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The evolution of the concept of wilderness in America

1. Introduction

The concept of wilderness constitutes one of the most fundamental American ideas. It has a deep, complex and contested history and various contending and evolving images of wild nature can be found in US culture. In its time - similarly to the idea of freedom, democracy or progress – it defined the meaning of America. Some scholars claimed that it was an especially strong force in shaping the American character and the interaction between the settlers and raw wilderness molded the nation's identity in early American history. Some, more contemporarily, consider wilderness as a cultural construction of a particular Euro-American tradition and criticize the ideological naturalization of a concept. Some perceive it through the lens of ecology and dramatically shrinking habitats.

Indisputably, one of the most renown descriptions and analyses of this idea can be discovered in the incredibly popular 1964 book by Roderick Frazier Nash titled *Wilderness and the American Mind*. This popularity reflected not only the quality of the book, but also captured the environmental spirit of the age. *Wilderness and the American Mind* provided a foundation for understanding the way Americans value and relate to the natural world. It has been of tremendous importance and scholars from various academic fields are still engaged in the process of critical reconsiderations of meanings assigned by Nash to nature and wilderness in both political and cultural contexts. Yet, more contemporary understanding of nature has exceeded the framework of a presentation of a history of American perceptions of this idea rendered by the author.

2. Problems with Definition

As Raymond Williams observed the word nature is one of the most elusive words and is a notorious semantic and metaphysical trap¹. Usually, we cannot tell whether references to nature are meant to include or exclude people. Besides, the word also carries the sense of essence pointing to the irreducible character of an analyzed concept and tacitly conveying idealists or essentialists, and thus ahistorical overtones. The same problems arise when defining a similar term, namely wilderness. Three hundred years after the introduction of the term in American culture, its meaning, or rather meanings, have become even more complicated and contested.

According to Nash, wilderness is difficult to define in part because this is a noun, but “acts like an adjective”, joining the ranks of similarly elusive words like beauty, justice or wisdom. The term designates a quality that produces a certain mood and as a consequence may be assigned by that person to a particular place. Nash offers a very subjective definition of wilderness but claims that although different people perceive wilderness is different ways, it is inaccurate to argue that wilderness is purely in the eye of the beholder. In an attempt to provide at least a tentative definition of the term he refers to a spectrum of wilderness, with wilderness at one end and civilization at the other². This permits distinctions to be made between places based on intensity instead of absolute qualifications. Yet Nash does not settle the debate what should and should not be called wilderness and in lieu of it, presents a history of American perceptions of this idea. However, as Talbot observes, the wilderness narrative does not only reflect a subjective ordering of nature, but also the objective production of space by capitalism³. Over the past few decades the meaning of wilderness has become even more complicated through its formalization as a type of land management classification. If a specific area is considered as wilderness, its material aspects such as size, land formation, composition as well as aesthetic values are considered. Historians such as Nash are trained to study culture rather than forests ecosystems and even environmental history often focuses more upon reconstructing past human perceptions of ideas than on reconstructing material ecosystems. As Kate Soper claims, it is a mistake to read into that focus the assumption that human perceptions create reality.

Soper, offering some general mapping of Western attitudes to nature, stages the encounter between two currently influential perspectives; namely ecology and cultural criticism. The distinction is between an approach to nature that has emerged in response to ecological crisis, which is critically targeted on human plunder as well as the approach focused on the semiotics of nature, which refers to the role of the concept in mediating access to reality⁴.

¹ WILLIAMS R., *Keywords*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1983.

² NASH R.F., *Wilderness and the American Mind*, New Haven, 2014, pp. IX-XII.

³ TALBOT C., *Wilderness Narrative and the Logic of Capitalism*, https://www.academia.edu/23522631/The_Wilderness_Narrative_and_the_Logic_of_Capitalism [Accessed:10.07.2020].

⁴ SOPER K., *What is nature? Culture, Politics and non-Human*, pp. 3-4.

Elusive as the concept may be, in recent years several ecologically oriented writers have endorsed a way to salvage the venerable idea of nature. They propose to rehabilitate the compelling distinction, favored by Hegel and Marx, between two historically grounded states of nature, called first nature and second nature. The former is the biophysical world, as it existed before the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, whereas the latter is the artificial - material and cultural environment that humanity has superimposed upon the first nature⁵.

3. The historical trajectory of the idea

Rarely does the history of a word reveal its correct, present meaning as this changes over time and diverts from its original use. However, an etymology may provide important clues into the biography of an idea and may have rhetorical significance when the meaning of a word is contested. Both of these are true of the etymology of wilderness. As Nash shows the origins of wilderness refer to a place characterized by wild animals. The oldest and central root in this word is wild. It is present in Common Germanic and is found in Old English as *wilde*, with surviving instances from 725c. as an adjective for plants and animals that were not tamed. The next piece in the etymology is the Common Germanic word for beast, found in Old English as *deor*. This was combined with *wilde* to form *wildddeor*, "wild animal", with instances known from 825c. The centrality of wild animals in the etymology is important. Wilderness points not only to the absence of human culture in the landscape but to the presence of that which is often incompatible with it.

A history of conflicted attitudes towards wild places and nonhuman nature goes much further back than the roots of the word wilderness. Moreover, many languages have no equivalent word to wilderness, but still they have managed sophisticated literature on the question. In telling the history of attitudes toward wild nature, there are two opposite errors of oversimplification to avoid. On the one hand, some treat the modern American and romantic elevation of wilderness as something entirely new, contrasting with previous expressions of antipathy toward wild nature and this is the direction Nash takes in his book. On the other hand, one might find romantic sounding passages of wilderness appreciation in diverse ancient texts, whether in the Vedas or the Psalms and thus conclude that there is nothing particularly new or interesting about the American idea⁶.

Western society viewed wilderness as uncultivated, rugged, beyond control and dangerous. The wilderness of classical mythology was populated by demonic creatures. The comparison of paradise and wilderness took place in biblical terms in Western cultures. The prime example exists in the book of Genesis with the story of Adam

⁵ MARX L., *The idea of nature in America*, Daedalus Spring 2008, p. 20.

⁶ HENDERSON D., *American Wilderness Philosophy*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/am-wild/> [Accessed: 10.07.2020].

and Eve's expulsion out of the Garden of Eden into the wilderness where God uses wilderness as a punishment. In medieval European folklore the wilderness outside the protective walls surrounding human settlements was the domain of such supernatural beasts as trolls and werewolves. This idea of the wilderness as an immoral, godless place was also transplanted in America in allegorical and metaphorical discourse. Hostility to the wilderness emerged since it presented a physical obstacle to human endeavors to secure the material necessities for survival. However, the Christian Bible also used wild nature as a way to seek refuge, a place to purify oneself and discover God. For instance, the Israelites find refuge as they wander for forty years in the wilderness in order to prepare for a life in a paradise granted to them by God.

The comfort of wilderness appreciation developed with the opportunities of civilization, which via the methods of agriculture and domestication, offered the means of controlling nature to satisfy human material needs. The civilizing process and the consequent subjugation of nature allowed for a theoretical distinction to be made between humanity and nature such that the labels of wild and wilderness were applied to those aspects of nature not controlled by humans⁷. These binary oppositions in wilderness understanding and appreciation have been under attack since they pose difficulty for making sense of multifaceted nature/human relations.

Much of Western thought articulated and perpetuated a pervasive and popular prejudice towards the wilderness and with the European colonization of the New World in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this representation of the wilderness as the enemy of civilization became the dominant one. This instrumental and adversarial model of the relationship between humanity and nature persisted in American history. Thus, early New England settlers organized towns rather than sought solitude in the wild. They aimed not for urbanity but sought the rural, as distinct from wildness. In the pastoral landscape of rural spaces the early pioneer who strived to fulfill God's first commandment that humanity increase, conquer the earth and have dominion over all living things actualized progress. While wilderness symbolized hardship, the pastoral represented the reward of an easier life, for "Americans hardly needed reminding that Eden had been a garden"⁸. Nathaniel Hawthorne's books, for instance, bear witness how the waste-to-garden vision served as a metaphor for the Christian mission to cultivate the mind and thereby the spirit.

This view was also echoed in the militaristic frontier discourse of the New World where the wilderness was identified as an enemy to be subdued for the advantage of civilization which could then utilize its resources. This outlook, for example, is revealingly documented in the diaries of American pioneers which refer to the "reclamation" and "transformation" of the wilderness into "fruitful farms" and "flourishing cities". This frontier myth received its most academic interpretation in the work of Frederic Jackson Turner. In *The Frontier Thesis and American History* he argued that

⁷ NASH R.F., *Wilderness and the American Mind*, p. xiii.

⁸ NASH R.F., op. cit., p. 31.

American civilization was in trouble following the 1890 census and closing of the frontier. Turner held that it had acted as a release valve for the pressures of urbanization and as a forge for the national character and culture. In his view, due to the lack of empty wild space America was destined for a slow decline. On the frontier Americans could shed the trappings of civilization, rediscovered their energies and reinvent democratic institutions. When the frontier ceased being part of American reality an important part of the nation's character had passed away and this led many to want to preserve at least a part of it. Turner's reading of the crucial role of the frontier and consequently wilderness in the USA history helped to provide some political action to save wilderness in the decades to come, to expand and formalize the national park system and to popularize wilderness appreciation among the US citizens. This idea was expressed not only by Aldo Leopold, but also Theodore Roosevelt. However, the nature preserves established by the Roosevelt administration were intended to assure the continuance of a virile American spirit by maintaining a 'perpetual frontier'.

In addition to helping to create the American character the frontier also presented a means of escaping the restraints of modern civilization. On the frontier a person no longer had to deal with confining social relationships and structures. On the frontier a person that had become weakened by an overexposure to civilization could become a rugged individual. This belief was often held by rich urbanites that saw wilderness as an antidote to civilization. Critics of connecting the wild idea to national character point to its historical relativism and bemoan ethnic exclusivity of this thesis. For sure, neither Native Americans, for whom land was not wild in conception, nor African Americans on plantations and in urban ghettos, as theirs was the city wilderness, were molded by this experience. For all these and others, wild land conceived in the mainstream preservation had played little role in forging their character. For schools of revisionist American historians the conception of a momentous impact of the idea of wilderness on the shape of American character was a myth in an uncomplimentary sense. In the times of ecofeminism and deep ecology ethnocentrism of this thesis, its vagueness as to the virtues engendered by wild experience, its masculinity, exclusivity of male camaraderie, sound dissonant.

According to Marvin Henberg, the character thesis is in serious philosophical trouble as it provides a very selective reading of this nature discourse and constructs an innocently faithful self-conception for Americans. Yet he asserts that "concepts mainly divide rather than unite. We need symbols and their emotive associations. Among these symbols we need most is wilderness"⁹. Taking account of all the reservation and shortcoming of the thesis and acknowledging that his defense is more fidelistic than rational, Henber still believes that the self-perception of Americans as the nation shaped by wilderness does more good than harm. He is convinced that in this light the character thesis becomes a different myth - not an exclusive, false, misleading tale but a symbolic means of uniting Americans in celebration of something larger

⁹ HENBERG M., *Wilderness Myth and American Character* [online] updated on 10 July 2020, <http://www.georgewright.org/114henberg.pdf> [Accessed:16July 2020].

than themselves. Certainly, as a country with a relatively short history Americans are in dire need of symbols that coalesce and unify the disparate nation and offer a chance for some inward glance – all so much needed to reinvent themselves. Finally, Henberg concedes that wilderness should be less about the mythic American character than about characters who live their natural lives in the wilderness.

It was the combination of the frontier and the sublime, as William Cronon argues, that created the traditional wilderness concept in America. Wilderness was seen as an escape from civilization. Moreover, it was viewed as divine or at least as a place to experience the divine. Combined with the primitive idealization of a life closer to nature, these ideas fed the Romantic movement and had momentous implications for wilderness Romanticism which established a preference towards the wild in nature. This concept, however, still perpetuated the assumption of a tight separation of humans from nature. Primitivism, cherished by the Romantics, postulated that people's happiness and well-being decreased in direct proportion to the degree of civilization. Contact with the wilds was believed to give exceptional strength, ferocity combined with innocence and nobility. Enjoyment of wilderness was a function of gentility and wilderness became an established literary genre.

However, both of these concepts seem to have separated wilderness from humanity in the same way that wilderness was seen as separate in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Thus, Cronon argues, although the wilderness conception became "frightened" with the values of the sublime and the frontier, it still effectively perpetuated the human-nature dichotomy. An intellectual framework in which wilderness could be favorably portrayed was created. The first Americans who appreciated wild country relied heavily on this tradition and its vocabulary in expressing their ideas. Yet most people shared the pioneer aversion to wilderness and the new attitude coexisted with the old.

Romanticism created the right conditions in which wilderness could be appreciated, the fact of the country's independence gave rise to a second wave of enthusiasm. It was assumed that America's primary task was the justification of newly established freedom. Creation of a distinctive culture was thought to be an indispensable factor of nationhood. Americans started seeking something that can be perceived as uniquely American. In terms of history, traditions, literary achievements their legacy looked meagre compared to Europe. Yet wilderness was an element that could not find its counterpart in the Old World. This element coupled with its deistic and Romantic assumptions about the value of wild country enabled nationalists to argue that far from being a liability, wilderness was actually a uniquely American asset.

As Nash observes, the conquest of nature was still an important element of American culture but by the mid nineteenth century wilderness was recognized as a cultural and moral resource and a basis for national self-esteem. Immediately after independence nationalists began investigating the significance of nature. In the nineteenth century a national style was developed. Gradually American letters and arts acquired some distinction and distinctiveness. New world themes were essential and wilder-

ness fulfilled this aim. William Cullen Bryant, James Fenimore Cooper exhausted the literary potential of the frontier. Robert Montgomery, Thomas Cole and Albert Bierstadt were fascinated by American landscape¹⁰. Wilderness became a source of nationalism in America.

It was Thoreau's famous quote, "In Wilderness is the Preservation of the World", which shed a new light on the value of wilderness in American culture. One of the major intellectual trends shaping Thoreau's views was Transcendentalism which distinguished intuition and imagination from rational understanding and believed that through the former, people could discover spiritual truths about themselves and the natural world. Thoreau's conception of wilderness was also formed by his disdain for the materialistic side of civilization. The philosopher argued that earlier civilizations fell because they lost touch with their wild origins. He valued wilderness primarily as intellectual stimulation and believed that it represented each individual's greatest potential. Living a free and simple life was conducive to discovering truths about oneself and the nature of reality. These ideas were attuned with the nationalists' conception that America's greatness was rooted in wilderness. He believed that the New World had more potential than Europe because America's potential had not yet been consumed by civilization. Within his theory that earlier nations failed because they grew away from their inherent wilderness, America's relatively untouched landscape represented a land of boundless possibility. Despite high regard for wilderness, while writing about his trips to Maine, Thoreau also expresses his lingering fears of wilderness. He saw a negative side of primitive culture that changed his ideas about good being found only in wilderness and began to see the good in civilization.

Through this experience, the philosopher began advocating a balance between civilization and wilderness. He appreciated the vitality and toughness of the wild but also the refined sensitivity and intellect of civilization. Rather than subscribe to a pastoral ideal that achieved a middle ground by blending wilderness and civilization, Thoreau believed in incorporating aspects of both extremes. He was a major supporter of the intellectual revolution that re-conceptualized wilderness as attractive and beneficial to American culture and alleviated its image as threatening and hostile¹¹.

A growing appreciation for wild spaces and the lament at the losses that had been seen throughout Europe and parts of the Americas laid the foundations for the United States government to begin planning for national preservation areas. Those ideas originated once more in the literary and artistic circles of the East Coast. The first voices of this movement were writers and artists that expressed concerns over the loss of wilderness to progress, among whom were John James Audubon, he was soon joined by many writers of the Romantic inclinations who echoed his sentiments, among whom were Thomas Cole, William Cullen Bryant, Washington Irving and James Fenimore

¹⁰ The most seminal description of the works of the Hudson River School artists, the Luminists and other mid-nineteenth century painters of the American landscape presented in the broader cultural context can be found in Barbara Novak's *Nature and Culture: American Landscape Painting, 1825-1875*.

¹¹ NASH R.F., op. cit., pp. 68-115.

Cooper. any of the writings by these authors were harshly critical of the unchecked exploration, conquering and civilizing of wild spaces. Horace Fairfield Osborn, after comparing America's treatment of nature with that of other nations over the ages concluded that: "The story of the United States as regards the use of forests, grassland, wildlife and water sources is the most violent and most destructive in the long history of civilization"¹². Because of this movement to preserve wild lands in America, the government began to feel responsible to designate areas for the people where they could experience nature. Acts passed that preserved for instance the Yosemite Reservation, an area protected from private ownership, and they laid the foundation for continued government action in the area of wilderness preservation. Drawing on previous ideas about the relationship of humanity to wilderness, John Muir exerted enormous influence on both public perception of untouched places and the political protection of such areas. Transcendentalism became Muir's essential philosophy for interpreting the value of wilderness. Emerson's ideas, in particular, shaped Muir's approach to understanding the natural world. He began to see nature, especially "wild nature" as the most direct connection a human being could have with the divine. Muir ultimately came in personal contact with Emerson himself and though Muir still idolized his mentor, Emerson's version of wilderness was too tame for him. Muir wanted to "dispense with civilization entirely". And began to develop a sense that in nearly all ways, the wild was preferable to the civilized. It was civilization's "stifling effect on man's spirit" that Muir identified as its most deleterious quality¹³.

Just as Muir was developing his sense of the value of the natural world, the country was struggling to define its political stance toward undeveloped land and a number of conservation-oriented groups were brought together initially by concerns over the "rapid depletion of raw materials, particularly forests. A deep rift developed, however, between those like Gifford Pinchot, who wanted to manage the exploitation of forest resources, and those like Muir, who wished to preserve wilderness for its own sake. Muir struggled to reconcile the need for economic benefit and his own deeply held conviction of the value of untouched nature; he eventually rejected the foresters as allies and worked to preserve wilderness areas as sacrosanct.

Yet, as Cronon observes, all these conceptions emphasized the ontological separation of wilderness from humanity. Wilderness was conceived as area shaped by natural forces, with natural origins and free of human inhabitation and human structures. In the works of Muir, Leopold and Marshall wilderness is perceived as an ontologically separate place. All these writers contributed to the traditional wilderness conception that became concretized in the 1964 Wilderness Act.

In the 1960s and 1970s, many Americans identified their personal lifestyle as "counterculture" and found great value in wilderness. Many Americans began to think of wild nature and, parenthetically, of Indians, as victims of the same fixation on

¹² FAIRFIELD O., *Our Plundered Planet*, Boston, 1948, p. 175.

¹³ MUIR J., *Our National Parks*, Boston, pp. 57-58.

progress, growth and competition which threatened counter-cultural values such as peace, freedom and community. They decided that wilderness was good and valuable because it was uncontrollable. This “neoromanticism” valued uncontrolled wilderness as essential for the survival of civilization. The idea that nature might have some sort of intrinsic value beyond those instrumental values assigned to it by humans began to receive some attention from Arie Naess or Bill Devall¹⁴. However, most wilderness advocates sympathized with the sentiments asserted that the wilderness right that mattered most was the right of humans to experience it.

Modern forms of environmental philosophy have been quick to incorporate this wilderness narrative, including, perhaps most dangerously its ahistoricism. Still, Talbot observes that this emphasis of much of the environmentalist program on human psychological rehabilitation and development deflects our understanding away from the reality of the politics and economics of capitalism towards an ahistorical appeal to redeem ourselves.

4. Critiques of the wilderness concept

The contemporary critique of the wilderness concept argues that American wilderness as presented by Nash is a Euro-American cultural construction and is considered to be a mythic conception that perpetuates the dualism between nature and people. Moreover, this conception is considered to be harmful to environmental and conservation policy since it ignores the human presence in nature and causes humans to concentrate on preserving unmodified wilderness while neglecting areas where humans and nature exist together. Insofar as Nash's ideas sound familiar, that reflects the degree to which they, and the cultural attitudes they reflect, continue to dominate popular American conceptions of wilderness. For example, Historian Samuel P. Hayes makes an interesting contrast to Nash. Like Nash, Hayes observed the conservation movement debates and changes within the context of the progressive era, arguing that wilderness activism was not motivated solely by appreciation for the wilderness, but often by progressive concerns with order, rationality and permanence¹⁵. As Michel Lewis noted, historians have found Hayes' insights useful, yet he never enjoyed as much of a following among the wilderness activists of the 1960s. His thesis did not dovetail as neatly with the goals of the wilderness movement and perhaps activists found his larger historical concerns less relevant to their activism¹⁶.

After Nash's book dozens of historians followed into his footsteps and studied different aspects of the history of American wilderness idea and politics. And wilderness history became a key component of the growing discipline of environmental history.

¹⁴ NAESS A., *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1989.

¹⁵ HAYES S., *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890-1920*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1959.

¹⁶ LEWIS M., *American Wilderness. A New History*, p. 10.

As more scholars studies this history, it became increasingly complex. Among the gradual modifications of Nash's original argument, they suggested that the Christian legacy was not only subduing the earth, but also saving God's creation, farms were sometimes as destructible of wilderness as industry; women played a key role in conservation efforts; not all wilderness activism began with urban elites; American Indians inhabited most of "the virgin wilderness", not all European settlements shared the same values as New England; the conservation-preservation dichotomy was too rigid and simplistic, and finally wilderness itself was not necessarily best analyzed in the history of wilderness areas¹⁷.

By the 1999, a growing number of historians argued that these findings called for a different interpretation of wilderness and its history. Among these wilderness revisionists, none has been more influential than William Cronon, particularly through his 1955 essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"¹⁸. The paper has been widely read and has become at focus of the current wilderness debate. It also appeared in the New York Times Sunday Magazine and was thus read by people outside of environmental studies and philosophy. Cronon describes the way that the wilderness concept (the wilderness myth) emerged and the way it actually harms the conservation movement. Yet, as Foreman demonstrates, for the advocates of the environmental movement in America it is easier to designate wilderness areas than to introduce reforms in forestry, agriculture or industry. Cronon opted for creating protected areas but stated that wilderness thinking in the USA presupposed a pre-Darwinian dichotomy between nature and people and wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural. Moreover, only pristine, uninhabited nature is considered worth protecting. Cronon thinks that conceiving of wilderness in this way is dangerous to environmentalism because it causes us to think that the places where we live are not natural.

Cronon does not go into detail about a better way to conceive nature and wilderness. However, he is sure that the traditional wilderness conception prevents discovering a more ethical, sustainable and honorable human place in nature. The conviction that any human touch (or any sign of industrial civilization) degrades a landscape beyond being worth saving, deters us from improving the local environments in which we work and whose degradation is so economically attractive. This allows many Americans to be good wilderness loving environmentalists and at the same time to continue to participate in environmentally destructive development at home. By that token, wilderness preservation is not a reaction against industrialization but facilitates the process. Also, whilst the complex history of wilderness might not mean that the revised version of it cannot be pressed into service by environmen-

¹⁷ For more detailed analysis, especially the role of women in the wilderness preservation see: *American Wilderness. A New History* by Michael Lewis.

¹⁸ CRONON W., *The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature*[in:] Cronon W.(ed.), *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1995, pp. 69-90.

talism, an uncritical acceptance of it might blind one to the complex of political and economic interests that inhabit this ideological space. Cronon renounces the usefulness of the term wilderness and states that Americans should be focused on wildness - the wildness that can be found in the middle landscape, in our closest environment, that blends the human and the natural. According to him, pure and virgin wilderness exists outside of history and a tendency to see the removal of people as the solution to every environmental problem is a mistake. Also, conceiving of wilderness as a place preserved in a particular form forgoes the dynamic character of nature and its processes. It seems that his transition from wilderness to wildness can be likened to the transition in the contemporary American public discourse from nature towards the environment¹⁹.

In 1983 William Cronon published *Changes in the Land*, a book dealing with the human modification of New England landscapes. It has been widely acknowledged that humans have occupied and manipulated most of the earth. In it he discusses the way Native Americans managed and manipulated the New England area and then illustrates the changes brought by European settlers. He argues that Native Americans actively altered the environments in which they lived. This challenges a central assumption of many environmentalists and wilderness advocates: the pristine state of North America prior to European contact. Rather than a virgin land primarily shaped by natural forces, the landscape that Europeans discovered was largely a product of human alteration. The pristine state of North America is thus a myth developed by Euro-American settlers. The population of Native Americans at the point of contact and suggests why people thought that these populations were much smaller. The widely used estimate of the population of American Indians at the time of contact was about one million. However, this measurement did not take into account the rapid spread of disease that swept through the American Indian population. With such an increased population density the presence and effect of Native Americans on American ecology would also be substantially more dramatic. This further adds to the problem of considering North American lands as uninhabited wilderness²⁰.

Undoubtedly, this idea of wilderness as that part of nature as yet untransformed by the activity of humanity played an important ideological role in legitimating the colonial aspirations of the European powers, not only to justify colonization but also expropriation. Peoples indigenous to these newly 'discovered' wildernesses of the New World were viewed by the colonists as a 'part of nature' and not distinct from it as the Europeans considered themselves to be. As a part of nature it was as legitimate to exploit these indigenous populations as it was to exploit any other natural resource. In these newly encountered peoples was a living manifestation of the imaginary primeval Wild Man of the wildernesses of medieval Europe. The classification of non-Europeans as semi-human, uncivilized and mysterious was to form a significant

¹⁹ MARX L., op. cit, p. 20.

²⁰ CRONON W., *Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists, and the Ecology of New England*, New York, Hill and Wang, 1983.

ingredient in racism, particularly of the nineteenth century. Moreover, the indigenous peoples 'failing' to transform this wasteful wilderness into the material fabric of Western civilization were seen deficient in their ambitions and primitive in their abilities. By default any entitlements to this wilderness they might have had were rescinded by Europeans with the vision and the means to 'make something' of this New World. As such the idea of wilderness also helped legitimate the wholesale guilt-free colonial expropriation of the homelands of indigenous populations.

The American idea of wilderness was also criticized on the international arena. Since the early twentieth century the wilderness conception, defining wilderness as a place where "man himself is a visitor who does not remain", became legitimized in the Wilderness Act and has subsequently been exported to other countries. This has led to a third-world critique of the traditional wilderness concept known as the great new wilderness debate. The 1989 essay "Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique" by Ramachandra Guha is often credited with instigating this critique of wilderness. Guha argued that the radical environmental movement in the USA, with its focus on biocentrism and wilderness, tends to overlook the problems that are at the root of our environmental crisis; overconsumption and militarization. In his view, in India environmentalism has been largely a class struggle between the rural poor, for whom forests are the source of subsistence and the urban rich, who threaten to destroy such places. Western environmental organizations establishing in India "parks" and "wilderness" areas have been highly criticized due to the way they ignore the historic presence of people. It was chiefly the exportation of wilderness to India that motivated Guha to criticize the traditional wilderness conception. He sees the exclusion of people as something that can work in America. However, in places like India, where there exists a high density of people that have lived in most areas for a long period of time, the wilderness ideal becomes problematic. Rural people that depend on these areas for livelihood are removed by force to create a protected wilderness. This is often to the benefit of tourists and more wealthy individuals and serves as an injustice to the rural population. The creation of wilderness areas in India is conceived as being imperialistic, ignoring the needs of the rural poor and distracting from more important environmental concerns including water shortages, air and water quality and soil erosion. The only people taken into consideration are a small group, namely tourists and an Indian elite, who have the resources and time to enjoy these places²¹.

Moreover, the presence of people in wilderness areas allows for a guide in developing a better conception of nature which will in turn lead to better policies. Although Guha thinks that wilderness preservation is applicable in America, there have been many criticisms asserting that the wilderness concept is also flawed in an American context. That is, wilderness areas in America have also been inhabited historically. The movement to set aside national parks and wilderness areas followed the final In-

²¹ GUHA R., *Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique*. *Environmental Ethics*, 1989, Vol. 11, pp. 71-83.

dian wars, in which the prior human inhabitants of these areas were rounded up and moved onto reservations.

Other criticism have come from the new conservationists, an umbrella term for an alliance of wilderness activists and conservation biologists that strived to implement a much more aggressive preservation strategy in the 2000s. The new conservationists want to expand wilderness habitat to mitigate the extinction crisis. Instead of looking for lands supposedly never touched by people, they attempt to restore land trammelled by people.

One monolithic American way of seeing wilderness simple does not exists. The new wilderness historians since 1990 tend to be more attuned to power disparities and politics of race, class and gender than their 1960 counterparts. They are often concerned with US overconsumption, the state of the cities and urban sprawl and Americans role as world highest polluters. Their work has, however, been received by many contemporary wilderness activists as antithetical to preserving more wilderness on earth. Not surprisingly, most of the new wilderness histories have not received such a popular response as was afforded to Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*. Simply, the new wilderness historians are not telling stories that many environmentalist want to hear. They tend to argue their work reflects the natural maturation of any academic subfield, particularly a subfield born of the concerns of a social movement. Over time, wilderness historians have deepened their analysis, discovered new sources and stories and inevitably acquired a critical distance from the movement not initially possible in the first days of activists who fired academic inquiry in the 1960s. Nonetheless, it is still possible to see a cultural context for the new wilderness histories that bore the imprint of 1960s environmentalism.

Contemporary wilderness historians reflect a series of concerns and events that have emerged since the 1980s. Rather than reflecting the exuberance of the passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 and the following environmental movement, the new wilderness histories function in a different set of contexts. They are instrumental in bringing national attention to the environmental justice movement. Environmental justice activists criticized the way that traditional environmentalism had ignored the plight of the less privileged. Internationally there was a postcolonial backlash started by Guha against what many developing-world activists, scholars and government representatives specified as the inappropriate imposition of the US style wilderness preservation in the third world. Yet, they inevitably took these criticism into consideration in the way they conceived and presented their scholarship. There is the need to reframe the research in the light of the last 40 years of historical inquiry and to move past the wilderness debate of the last decades.

Undoubtedly, the wilderness idea has been crucial to the USA identity and history, however, it has never been solely an American idea. Rather it derived from the shared human experience of modernity – the initially Anglo-American and subsequently global experiences of exploration, colonialism, scientific revolution, industrialization and the unparalleled transformation of the natural world. Couching their arguments

in sometimes opposing, always evolving terms, it seems that wilderness historians have been asserting that to understand American wilderness is to understand a crucial part of America. The concept of wilderness appears to possess a lot of explanatory power and the revisions of its meanings reveal new insights into the topic. Perhaps the importance of wilderness history has not been appreciated enough.

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The evolution of the concept of wilderness in America

Abstract: This paper presents some of the critical stages in the evolution of the concept of wilderness in American thought and its revisions. First, it shows the transformation of the idea of wilderness in American culture from something to be feared, to something to be conquered, to something to be cherished by modern environmentalism and demonstrates how nature discourse may perpetuate dualistic relations with wilderness. Then it analyzes some criticisms and responses to the traditional idea of wilderness known as the great new wilderness debate and attempts to put the concept of wilderness not only into American but also a more global perspective.

Keywords: American wilderness, frontier, environmentalism, the great new wilderness debate, constructionism

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