

Environmentalism and the Concept of Wilderness

ENG/ENV M30: Environment across Cultures

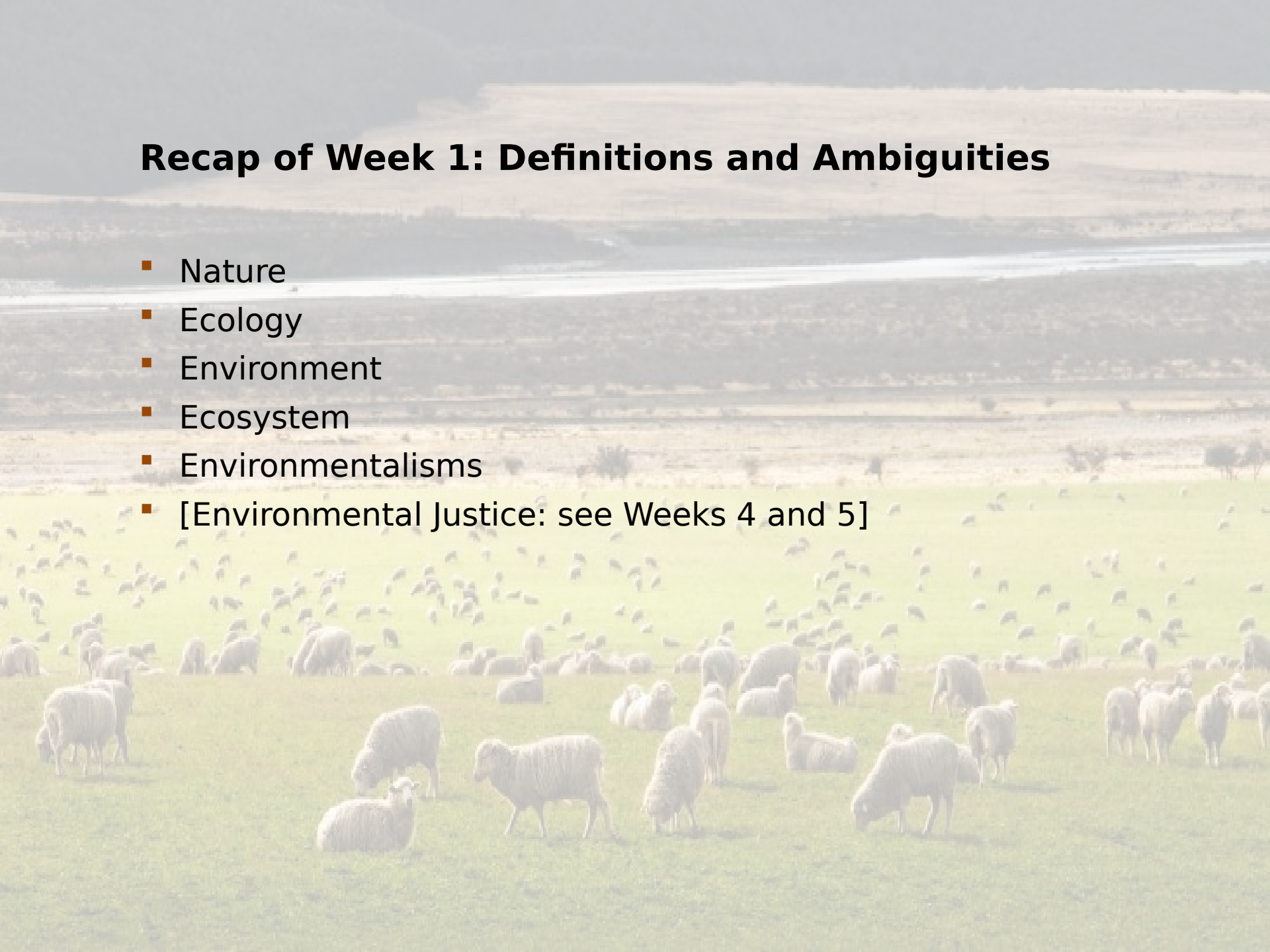
Prof. Heise

Lecture 3

11 April 2023

Recap of Week 1: Definitions and Ambiguities

- Nature
- Ecology
- Environment
- Ecosystem
- Environmentalisms
- [Environmental Justice: see Weeks 4 and 5]



Masterplots/Story Patterns

- ◆ "There are some masterplots, very loosely conceived, that would appear to be universal: the quest, the story of revenge, seasonal myths of death and regeneration. But the more culturally specific the masterplot, the greater its force in everyday life. All national cultures have their masterplots, some of which are local variations on universal masterplots. . . . They constitute . . . 'the mythological structure of a society from which we derive comfort, and which it may be uncomfortable to dispute'" (Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* 47-48).
- ◆ "Looked at from the perspective of narrative, then, national culture is a complex weave of numerous, often conflicting, masterplots" (Abbott, *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* 48).



What kind of nature do you see in this painting?



Albert Bierstadt, *Among the Sierra Nevada Mountains, California* (1868)

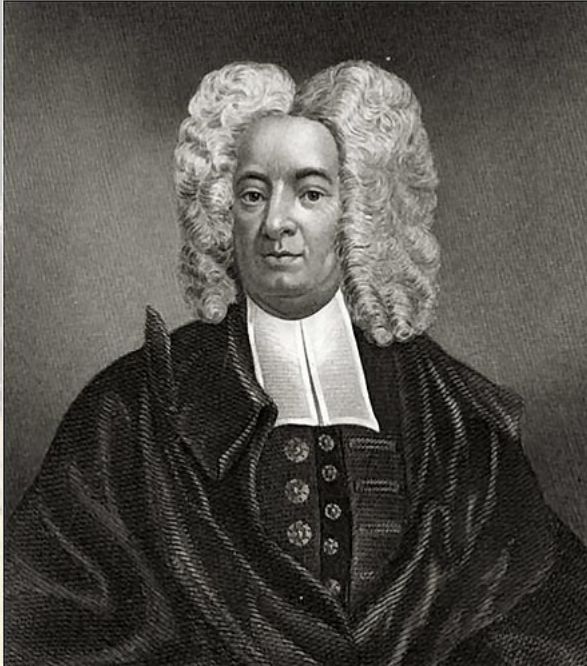
The Wilderness Masterplot

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- This masterplot is not shared by cultures and environmental movements in other countries: in East Asia, South Asia, and Western Europe, there has been very little nature for the last few centuries that could possibly be construed as untouched by humans, and the ideal nature that environmental organizations in these regions seek to conserve and restore is not wild in the North American sense (see Week 3).



Cotton Mather
(1663-1728)

"It is a vexing eye-sore to the Devil that our Lord Jesus Christ should be known and owned and preached in this howling wilderness. . . .

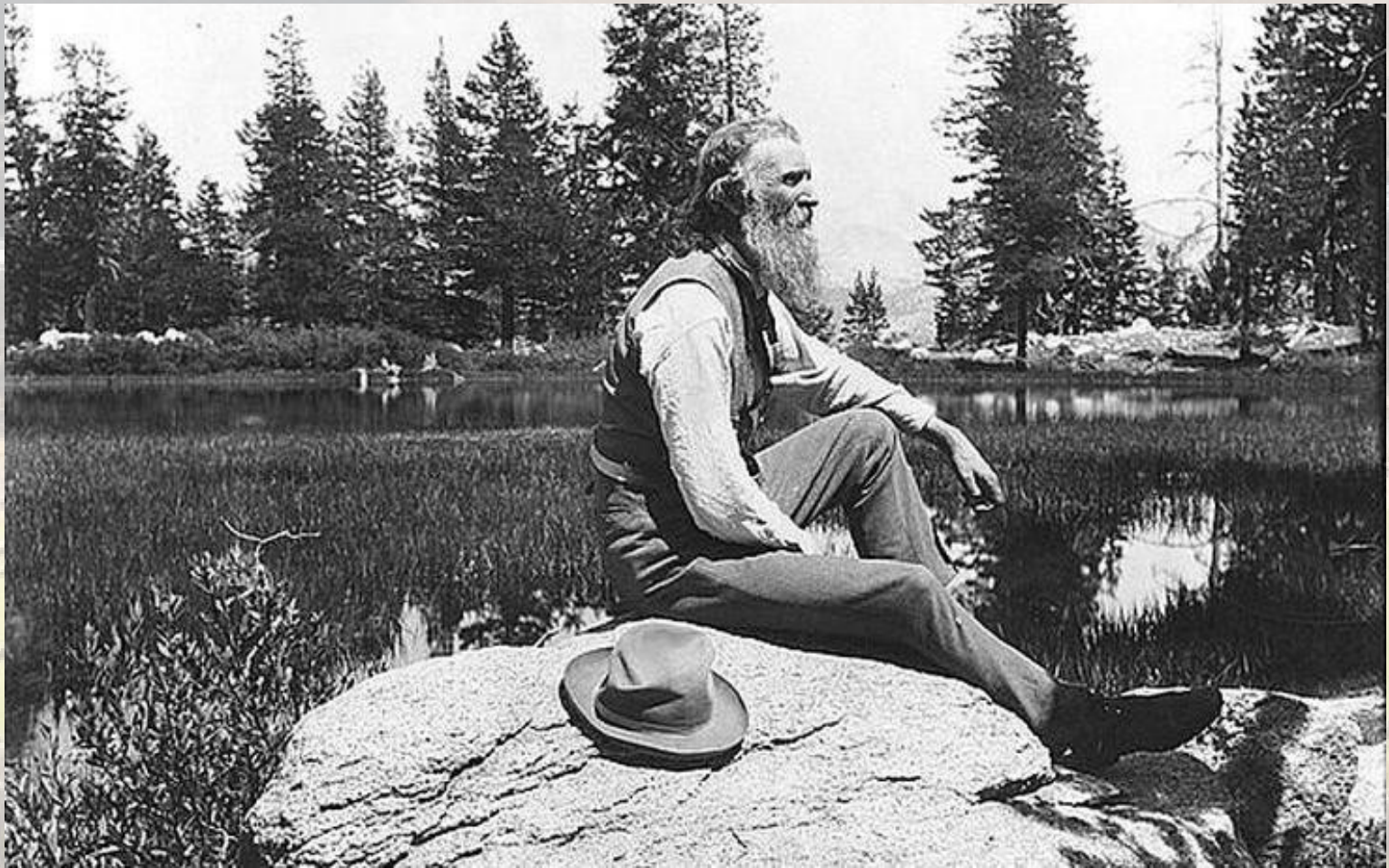
Never was any plantation brought unto such a considerableness, in a space of time so inconsiderable! an howling wilderness in a few years became a pleasant land"

(*Magnalia Christi Americana* [The Glorious Works of Christ in America], 1702).

The Wilderness Masterplot



- "We can never have enough of nature. We must be refreshed by the sight of inexhaustible vigor, vast and titanic features, the sea-coast with its wrecks, the wilderness with its living and its decaying trees, the thunder-cloud, and the rain" (*Walden*, 1854).
- "In wildness is the preservation of the world" ("Walking," 1861).



John Muir (1838-1914)

Wilderness in *My First Summer in the Sierra*:

- "The whole landscape showed design, like man's **noblest** sculptures" (14).
- "**Beauty** beyond thought everywhere, beneath, above, made and being made forever" (14).
- "glad to be a servant of servants in so **holy** a wilderness" (16)
- "a **noble** sugar pine"; "a **glorious** tree" (17)
- "definite symbols, **divine** hieroglyphics written with sunbeams" (21)
- "**solemn**-sounding waterfalls and many small **soothing** voices in sweet accord whispering peace!" (32)
- "spring work is going on with **joyful** enthusiasm, new life, new beauty, unfolding, unrolling in **glorious exuberant extravagance** . . . new leaves, new flowers, spreading, shining, rejoicing everywhere" (32-33)
- "Another glorious Sierra day . . . This is true **freedom**, a good practical sort of **immortality**" (39).
- "this June seems the greatest of all the months of my life, the most truly, **divinely free, boundless** like eternity, **immortal**. Everything in it seems equally divine – one smooth, pure, **wild glow of Heaven's love**" (68)
- "The whole wilderness seems to be **alive and familiar**, full of humanity" (238).
- "plant-people" (244)

Controversies over John Muir View of Native Americans

- <https://www.latimes.com/local/california/la-me-rethinking-muir-20141113-story.html>



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- 2020: Blog post by Michael Brune, Director of the Sierra Club:

"The most monumental figure in the Sierra Club's past is John Muir. Beloved by many of our members, his writings taught generations of people to see the sacredness of nature. But Muir maintained friendships with people like Henry Fairfield Osborn, who worked for both the conservation of nature and the conservation of the white race. . . .

And Muir was not immune to the racism peddled by many in the early conservation movement. He made [derogatory comments](#) about Black people and Indigenous peoples that drew on deeply harmful racist stereotypes, though his views evolved later in his life. As the most iconic figure in Sierra Club history, Muir's words and actions carry an especially heavy weight. They continue to hurt and alienate Indigenous people and people of color who come into contact with the Sierra Club."

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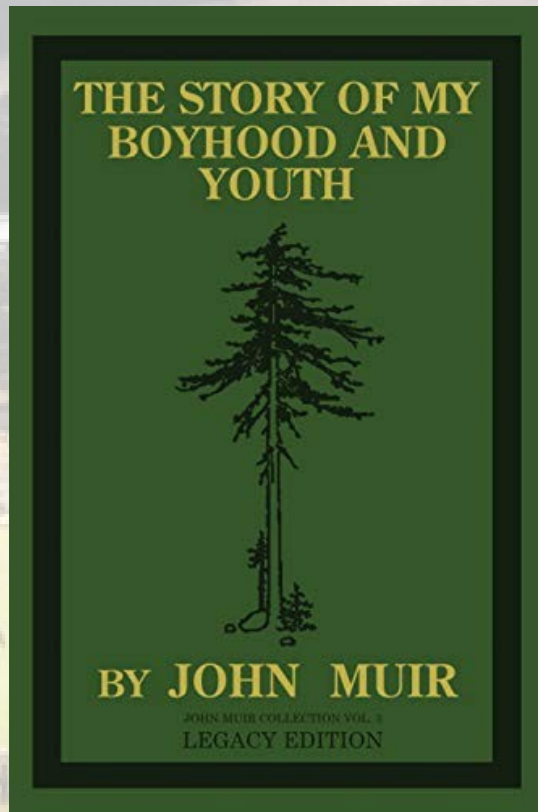
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- 2021: Renaming of the John Muir Endowed Chair in UCLA's Department of Geography



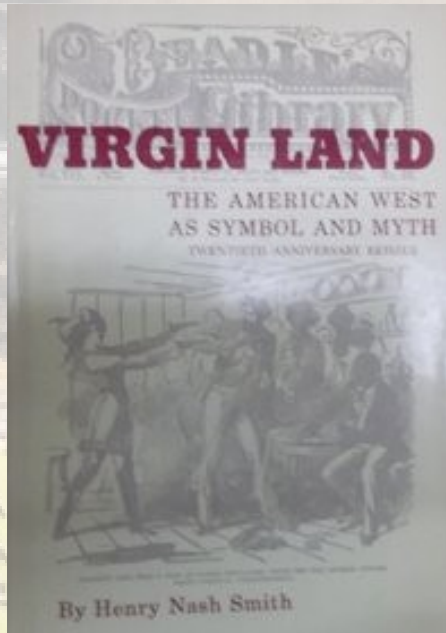
- Extensive discussion of Native American ways of life and strategies for stewarding wilderness
- Far more nuanced and positive assessment of those ways of life than in *My First Summer in the Sierra*

1912-13

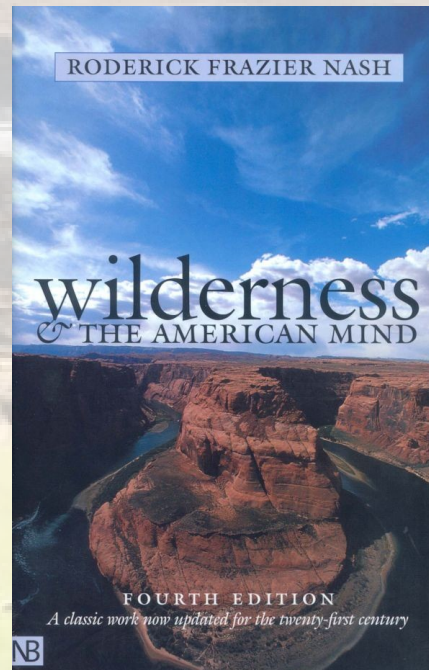
US Wilderness Act | 1964

2 (c) A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable; (2) has outstanding opportunities for solitude or a primitive and unconfined type of recreation; (3) has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition; and (4) may also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value.

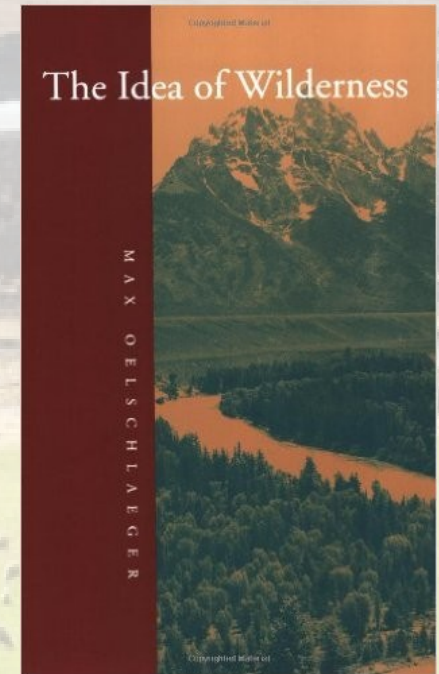
Older Studies of Wilderness in the American Imagination:



1950



1967



1999