biodiversity, and the role that protected lands can have in combating climate change are all potential avenues into making the case for wilderness preservation (for example, essayists Eric Edmunds and Phillip Kelly emphasize the importance of these ecosystem services (Edmunds, "Wilderness—What is it Good for?" and Kelly, Wilderness in the City)). Our writers are also interested in discussing access, especially access for underserved communities, to these lands. These are not entirely new themes in the tradition, but they may become newly salient as wilderness advocates have to find a place within the crowded field of environmental advocacy more generally. Making alliances with climate, environmental justice, and biodiversity conservation advocates may require wilderness lovers to give greater attention to these connections.

Finally, some of our writers suggested that even if they are somewhat disconnected from natural landscapes, Millennials do enjoy a sense of global connectedness—a global

consciousness—that can be used to protect wilderness. Madelyn Hoagland-Hanson put it well in "Young in a Future Without Wilderness," "Say what you will about our attention deficits and lack of close social ties; there is little denying that we have greater immediate access to a massive international network of people and information than ever before. Consequently, our global connectedness is, if not actually greater, then certainly more visible than it has been in the past."

For example, a large part of the youth climate movement has been focused on the rights of indigenous peoples across the world. That movement springs from a sense that those who are most affected by climate change are often the most vulnerable and least politically powerful. For some of our writers, there is a connection to be made between climate change and the loss of wild places on which many cultures still rely for subsistence living. Others simply call on us to remember, as Jasmine Wang put it, that

> Through the near instantaneous spread of digital information, we are exposed to the jarring contrast of privilege and poverty and the vast inequality of resource distribution across the globe. In the oversimplified quest to develop "third-world" societies into "first-world" societies, we confuse primitive with wild and often sacrifice both for sake of civilization. The idea of wilderness must remain relevant in order to integrate it into the vision of a first-world society. A first-world society that does not recognize its part in a delicate global ecosystem is neither developed nor sustainable nor, ultimately, humane. A healthy environment and basic human rights of clean water, sanitation, food and shelter are not—and cannot be—mutually exclusive ("Life Without Boundaries").

As Wang and our other essayists demonstrate, the wilderness tradition remains vital and powerful, and it has the capacity to evolve to accommodate the new concerns and experiences of twenty-first century Americans. Our small study has allowed us to chart some of the directions that we might expect it to go; further research on the rhetoric of young environmental leaders could identify additional themes, tropes, and transformations that will inspire the next generation of wilderness lovers.

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