**OUTLINE OF “PRESERVING WILDNESS”**

Thesis: The argument over the proper relation of humanity to nature.

1. **Describes both sides of the conflict**
2. The argument over the proper relation of humanity to nature is becoming, as the sixties used to say, polarized.
3. At the other extreme are the nature conquerors, who have no patience with an old-fashioned outdoor farm, let alone a wilderness.
4. If I had to choose, I would join the nature extremists against the technology extremists, but this choice seems poor, even assuming that it is possible.

**II. States his assumptions**

1. The middle, of course, is always rather roomy and bewildering territory, and so I should state plainly the assumptions that define the ground on which I indent to stand:
   1. We live in a wilderness, in which we and our works occupy a tiny space and play a tiny part. We exist under its dispensation and by its tolerance.
   2. This wilderness, the universe, is *somewhat* hospitable to us, but it is also absolutely dangerous to us (it is going to kill us, sooner or later), and we are absolutely dependent upon it.
   3. That we depend upon what we are endangered by is a problem not solvable by “problem solving.” It does not have what the nature romantic or the technocrat would regard a solution. We are not going back to the Garden of Eden, nor are we going to manufacture an Industrial Paradise.
   4. There does exist a possibility that we can live more or less in harmony with our native wilderness; I am betting my life that such a harmony is possible. But I do not believe that it can be achieved simply or easily or that it can ever be perfect, and I am certain that it can never be made, once and for all, but is the forever unfinished lifework of our species.
   5. It is not possible (at least, not for very long) for humans to intend their own good specifically or exclusively. We cannot intend our good, in the long run, without intending the good of our place—which means, ultimately, the good of the world.
   6. To use or not to use nature is not a choice that is available to us; we can live only at the expense of other lives. Our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use. This is not a choice that can be decided satisfactorily in principle or in theory; it is a choice intransigently impractical. That is, it must be worked out in local practice because, by necessity, the practice will vary somewhat from one locality to another. There is, thus, no *practical* way that we can intend the good of the world; practice can only be local.
   7. If there is no escape from the human use of nature, then human good cannot be simply synonymous with natural good.
2. What these assumptions describe, of course, is the human predicament. It is a spiritual predicament, for it requires us to be properly humble and grateful; time and again, it asks us to be still and wait. But it is also a practical problem, for it requires us to *do* things.

**III. Call to action**

1. In going to work on this problem it is a mistake to proceed on the basis of an assumed division or divisibility between nature and humanity, or wildness and domesticity.
2. The indivisibility of wildness and domesticity, even within the fabric of human life itself, is easy enough to demonstrate.
3. The same is true of a healthy human economy as it branches upward out of the soil.
4. Breeders of domestic animals, likewise, know that, when a breeding program is too much governed by human intention, by economic considerations, or by fashion, uselessness is the result.

**IV. Our cultures dominance upon nature**

1. To be divided against nature, against wildness, then, is a human disaster because it is to be divided against ourselves.
2. But to say that we are not divided and not dividable from nature is not to say that there is no difference between us and the other creatures.
3. But humans differ most from other creatures in the extent to which they must be *made* what they are—that is, in the extent to which they are artifacts of their culture.
4. In the recovery of culture and nature is the knowledge of how to farm well, how to preserve, harvest and replenish the forests, how to make, build, and use, return and restore.
5. Harmony is one phase, the good phase, of the inescapable dialogue between culture and nature.
6. The awareness that we are slowly growing into now is that the earthly wildness that we are so complexly dependent upon is at our mercy.

**V. Our economy doesn’t positively reward good use of nature.**

1. To me, this means simply that we are not safe in assuming that we can preserve wildness by making wilderness preserves.
2. Conservation is going to prove increasingly futile and increasingly meaningless if its proscriptions are not answered positively by an economy that rewards and enforces good use.
3. Our present economy, by contrast, does not account for affection at all, which is to say that it does not account for value.
4. Now that the practical processes of industrial civilization have become so threatening to humanity and to nature, it is easy for us, or for some of us, to see that practicality needs to be made subject to spiritual values and spiritual measures.
5. “The dignity of toil is undermined its necessity is gone,” Kathleen Raine says, and she is right.

**VI. The Reason to Preserve Nature**

1. And so, though I am trying to unspecialize the idea and the job of preserving wildness, I am not against wilderness preservation.
2. The reason to preserve wilderness is that we need it.
3. We need wilderness also because wildness—nature—is one of our indispensable studies.
   1. What is here?
   2. What will nature permit us to do here?
   3. What will nature help us to do here?
4. The second and third questions are obviously the ones that would define agendas of practical research and of work.
5. But the second and third questions are ruled by the first.
6. However, to say that wilderness and wildness are indispensable to us, indivisible from us, is not to say that we can find sufficient standards for our life and work in nature.
7. Clearly, if we want to argue for the existence of the world as we know it, we will have to find some way of qualifying and supplementing this relentless criterion of “natural.”

**VII. Hope In Finding Solution**

1. We are creatures obviously subordinate to nature, dependent upon a wild world that we did not make.
2. Humans differ from earthworms, thrushes, and hawks in their capacity to do more—in modern times, a great deal more—in their own behalf than is necessary.
3. We have no way to work at this question, it seems to me, except by perceiving that, in order to have the world, we must share it, both with each other and with other creatures, which is immediately complicated by the further perception that, in order to live in the world, we must use it somewhat at the expense of other creatures.
4. But in the recognition of the difficulty of our situation is a kind of relief, for it makes us give up the hope that a solution can be found in a **simple preference for humanity over nature or nature over humanity.**

**VIII. Population**

1. As undertake this work, perhaps the greatest immediate danger lies in our dislike of ourselves as a species.
2. For these reasons, there is great danger in the perception that “there are too many people,” whatever truth may be in, for this is a premise from which it is too likely that somebody, sooner or later, will proceed to a determination of who are the surplus.
3. I would argue that, at least for us in the United States, the conclusion that “there are too many people” is premature, not because I know that there are not too many people, but because I do not think we are prepared to come to such a conclusion.
4. The “population problem,” initially, should be examined as a problem, not of quantity, but of pattern.
5. The population issue thus leads directly to the issue of proportion and scale.

**IX. Conclusion**

1. When we propose that humans should learn to behave properly with respect to nature so as to place their domestic economy harmoniously upon and within the sustaining and surrounding wilderness, then we make possible a sort of landscape criticism.
2. Looking at the monocultures of industrial civilization, we yearn with a kind of homesickness for the humaneness and the naturalness of a highly diversified, multipurpose landscape, democratically divided, with many margins.

Axe in Hand

Thesis: It is often assumed that whoever owns land must forsee, compare, and decide upon with the calm assurance that his bias will, on the average, prove to be something more than good intentions.

Conclusion:

Our biases are indeed a sensitive index to our affections, our tastes, our loyalties, our generosities, and our manner of wasting weekends.

I.

The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away, but He is no longer the only one to do so. When some remote ancestor of ours invented the shovel, he became a giver: he could plant a tree. And when the axe was invented, he became a taker: he could chop it down. Whoever owns land has thus assumed, whether he knows it or not, the divine functions of creating and destroying plants.

Other ancestors, less remote, have since invented other tools, but each of these, upon close scrutiny, proves to be either an elaboration of, or an accessory to, the original pair of basic implements. We classify ourselves into vocations, each of which either wields some particular tool, or sells it, or repairs it, or sharpens it, or dispenses advice on how to do so; by such division of labors we avoid responsibility for the misuse of any tool save our own. But there is one vocation-philosophy-which knows that all men, by what they think about and wish for, in effect wield all tools. It knows that men thus determine, by their manner of thinking and wishing, whether it is worth while to wield any.

November is, for many reasons, the month for the axe. It is warm enough to grind an axe without freezing, but cold enough to fell a tree in comfort. The leaves are off the hardwoods, so that one can see just how the branches intertwine, and what growth occurred last summer. Without this clear view of treetops, one cannot be sure which tree, if any, needs felling for the good of the land.

I have read many definitions of what is a conservationist, and written not a few myself, but I suspect that the best one is written not with a pen, but with an axe. It is a matter of what a man thinks about while chopping, or while deciding what to chop. A conservationist is one who is humbly aware that with each stroke he is writing his signature on the face of his land. Signatures of course differ, whether written with axe or pen, and this is as it should be.

I find it disconcerting to analyze, ex post facto, the reasons behind my own axe-in hand decisions. I find, first of all, that not all trees are created free and equal. Where a white pine and a red birch are crowding each other, I have an a priori bias; I always cut the birch to favor the pine. Why?

Well, first of all I planted the pine with my shovel, whereas the birch crawled under the fence and planted itself. My bias is thus to some extent paternal, but this cannot be the whole story, for if the pine were a natural seedling like the birch, I would value it even more. So I must dig deeper for the logic, if any behind my bias.

The birch is an abundant tree in my township and becoming more so, whereas pine is scarce and becoming scarcer; perhaps my bias is for the underdog. But what would I do if my farm were further north, where pine is abundant and red birch is scarce? I confess I don’t know. My farm is here.

The pine will live for a century, the birch for half that; do I fear that my signature will fade? My neighbors have planted no pines but all have many birches; am I snobbish about having a woodlot of distinction? The pine stays green all winter, the birch punches the clock in October; do I favor the tree that, like myself, braves the winter wind? The pine will shelter a grouse but the birch will feed him; do I consider bed more important than board? The pine will ultimately bring ten dollars a thousand, the birch two dollars; have I an eye on the bank? All of these possible reasons for my bias seem to carry some weight, but none of them carries very much.

So I try again, and here perhaps is something; under this pine will ultimately grow a trailing arbutus, an Indian pipe, a pyrola, or a twin flower, whereas under the birch a bottle gentian is about the best to be hoped for. In this pine a pileated woodpecker will ultimately chisel out a nest; in the birch a hairy will have to suffice. In this pine the wind will sing for me in April, at which time the birch is only rattling naked twigs. These possible reasons for my bias carry weight, but why? Does the pine stimulate my imagination and my hops more deeply than the birch does? If so, is the difference in the trees, or in me?

The only conclusion I have ever reached is that I love all trees, but I am in love with pines.

As I said, November is the month for the axe, and, as in other love affairs, there is skill in the exercise of bias. If the birch stands south of the pine, and is taller, it will shade the pine’s leader in the spring, and thus discourage the pine weevil from laying her eggs there. Birch competition is a minor affliction compared with this weevil, whose progeny kill the pine’s leader and thus deform the tree. It is interesting to mediate that this insect’s preference for squatting in the sun determines not only her own continuity as a species, but also the future figure of the pine, and my own success as a wielder of axe and shovel.

Again, if a drouthy summer follows my removal of the birch’s shade, the hotter soil may offset the lesser competition for water, and my pine be none the better for my bias.

Lastly, if the birch’s limbs rub the pine’s terminal buds during a wind, the pine will surely be deformed, and the birch must either be removed regardless of other considerations, or else it must be pruned of limbs each winter to a height greater than the pine’s prospective summer growth.

II.

## Such are the pros and cons the wielder of an axe must forsee, compare, and decide upon with the calm assurance that his bias will, on the average, prove to be something more than good intentions.

### I am amazed to learn what diverse characters different men impute to one and the same tree.

I like the red dogwood because he feeds October robins, and the prickly ash because my woodcock take their daily sunbath under the shelter of his thorns. I like the hazel because his October purple feeds my eye, and because his November catkins feed my deer and grouse. I like the bittersweet because my father did, and because the deer, on the 1st of July of each year, begin suddenly to eat the new leaves, and I have learned to predict this event to my guests. I cannot dislike a plant that enables me, a mere professor, to blossom forth annually as a successful seer and prophet.

It is evident that our plant biases are in part traditional. If your grandfather liked hickory nuts, you will like the hickory tree because your father told you to. If, on the other hand, your grandfather burned a log carrying a poison ivy vine and recklessly stood in the smoke, you will dislike the species, no matter with what crimson glories it warms your eyes each fall.

It is also evident that our plant biases reflect not only vocations but avocations, with a delicate allocation of priority as between industry and indolence. The farmer who would rather hunt grouse than milk cows will not dislike hawthorn, no matter if it does invade his pasture. The coon-hunter will not dislike basswood, and I know of quail hunters who bear no grudge against ragweed, despite their annual bout with hayfever. Our biases are indeed a sensitive index to our affections, our tastes, our loyalties, our generosities, and our manner of wasting weekends.

Be that as it may, I am content to waste mine, in November, with axe in hand.

The terms ***a priori*** ("from the earlier") and [***a posteriori***](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empirical_evidence) ("from the later") are used in [philosophy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philosophy) ([epistemology](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Epistemology)) to distinguish two types of[knowledge](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge), justification, or [argument](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Argument):

* *A priori* knowledge or justification is independent of [experience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experience) (for example "All bachelors are unmarried"). [Galen Strawson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen_Strawson) has stated that an *a priori* argument is one in which "you can see that it is [true](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth) just lying on your couch". You don't have to get up off your couch and go outside and examine the way things are in the physical world. You don't have to do any science."[[1]](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/A_priori_and_a_posteriori#cite_note-Galen_Strawson_interviewed_by_Tamler_Sommers-1)
* *A posteriori* knowledge or justification is dependent on [experience](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Experience) or [empirical evidence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Empirical_evidence) (for example "Some bachelors I have met are very happy").

## Our biases are indeed a sensitive index to our affections, our tastes, our loyalties, our generosities, and our manner of wasting weekends.