

# Environmental Fixes + Urban Problems

*How Common Perceptions of Nature are Constructing Environmentalist  
Market-Based Solutions and aiding the Capital-Driven Climate Crisis*

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*“ With the latest developments, the discontent shifts from culture to nature itself: nature is no longer “natural,” the reliable “dense” background of our lives; it now appears as a fragile mechanism which, at any point, can explode in a catastrophic direction.”*

-Slavov Zizek  
(*Nature and its Discontents*, 2008)

Social preservation and the preservation of nature have for too long been treated as separate matters but when looked at as a holistic system, operating under market-driven devices, it is realized that the two are conjunctive and that one cannot be discussed without the other. Both the preservation of nature and the modern environmental movement have been tainted by the natural imaginary of anti-modern and post-frontier romanticism, and as such, this is where modern reform environmentalism has derived much of its discourse. The omnipresent influence of the natural imaginary provides a deceitful and dangerous base from which to build an environmentalist platform as it has, thus far, been co-opted by free-market environmentalists and has impeded our ability to problem-source and solve. If we are to continue to sentimentalize nature, nature will continuously fail to serve environmentalist efforts in the fight for climate justice. This is intended to be a look into how our perception of nature is impeding our ability to shape the climate debate within the public sphere. However, it is seen that If we are able to form a unified message, then perhaps we will be able to act insurgently to reclaim our right to a participatory democracy within the climate crisis and, in turn, create an environmental commons. In the environmental commons, we will be able to conceive of more viable solutions for both social and environmental afflictions as the climate crisis comes to a head.

### **Capitalism, Nature and the Environment** **Natural Imaginary and Industrial Escapism**

Our disjointed relationship with nature, has lead us to prescribe “environmental fixes to urban problems”, Maria Kaika argues that our prescriptive restoration and our faltered views on keeping pure some form of nature in one place will undoubtedly direct us toward the acceleration of socio-ecological disintegration of the whole.<sup>1</sup> Such is the problem with commodified nature comparative to parks and wilderness reserve; while the two serve as a reprieve from the everyday urban, they provide a distinct separation between the city and nature, breeding a view of nature that is fraudulent. Timothy Morton ascertains that “Wilderness areas are giant, abstract versions of the products hanging in mall windows...in the name of ecology we must scrutinize nature with all the suspicion a modern person can muster - let the buyer beware - nature has turned out to be a plastic knockoff of the real thing.”<sup>2</sup> Therefore, If we continue to view nature as pure, natural and untouched by man, we will continue to utilize faulty operations and environmental fixes in confronting the climate crisis.

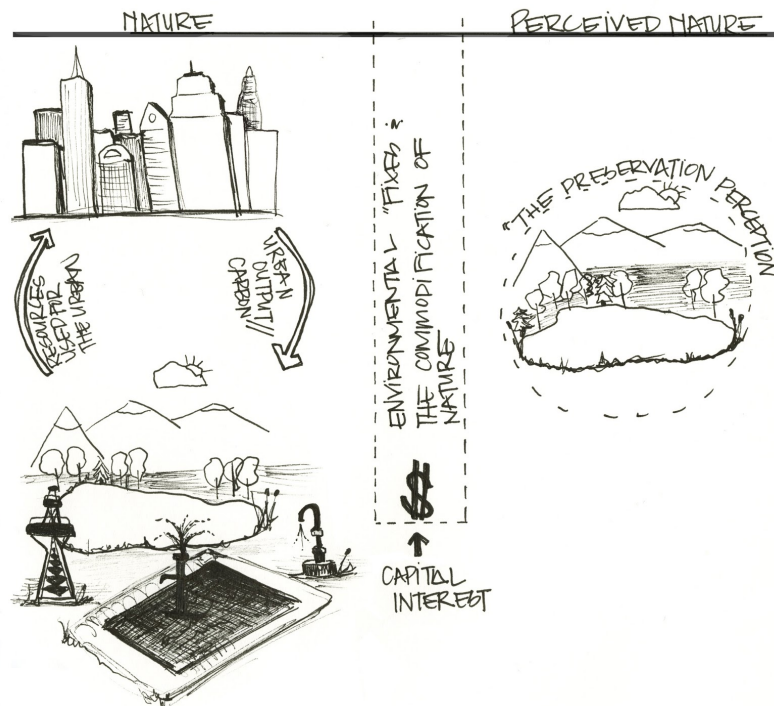
These environmental fixes are elemental to the romanticization of nature and market interests, they blind us to the reality of the holistic system and, in turn, allow us only to see nature and the urban as separate functioning islands rather than coexisting systems. Drawing from Kaika's theory it should be seen that because of this commodification, the separation of nature from society eventually permeate our social and

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<sup>1</sup> Kaika

<sup>2</sup> Morton

spatial practices - these ideals are then politicized and are translated into dualistic spatial practices that allow us to only see nature as a pure form operating “elsewhere” and under different management.<sup>3</sup>



While it may seem iconoclastic or even atheist to deny nature's purity by calling it unnatural, one must explore the ways in which the wilderness that we have safeguarded prevails because of man's need to manicure his world, including its remotest and most seemingly natural corners. When Theodore Roosevelt sought to congressionally dedicate wilderness areas for preserve he said, “Cherish these natural wonders, cherish the natural resources, cherish the history and romance as a sacred heritage...Do not let selfish men or greedy interests skin your country of its beauty, its riches or its romance.”<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt's words had a deep resonance with American Society and his ideologies penetrated many parts of the world, however, what Roosevelt did not see was that, following mass-industrialization, nature had already been invaded by man and changed indefinitely. The problem with Teddy Roosevelt's precarious romanticism is this: that to name nature pure, to view it as the last thing left that has not been tainted by man is blatant denial of the true impact of man.

William Cronon has studied this phenomena in order to better understand human interactions and problem solving within the natural world. He claims that nature, as it stands today, is deeply embedded in human creation and, more than that, it was contrived at very specific points in human history. He asserts that Nature is not a pristine sanctuary where the last remnant of an untouched and endangered tract of land can be encountered without the contaminating taint of civilization. Instead, it is a product of that civilization. For this reason, he says, “we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the *solution* to our culture's problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Kaika

<sup>4</sup> National Museum of Forest Service History

<sup>5</sup> Cronon

Our skewed perception of “wilderness”, paradoxical as it may seem, is a derivative of several different movements within modernity. During the eighteenth century and onto the dawning of the nineteenth century the doctrine of wilderness was written; men like John Muir, Theodore Roosevelt and Immanuel Kant described nature in a deific light - characterized as the romantic sublime, a movement toward primitivism, or an exploration of the individual, but more importantly, all of these themes capture it as the antithesis of the modern industrial revolution. These men, as well as many others, saw the hinterlands as a symbol of all that was free and true - it was a masculine escape from the confines of the domesticity and femininity of the modernistic city. Incongruously, “more often than not, men who felt this way came from elite class backgrounds. The curious result was that frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism. The very men who most benefited from urban-industrial capitalism were among those who believed they must escape its debilitating effects.”<sup>6</sup>

In analyzing this historical perspective, it is clear that the symbolic perception of wilderness as the final citadel of rugged individualism is born from that which it provides remiss: chaotic urban life in the modern world. This historically derived illustration of the natural can also be seen as a form of cultural imperialism as it is implanted in many parts of the world today and serves as the ideological foundation in which problem solving for current environmental concerns and crises is employed.<sup>7</sup> This cultural imperialism not only saturates our views with natural imaginary, but it escapes any logical environmentalist thinking - It is thusly urgent, now, to rethink nature lest we part with it in the coming century; for to redefine nature and to develop a unified message will mean to reassess our rehabilitation efforts entirely.

## **Capitalism, Nature and the Environment**

### **Nature Bought and Sold**

Nature can be claimed to be used in three ways: as a *refuge* from the urban, as a *resource* to sustain both life and capital, and as a *symbol* that is contra to the urban. By virtue of the men who wrote the doctrine of the American Frontier, our national parks stand as our *symbol* of nature today and the narrative of our national parks is both carefully and commercially told through elaborate design concepts and natural imaginary. If you decide, yourself, to pay a visit to one of California's National Parks - you will find a pleasurable, graphically designed, beautifully branded, and completely retrofitted experience throughout; from the whimsical wilderness hotels that line the park to the pamphlets given by the park rangers in exchange for a twenty-dollar admissions fee. This luxurious natural experience is not exclusive to California, however, in 1994 Disney partnered with Yosemite and California Redwoods to rebrand and “disney-ize” in order to make for a more tourist-friendly natural experience which now, according to Mike Hudak, tells the story of hardship and adventure, but does not require its guests to possess a particular set of skills to enjoy the experience. This, Hudak says, “is anathema to the real life commitment needed to enjoy and protect true wilderness, which involves a deep connection to place...the wilderness experience told through the eyes of Disney is in the form of gift shops, design features, promotional gimmicks, and technological wizardry.”<sup>8</sup> It should be made clear that nature has been purchased, sectioned off and branded to fit its symbological purpose in the minds of vacationing urban-dwellers everywhere.

Neil Brenner asks why it is imperative, now, that urban and non-urban distinctions should be transcended. Why now, he asks, when clearly spaces of settlement have already been differentiated by place, name, and even *symbol*? The symbology that we have ascribed to nature gives nature a distinction from that of the urban, it denies that the socio-spatial relations of urbanism, that were once apparently

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<sup>6</sup> Cronon

<sup>7</sup> Slater

<sup>8</sup> Hudak

contained within these units that Brenner has described, have somehow not transcended our commodity chains, infrastructural circuits and our migration streams in the process of globalization.<sup>9</sup> But most importantly, this “othering” that takes place when we symbolize nature blinds us to its modern capitalist formation in the scheme of globalization. We must begin to look past this culturally imperialistic symbol because it is no longer as David Harvey suggests when he says that “the things we call a city is the outcome of a process that we call urbanization” - the process of urbanization extends far beyond the city to the world's most isolated regions and this stark distinction between both city and nature is serving no one but the pockets of investors.

### **Environmental ‘Fixes’ and Urban Problems Mixed Messages in the Climate Debate**

The gaps in our ideologies about both nature and environmentalism have left holes for climate change and the climate cause to develop into an alluring investment - investors, oil companies, and green groups have capitalized on our confused views of nature and it seems as though the public, for the most part, has bought into their efforts. Green is suddenly the new black and the public is now being marketed to and called upon by green groups everywhere to exercise their consumer powers for the climate cause by buying into carbon friendly offsets to preserve the untouched natural wonders that they so cherish. In addition to not doing much, if anything at all, to actually lower emissions, Klein says that “...these various approaches also served to reinforce the very “extrinsic” values that we now know are the greatest psychological barriers to climate action...the idea that change is something that is handed down from above by our betters, rather than something we demand for ourselves.”<sup>10</sup> These psychological barriers have allowed the cultural commons of the urban, the wilderness and of the environment to become commodified by a heritage industry bent on Disneyfication where behind the clever marketization follows ever-dissuaded responses to the climate crisis.<sup>11</sup>

In the early 1960's and all through the 1970's the climate cause seemed to be making progressive moves in support of environmental justice. There began a wave of environmental activism originating with the publication of Carson's *Silent Spring* in 1962 which led to the establishment of the US Environmental Protection Agency in 1970 along with similar agencies around the world.<sup>12</sup> Rapt in the momentum of this activism, environmental law saw a breakthrough as cases were being won against large conglomerates and key stakeholders in the oil and gas industries. But by the 1980's and '90's business opposition to environmental protection advanced significantly beginning with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. When Reagan took office in 1981 his first initiatives were to override much of the Carter environmental agenda - The market perception was that, “environmental risks were not balanced against compliance costs, and that direct regulation was an inefficient and blunt tool to address environmental concerns,” and by the 1990's, regulatory authorities began to experiment with market-based measures in order to benefit, both the climate and the free-market.<sup>13</sup> By leveraging our misguided perceptions, the market and green groups from the 1990's to present day, have allowed large corporations to continue to emit dangerous levels of methane and carbon into the atmosphere and consume massive amounts of natural resources while pointing the finger of blame back at the public for “over consumption”.

No one example of ‘climate cause’ marketing and investment is more egregiously deceptive than the promotion of natural gas. In the early '90's, sustainable energy began to be a buzzword, natural gas was referred to and sold as ‘the bridge’ to clean and renewable energy, and it seemed to be an administrative

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<sup>9</sup> Brenner

<sup>10</sup> Klein

<sup>11</sup> Harvey

<sup>12</sup> Levy

<sup>13</sup> Ibid

push in the right direction - away from coal and fossil fuel energy. Since then that 'bridge' has replaced conventional drilling methods with hydraulic fracturing, a process used in 9 out of 10 gas wells in the United States where millions of gallons of water, sand and chemicals are pumped underground to break apart the rock and release the gas - and where the emissions are nearly equivalent to that of coal.<sup>14</sup>



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In spite of the frivolous drilling techniques used to retrieve natural gas, it is still being marketed as "*safe*", "*natural*", and "*renewable*"; this language is carefully constructed to provoke an already false natural imaginary - by contending that it will not disturb our symbol of a pure and uncivilized nature, this language is formulated to urge the public that natural gas is the road toward a '*clean energy*' future. Natural gas double-speak is so pervasive that in a 2013 public opinion poll executed by chief economists, 65% of Americans stated that they wanted the U.S. to put more emphasis on producing domestic energy using natural gas, stating that "Americans overall and across political and socioeconomic groups generally are most likely to call for more emphasis on solar and wind power - but these potential future sources of energy have a long way to go in terms of technology and affordability before they can significantly affect overall U.S. domestic energy production."<sup>16</sup> Think about this statement - Americans *would* support wind and solar energy, if it didn't have so far to go or if only it were more affordable than natural gas - but could it be that the force that has stood in the way of technological advancement and affordability for better renewables is, in fact, the market, itself? Wouldn't oil and natural gas industries have a vested interest in the miscarriage of wind energy, solar energy and other renewables? Given all of this, we know now that natural gas points even further and further away from a viable solution - that it does not replace only coal, but it also both replaces and strips potential power from renewables - one step forward and five steps back, we are no longer running in place, but backwards.<sup>1718</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Pro Publica

<sup>15</sup> America's Natural Gas Alliance

<sup>16</sup> Jacobe

<sup>17</sup> Klein

<sup>18</sup> Klein

Where capital investment and clever marketing have penetrated our views of nature based on natural imaginary they have also had an undue influence on our ability to problem-source as well. The climate crisis, as Rittel and Webber might describe it, is a 'Wicked Problem' - in other words, solutions to the climate crisis thus far have been born out of the linear progression of goal-formulation, problem-definition and equity issues in order to form straightforward solution proposals. Additionally, the climate crisis is so deeply embedded in capital accumulation that a proposed solution for one particularity of its entangled web will often cause resounding negative impacts to emerge elsewhere within the entanglement. Where our views of nature and our solutions come into a head on collision is where these fragmented, niche responses are deployed. Consequently, defining the problematic of climate change is the easy part - to say that climate change is going to be an issue of considerable size for future generations is incontestably problematic, however, identifying the problem sources becomes increasingly more difficult; and due to our figmental separation of the natural from the urban we are allowing problem definition to be placed in the hands of corporate environmentalists rather than our own.

In the case of the current climate debacle we are asking valutive questions as opposed to operational questions - "We have been learning to see social processes as the links tying open systems into large and interconnected networks of systems, such that outputs from one become inputs to others...Within this structural framework it has become less apparent where problem centers lie, and less apparent where and how we should intervene even if we do happen to know what aims we seek."<sup>19</sup> And as it is monetarily valutive questions that the problem solvers of the climate crisis are asking, the emergent problems are that of the replication of capitalist social relations. What's worse is that rather than engaging a broader public, reform environmentalism is cleverly staged by the market and green groups[corporate environmentalists] as it focuses debate among experts in the scientific, legal, and economic communities and, as Robert Brulle, claims "[reform environmentalism] may provide technical solutions to specific problems but it neglects the larger social dynamics that underlie environmental degradation."<sup>20</sup>

This phenomena can be seen in our scattered problem sourcing within North America's current water crisis. Water suppliers, Farmers, and Natural Gas companies have perpetuated that the source of the crisis is an issue of household overconsumption, in which case the solution is to personally conserve by taking shorter showers, using water-efficient toilets, watering our lawns at night, and buying appliances that offer cycle and load-size adjustments. Meanwhile, the annual water usage demands for the practice of hydraulic fracturing is anywhere between 70 and 140 Billion gallons of water, and animal agriculture's annual water usage ranges from 34-76 trillion gallons - the equivalent of 80-90% of US water consumption; not to mention that the Methane emitted from animal agriculture has a global warming power 86 times that of CO<sub>2</sub>.<sup>21 22 23</sup> It is the very corporations and supply chains that are veraciously lobbying in order to keep their consumption and distribution undisturbed who have jumped to the fore to problematize the public's consumption while masking their own, while veritably only 5% of water consumption in the US is attributed to private homes.<sup>24</sup> Seen in this light, the personal consumption problem begins to pale in comparison to the consumption of both fracking and animal agriculture. This is not to say that personal consumption has no contribution to the usage of natural resources and in the production of emissions, it is only to say that one of the most intractable problems is defining the actual problem, itself - there is not only one lynchpin in the convoluted chain of the climate crisis. We need, instead, to begin asking questions

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<sup>19</sup> Rittel/Webber

<sup>20</sup> Klein

<sup>21</sup> Pimentel

<sup>22</sup> EPA

<sup>23</sup> Anderson/Kuhn

<sup>24</sup> Ibid

about outcome before identifying the problem at hand in order to identify the steps that need to be taken to lead us toward climate justice; however, in order to idealize an outcome within the climate crisis, the precondition is a reidentified nature and a conceptualized message.

## **Reclaiming the Environmental Commons** **Unifying A Message for Insurgent Action and Participatory Democracy**

Up until now I have spoken of the redefinition of nature and the climate crisis as the solutions to better problem solving, within both nature and the urban, but I have not, however, laid the groundwork for how a reimagining of nature and rehabilitation efforts might be possible. As a result of new-frontier romanticism and wilderness preservation, nature has been poised as an "island in a polluted sea of industrial modernity", and thus, our delusive natural imaginary has been positioned in such a way that multi-national privatizing forces have been able to capitalize on them.<sup>25</sup> According to Klein, "[These] 'market-based' climate solutions favored by so many large foundations and adopted by many greens have provided an invaluable service to the fossil fuel sector as a whole. For one, they succeeded in taking what began as a straightforward debate about shifting away from fossil fuels and put it through a jargon generator so convoluted that the entire climate issue came to seem too complex and arcane for non-experts to understand, seriously undercutting the potential to build a mass movement capable of taking on powerful polluters."<sup>26</sup> Most importantly, they have impeded our ability to problem source and organize for climate justice.

In interpreting the urban processes, David Harvey asserts that *accumulation* cannot be separated from *class struggle*. In the climate crisis, capital interests do not want us to lose our undisturbed dreams of civilized cleanliness, they do not want us to squander our thoughts of nature as a "pristine" and non artificial thing, nor do they want us to redefine the natural, because if they cannot place a finger of blame back at us for the degradation of wilderness then we would not be wasting our time cutting back on water consumption, building green roofs and guiltily purchasing energy saving vehicles and we would be going directly to the root of the problem - *them*. In the case of the climate crisis, this act of diversion is where society's class struggle cycles back to be their accumulation. If it is that the commons are most threatened by multi-national privatizing forces and if it is that the "construction of the commons is the anti-capitalist critique," as Harvey claims; then I see that the only way to press forward toward climate justice is to reclaim the environmental commons.<sup>27</sup> In order to do this we must be able to unify a message in order to be able to act insurgently against free-market environmentalism, and we must create a more participatory democracy in which environmental and climate decisions can be made within the public's reach.

Our current message has been convoluted and bogged down in natural romanticism, allowing us to become hoodwinked by capital-driven reform environmentalist messages. According to Klein, If we continue to subscribe to this culturally imperialistic symbol of nature and allow it to dilute our thinking, then decision making will remain pointing further and further away from citizens "...from local to provincial, from provincial to national, from national to international institutions, that lack all transparency or accountability." The solution, she says, is to articulate an alternative, participatory democracy."<sup>28</sup> But what would it take, and more realistically, what would it *cost* to breach the unfathomably distant and apparently multidimensional levels of climate democracy from a singular person to a multi-national private corporation sitting on the panel at the Climate Summit? How can civil society begin to position

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<sup>25</sup> Cronon

<sup>26</sup> Klein

<sup>27</sup> Harvey

<sup>28</sup> Klein



itself to put an end to the privatization of forces and liberalization of regulations within the free market in realm of climate change? While the insurgent act of demonstration is pressing our governments and leaders for both answers and accountability we still must ask ourselves, “what does it mean to demonstrate, to form a coalition, or to act insurgently?” And if our views of nature and progress are misled from the start, do these views translate into a fragmented insurgency?

Margit Mayer argues that in order to achieve a unified message for insurgent demonstration, you must be able to understand the social groupings that occupy very different strategic positions within the post-industrial neoliberal city that are present in this formation. She claims that though multiple social groupings are affected by contemporary forms of dispossession and alienation, (and in this case, climate crisis), it is crucial to acknowledge and understand their differences if we want to succeed in bringing these forces together.<sup>29</sup> With misinformation abound and multiple publics, corporate figures, and double-speaking green groups to blame, one unified message is, perhaps, too much to ask of the millions of people who genuinely want to take action on behalf of the climate. However, Castells reflects that where global civil society now has the technological means to exist independently from political institutions and from the mass media, “the capacity of these social movements to change the public mind still depends, to a large extent, on their ability to shape the debate in the public sphere.”<sup>30</sup> Therefore, as we already have our platform that exists aside from the political institutions and mass media, it is up to us to decide on the outcome - because if we are able to shape the debate, we will be able to reclaim our environmental commons and climb ever closer to climate justice.

At this point, it is understood that our insurgency cannot only be a conversation or topic that brings multiple publics together, our insurgency must also be what sustains the movement in order to create both climate justice and social change. When we begin to shape the debate by redefining the pervasive natural imaginary, we will begin to see, on the scale of a participatory climate democracy, where insurgency can be taken further than singular actions in order to steer the climate crisis back to livable levels.

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<sup>29</sup> Mayer

<sup>30</sup> Castells

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