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Beyond Wilderness

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Phi Alpha Theta Conference Presentation

Synthesis Paper:
Beyond Wilderness

The concept of wilderness has evolved over time and across cultures to the point of exposing its most obvious paradoxes. Human societies' increasing demands for natural resources has been countered by forces within society to conserve and preserve those resources. The creation of the first National parks in the United States and Canada provide parallel examples of the paradox of human society's relationship with natural resources. The most resource and energy intensive industry of the time, railroads, were instrumental in the creation of areas protected from societies demands for natural resources. The railroads were interested in promoting tourism to 'wild' areas and appealed to their prospective governments to secure the preservation or conservation of these areas. The paradox of railroads seeking to create wilderness could help us to reexamine the concept of wilderness itself. Human societies' relationship with natural resources can be improved through a rethinking of our relationship to wilderness which makes us a part of wilderness. The advent of human induced global warming has made clear the fallacy of a separate wilderness.

In understanding modern conceptions of wilderness Roderick Nash looks to the word's etymology. He traces it to mean a place of animals that are lost, unruly, disturbed, or confused. Furthermore, "The idea of a habitat of wild beasts implied the absence of men, and the wilderness was conceived as a region where a person was likely to get into a

disordered, confused, or “wild” condition.”¹ The most traditional meaning of wilderness is a place without, and not for, humans. But the wilderness could be transformed, and used to man’s benefit. As the frontier moved outward from civilization wilderness was something to be tamed and mastered in order to serve society. The frontier of European society reached America and, “The New World was also wilderness at the time of discovery because European’s considered it such. They recognized that the control and order their civilization imposed on the natural world was absent and that man was an alien presence.”²

The dominant and successful Europeans pushed their concepts west across America until they reached the Pacific. They subdued and harnessed the wilderness and its peoples to meet the demands of their society. The infinite abundance had been reduced. Forests and game were no longer unlimited, and had to be managed for societies highest and best use. The highest and best use for American society of North America’s natural resources at the turn of the twentieth century was the railroad. It demanded more energy and material than any other industry at the time and spread throughout America eventually reaching the mountainous West. The coal and iron industries which formed the backbone of the railway system transformed cities and entire regions. The acceleration in economic activity which this new mode of transportation provided society changed its nature and pace. But the mountain west offered an alternative vision of America: pristine, unchanging landscapes. This vision was marketable, and those who had prospered through the exploitation of eastern natural resources could purchase a piece of the

¹ Roderick Nash. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967) 2

² Nash. 7

unblemished and magnificent West through tourism. Railways keen to exploit this opportunity were instrumental in the creation of Rocky Mountain National Park in Canada and Yellowstone National Park in the United States.

Arthur Carhart was an American government employee entrusted with developing management strategies and schemes for the vast public lands of the West. Although issues of conservation and preservation might have formed the philosophical framework for political debate over public lands, the pragmatic management of natural resources was Carhart's legacy. Tom Wolf's biography of Arthur Carhart states its purpose, "The goal of the biography is to recover some key "parts" from the past in order to reformulate land management in light of changing conditions."³ Aspects of Carhart's practical approach to resource management might be useful in our contemporary challenge to 'manage' and 'protect' our planet in an environment where climate change eliminates the possibility to micro-manage a specific geographical region. Receding glaciers and changes in rainfall patterns cannot be managed on an individual site basis. The framework, perspective, and reach of resource management must incorporate a global scope. Carhart's thinking offers a commonsense democratic approach to administering and changing laws and institutions that manage our natural resources.

Rethinking of the concept of wilderness is part and parcel to the changing laws and institutions which will help us manage our natural resources effectively. The idea that there is, or ever was, an environment separate from human interaction is discredited through human induced global warming. The accelerated nature of human impact on the

³ Tom Wolf. *Arthur Carhart, Wilderness Prophet*. (Boulder: University of Colorado Press, 2008) 2

environment has simply made that impact more evident. It has always been a factor, but simply of degree, and now that degree is becoming perceptible on a global scale, most obviously through our relationship with water.

Carhart's legacy as a manager of natural resources is based largely on his ideas pertaining to water. From his conversion experience at Trappers Lake to the catastrophe he witnessed in the Pueblo flood of 1921, the element and nature of water is central to Carhart's legacy. Before the National Forests were created the timberlands of Colorado were exploited by the citizens as a 'commons' holding. Ameliorating the devastation to the watershed was a large part of Carhart's mission. He coined the term 'tin roof watershed' to describe the inability of the denuded hillsides to absorb the infrequent but substantial rainfall. It was the combination of the tin roof watershed with a particularly heavy rain event upstream from Pueblo in 1921 which resulted in the flooding which is still Colorado's most disastrous natural event in terms of human life lost. In this instance the tragedy can be linked to specific human activity. Unregulated deforestation combined with an unpredicted extreme natural phenomenon had created a disaster. But was the rainstorm extreme? Can the event be characterized as human interaction with wilderness? Carhart's experience in Pueblo might teach us that weather, and its water component, can be the next frontier of wilderness revision. Carhart's contribution to the evolution of a wilderness incorporating humans is linked to his understanding of our indivisible union with water and water's circulating and pervasive presence in our environment, "Carhart's prescient ability to think in terms of entire watersheds would distinguish the rest of his career at least as much as his ideas about zoning public lands."⁴

⁴ Wolf. 67

The relationship between human societies and wilderness evolved in South America during the twentieth century as well. In “Wilderness and the Brazilian Mind” the relationship of civilization and its needs to the regions providing it with natural resources in early twentieth century Brazil is analyzed. The author’s point is to rescue some of that era’s wilderness advocates from obscurity or defamation in order to propose that their ideas are critical today. The strongest contemporary criticisms of the four authors involve their alleged disregard for human interaction with wilderness. Although the Brazilian language does not have a word corresponding to wilderness the authors settle on ‘sertao’, which combines a sense of disorder with landscape. Armando Magalhaes Correa’s book *O Sertao Carioca*, “...ends with a call for an unselfish effort of the true patriots who wish to make Brazil a stronger society and to protect its natural endowments. Correa lists many proposals for a complex program of reforms aiming at the integration of humans, especially those living in the sertao environment.”⁵ These second wave pioneers of Brazilian environmentalism were clearly concerned with society’s relationship with wilderness. In fact Correa’s call for a complex program of reform aiming at the integration of humans with the environment would have struck a note with Arthur Carhart, who was engaged in a similar pursuit through his involvement with the Wilderness protection Act of 1964. In common with the second wave Brazilian environmentalists he too allied himself with what are considered the socially conservative political factions of his time. Carhart’s support for Barry Goldwater and the second wave

⁵Jose Augusto Drummond and Jose Luiz DeAnrade Franco. “Wilderness and the Brazilian Mind. *Environmental History* 13, October 2008

Brazilian's support for right wing nationalists of their time have been used to discredit them as progressive thinkers. In both cases these environmentalists were approaching their political affiliations from a pragmatic perspective; Carhart was interested in the environmental impacts of Goldwater's fiscal strategy, while the Brazilians were supportive of the abilities of a strong central government to protect the environment for nationalist purposes.

The clash of modern society with wilderness through its rapacious demand for natural resources is clearly evidenced in William Cronon's *Uncommon Ground, Toward Reinventing Nature*. The book begins with a reminder that wilderness is a social construct. The idea of beauty expressed in landscape untouched by human activity is valued highly by a culture which has in fact altered the landscape and its components in significant ways. The gathering of intellectuals which produced this book took place in a place which well exemplifies the paradox of values concerning landscape and resources. As much as Southern Californians try to manage a workable relationship with this paradox, building sophisticated and resource rich palaces on hillsides overlooking the Pacific, their relationship with wilderness is inescapable as evidenced through earthquakes, wildfires, and flash flooding. Southern Californians are graced regularly with reminders of their inclusion in the wilderness, and the conference which Cronon had assembled coincided with a display of the wildfires which have regularly visited the region for eons. Had his conference been a few months earlier it would have experienced the Northridge Earthquake, which had its epicenter almost a hundred miles from Orange County but had an impact on the entire region. Cronon's introduction to the book restates

the problem or paradox of the modern concept of wilderness, “this, then, is the central paradox; wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural.”⁶ The challenge today is to reintegrate human activity with nature, and it is being forced upon us by the consequences of our rapacious consumption of fossil fuels. Whether this reintegration will occur as the result of some mandating organization which enforces it, or through the concerted activity of local citizens in their local regions. Whatever the approach may be, the basic end must be some regulation of natural resources in support and consideration of human integration with nature. The historical record is replete with examples of national government’s efforts to manage and regulate natural resources in the name of wilderness preservation.

In “Let the Line Be Drawn Now” the creation of Canada’s Rocky Mountain National Park is described. It becomes a social construct of the Canadian government, which will determine and oversee its regulation and use. The role of the Canadian Pacific Railway is noted, “...the CPR was the primary lobbyist for Canada’s first national park.”⁷ Leslie Bella is cited in that article concerning the railroad’s control of the park and its desire to maximize its profit by maintaining a pristine look, “Access to the mountains was provided instead to upper and middle income tourists willing to pay substantial sums for a sanitized view of the mountains.”⁸⁹ The article documents the exclusion of Native Americans from the Park in order to insure the abundance of big game. The abundance of

⁶ William Cronon ed. *Uncommon Ground, Toward Reinventing Nature*. (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1995) 80

⁷ Ted Binnema and Melanie Niemi “‘Let the Line be Drawn Now’: Wilderness, Conservation, and the Exclusion of Aboriginal People from Banff National Park in Canada” *Environmental History* 11, October 2006 728

⁹ Binnema. 728

big game was important for the tourism which the railroads hoped to promote through the creation of the Park.

Binnema's article gives a good example of how natural resources can be regulated by a national government, and that these regulations have traditionally been to the advantage of particular stakeholders, in this case the railroads and wealthy tourists. Although the article's purpose is to reveal the true reasons for excluding Native Americans from the park it provides an example of how a traditional vision of wilderness was used to limit the exploitation of resources from a particular area. A more progressive view of wilderness, which incorporates all stakeholders' access to natural resources, would not have strictly benefited the CPR or wealthy tourists, but the historic human elements of the region as well.

The time for a new vision of wilderness, and the impacts and access we share as a global community is upon us. As the Canadian government operated in the interests of the railway and wealthy tourists, contemporary global institutions can work in the interests of all stakeholder groups in the regulation of resource management and use. The need has preceded the political will and structure, as it often does, and was evidenced in the lack of significant results at the Copenhagen Climate Summit of 2009. But progress comes in fits and starts, and is always saddled with delays and reversals. What the sources in this paper remind us is how important it is to look to the past for directions toward the future.

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