

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

The idea of wilderness, of a place apart, is one of the most ancient concepts of human culture. It appears in history shortly after the development of agriculture and by the time of Sumer had evolved into one of the distinguishing features of what we have come to call civilization. By the time of the Old Testament, wilderness was characterized as a barren, desert place, separated from humanity and suited only for wild beasts. Biblical prophets from Moses and Elijah to John the Baptist and Jesus would go apart into the wilderness to reconnect with the wellspring of the universe. In these wild, desert places, among the beasts and empty land, and free from human companionship, they would find solace and spiritual renewal.

The wilderness idea endured through the Greco-Roman era and persisted, even thrived, in Medieval Europe. Monks and mystics would commonly desert the cities and towns to live in the wilds, and whenever they were troubled, or wanted to expiate some sin, heroic Arthurian knights often took to the greenwood, there to spend their days living alone, dressed in green ivy, until some event or epiphany would draw them back into the human community.

Traditionally, here in America, the wilderness was seen as a place that must be conquered—as it seems to be at the beginning of all civilizations. The great deserts and mountains of the American continent were obstacles that had to be overcome in the westward course of empire. It took brawny men and enduring women to cross the Great Plains and Rockies, and the journey consisted in defeating the natural world—wolves, bears, and, most dangerous of all, the races of wild people that inhabited the “wilderness” (a concept, by the way, that was unknown to Native Americans).

Once the continent was tamed, American attitudes changed, and wilderness evolved into a place of solace and renewal, so much so that a whole industry of outfitters, trained to take stressed-out urban and suburban people into the remote spots of the world, developed.



More recently, a realization has come that it is not necessary to go off to the distant places of the world to find peace. For those who care to explore, there are wild places just beyond the backyards of suburbia that offer similar comfort.

At the core of all these wilderness experiences is the long, abiding silence of the land—the existence of a spot, no matter how small, where one can find a quiet place to think. Unfortunately, in the past few decades, all of these places, from the wild reaches of the mountain passes to the woods of suburbia, have been invaded by a plague of noisy recreational machines.

There is something in the American character that seems to require the presence of a powerful machine in order to interact with nature. Now, in the popular mind, in order to get into wilderness, one needs a four-wheel-drive vehicle, a trail bike, a snowmobile, an ORV, ATV, or any one of the many iterations thereof. Even the pursuit of fish, which according to Izaak Walton is one of the most contemplative of human pastimes, has generated in America a vast array of machines, everything from beach buggies to powerful, high-speed bass boats that carry those who are fishing to their chosen sites.

A mere glance at the advertisements in the American media demonstrates the phenomenon in full color—a beautiful wild spot, and, in the midst of all that greenery, a machine. Machines blasting through deep forests and ascending mountains, machines fording streams, machines crossing dunes and deserts—in short, machines overcoming the obstacles presented by nature, even if the obstacles

are not a hindrance. One ad even went so far as to describe the machine—a four-wheel-drive vehicle—as “all natural.”

These devices, by their very nature, do not encourage the one passive use of wilderness that civilization established—contemplation. Furthermore, because they are often noisy, they discourage contemplation for anyone within their range. They also quite successfully destroy land, uproot native vegetation, and even threaten a wide range of endangered species, everything from manatees to Plymouth gentians to desert tortoises.

Why has it been necessary to develop these powerful machines now, in an age when nature has been unconditionally vanquished, when one cannot go even into the vast reaches of the Arctic and Antarctic without finding signs of human activity, and when grizzly bears, and wolves, and trackless virgin forests are in danger of extinction? It can only be that, while destructive to the natural world, both physically and through the attitudes they encourage, recreational machines are metaphors.

They are the symbols of our power over nature; they evoke atavistic memories of human conquest that date back to the earliest struggles of civilization against the forces of nature.

But in an age when not only wilderness, but the biological structure of the earth itself, is out of balance, we need a new paradigm. Quite clearly, we have won the battle against nature, and now we need to give up our war machines and make a lasting peace with the world.

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