Examining a Rhetorical Analysis

On the following pages, well-known *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof reports on his family's annual vacation, when they "run away to the mountains." He argues that we are plagued by "nature deficit disorder," that we have lost our connection with the wilderness, with the land that supports us, and that we must do our best to preserve and protect the "natural splendor that no billionaire is allowed to fence off." Responding to Kristof's argument with a careful critical reading and detailed rhetorical analysis is Cameron Hauer, a student at Portland State University.

Fleeing to the Mountains

NICHOLAS KRISTOF

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ON THE PACIFIC CREST TRAIL, NORTHWEST OF TRUCKEE, Calif. —

This will make me sound grouchy and misanthropic, but I sometimes wonder if what makes America great isn't so much its people as its trees and mountains.

In contrast to many advanced countries, we have a vast and spectacular publicly owned wilderness, mostly free and available to all. In an age of inequality, the affluent have gated neighborhoods, private schools, backup generators and greater influence on elected officials. But our most awe-inspiring wild places have remained largely

a public good to be shared by all, a bastion of equality.

My family and I have been backpacking on the Pacific Crest Trail through the Sierras north of Donner Pass, enjoying magnificent splendor that no billionaire is allowed to fence off. We all have equal access, at no charge: If you can hold your own against mosquitoes and bears, the spot is yours for the night.

Yet these public lands are at risk today. More on that in a moment, but first let me tell you about the Kristofs' grand vacation. As we do each summer, we ran away from home to the mountains. We escaped the tether of email and cellphones, the tyranny of the inbox, and fled with everything we needed on our backs.

We're yanked back to a simple life. We sleep under the stars rather than in a tent; if it rains we pull out a tarp to keep dry. Dawn wakes us up, we roll up our sleeping bags and plastic ground sheet, wolf down trail mix or granola bars and start down the path. We fill our water bottles at passing streams, stop for rest and meals wherever we fancy, chat as we walk, and when dusk comes we look for a flat spot, kick aside any rocks and branches and unroll our ground sheet and sleeping bags again.

Granted, we also moan about blisters. And marauding mosquitoes. And the heat — or, sometimes, the cold. We whine a lot, but that builds family solidarity.

This is also a spiritual experience: It's a chance to share a reverence for the ethereal scenery of America's wild places. The wilderness is

nature’s cathedral, and it’s a thrill to worship here.

The march of civilization has been about distancing ourselves from the raw power of nature. At home, we move the thermostat up or down by a degree, and we absorb the idea that we are lords of the universe. On the trail, we are either sweating or freezing, and it always feels as if the path is mainly uphill. Nature mocks us, usefully reminding us who’s boss.

Caroline Kristof

If your kids are suffering from what the writer Richard Louv calls nature-deficit disorder, I recommend that you all run away from home together. Flee to the mountains. It’s heaven with blisters.

There are often charges to enter much-trafficked spots like Yellowstone or Yosemite, but the wilderness is mostly free to hikers.

This is our collective patrimony, a tribute to the wisdom of Theodore

Roosevelt, Gifford Pinchot and other visionaries who preserved our wild places for the future. Thank God for them. Otherwise, these lands might have been carved up and sold off as ranches for the rich.

Because of the foresight of past generations, the federal government owns one million square miles, an area three times the size of California, Oregon and Washington combined. Much of this is unspoiled, our inheritance and our shared playground.

Yet today, President Trump sees this heritage as an opportunity for development. More aggressively than past administrations, Trump's is systematically handing over America's public lands for private exploitation in ways that will scar the land forever.

The Trump administration lifted a moratorium on new coal mining leases on public land, it is drawing up plans to reduce wilderness protected as national monuments and it is rapidly opening up additional public lands to coal mining and oil and gas drilling.

A second challenge comes from our paralysis in the face of climate change, compounded by the Trump administration, and the risks this creates to our wilderness. A warmer climate has led to droughts and to the 20-year spread of the mountain pine beetle, and a result is the death of vast swaths of Western forests. Last year, 62 million trees died in California alone, the Forest Service says, and in Oregon and Washington I've watched forests turn brown and sickly. In parts of Wyoming and Colorado, the pine beetle has killed almost all the mature lodgepole pine trees, and it's arguably even worse in British Columbia.

The third risk is from gradual degradation and chronic underfunding. Even before Trump took office, wilderness trails and campgrounds were in embarrassing disrepair. How is it that we could afford to construct these trails 80 years ago in the Great Depression but cannot manage even to maintain them today?

When public lands are lost — or mined in ways that scar the landscape — something has been lost forever on our watch. A public good has been privatized, and our descendants have been robbed.

To promote an understanding of what is being lost, I encourage everyone to run away from home as well. Flee to the mountains, deserts and babbling brooks to get in touch with wild spaces, to find perspective and humility. The wilderness nourishes our souls, if we let it.

Appeal, Audience, and Narrative in Kristof's Wilderness

CAMERON HAUER

Growing up in an outdoorsy middle class family instilled a love of the outdoors in me from an early age. I joined a local Boy Scouts chapter as a pre-adolescent and spent practically every other weekend in the pristine wilderness of Washington, Idaho, and Montana. From alpine skiing in the Canadian Rockies to 50-mile backpacking treks, the wilderness was a big part of my life. I owe a lot of personal development and fond memories to America's vast and mostly public wilderness, the value of which Nicholas Kristof captures stirringly in his *New York Times* op-ed column, "Fleeing to the Mountains."

Connects article to personal experience to create an ethical appeal

Kristof's article is principally a piece of epideictic rhetoric, extolling the virtues of America's publicly owned wilderness areas and those who created them while casting blame on those who try to undermine them. Early in the piece, Kristof connects public ownership of wild lands to a core set of American values, regarding the country's public lands as "a bastion of equality." In the wilderness, he says, "we all have equal access, no charge." Kristof warns, however, that America's wilderness is under attack.

Provides brief overview of Kristof's argument and major claim

To bolster his case for the specialness of America's wildlands, Kristof relies heavily on ethical and emotional appeals: a lively account of his family's backpacking trips and the ways they free them from the technologically structured rigidity of modern city life. In these sections, Kristof's style ranges from breezy and playful

Identifies appeals used and provides examples

(the wilderness is "heaven with blisters") to awestruck and reverent (it is "our inheritance and shared playground"). This section also offers personal testimony; Kristof has spent a lot of time in wild places, and he is well positioned to describe their virtues. He invites readers to share this ethic, to revel in the joy provided by open spaces, but also to regard them as an almost sacred inheritance.

Transition sentence signals a shift in the argument

About halfway through the column, Kristof makes a shift to address threats facing our wilderness. He lays blame on those in power, like President Trump, who "sees this heritage as an opportunity for development" and is "systematically handing over America's public lands for private exploitation in ways that will scar the land forever." Kristof's style here becomes more somber and more reliant on verifiable facts. The primary appeal shifts to logos rather than the ethos and pathos of the earlier sections. Whereas before he was trying to evoke a particular feeling and ethic, his present goal is to convince readers that public lands in the U.S. are under threat by marshaling a series of facts about actions of the Trump Administration that Kristof believes undermine the U.S. public wilderness system. These facts include lifting a moratorium on new mining leases and opening up new lands to fossil fuel extraction. He also describes the effects of climate change, which he argues the Trump Administration ignores, and chronic underfunding, which he notes predates Trump. In the online version of the column, Kristof includes hyperlinks so readers can fact-check his evidence. This is the only section in which hyperlinks appear, underscoring again the shift to logical appeals. Note, however, that Kristof lessens the effect of what could be an abrupt shift in appeal by maintaining his established narrative, of wilderness as an inheritance.

Discusses style and use of evidence

Puts Kristof's article in rhetorical context

Several elements of Kristof's argument give special insight into the particular moment in which Kristof offers his argument as well as into the audience he is

addressing. The place of Trump in Kristof's narrative is particularly significant, because what Kristof describes as a unique threat to American public lands is simply the implementation of long-standing Republican Party policy. If he had wanted to, Kristof could fairly ascribe the policies of privatization and fossil fuel extraction to the GOP as a whole. But in the rhetorical context Kristof occupies—a left-of-center newspaper in 2017—choosing Trump as the avatar of anti-environmental policies is a strong, if obvious, rhetorical move. To a liberal readership still reeling from the shock of the 2016 election, the invocation of Trump is an invitation for the audience to adopt Kristof's pro-wilderness platform as a plank of a broader anti-Trump agenda.

Analyzes author's intended audience

It is also worth noting some telling elisions in Kristof's argument. In the narrative Kristof provides, wild lands are either public and devoted to use by the people, or privatized and devoted to resource extraction and "ranches for the rich." To Kristof's invoked audience, which bristles at the rapacity of unrestrained free enterprise and its attendant inequality, this framework may be convincing, but a rural conservative who believes strongly in the primacy of property rights will probably be unmoved. While it may seem natural to progressives to regard public ownership as an unmitigated good, conservatives often view such ownership with extreme suspicion. Whereas Kristof views public ownership as a means of providing equal access for all Americans, rural conservatives may view it as a means by which potentially valuable resources are turned into playgrounds for yuppies. And whereas Kristof views private ownership as facilitating degradation and waste, conservatives may view it as a means by which hardworking people can make a decent living off the land.

Offers a critique of Kristof's position

Such considerations bring up another important evasion in Kristof's argument, one that may stand out sharply to both left and right. Kristof's characterization

Points out another flaw in Kristof's argument

of public lands as "a bastion of equality" may be true in a narrow, legal sense: most of these places are open to the public, free of charge. But to get access to wilderness requires a decent salary and paid time off, among other things. In an economic system where millions struggle to afford basic food and housing, unfettered use of America's wildlands remains out of reach.

Analyzes the genre of Kristof's piece (and its limitations)

These evasions and omissions may point to Kristof's biases and his own rhetorical stance, but they should not be regarded as damning. Even if Kristof has rejoinders to these objections—and it's likely he does—it would be hard to give them their due in the restricted format of a newspaper column. This op-ed article is, after all, crafted for a particular audience. To address the concerns of staunch conservatives would probably require Kristof to adopt very different rhetorical strategies. Kristof's readers are mostly a self-selecting group of liberals already sympathetic in some ways to his views. Thus the rhetorical goal is not to convince a group of hostile adversaries of his position but to persuade a group of amenable readers that this particular issue—and this particular ethic—is one that they should adopt as their own.

Work Cited

Kristof, Nicholas. "Fleeing to the Mountains." *Everything's an Argument*, 8th ed., by Andrea A. Lunsford and John J. Ruszkiewicz, Bedford/St. Martin's, 2018, pp. 118–20. Reprint of "Fleeing to the Mountains," *The New York Times*, 12 August 2017.

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GUIDE to writing a rhetorical analysis