[Anthropocene Boosters and the Attack on Wilderness Conservation](https://www.independentsciencenews.org/environment/anthropocene-boosters-and-the-attack-on-wilderness-conservation/" \o "Permanent Link to Anthropocene Boosters and the Attack on Wilderness Conservation)

By George Wuerthner

A growing debate has serious consequences for our collective relationship to Nature. Beginning perhaps twenty years ago, a number of academics in disciplines such as history, anthropology, and geography, began to question whether there was any tangible wilderness or wild lands left on Earth.

These academics and others, have argued that humans have so completely modified the Earth we should give up on the notion that there is any place wild and instead recognize that we have already domesticated, in one fashion or another, the entire planet for human benefit.

A new version of the Anthropocene boosters are within the social justice movement that has overtaken many politically progressive groups and university departments.

These individuals and groups are identified under an umbrella of different labels, including “Neo Greens”, “Pragmatic Environmentalists,” “New Conservationists,” “Green Postmodernism,” and “Neo-environmentalists,” but the most inclusive label to date is “Neo Progressive,” so that is the term I will use in this essay.

The basic premise of their argument is that humans have lived everywhere except Antarctica and that it is absurd to suggest that Nature exists independent of human influences. That wilderness was, just like everything else on Earth, a human cultural construct—that does not exist outside of the human mind (1). With typical human hubris, Anthropocene Boosters suggest we need a new name for our geological age that recognizes human achievement instead of the outmoded Holocene.

Not only do these critics argue that humans now influence Nature to the point there is no such thing as an independent “Nature”, but we have a right and obligation to manage the Earth as if it were a giant garden waiting for human exploitation (2). Of course, there are many others, from politicians to religious leaders to industry leaders, who hold the same perspective, but what is different about most Anthropocene Boosters is that they suggest they are promoting ideas that ultimately will serve humans and nature better.

From this beginning, numerous other critiques of wilderness and wildness have added to the chorus. Eventually, these ideas found a responsive home in some of the largest corporate conservation organizations like The Nature Conservancy as well as some think tanks like the Breakthrough Institute (3), Long Now Foundation (4), The Reason Foundation (5), and others.

**The Anthropocene Boosters make a number of assertions.**

**1.**    Pristine Wilderness never existed, or if it did, is now gone. Making wilderness protection the primary goal of conservation is a failed strategy.  
**2.**    The idea that Nature is fragile is an exaggeration. Nature is resilient.  
**3.**    Conservation must serve human needs and aspirations and do so by promoting growth and development.  
**4.**    Managing for “ecosystem services”, not biodiversity protection, should be the primary goal of conservation.  
**5.**    Conservation efforts should be focused on human-modified or “working landscapes” not creating new strictly protected areas like national parks, wilderness reserves and the like. Wildlands protection is passé.  
**6.**    Corporations are key to conservation efforts, so conservationists should partner with corporate interests rather than criticize capitalism or industry.  
**7.**    In order to garner support for these positions, conservation strategies like creation of national parks and other reserves are attacked as “elitism” or “cultural imperialism” or “colonialism.” (6)

Many holding these viewpoints seem to relish the idea that humans are finally “masters of the Earth”. They celebrate technology and the “path of progress” and believe it will lead to a new promised land where Nature is increasingly bent to human desires, while human poverty is alleviated.

For instance, Stewart Brand, of Whole Earth Catalog fame, embraces the idea of altering evolution with genetic modifications of species by “tweaking” gene pools. (7) Geographer Ernie Ellis is optimistic. He says: "Most of all, we must not see the Anthropocene as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity” ([[1]](#endnote-1)).

These trends and philosophical ideas are alarming to some of us who work in conservation. The implications of these goals and observations imply no limits upon consumption that destroys the planet’s ecosystems and contributes to a massive Sixth Extinction of species. Whether intentional or not, these ideas justify our current rapacious approach celebrating economic and development growth.

These ideas represent the techno-optimism of a glorious future where biotech, geoengineering, and nuclear power, among other “solutions” to current environmental problems, save us from ourselves.

Many Anthropocene Boosters believe the expansion of economic opportunities is the only way to bring much of the world’s population out of poverty. This is a happy coincidence for global industry and developers because they now have otherwise liberal progressive voices leading the charge for greater domestication of the Earth. But whether the ultimate goals are humane or not, these proposals appear to dismiss any need for limits on human population growth, consumption, and manipulating the planet.

Many of those advocating the Anthropocene Booster worldview either implicitly or explicitly see the Earth as a giant garden that we must “steward” (original root from “keeper of the sty” or caretaker of domestic livestock). In other words, we must domesticate the planet to serve human ends.

But the idea of commodifying Nature for economic and population growth is morally bankrupt. It seeks only to legitimize human manipulations and exploitation and ultimately is a threat to even human survival.

My book, [**Keeping the Wild—Against the Domestication of the Earth**](http://islandpress.org/keeping-wild), explains why this is so. It advocates a smaller human footprint where wild Nature thrives and humans manage ourselves rather than attempt to manage the planet.

However, let us take these assertions one by one.

**Pristine wilderness**

First is the Anthropocene Booster’s assertion that “pristine” wilderness never existed, and even if it did, wilderness is now gone. Boosters never define what exactly they mean by wilderness, but their use of “pristine” suggests that they define a wilderness as a place that no human has ever touched or trod (8).

That sense of total human absence is not how wilderness advocates define a wild place. Instead, wilderness has much more to do with the degree of human influence. Because humans have lived in all landscapes except Antarctica, it does not mean the human influence is uniformly distributed.

Wilderness is viewed as places largely influenced by natural forces rather than dominated by human manipulation and presence. Downtown Los Angeles is undoubtedly a human-influenced landscape, but a place like Alaska’s Arctic Wildlife Refuge is certainly not significantly manipulated or controlled by humans. Though few humans have indeed hunted, camped, and otherwise occupied small portions of the refuge for centuries, the degree of human presence and modification is small. The Alaska Refuge lands are, most wilderness advocates would argue, self-willed.  By such a definition, many parts of the world are to one degree or another, largely “self-willed”.

Proponents of the Anthropocene often have a ready rejoinder that wild nature is a myth: “We create parks that are no less human constructions than Disneyland” (10). But such a response seeks to ignore there is a real Nature out there that exist irrespective of whether we wish to acknowledge it as independent of humans as hurricanes, earthquakes, and wildfire prove.

**Nature is resilient**

Some Anthropocene advocates cite the loss of the passenger pigeon, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, whose demise, according to some, had “no catastrophic or even measurable effects.”

Such a cavalier attitude towards the demise of species and the normalizing of species declines undermines the efforts of many conservation organizations to preclude these human-caused extinctions.

Many biologists disagree with this perspective. They believe we are on the verge of a Sixth Mass Extinction. There have been other extinctions, but this is a preventable mass extinction. We know it is occurring, and the cause of this extinction spiral is human domination of the Earth and its resources (11).

There is something callous and morally bankrupt in asserting that it is OK for humans to drive species to extinction knowingly.  There seems to be no expression of loss or grief that we are now pushing many species toward extinction. Humans have survived the Black Plague, the Holocaust, and many other losses over the centuries, but one doesn’t celebrate these losses.

**Conservation must serve human needs**

Another pillar of the Anthropocene Boosters platform is that conservation’s main purpose must be to enhance and provide for human needs and desires. Of course, one consequence of conservation is that protected landscapes nearly always provide for human needs—contributing clean water, biodiversity conservation (if you think that is important), and moderation of climate change, to name a few.

However, the main rationale for conservation should be much broader and inclusive. Despite the fact that most conservation efforts do have human utilitarian value, the ultimate measurement of value ought to be how well conservation serves the needs of the other species we share the planet with.

The problem with Anthropocene Boosters’ promotion of growth and development is that most species losses are due to habitat losses. Without reigning in population and development, plants and animals face a grim future with less and less habitat, not to mention changes in their habitat, making survival difficult if not impossible.

Even when species do not go extinct, the diminishment of their ecological effects can also lead to biological impoverishment, for instance, when top predators or pollinators are eliminated from ecosystems.

**Conservation should focus on “working landscapes,” not the creation of more parks and wilderness**

The timber industry invented the term “working landscapes” to put a positive spin on their rapacious operations. Americans, in particular, look favorably upon the “work ethic,” and industry coined the phrase to capitalize on that affirmative cultural perspective. Working landscapes are typically lands exploited for economic development, including logging, livestock grazing, and farming.

While almost no conservationists would deny that there is vast room for improvement in these exploited landscapes, the general scientific consensus is that parks, wilderness reserves and other lands where human exploitation is restricted provide greater protection of ecosystems and biodiversity.

For this reason, many scientists, including such eminent biologists as now deceased Harvard biologist, E.O. Wilson, call for protecting of half of the Earth’s terrestrial landscapes as parks and other reserves.

**Conservationists should stop criticizing corporations.**

Some Anthropocene Boosters believe conservationists should stop criticizing corporations and work with them to implement more environmentally friendly programs and operations.

Almost no conservationist would argue that corporate entities should not adopt less destructive practices. However, it is overdevelopment that is the ultimate threat to all life, including our own. Implementing so-called “sustainable” practices may slow the degradation of the Earth’s ecosystems and species decline, but most such proposals only create “lesser unsustainable” operations.

At a fundamental level, the promise of endless growth on a finite planet is a dead-end street, and it is important for conservationists to harp upon that message continuously. To halt criticisms of corporations invites greenwashing and precludes any effective analysis of the ultimate development and growth problems.

**National parks and reserves are a form of cultural imperialism**

Many Anthropocene Boosters, particularly those in the humanities and social justice movement, go beyond merely criticizing environmental and conservation strategies to validate their particular view of the world. They seek to delegitimize parks and other wild lands protection efforts by branding them with pejorative terms like “cultural imperialisms,” “colonialism,” and other words that vilify protected lands.

Parks and protected areas began with Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (or arguably Yosemite, a state park earlier). The general Anthropocene Boosters theme is that this model has been “exported” and emulated worldwide and that Western nations are forcing parks upon the poor at the expense of their economic future.

Notwithstanding that nearly all cultures have some concept of sacred lands or places that are off limits to normal exploitation, denigrating the idea of parks and wildlands reserves as “Imperialism” because it originated in the United States is crass. It is no different from criticizing democracy as Greek imperialism because many countries now aspire to adopt democratic institutions. Western countries also “export” other ideas, like human rights, racial equality and other values, and few question whether these ideas represent “imperialism.”

Of course, one of the reasons protected areas are so widely adopted is because they are better at protecting ecosystems and wildlife than other less protective methods.

But it is also true that strictly protected areas have not stemmed the loss of species and habitat, though in many cases, they have slowed these losses. When parks and other reserves fail to safeguard the lands they are set aside to protect, it is typically due to a host of recognized issues that conservation biologists frequently cite, including small size, lack of connecting corridors, lack of enforcement, and underfunding.

To criticize parks for this is analogous to arguing we should eliminate public schools because underfunding, lack of adequate staffing, and other well-publicized problems often result in less-than-desirable educational outcomes. Just as the problem is not with the basic premise of public education, nor are the well-publicized difficulties for parks a reason to jettison them as a foundation for conservation strategies.

Another criticism is that strictly protected parks and other reserves harm local economic and sometimes subsistence activities. In reality, that is what parks and other reserves are designed to do. We create strictly protected areas because on-going resource exploitation harms wildlife and ecosystems or we would not need parks or other reserves in the first place.

While park creation may occasionally disrupt local use of resources, we regularly condone or at least accept the disruption and losses associated with much more damaging developments. The Three Gorges Dam in China displaced millions of people. Similar development around the world has displaced and impinged upon indigenous peoples everywhere. Indeed, in the absence of protected areas, many landscapes are ravaged by logging, ranching, oil and gas, mining and other resource developers, often to the ultimate detriment of local peoples and of course, the ecosystems they depend upon. In the interest of fairness, however, people severely impacted should be compensated somehow.

Nevertheless, it should also be recognized that the benefits of parks and other wildlands reserves are nearly always perpetual, while logging the forest, killing off wildlife, and other alternatives are usually less permanent sources of economic viability.

**What you can do**

The threat to wildlands from Anthropocene boosters is real. The best antidote to their critiques is education and context. Wherever one reads critiques of parks and wildlands, write a response addressing their misinformation, hopefully using the information in this article and the books I’ve helped publish, including Keeping the Wild and Protecting the Wild. Both have essays that challenge and/or refute all the fundamental assumptions commonly asserted by Anthropocene boosters.

The real answer is more personal involvement with Nature. So, encourage Anthropocene boosters to spend a little time in a wild place. I find it difficult to believe that anyone who has spent serious time in a wild place would doubt that wilderness and wildness aren’t real and not just a human cultural construction. A few weeks in the Arctic Wildlife Refuge, or even Yellowstone's backcountry, might cure naysayers of their myopic perspective.

**Summary**

The Wild does have economic and other benefits for human well-being. However, the ultimate rationale for “Keeping the Wild” is the realization there are intangible and intrinsic value to protecting Nature. Keeping the Wild is about self-restraint and self-discipline. By setting aside parks and other reserves, we, as a society and a species, are making a statement that we recognize that we have a moral obligation to protect other lifeforms. And while we may have the capability to influence the planet and its biosphere, we lack the wisdom to do so in a manner that does not harm.

(1) Cronon, William The Trouble with Wilderness in [**Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature**](http://www.amazon.com/Uncommon-Ground-Rethinking-Human-Nature/dp/0393315118) (1995)  
(2) Marris, Emma (2011). [**Rambunctious Garden**](http://www.amazon.com/Rambunctious-Garden-Saving-Nature-Post-Wild/dp/160819454X). Bloomsbury NY.  
(3) [**Breakthrough Institute**](http://thebreakthrough.org/dialogue)  
(4) [**The Long Now Foundation**](http://longnow.org/)  
(5) Ronald Bailey 2011 [**The Myth of Pristine Nature**](http://reason.org/news/show/the-myth-of-pristine-nature).  
(6) Peter Kareiva, Michelle Marvier and Robert Lalasz  [**Conservation in the Anthropocene**](http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/journal/past-issues/issue-2/conservation-in-the-anthropocene).  
(7) Steward (Brand 2015) [**Rethinking Extinction**](http://aeon.co/magazine/science/why-extinction-is-not-the-problem/).

(8) Ernie Ellis (2011). “The Planet of No Return.” *Breakthrough Journal****,*** 2(Fall).

http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/journal/past-issues/issue-2/the-planet-of-no-return  
(9)[**Interview with Emma Marris**](http://www.asla.org/ContentDetail.aspx?id=34133).  
(10) Peter Kareiva, Robert Lalasz and Michelle Marvier 201 [**Conservation in the Anthropocene**](http://thebreakthrough.org/index.php/journal/past-issues/issue-2/conservation-in-the-anthropocene). *Breakthrough Journal****,*** No. 2(Fall): 29-37.  
(11) Stewart Brand (2015) [**Rethinking Extinction**](http://aeon.co/magazine/science/why-extinction-is-not-the-problem/).  
(12) Brian Miller, Michael Soulé, and John Terborgh, [**The “New Conservation’s” Surrender to Development**](http://rewilding.org/rewildit/images/The-%E2%80%9CNew-Conservation%E2%80%99s%E2%80%9D-Surrender-to-Development1.pdf).

1. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)