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Wilderness Islands: Wilderness in a Paradigm Shift

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Reading about the concept of wilderness, and especially about wilderness areas in contemporary American environmental literature, one is bound to come across some island metaphors describing the isolation of wild places in an ocean of land settled by man. As James M. Glover recently put it, “[p]erhaps the most important overall insight we’ve gained since Marshall’s time is our increasing awareness that our wilderness lands are, both literally and figuratively, tiny islands of nature in a rising ocean of industrial civilization.”² The relevance of such images seems obvious enough in a context of ever sprawling urbanization, easily available transportation and communication. In contemporary America, wilderness has indeed been confined to insular spaces.

Such wilderness island metaphors possibly help visualize the imperiled state of remote, empty places, but trying to draw the parallel systematically further might prove hazardous. Yet, metaphors have a logic of their own that can illuminate their objects. For example, if one concentrates on the concept of island, one may wonder what treasures wilderness hides in the seclusion of its remote-

¹ . François Duban, Université de La Réunion, 15, avenue René Cassin, 97400 Saint Denis (France).

² . James M. Glover, “Bob Marshall, Backcountry Recreation and the Island Effect,” *Trends* 31: 3 (1994): 2. Bob Marshall (1901-1939) was one of the leading figures of the wilderness movement.

ness. Similarly, islands are supposedly protected worlds and as such provide a readymade terrain for utopian dreams and experiments, or the idealistic visions of a new order that is to prevail over the rest of the world. This is what actually happened to "Turtle Island," the American continent as it is called by Native Americans.³ As a wilderness, it was to be the place of the Puritan experiment.

In the early days of white settlement, wilderness had a biblical sense. To the Puritans, it was the evil abode of demons and a place of chaos. Over the decades, it became a place to be conquered, to be enlightened by the torch of civilization and redeemed from its satanic rule. With the romantic influence from Europe and the Transcendentalists' paeans sung to nature, it also became a place of wonder in the nineteenth century. Later, wildcat capitalism set loose exploited its natural resources: wilderness had become a place of plunder. Nowadays, in an age of environmental awareness, it is extolled as the shrine of innumerable values. Nature is turned to for meaning and solace, and pristine areas have become places of worship. Obviously, wilderness is a notion that is redefined by each age, as are most concepts, but this is possibly even more applicable here since, as an empty space, it appears as a cultural void on which nearly any dream, expectation or utopia can be projected.

In recent decades, as more undeveloped areas came to gain legal protection, they had to be defined by law. Such places were indeed legally defined by Congress in the Wilderness Act of 1964:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own work dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean ... an area of undeveloped federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvement of human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; (4) also contains ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, or historical value.⁴

³ . Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990).

⁴ . *United States Statutes at Large, 1964* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1965) vol. 78, 891.

Such a definition obviously addresses several values enshrined in primitive, undeveloped areas. It is not clear whether wilderness is preserved for itself or only for more anthropocentric concerns like recreation, aesthetic appreciation of wild nature or retaining a gene pool for future scientific research. In an age of environmental awareness, such questions may be of particular significance for the future and preservation of such islands of primitiveness.

Why should such places as wilderness areas exist? A historical survey of the statutes ruling such areas and their implementation may help in addressing this question. Each age not only has had its own idea of wilderness but also has defined a special topology for it which informs the ever changing meanings and values conferred onto it, especially the shift from anthropocentric to biocentric ones in more recent years. If indeed values attached to wild places keep changing over decades and centuries, we may wonder whether the rising tides from an overdeveloped, overpopulated human world are not likely to fill up the emptiness of wilderness islands. Can they really remain unimpaired in times of tidal changes? Moreover, the very notion of places isolated from the rest of the world runs against the canon of ecology, which lays emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things. The notion of wilderness appears to be, to some critics at least, a mere construction of the human mind right from the start. Environmentalists, however, maintain that it can be truly experienced and that its existence cannot be questioned. The current conflicts derived from such opposed views are evidence of the ambiguity of the notion. They have come to a gridlock recently, a state of things that is characteristic not only of environmental affairs, but also of many other controversial issues currently examined by the nation, as revealed in the recent elections of November 8, 1994. The nation seems divided on itself and unable to decide which set of values — grossly put liberal vs. more traditional ones — is going to shape its future. The aim of this paper is to show that an interpretation of this gridlock from an environmental point of view may provide some clues as to the meaning of the current paradigm shift.

I - Establishing wilderness islands

The history of America is first and foremost the history of the conquest of the wilderness. With rapidly vanishing wild lands, the idea of setting aside significant acreage of such lands as parks for the enjoyment of the public became a fact by the end of the nineteenth century. It was a step that exposed the split that

still divides the environmental movement in the United States into two currents. One is concerned with the preservation of wild nature, putting biocentric values first. Recent developments such as deep ecology easily relate to this preservation tradition. Another current, sometimes called utilitarian or conservationist, has developed into what is now mainstream environmentalism in the United States. Right from the start, wilderness has been shaping the American environmental movement.

The distribution of wilderness islands

The first islands of preserved nature in the United States were established at a time when frontier life was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Yosemite Valley was created as a state park in 1874. Yellowstone (1872), the Adirondacks (1885) and Yosemite (1890) were established as national parks for people's pleasure and for utilitarian purposes such as water and game supply. The National Park Service Act of 1916 created a new, distinct agency to manage these increasingly popular retreats. Thanks to the dynamic and tireless management of its first director, Stephen T. Mather, the National Park Service (NPS) was created as a different entity from the already existing Forest Service. Mather feared that the utilitarian approach of the Forest Service might inevitably lead to some form of resource extraction in the national parks. If preservation was soon firmly established as the policy of the agency against the wishes of local ranchers and miners, the mission set to the service was also to provide the means for the American public to enjoy the parks. In other words, right from the start, the mission of the NPS was based on both preservation and anthropocentric values, which inevitably led to conflict. To make the parks accessible to an ever increasing number of visitors, roads, trails and all forms of accommodations were built and inevitably impaired the pristine beauty of the places the agency was supposed to preserve. In their own way the national parks were intended to be islands of wilderness, but they could not and cannot be considered as wilderness if wilderness is defined by the provisions of the Wilderness Act of 1964.

The Forest Service which was established as such in 1905 with Gifford Pinchot as its first chief was based on utilitarian principles in an age of progressivism. A wise management of the public forests for timber — so that on average no more wood should be cut each year than can be replaced with growth, ensur-

ing a steady wood supply forever — was to make their resources accessible to all American citizens and to future generations. This policy is still known and implemented as “sustained yield.” It took another two decades before a young forester whose writings still inspire the American environmental movement, Aldo Leopold (1887-1948), had the first wilderness area protected in the Gila National Forest (1924). From then on, the Forest Service became an agency which in theory at least, had to implement some kind of multiple use policy. The fast rise of recreational activities along with the emergence of the ecological movement in the 1960s and 1970s prompted Congress to pass the National Forest Management Act (NFMA) of 1976.

The 1976 National Forest Management Act had given the agency new marching orders. It was to prepare comprehensive land and resource management plans that would strike the balance Congress wanted from the national forests: Pure drinking water and white-water rafting, campgrounds and wilderness solitude, deer and woodpeckers, wild flowers and clear-grain Douglas fir lumber.⁵

This multi-purpose policy assigned to the Forest Service — to organize timber sales, provide for recreational use, and manage national forests according to ecological principles — was soon to prove impractical. For one thing, under the influence of Senator Mark Hatfield of Oregon, the agency was allowed to depart from the principle of sustained yield, opening an era of unprecedented levels of timber sales and cuts. The agency culture and tradition is still largely resource-oriented. The ecosystemic approach which is supposed to inspire the policy of the Service currently will take time to be fully adopted by the whole hierarchy within the agency. But the NFMA at least secured places where nature would remain untouched. These areas provide wilderness lovers of today and those of future generations with solitary places to roam, in contrast with the National Parks, thronged with so many visitors as to obliterate their wild character. Probably twenty percent of the National Forest system will ultimately be so designated.⁶

Other wilderness areas are managed by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM). BLM was created in 1946 by executive order of President Truman and combined the old General Land Office and the Grazing Service. Lack of proper funding and personnel are serious impediments to the proper management of

⁵ . Kate Durbin, “Politics Helped Delay NW Timber Management Plans,” *The Oregonian* 15 October 1990: 8.

⁶ . Bill Worf, “Trammeling the Wilderness: Clash at the Wildland-Urban Interface,” *Inner Voice* 6-4 (1994): 5.

these wilderness areas. Nevertheless, BLM lands can also be seen as a reserve of wilderness islands for the future.

All in all, the National wilderness Preservation System holds 95.3 million acres — the equivalent of seventy percent of continental France — of National Forest, National Park, Bureau of Land management, and Wildlife Refuge lands in the lower forty-eight states and Alaska. This system, of which no equivalent is anywhere else to be found in the world, was defined by the Wilderness Act of 1964. It includes alpine solitudes, deserts, swamps, seashores and forests. In all, two percent of the lower 48 states is now protected as wilderness, or four percent of the national territory if one includes Alaska.

The ambivalence of wilderness

The Wilderness Preservation System is protected in perpetuity by law. It forms an archipelago on the map of the lower 48 states, whose biggest wilderness islands lie in the West, where most of the federal lands are to be found. A look at the map of the American continent by the beginning of the seventeenth century shows tiny islands of white settlements along the Atlantic coast isolated in an ocean of land mostly covered by forests. Today, the map shows an opposite pattern of tiny islands of wilderness in an ocean of man-impacted lands. In the course of four centuries, the America of the white man has been “civilized” and Frederick Jackson Turner has become famous for a theory that establishes the national character in the frontier experience and the conquest of a rapidly receding wilderness. Why then has the wilderness archipelago been preserved?

The values located in wilderness clearly expose ambivalent attitudes. Wild places have become the locus of both anthropocentrism and biocentrism over the years. The original contradiction of the preservation of wilderness for the enjoyment of the people could not be solved to the advantage of either policy. In a pluralistic, democratic society, Congress can only compromise. Over the years, the multiple-use concept has thus developed, mixing nature preservation, recreation, wilderness protection, sustained yield and resource exploitation as various policies of land-use to meet everyone’s needs. Such a multiplicity of policies basically reflects two traditions that run concomitantly throughout the history of the nation. Wilderness is either to be conquered, tamed, dominated and exploited or it is to be a source of awe and wonder. As the forests in the East disappeared under

the axes of the first pioneers and settlers, Cooper mourned the disappearance of the wooded expanses of the Frontier and Thoreau celebrated wilderness and wildness in nature. Miners and ranchers settled the West while John Muir (1838-1914), the father of the preservation idea, roamed and praised the wilderness of the Sierras. The TVA dammed the rivers of the West and the Wilderness Society was created to save the last wild places of the nation. In an age of environmental awareness, these two trends are now on colliding courses as wild lands have become so few that wilderness lovers will not compromise.

Wilderness islands have been protected for a variety of reasons and values. They can be cherished for solitude and spiritual redemption from the materialism of the city, they can be enjoyed for their aesthetic qualities. They are also places of national heritage, the very living witnesses of the birth of the nation. Some visitors simply go hunting or fishing in wilderness designated areas, which may surprise ecologists from abroad who fail to see these places as essentially American, with a national tradition of hunting and fishing in the wilderness for recreation. This vast array of sometimes conflicting values is mostly anthropocentric. But as places where biological and ecological processes can be maintained and evolve, free from human interference, they have acquired a distinctive biocentric value in this age of ecologism.

These islands are expected to sustain ecosystems which in almost every case need more space to sustain themselves than they have been allotted. At the same time, they are expected to provide entertainment, education, spiritual rejuvenation, physical challenge, solitude and a host of other benefits for people armed heavily with the accouterment of the industrial culture they are trying to escape.⁷

The shift from anthropocentric appreciation of wilderness to a biocentric valuation raises new and far-reaching issues about these areas. A biocentric approach inevitably leads to the recognition of the rights of nature. The preeminence of man as the measure of all things in the humanistic tradition is now widely questioned by the biocentrism of what has come to be called deep ecology.

II - Wilderness threatened

The paradox is that wilderness is more and more valued at a time when the pressures it is subjected to are so high as to threaten its survival. It is physically

⁷. James M. Glover, "Bob Marshall, Backcountry Recreation and the Island Effect," *Trends* 31: 3 (1994): 2.

assaulted by a rising tide of urban development that now reaches into wild places for better quality of life. It is biologically imperiled by agricultural practices that concentrate on a few species and discard others, making it more and more difficult for the remaining wild species to survive in unsettled areas. Semantically, the very notion of wilderness is being re-examined and criticized, somewhat over-emphatically, as a pure construct of the mind at time when increasing numbers of visitors are loving the national parks and forests to death. The question is to know whether wilderness islands will survive such developments.

Wilderness areas: impossible islands in a global ecology

From a strictly ecological point of view, isolated and small-sized ecosystems find it extremely difficult to survive. The surface of the planet is now almost fully settled by humans so that very few wild places remain as original habitats for wild species of animals and plants. This process of fragmentation and reduction of ever shrinking habitats only leads to more isolation and extinction as receding numbers of individuals make it increasingly difficult to achieve the perpetuation of species. The immigration rate of new species to these islands that could maintain biodiversity essential to healthy ecosystems also keeps dwindling. An example of this is to be found in the intermountain desert of the American West:

Since the earth as a whole is being rapidly converted into a system of habitat islands surrounded by a sea of human disturbance, the Great Basin can be viewed as a model for the global conservation of biological diversity. As island biogeographic theory predicts, the process of fragmentation, with the associated shrinking habitat, increases the isolation of those areas and raises the extinction rate while lowering the immigration rate. Thus, the faunas of the Basin islands equilibrate with fewer species. Precisely the same thing is happening throughout the entire planet.⁸

Interestingly, the very word "island" is used again to describe isolated ecosystems and name a biological theory. The Great Basin islands, with their dwindling genetic reserves, are evidence that tiny wilderness islands as isolated ecosystemic preserves cannot survive in America today. The implication is that there is no such thing as an ecologically isolated island.

In fact, nature ignores human boundaries. A park, a wilderness area or a wildlife refuge may have limits set by man, but such limits have no meaning ecol-

⁸ . Paul R. Ehrlich, Dennis D. Murphy, and Bruce A. Wilcox, "Islands in the Desert," *Natural History* 97-10 (Oct. 1988): 64.

ogically speaking. The animals within the park or wilderness areas will roam outside. Fires will sweep in and out of protected areas. Exotic species will invade wilderness preserves and exterminate the local species. Not only are the boundaries set by man to these islands completely irrelevant from an ecological point of view, but the very concept of boundary is unacceptable ecologically speaking. The whole planet is one network of ecosystems interacting with each other. In practice, national park managers have developed the concept of "greater" ecosystem to try and take such realities into account:

One of the most important trends may be the increased recognition that no park or wilderness is an island. The concept of "greater" ecosystem management is becoming widely accepted, and neighboring land management agencies and the communities around them must work more closely together to mitigate and resolve the issues of the future.⁹

The irrelevance of defining spatial limits to create so-called protected areas only exposes the artificial character of the wilderness concept.

Wilderness as a pure construct of the human mind

The concept of wilderness has been recently re-examined by J. Baird Callicott¹⁰ who maintains that it is nothing but a pure construct of the mind. Although he makes it clear that such areas should be preserved and new ones be created, he wants to underscore the paradoxical quality of wilderness islands which are so-called natural places entirely created by man.

First, Callicott argues that wilderness has never existed since right from the beginning men have necessarily interacted with their environment. In other words, men are just natural creatures and their actions on the environment are just as natural as beavers' dams or deer trails. The so-called ancient forests of the Northwest for example are, for many of them, the very creation of Indian fires. Some ecocritics like Murray Bookchin have thus developed the notion of "second nature" to include all man-made objects. This approach paves the road for a man-

⁹ . Boyers, Laurel Munson, "Wilderness Management at Yosemite National Park." *Trends*. 31:3 (1994): 5.

¹⁰ . J. Baird Callicott, "The Wilderness Idea : a Critique and an Alternative," *Inner Voice* 6-4 (1994): 13.

controlled world, with man not only as the steward of God's creation, but as enlightened monitor of the processes of evolution.

The Eurocentricity of the wilderness concept also reveals its artificiality. Looking at the New World as an empty continent is historical fallacy, Callicott maintains. The American continent and its environment had been peopled and shaped by human presence for millennia when, with the arrival of the first Europeans in the fifteenth century, Indians were decimated by the diseases that the new settlers had brought with them. Their populations were reduced by perhaps ninety percent. The Pilgrim Fathers thus wrongly assumed that they had landed in a desolate and howling wilderness. Callicott insists that this "wilderness" was no wilderness at all, in that Indians had managed their lands and forests with fire for ages.

Another concept re-examined by Callicott is the false assumption of the permanence of ecosystems. Even if we consider nature free from human interference as it was before the emergence of humanity, we must admit that there is no such a thing as permanence in nature. Huge and cyclical climate changes lead to changing ecosystems. Species naturally become extinct. So that demanding the preservation of selected areas of wilderness is more of a romantic attitude than an environmentally sound stance.

Finally, establishing a dichotomy between man, the purveyor of meaning and order in the original chaos, and wilderness as pure nature, is just perpetuating the errors of Cartesian dualism between man and nature. This dualism has its roots in the Judeo-Christian tradition itself, which has made man the steward of the planet, God's special agent in a world doomed to Armageddon. Ecology holds on the contrary that man is only part of nature, an element in a whole, a center of interrelationships. Deep ecology in particular strives at re-establishing the connection of the individual self with the cosmic Self.

Callicott comes to the conclusion that wilderness areas, the shrines of so-called nature, are paradoxically purely artificial. One could easily argue on the contrary that wilderness does exist and that by creating wilderness areas, man acknowledges its very existence, protecting an already existing entity from the rising tide of lands that are settled and developed. What is of true significance here is that the deconstruction of the wilderness idea, if it is to be accepted, may have important implications on American environmentalism in so far as America is the first and possibly the only country that has developed a policy of wilderness

protection based on the very notion of wilderness. This policy has deeply shaped the environmental movement in the United States. While in Europe environmentalism has focused on a healthy environment and political activism, much of the American environmental movement is based on the defense of the wilderness. If the latter is being questioned or redefined, American environmentalism is very likely to be affected in some way or other.

The dissolution of wilderness islands

The critique of wilderness as a notion is paralleled by a threat to the very physical existence of wilderness islands which are literally being “loved to death.” In 1954, the director of the National Park Service, Conrad Wirth, commenting on the popularity of the national parks, uttered a now famous remark: “The people are loving the parks to death.”¹¹ By 1990, national parks had more than 330 million visitors yearly. Booking one year in advance is common practice. The passing on some trails is so important that their use has to be regulated so as to keep a semblance of wilderness. Traffic congestion is common. Similar trends occur in the National Forests wilderness areas. Some spots, especially trails leading to famous peaks are now so popular that trash and human waste simply put an end to the wilderness experience. This overcrowding must be set in perspective. Remote wilderness areas in the back country are still solitary places where the locals go for fishing and hunting. Other wilderness designated areas are famous nationwide and are truly overwhelmed by the pressure put on them by visitors — like the Mount Jefferson wilderness area, the most popular in Oregon. The striking feature currently is the dramatic change in the use of wilderness areas close to urban cities. Mostly forested areas, they have come to be known as urban forests.¹² There are now twelve national forests within an hour’s drive of more than one million people. They provide city dwellers with opportunities for daily recreational activities such as running, biking, hiking, and picnicking.¹³ These places are beginning to experience large crowds and vandalism. The thrust from highly populated areas into the National Forests threatens the very idea of wilderness in the long run. More regrettably, such trends simply anticipate the

¹¹ . Conrad Wirth, as quoted in Jeff Taylor and Jake Thompson, “National Parks Cry For Leaders With Backbone,” *The Oregonian* November 9, 1993: A03.

¹² . The concept of urban forest can also refer to groups of trees within an urban area.

¹³ . Anne Fege, “The New Urban Forest Coalition,” *Inner Voice* 6-4 (1994): 7.

situation of the wilderness system as it will be in the forthcoming decades. Wilderness islands are doomed to the fate of National Parks, unless visits to wilderness areas are restricted and ecological considerations prevail over the accommodation and entertainment of the public, as it is already the case in some places, where visitors are required to refrain from using riparian zones.

III - From wilderness to wildness

Perhaps the defacement of wilderness has forced its critics and lovers alike to probe into the appeal it exercises on them and value its remaining preserved islands even more.

Wilderness areas as sanctuaries

Even though more and more wilderness areas are being "loved to death," there remains wilderness enough in less popular national parks and National Forest lands for its worshippers to find places where they can enjoy their own pursuits in solitude. Wilderness has not been wiped out from the surface of the earth, just as deconstruction has not disintegrated the wilderness concept. Simply, it has refurbished it to the point where it exposes the bare bones of existence, to use Edward Abbey's phrase in *Desert Solitaire*. In other words, deconstructing the notion of wilderness only leads to the rediscovery of the unavoidable wildness of the world. Wilderness may be a cultural artifact, but any criticism of it will ultimately have to cope with the reality of the outer world that still remains in its strangeness, otherness, its wildness best revealed in the non-humanized context of wilderness. This is highly reminiscent of Thoreau's extraordinary exclamation on the fog-shrouded slopes of Maine's Mt. Katahdin: "Talk of mysteries!" he exclaimed, "... Think of our life in nature, ... daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it, ... rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the *solid* earth! the *actual* world! the *common sense*! *Contact! Contact!* *Who are we? where are we?*"¹⁴ In a contemporary context, writers do not romanticize the wilderness experience but

¹⁴ . Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods* (New York: The Library of America, 1985) 646.5, as quoted in Brett Zalkan, "The Metaphysics of the Recreational Vehicle: Industrial Tourism, Frederick Turner's Desert Covenant, and Pastoral Ideology," 29th Annual Western Literature Association Conference, Salt Lake City, 8 Oct. 1994.

concentrate on what makes it so intense and bewildering, namely, the wildness in the wilderness.

The shift has been from the wilderness concept, to that of wildness, a most favorite theme with nature-writers currently. Like Thoreau, many of these nature-writers have gone to some pastoral retreats in nature, some remote islands of quiet and solitude, where they can best explore the meaning of the world. They want to face things as they are, the wildness of things, and explore it. They try to "practice the wild." Gary Snyder, living on land in the Sierra Nevada range of northern California, typifies a new breed of writers who are mostly concerned with establishing new links with nature, developing a sense of place, of belonging to the region where they have chosen to settle down and live the rest of their lives. Annie Dillard explores the wildness at Tinker Creek.¹⁵ Barry Lopez has lived on the McKenzie River above Eugene, Oregon, since 1970. With *Arctic Dreams* in 1986, he won the National Book Award. His *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of a Raven / River Notes: the Dance of Herons*¹⁶ are fine explorations of the wildness inside as it finds its way out in the wilderness outside, in the deserts and wild places.

The rediscovery of wildness in contemporary nature writing is commonly interpreted as the rediscovery of the otherness of the world. Wildness inspires awe and wonder at the otherness of things. If we are to follow Neil Evernden, awe and wonder, the discovery of the otherness of things, are the very bases of the religious: "It might be fair to say that the experience of radical otherness is at the base of all astonishment or awe It is that shock of recognition that generates the acknowledgment of mystery that we can characterize as religious."¹⁷ What has been called the spiritual value of wilderness, the rejuvenation experienced in wild places could just as well be labeled the rediscovery of the sacred. No wonder then if the current religious quest has to some extent found an outlet in the environmental movement:

¹⁵ . Annie Dillard, *Pilgrim At Tinker Creek* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974.).

¹⁶ . Barry Lopez, *Desert Notes: Reflections in the Eye of A Raven / River Notes: the Dance of Herons* (New York: Avon Books, 1976/1979).

¹⁷ . Neil Evernden, *The Social Creation of Nature* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) 117.

To any Americans who find conventional religion alienating — and even some of those who don't — that quest begins with a heightened concern for the environment. Nature, of course, has always prompted feelings of transcendence. But to many environmental enthusiasts, the evolution of the earth, and its interlocking ecosystems, provides a new context for encountering the sacred.¹⁸

To celebrate sacralized nature there are no better places than the wilderness areas which enshrine all the values embedded in nature as the ultimate norm in a world stifled to death by man's artifacts. "Wild nature has replaced ... the rural landscape as the locus of stability and value, the seat of instruction."¹⁹ Wilderness areas are the shrines and sanctuaries of the cult of nature, and "cathedral forests" its most lofty temples. Such places have become places of pilgrimage, where the spirit of the world is to be approached and brought back to the places of everyday life, to the city even, in order to illuminate everyday life:

The wilderness as a temple is only a beginning. One should not dwell in the specialness of the extraordinary experience nor hope to leave the political quag behind to enter a perpetual state of heightened insight. The best purpose of such studies and hikes is to be able to come back to the lowlands and see all the land about us, agricultural, suburban, urban, as part of the same territory ... Great Brown Bear is walking with us, Salmon swimming upstream with us, as we stroll a city street.²⁰

This quest for the sacred of course is an old quest, now cloaked in the environmental and ecological worldview. What is new in such an approach informed by ecology is the emphasis on and analysis of the wildness of things. The religious dimension in this kind of experience is no longer just metaphorical but truly religious in nature. Deep ecology, a philosophy that inspires radical environmentalism all over the world, can be analyzed in religious terms.

Deep ecology as a form of religion

If we consider religion as the source of doctrine and dogma that explains the world and gives it a meaning by relating human experience to the cosmos, by binding man to the world (*re-ligare* — to bind — is the etymology of the word), then Deep Ecology is the religion of the earth. Its purpose is to make man part of the community of life, not above and apart from the world as in the old western

¹⁸ . Kenneth L. Woodward, "On the Road Again," *Newsweek* 28 Nov. 1994: 62.

¹⁹ . Glen A. Love, "Et in Arcadia Ego: Pastoral Theory Meets Ecocriticism," *Western American Literature* XXVII (1992): 195-207.

²⁰ . Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* (San Francisco: North Point, 1990).

Cartesian dichotomy. Deep ecology strives to relate the individual self to the Self, the whole, the world. Ecology is largely dominated by the notion of holism that claims that the whole is more than the sum of its parts. As a system, the whole — as an ecosystem, the biosphere or the cosmos — by circulating information is truly a natural mind in which individuals are the interconnections of the channels of information. Putting the self into a broader perspective, deep ecologists subvert it to the oneness of things, which is the very approach of traditional mysticism. No wonder then if Aldous Huxley's *Perennial Philosophy* is one of their often quoted references.²¹

Similarly, deep ecology is very much of a religion if we consider humility as a religious virtue and prerequisite. Deep ecology institutes biocentric egalitarianism as a principle, thus demoting man from the humanistic pedestal. In that sense, deep ecology, even though it may be often referred to in New Age circles, cannot validate the latter movement's hubris that makes man the engineer of evolution on earth. In that sense, deep ecology is very much in keeping with the current trend of cosmic piety in modern science whose development owes much to the influence of ecology and holism. The former mechanistic view of the universe inherited from Newton is being replaced by a much more complex approach to the world. Heisenberg has greatly contributed to the new scientific humility and the realization that epistemology has to be included explicitly in the description of natural phenomena. What science describes is not reality, but a piece of reality cut off from the web of relationships that constitutes reality: "[A]ll scientific concepts and theories are limited and approximate."²² Because science ultimately depends on the researcher's perception and personal system of values, Capra calls for a new, ecologically oriented ethics in science. Even if in the detail of the research a personal value system has limited or no influence, the overall context of the research cannot be value free. Science no longer stands out as the ultimate and absolute purveyor of truth, Capra maintains.

A paradigm shift

Science is not the only field to have been revisited by ecology defined as the philosophical worldview derived from ecology. A form of holism, ecology

²¹ . Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946).

²² . Fritjof Capra, "Systems Theory and the New Paradigm," in *Key Concepts in Critical Theory : Ecology*, ed. Carolyn Merchant (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1994) 338.

finds its model in the ecosystem whose complexity, sustainability, balance, interconnectedness and diversity are considered acceptable moral values. To some critics like Luc Ferry in France, ecologism has come to be recognized as an alternative ideology after the demise of communism.²³ It informs the new worldview embraced by what is now called deep ecology whose tenets are slowly pervading the social paradigm in America. This paradigmatic shift is showing in the gridlock that a significant number of intractable issues like the preservation of endangered species have come to.

The old American tradition of the Frontier is being replaced by a more ecological relation to the world. Such notions as the exploitation and domination of the land give way to environmental consideration of or even reverence for the earth. The old rugged individualism of frontier life is being replaced by a sense of one's responsibility and belonging to the world as an ecological community. That essentially American feature, mobility, the quest for an endless series of second chances that the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the West made possible is now being replaced by a craving for a place to call home. Deep ecology and its insistence on a sense of place has found attentive listeners in many American new migrants to the pleasant pastoral retreats of the back country. Like Snyder, running away from the tensions and violence of urban life, they try to grow roots in rural places by consciously developing relationships with nature around them.²⁴ Bioregionalism, the sense of place and attachment to a region that transcends human administrative boundaries, is more and more accepted as a germane concept. The new migrants to better places to live no longer consider material success as essential in their lives. From materialism and the status symbols that it demanded, the new ecologically informed paradigm lays emphasis on the quality of life, livability. All these values are those of an essentially young, well educated, urban section of the American population who, because of its age, economic power and political clout, inevitably disseminates its values throughout the rest of the nation.

Both currents — the American tradition of the Frontier and the ecological trend — are of equal strength currently, which accounts for a number of vexed questions that now pit one half of the nation against the other. Recent polls and

²³ . Luc Ferry, *Le nouvel ordre écologique : L'arbre, l'animal et l'homme* (Paris: Grasset, 1992).

²⁴ . See Brent S. Steel, Peter List, Bruce Shindler, "Conflicting Values about Federal Forests: A Comparison of National and Oregon Publics," *Society and Natural Resources* 7.2 (1994): 137-153.

the outcome of the November 1994 election show a 50/50 stance on such issues as logging old-growth forests, abortion, assisted suicide, gay rights, mining restrictions, school-prayer. This gridlock on many of the points that have inspired the political arena for years now has been recently translated to Washington D.C. where a Democratic administration will have to face a Republican dominated Congress. The fact that such an impasse can be at least partly traced back to the spreading out of ecological values only exposes the depth of the environmental vision in American society today.

To summarize, the wilderness islands preserved by the National Park Service, the Forest Service, the Bureau of Land Management all grouped within the National Wildlife Refuge System may be threatened by the very popularity that causes millions of visitors to throng them yearly. The very notion of wilderness may be criticized and deconstructed. But such threats only reveal the price and value of that essentially American concept, wilderness. Wilderness has value for the recreationists as it has value for scientists. The critique of wilderness may reveal its artificiality but cannot deny the wildness that constitutes its essence. Because the true wilderness experience leads to awe and wonder, to the rediscovery of the otherness of the world, of the sacred, wilderness spaces have become the sanctuaries of environmentalists who go to them on pilgrimage for spiritual rejuvenation, so powerful as to inspire their everyday life in the city. Wilderness places emerge as the shrines of new values best articulated in the deep ecology philosophy which to some extent appears as a form of religion.

The valuation of wilderness, the quest for wildness that inspires so many contemporary prestigious nature-writers must be analyzed within the larger context of the current paradigmatic shift that is so deep as to lead to a gridlock on a significant number of issues. It means that the American tradition as shaped by the Frontier heritage is being eroded by the spreading out of new values, many of them being associated with ecologism. That the spirit of remote islands of wilderness can inspire the ongoing American experiment on Turtle Island is a tribute to the visions of Thoreau, Muir and Leopold.

What at first appears as a new set of values, an ecologically informed paradigm of the late twentieth century, should nevertheless be put into a broader perspective. The permanence of wilderness islands, their success in the context of rising tensions within cities and sprawling urbanization obviously belong to American pastoralism as defined by Leo Marx.²⁵ What is truly new in the recent

²⁵ . Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

paradigmatic shift is the greening of the whole pastoral frame, as it is vested with ecological references. Wilderness islands have become true ecosystems supposedly free from man's interference to be preserved for the sake of biodiversity. The city remains the place of tensions, corruption and now the source of pollution. Increasing numbers of city-dwellers run away to the pastoral retreat of the country for cleaner air, pure water and the amenities of nearby recreation areas, in other words for what is now called a better quality of life. The problem is that with too many enthusiasts regularly invading the once remote islands of wilderness, the pressure on them, jeopardizes their very existence. America as a nation was built upon the idea of the conquest of the wilderness, so that as long as there remain wilderness islands, America can keep its distinctiveness and remain a country in the making. In that sense, the disappearance of America's wilderness islands would alter its identity.

