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Defining Wilderness

We all have an instinctual understanding of what "wilderness" is. In "A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea," Baird Callicott calls this unexamined view the "received" definition. According to him, "the wilderness ideal" is "pristine, untouched nature." (173) Of course, no such areas exist on Earth; every inch of the planet has felt the touch of human hands in some way. But there are more problems than this with the received definition of wilderness, and Callicott discusses them. In "The Twofold Myth of Pristine Wilderness" Scott Friskics accuses Callicott of attacking a straw man. The so-called "received definition" is one which no one involved with environmentalism has accepted for a long time, and which has not affected recent environmental policy, he claims. Friskics' case is convincing, but we shall set aside this particular failing of Callicott's article for the time being and examine the received definition and its flaws despite their hay-like consistency. In this way we may come to an understanding of what our definition of wilderness must be like in order to avoid the various attendant problems of the received definition.

Friskics actually ignores Callicott's first two objections to the received definition, and with good reason. Nevertheless, in the interests of completeness, we shall discuss them – albeit briefly. The first objection runs as follows:

> First, at the practical level, the original rationale for wilderness preservation was not articulated in terms of biological conservation by turn-of-the-century environmentalists

> like John Muir. Instead, they emphasized the way wilderness satisfies human aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual needs. (Callicott 173)

The historical accuracy of this assessment, and whether viewing nature as a "psychospiritual resource" (173) is good or bad, are irrelevant considerations. This is a point concerning the genesis of the received definition, and falls essentially under the same category as an ad hominem – just because the received definition resulted from potentially problematic ideas, does not mean that the definition itself is flawed. The second objection is that "the wilderness preservation philosophy of nature conservation is defensive and ultimately represents a losing strategy." (Callicott 174) Again, the accuracy of this assessment is irrelevant. Lack of pragmatic efficiency is not a sufficient reason to abandon a philosophical position. The correctness of a position is in no way affected by how many people are willing to accept it.

With those preliminary objections dismissed, let us move on to the rest, which Friskics organizes into three major problems. We will take them out of order. First, Callicott accuses the received definition of ethnocentrism. This is further broken down into two senses, the first being historical.

> Europeans came to what they called the 'new world' and since it did not look like the humanized landscape that they had left behind in the 'old world,' they thought it was a pristine wilderness… Europeans inadvertently created the New World wilderness condition by means of an unintended but utterly devastating biological warfare on the aboriginal inhabitants. (Callicott 175-6)

There is no question that this is at least a plausible account of the origin of the received definition. Our idea of pristine nature, untouched by human hands, may have deep cultural roots in the pioneer era, when we conquered the wild lands of North America. Of course, they weren't

actually wild – they were inhabited by a full-fledged civilization, which we sheepishly swept under the carpet to support grandiose notions of manifest destiny. Callicott says that we cannot ignore these bloody foundations of our received wilderness definition, and that this is a strong reason to dismiss it. Friskics describes this objection as the received idea of wilderness being a "uniquely European-American cultural artifact" (391).

Like the very first objection, this is a point concerning the genesis of the received definition, and need not reflect on its validity. It may have developed for utterly indefensible reasons, but this does not necessarily mean that the concept itself is flawed. Friskics says:

> …once we break the assumed connection between the myth of pristine nature and our understanding of wilderness, we can see the ethnocentric ideas within the received wilderness idea for what they are: a justification for claiming ownership to a previously uninhabited landscape. (Friskics 394)

In fact, we need not even break this connection to see that the ethnocentric ideas are separate from the concept itself. For these reasons, we may dismiss this objection and move on.

Far more interesting is the second sense of ethnocentric which Callicott discusses. Recall Friskics' earlier description of the received definition as a "uniquely European-American cultural artifact." This refers not only to its roots in the history of colonial domination, but also to its present day relationship to other cultures. As Callicott says, "at the international level, the uniquely American wilderness idea is not a universalizable approach to conservation" (Callicott 174). A common example used in environmentalist discourse is western Europe, where there is practically no wilderness left to conserve. Callicott also mentions the tragic cases in India, Africa, and South-America in which native peoples have been removed from their homelands in order to create "American-style" national parks.

Friskics does not give much consideration to this aspect of ethnocentrism. It certainly presents a challenging political problem – but what bearing does it have on the actual definition of wilderness? Perhaps we might wish to alter the definition of wilderness such that Europe actually has some – and thus can benefit from its conservation. On the other hand, Europe may be so thoroughly civilized that the idea of wilderness conservation has no place there. In this case we may have to turn to the idea of wilderness restoration, which would also benefit from a clear definition of wilderness, so that there we know exactly what we are restoring. As to the cases of ethnic minorities being displaced from their ancestral lands, it is worth noting that this is not a problem with the definition of wilderness per se, but a dilemma resulting from two competing value judgements. No matter what definition of wilderness we end up with, it is likely to conflict with various other human values and interests in some circumstances.

Nevertheless, a different definition might very well reduce the amount of conflict significantly. For example, Callicott's biosphere reserves allow for human habitation in harmony with natural processes. He envisions a version of the American Great Plains in which "Erstwhile ranchers and farmers could retain a home forty [sic] and form management co-ops to allot themselves culling rights" (179). but where the presence of these farmers is less disruptive. "With the fences down, the native ungulates could roam free and wild" (179). This is a charming idea, but is also frankly naïve. We have proven over and over that as a species, we are generally incapable of living in balanced harmony with other natural creatures. As Noss says:

> Multiple-use areas, which constitute the vast majority of public lands, have been degraded far more than virtually any of our wilderness areas… This evidence only strengthens that argument that we need more – not less – area off-limits to intensive human exploitation. (188-9)

It is true that Callicott is advocating for lands off-limits from *intensive* exploitation, but the fact of the matter is that allowing modern people to live in an area will almost inevitable result in such exploitation. In situations where native peoples are living in a way that is sustainable, we can justify leaving them be through a softening of the purity requirement (more on this later). And as Noss says later, "Even to exclude 'native' people from some reserves is not ridiculous when these people have acquired guns, snow-mobiles, all-terrain vehicles, bulldozers, and modern medicine." (190) If we wish to preserve any semblance of real wilderness (the definition of which we are getting nearer too, and which definitely does not include areas intensively exploited by humans) then we must be willing to sacrifice the use of some land as living space.

The charge of ethnocentrism has left few marks upon the received definition of wilderness. We have seen that we will have to allow some level of human interaction with the wild, but we already knew that based upon the fact that otherwise there would be no such thing as wilderness. A more in depth discussion of the interplay between human and nature can be found below, but for now we will move on to the second of the problems identified by Friskics and Callicott: that ecosystems are meant to be changing, not static.

> To be constantly changing and unstable is now believed to be their usual, rather than exceptional, condition. Thus, whether we humans interfere with them or not, ecosystems will undergo metamorphosis. But wilderness preservation has often meant freeze-framing the status quo ante… (Callicott 176)

Friskics describes this objection as "The very idea of preserving wilderness in its current state runs counter to our understanding of nature as dynamic" (Friskics 395). It is undoubtedly true that nature is, and is supposed to be, in constant flux. However, this is not necessarily incompatible with the preservation of wilderness as such. Friskics articulates it perfectly when he

says: “If nature, as we now understand it, is fundamentally dynamic, then wilderness areas will be protected and managed to facilitate and safeguard those natural processes.” (395) Preservation does not entail, as Callicott claims, “freeze-framing” an area of wilderness. Another important point is that while nature is supposed to be in a constant state of change, this change is also usually steady, slow, and healthy. When we introduce rapid, destructive changes to an environment, we cannot justify our actions by saying that the environment would change “whether we humans interfere… or not.” If you’re sharing an apartment and you and your roommates have a set cleaning schedule, they are unlikely to be appeased by the excuse that the state of cleanliness is always changing when you decide to skip your turn – or to make the analogy more accurate, decide to dump dirt all over the floor. All change is not equal.

The topic of human management of wilderness areas brings us to the most interesting and most discussed problem with the received definition: the implied dualism of human and natural. We have already touched on the idea that what is natural is by definition divorced from what is human, whenever “softening” the definition was mentioned. But there are more fundamental reasons than those previously discussed to question the sharp divide between humanity and nature. Callicott says: “at the philosophical level, the wilderness idea perpetuates the pre-Darwinian myth that ‘man’ exists apart from nature” (176). He is completely correct in calling this division a myth. As Katz says “there is the logical point that humans themselves are natural evolved beings, and so all human actions would be ‘natural,’ regardless of the amount of technology used or the interference on nonhuman nature.” (395) Any definition of wilderness that requires a complete separation of human and nature can be dismissed a priori before we even reach considerations of practicality. Instead we must “admit that the concepts of ‘natural’ and ‘artifactual’ are not absolutes; they exist along a spectrum, where various gradations of both

concepts can be discerned." (Katz 395) To those who still have qualms about separating humans and nature, given that humans are inherently a subcategory of nature, I offer this quote from Noss:

> It is not exclusion from these reserves that separates us from nature; it is our culture and our lifestyles, which had already separated us long before we began designating wilderness areas… we have been trying our damnedest to separate ourselves from nature emotionally and physically since Neolithic times (at least). (190)

We alter our environments more than any other creature on the planet. We build houses, skyscrapers, shopping malls, entire cities, to insulate ourselves from the rest of the natural world. As Noss says, from Neolithic times at least, we have tried to raise ourselves above the rest of the animal world – this is how we came to dominate the planet. Moreover, the fact that humans are inherently natural does not endow us with the right to destroy the rest of the natural world to an unprecedented degree. Recalling our shared apartment analogy, if you decide to destroy all the furniture, your roommates are unlikely to accept the excuse "I live here too."

How do we decide to what degree humans can interact with an environment before it stops being wilderness? To some extent we will never be able to draw a sharp line. This is no reason to abandon the search, however – there is no sharp line between a seed and a tree, but this doesn't mean they aren't two entirely different things. Katz offers us this criterion: "All human activity is not unnatural, only that activity which goes beyond our biological and evolutionary capacities" (396). This distinction is far from complete and will require much refining before it can be used to make sound judgements between natural and unnatural human actions, but it is a step in the right direction. Friskics points out one more interesting aspect of the relationship between humans and wilderness areas:

> Wilderness designation is based not only on the extent to which humans have modified certain places in the past; it also is based upon an understanding of our future relationship to such places… they are places where we have agreed to allow natural processes to proceed in a somewhat free and unhampered manner in the future. From this perspective, wilderness designation establishes a covenant between humans and a particular landscape. (Friskics 390)

This past/future distinction provides us with yet another level of flexibility when dealing with lands which were previously exploited by humanity – yet another way to justify the existence of wilderness in a world where no place is free from our influence. Moreover, it gives us a context in which to place our judgements of human interference in wilderness areas: firmly in the future.

So what definition of wilderness are we left with? Or rather, what definition have we created? We began with the received definition, which specified areas completely free from human contact. For a multitude of reasons, we dismissed this purist ideal: that there is no such thing as an area free from humanity's influence; that to refuse to soften on this front would require the unjust removal of indigenous peoples; that the distinction between human and nature is, in and of itself, incoherent. We found that a full conception of wilderness and its preservation must include steady, healthy change, but exclude overly rapid or destructive alterations. With this altered definition of wilderness, what would a wilderness preserve look like? It would be a place relatively free from harmful human exploitation; a place in which natural processes are allowed to operate at their natural pace, protected from disruptive influences, and nurtured to ensure their continuation; a place defined not by its past, but by our future commitment to preserve and protect it from the ravages of industrial civilization.