

The Heart of the Wild

ESSAYS ON NATURE, CONSERVATION,
AND THE HUMAN FUTURE

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Affirming the Wilderness Ideal

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THE WORD *beach* seems innocent enough, delightful even, to those who love visiting the sea to walk, swim, and soak up some sun. Yet words are rarely as innocent as they may appear—they tend to come freighted with images, connotations, and affect. “Beach” maps well with an experience I had on a Greek island. Upon following stone steps signposted “To the Beach,” a 90-degree turn revealed a sand area stocked with umbrellas and long chairs with people tightly packed side-by-side sunbathing, reading, or staring at their phones. The setup also allowed people to order drinks from waiters who lingered about tensely (being overdressed) in the background. There were so many people on the beach that newcomers had to wait for a spot to become vacant, and then pay ten euros for it (drink or no drink). I think of such experiences as *Anthropocene* experiences. The Anthropocene, in that sense, is less about a geological epoch than an experiential flavor of human takeover.

I am not a misanthrope. I do not begrudge people their beach experience of enjoying a drink, scrolling through social media, and occasionally gazing at the sea’s blue bounty. Yet neither can I help thinking—being that ecology has my undivided attention—of who and what were there in prior times (historical or deep), before the beach became human-occupied as opposed to being graciously shared with nonhuman others.

Then my thinking gets around to the word “beach,” which I notice is loaded: its images, connotations, and affect are colored by the human element. To be sure, one can come across an empty beach. Yet the beach always lies in wait for the sunny or weekend day when it will be inundated with people. In some places in the United States, beaches are also inundated by four-wheeling SUVs. You can catch such an Americana scene at some beaches of North Carolina’s Outer Banks, which offer the “fun” option of driving a military-grade vehicle (one’s own or rented) on the beach, packing the sand down and crisscrossing it with fat tire tracks. If it strikes those recreationists’ fancy, they can park their SUV right at the water’s edge, enjoy barbeque and beer, while on occasion feasting their eyes on the Atlantic blue-gray horizon. I might pointedly add that if such visitors have been coming to the same beach for a few years or decades, they may vaguely wonder where all the shorebirds went.

Affirming the wilderness ideal, in the face of the seized human ownership of the world, should not appear as an outlandish or radical standpoint. Affirming the wilderness ideal does not entail loathing people and their insane entitlements, nor wishing that they’d just all go away. Affirming wilderness simply says this: There’s a wide wild world out there filled with all sorts of beings, most of them not human. Let them be free to be and to become who they are, to make worlds together, to rest *their* gaze upon the expansive beauties of this world. (If you do not believe that animals love to enjoy a view, you have not observed enough animals.)

There is a place by the ocean that my husband and I like to visit in Costa Rica. You could call it a “beach,” but the word sits uneasily with the topography. I think of this place as a wild shore. It is a spacious expanse of sand, decorated with driftwood, tree trunks polished by the elements, and inlets and pools of ocean and river waters. This shoreline is *constantly* changing: it changes with the seasons (two in Costa Rica, green and dry), with the vicissitudes of weather, and, of course, with the tides. It never stays the same and sometimes it becomes completely inaccessible to people. It’s like a wild canvas that some crazy-wisdom god keeps painting anew. Or, like impersonal feng shui ceaselessly reinventing and

rearranging the place's features. There are some things you can mostly count on to be there—such as a jungle patch near the water with an extended family of scarlet macaws making a racket. Vultures are also omnipresent, taking in the horizon while waiting for the Pacific to bring them some “seafood” such as carcass of sea turtle or shark.

The expanse of this magical ecotone where seaside and jungle intimately and endlessly converse is framed by two rivers. River to river it is a laborious fifty-minute walk, with the Pacific on one side and tree-covered, cloud-smothered mountains on the other. The rivers are crocodile habitat and on the treetops, aside from birds, you might catch sight of a sloth. Sloths tend to perch on the limbs with a wide-angled view, but as far as I can tell what sloths mostly do is meditate.

Many of the world's shores (along with all its other places) should be wild and free. We can visit them, though there will be times they should be off-limits, when birds and sea turtles (in the case of seashores) are nesting. Why do we think that the world belongs to humans, to do with as we please, to make it and call it the Anthropocene? Wilderness lovers simply point out that it is better for most of the world to be a canvas painted by a crazy-wisdom god.

Wilderness came under fire, as both idea and reality, in the 1990s through a series of academic publications that became broadly influential. With doubt and aspersion cast upon wilderness, many began to regard it as an obsolete entity: suspect for its Western ideological origins and unsound for driving a wedge between humans and wild nature. The undermining of the wilderness ideal—as sizeable, relatively undisturbed natural areas in the world worth admiring, preserving, and restoring—has done a profound disservice to the natural world: it undercut environmentalism's credibility to advocate in strong defense of planet Earth.

The meaning of wilderness is neither a projection of the human mind nor a matter of cultural opinion. It is Earth's primordial manifestation of nature. Wilderness refers to autonomous, expansive, connected, and

ever-in-flux natural areas, where a diversity of living beings are interdependent in relations of symbiosis, competition, predation, affection, tolerance, and mutualism. Wilderness creates the richest manifestations of life on Earth in terms of variety of life-forms, ecological complexity, rife evolutionary potential, hybrid living-nonliving phenomena (like soil and coral reefs), emergent and spatiotemporally extended phenomena (such as ecotones and migrations), and nonhuman behavioral repertoires, cultures, and minds. Terrestrial and marine wilderness is dynamic and regenerative, able to absorb and bounce back from formidable natural disturbances such as wildfires and hurricanes. What's more, in wilderness large-bodied wild animals can continue to exist and evolve: healthy populations of large carnivores and herbivores require bigness, habitat connectivity, remoteness from human presence, and freedom from unwarranted intrusion. What remains today of wilderness are natural expanses that are unfragmented, or minimally fragmented, by the human technosphere.

Critics have made much of the claim that “wilderness” is unjust in ostensibly excluding human beings. I believe the matter is not so simple. Wilderness may exclude *or* include humans, depending on the context in which we are contemplating human presence in relation to the wild. To be sure, human presence is not constitutive of the reality and meaning of wilderness since the latter is independent of the human variable: wild nature preexisted humans and will outlast the sojourn of our species. Yet wilderness also clearly includes humans, for it birthed the human species. Human beings can remain integral with wilderness as long as they sustain reciprocal relations with wild nature in ways that retain its dynamism and regenerative qualities. This has been, and often remains, the case with Indigenous people (with some exceptions). Therefore, wilderness does not exclude humans with cultural traditions (material and ideational) that foster belonging with, and participating in, the orchestra of life that surrounds them. However, wilderness emphatically (and essentially by definition) excludes humans with traditions bent upon the appropriation, subjugation, destruction, and aggressive management of the wild. Clearly, modern humans equipped with a mindset that defines the natural world as “resources,” and with technologies invented



FIGURE 10. A photo we took when my husband and I visited this tree in 2021. It grows on the lovely property of Tilapias La Cascada, which is in the Puntarenas province of Costa Rica just south of the town of Ojochal. This tree (*Ceiba pentandra*, more informally known as kapok) is estimated to be over two hundred years old and is the third-tallest tree in Costa Rica. It has a magnificent presence. Photo by the author.

to exploit those so-called resources, are inimical to the wild. Their presence and activities destroy wilderness.

The academic offensive against wilderness as a “dubious human invention” occluded clear sight of wild nature’s primeval manifestation. As a result, sight of nonhuman beings and processes that require wilderness to flourish and evolve—not to say remain in existence—was dimmed. The loss of sight of wild nature’s original standing did nothing to discourage, and arguably buttressed, its continued obliteration. The understanding of wilderness as nature’s aboriginal design (having preceded our existence and almost certain to outlive us) worked as a stronghold against the ascendancy of *relativism* with respect to wild nature’s meaning. Relativism was exactly what wilderness critics propounded by foregrounding the anti-essentialist idea that the multiplicity of cultural perspectives on the natural world is exhaustive of nature’s meanings. Once the doors to relativism swung open, not only did different cultural conceptions of (wild) nature become *à la mode*, but the entire topography of what nature *could* mean was assumed to be an anthropological affair. The ascendancy of relativism encouraged abandoning any baseline of wild nature’s primal expression that is independent of human perspective and against which human impact might be gauged. This development attenuated cherishing and guarding the inherent integrity of the wild nonhuman world.

Even as wilderness critique vitiated the defense of wilderness by stripping it of independent signification, by the same token the critique effected something more subtle but equally damaging. It reinforced the received belief that all meaning, including the meaning of (wild) nature, stems from human mind and culture. Wild nature was denied inherent meaning, denied displaying its own standing, experience, and value. The evisceration of wild nature’s intrinsic meaning helped deliver the fate of wilderness into human hands for any decision-making, manipulation, conversion, extraction, destruction, killing, management, or “improvement.”

Alongside these downstream effects of wilderness critique—of weakening wild nature’s defense and reinforcing the notion that only humans determine meaning—the anti-wilderness thesis paved the way for the emergence of “the new environmentalism.” The new environmentalism

braced the human-centered understanding of wilderness propagated by its critics: this legitimated further erosions of wild nature and validated wholly subsuming the natural world under various human schemes. For the new environmentalism, the most important mandate became the sustainable use and management of wild nature and the fair allocation of “natural resources” among all humans. The idea and reality of self-willed nature, brimming with intelligent agency and intrinsic value, went largely by the wayside.

A widely circulated 2011 paper titled “Conservation in the Anthropocene” heralded the new environmentalism. Authors Peter Kareiva, Robert Lalasz, and Michelle Marvier proclaimed that “the wilderness ideal presupposes that there are parts of the world untouched by humankind. The wilderness so beloved by conservationists—places ‘untrammelled by man’—never existed, at least not in the last thousand years, and arguably even longer.” New environmentalists thus echoed the requiem for wilderness, in conjunction with enunciating the arrival of epoch Anthropocene in which humans have (allegedly) become the decisive planetary force. “Nature no longer runs the Earth,” according to new environmentalist Mark Lynas. “We do. It is our choice what happens here.”

The assertion that humans have completely altered and assumed control of the planet is further underscored by vocabulary describing Earth as “domesticated,” “used,” and filled with “working landscapes,” “anthromes,” and “novel ecosystems.” Emboldened by the first wave of wilderness debunking, new environmentalists urge that environmentalism now calls for a people-friendly identity; conservation efforts should be undertaken in the controlling context of human needs and demands. Echoing the relativism promulgated by wilderness critique, the reality of nature (wild or otherwise) became one to be decided among different *stakeholders*, a contemporary buzzword which refers exclusively to humans.

The turn against valorizing wilderness—attended today by a tacit proscription against even using the word wilderness if unbelted by scare

quotes—propelled the idea of “ecosystem services” to the foreground as the human-friendly rationale for conserving relatively intact natural places. The argument for some level of wild nature protection has become pragmatic and economic: some natural areas are worth “more” to human well-being and profit-making when left standing than when converted or destroyed. Cost-benefit models are deployed to demonstrate, for instance, the services provided by forests, coral reefs, or marshlands. Former CEO of The Nature Conservancy, Mark Tercek, expressed this paradigm shift in an article titled “Money Talks—So Let’s Give Nature a Voice.” “Thinking about the value of nature,” he writes, “leads to other ways of thinking familiar to business analysts. For example, concepts such as *maximize returns, invest in your assets, manage your risks, diversify, and promote innovation* are the common parlance of business and banking. These are rarely applied to nature, but they should be.” Conceptualizing (wild) nature within a human-service and monetary paradigm reinforced the blow against the ideal of protecting nature *for its own sake*. Tossing that aspiration into history’s dustbin—within two decades of the initial wilderness critiques—was likened to waking up from a fantasy. Environmentalism could finally join the so-called real world where tangible human benefit and money-in-the-bank are the bottom line.

Indeed, Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier (in a paper titled “What is Conservation Science?”) counsel that, “realism is in order.” The world will never again teem with wildlife, they proclaim, especially not with big animals like grizzlies, wolves, and sharks. We must resign ourselves to the reality that in the Anthropocene biodiversity will dwindle. We are reassured, however, that such losses are not fatal blows. For example, the same authors in the “Conservation in the Anthropocene” paper (cited above) write, “Passenger pigeons, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, went extinct, along with countless other species from the Steller’s cow to the dodo, without catastrophic or even measurable effects.” The academic discrediting of wilderness launched in the late twentieth century tilled the soil for such early twenty-first-century nonchalant assertions. The new environmentalism took wilderness debunking to its logical conclusion: they urge humanity to let go of preserving (another censured word) and recovering a wild world rife with diverse

and abundant life. They also counsel dropping the sentimentalism of grieving for the passenger pigeon, Steller's cow, dodo, and countless others driven prematurely to extinction. *Let's be real*: we cannot even measure the effects of their demise.

The encouraged resignation to the downward spiral of wilderness, and to the evanescence of the erstwhile biodiverse world it encompassed, extends even to the event of an anthropogenic mass extinction. The blasé mindset of relativism—wherein nothing of objective priceless value in the natural world can be lost since everything is a matter of human perspective—has perversely morphed into endeavoring to present a rosy side to an imminent human-driven mass extinction event. “Every other mass extinction led to a burst of profound evolution afterward,” states Kareiva. Chris Thomas agrees: “The flip side of a new great extinction would eventually be a new evolutionary explosion. A new genesis, if you like.” Vacating life-filled wilderness of inherent signification has arguably facilitated such bone-chilling apathy toward the fate of wild nature.

New environmentalists also second wilderness critics in countering the view that human presence mars and endangers wild nature: they regard “pristine wilderness” as an anti-human idea, for excluding humans from wild nature and, more generally, for casting humans as detrimental to the planet. New environmentalism insists we see ourselves as just another force of nature in the flux of life's history. We should embrace humanity's nature-molding gifts. Yes, sometimes humans are destructive, but we also have creative agency in engineering landscapes, shaping ecological niches, and moving species around into novel configurations of life. In alignment with reframing the human impact as the most recent episode in Earth's natural history, new environmentalists spurn catastrophizing about the ecological crisis. Forecasting collapse and displaying a doom-and-gloom attitude are passé. Instead, an upbeat outlook is recommended. The Anthropocene is not a dreaded or dangerous outcome but an age “ripe with human-driven opportunity.” No more “woe to me and shame on you,” for “a good Anthropocene is in our reach.”

Naturalizing the domination of nature by making it qualitatively continuous with Earth's 3.8 billion-year natural history works to legitimate the obliteration and dislocation of countless species and the wholesale

takeover of ecosystems and biomes. Additionally, suggesting that human planetary dominance can yield a stable and even flourishing “epoch” fosters a false sense of security for many people, who are not paying close attention to the gravity of our ecological predicament. Arguably, both these new arguments are riding the coattails of wilderness critique, which seeks to dissolve any boundaries between wild nature and human presence—including boundaries warranted by respect and reverence for nonhuman life.

New environmentalists welcome a human-landscaped world—with needed correctives to safeguard civilization—checkered by agricultural landscapes, human settlements, industrial plants, extractionist operations, and an infrastructural grid of highways, roads, satellite technologies, pipelines, cellular networks, hydropower dams, power lines, ship lanes, and underwater cables. Human beings, according to the new environmental paradigm, may well be able to prosper in a world dominated by the technosphere in which wild fish and wild forests, teeming wildlife and coral reefs, have vanished. New environmentalists embrace modern technological and lifestyle trends, and urge shedding the technophobic anti-modern image that has hounded environmentalism.

Endorsed technologies include nuclear power, genetic engineering, mega-dams, “precision agriculture,” de-extinction, and (more tacitly) climate geoengineering. The pro-technology stance embraces technological gigantism and invasive interventions that nature lovers have long eyed with dread. Technology is sweepingly eulogized for its avowed benefits for the developing world, for its ostensible solutions to formidable ecological challenges, and for its trailblazing of humanity's onward historical march. “We need a worldview that sees technology as humane and sacred,” implore Michael Shellenberger and Ted Nordhaus. Others in the new environmentalist platform express a consonant view of technology as empowering humanity to continually break natural limits and thrive. “Since prehistory,” Erle Ellis notes, “human populations have used technologies and engineered ecosystems to sustain populations well beyond the capabilities of unaltered ‘natural’ ecosystems.” “Who knows,” he muses, “what will be possible with the technologies of the future?”

The technophile turn of the new environmentalism also has direct ties with the disparagement of wilderness as a primordial realm that deserves and demands human restraint. A strong conception of wilderness—as expansive natural areas free of human technosphere and excessive interference—obviates against the indiscriminate embrace of modern technology. This view does not reject technological development, which is indeed a gift of the human species, but calls for a far more nuanced and critical perspective on it, most especially when it comes to the violent infringement and penetration of infrastructures and other technologies into the natural world.

Wilderness critique worked as the new environmentalism's launching pad. The human centeredness tacit in the former became the platform explicitly championed in the latter. As noted above, new environmentalists enlist a services and monetary idiom to protect some natural areas for human benefit. They also incite humanity to resign itself to species extinctions, and even to a mass extinction event, since "life goes on" in their wake. New environmentalists are upbeat about a human-dominated world in the Anthropocene and embrace modern technology's march as human destiny; they offer no caveats, nor suggest any restrictions, to the technosphere's unending sprawl. They stereotype the views of pro-wilderness environmentalism as antiquated, romantic, misanthropic, or Luddite. As conservation biologist Michael Soulé protested, according to the new environmentalism loving wild nature for its own sake is supposed to be "a dysfunctional antihuman anachronism."

The tenets of the new environmentalism ratify the retreat from saving wild places and beings for who they intrinsically are and in recognition of their right to exist and thrive on planet Earth. New environmentalists seek to entrench what wilderness criticism had earlier foregrounded: anthropocentric environmental ethics, politics, and conservation. It is always humans among humans who construct, decide, and negotiate the values and uses of the natural world. *Nonhuman nature has no voice of its own*. Wilderness criticism, and new environmentalism in its wake, thus enshrine a founding principle of Western civilization: that humans are sole creators of meaning and that humans are sole stakeholders when it comes to the fate of the natural world. Upholding that age-old

Western anthropocentrism, which ideologically bankrolled nature's destruction over centuries and millennia, it is deeply ironic that wilderness critics repudiate wilderness as a putatively *Western* ideal.

As I see it, this anachronistic stereotype of pro-wilderness environmentalism is not just damaging, it is spurious. There is nothing backward looking about cherishing and defending nature for nature's sake alone. Indeed, that perspective reflects a revolutionary critique of the human-centered worldview (most especially developed by Western culture) that has long silenced nature's inherent voice and capitalized on nature's destruction. Classical environmentalism set forth the historically groundbreaking idea that wilderness has, to paraphrase political scientist John Rodman, its "own existence, character, potentialities, forms of excellence, integrity, and grandeur." Human beings, armed with a supercilious, self-ascribed sense of specialness and entitlement, have neither right nor warrant to subjugate that wild world.

The forward-looking vision of classical environmentalism has found a new level of clarity in our time (partly through tension with the new environmentalism) in the emergence of the Rewilding movement. This movement is culturally diverse encompassing projects spearheaded by activists, NGOs, conservation scientists, citizens, and writers around the world. The Rewilding movement advocates for the preservation of existing wilderness areas and for the restoration of degraded nature into wildlands, thus substantially expanding protected nature overall. The ultimate advocacy of the Rewilding movement is to create an ecological civilization in harmony with wild nature. This vision is in tension if not outright opposition with an Anthropocene (and new environmentalist) imaginary of a managerial technocratic civilization engaged in sustainable resource use, mega-technological enterprises, whole planet surveillance, and assorted "damage control" schemes on a planet dominated by and for people.

Rewilding is a type of ecological restoration with the goal of returning natural areas to wild self-governed states. Understanding wilderness

as baseline and blueprint does not mean curating historically specific ecological constellations in “museum-like” states. It refers to reinstating conditions wherein the dynamism, regeneration, and creativity of wilderness can be expressed, eventually without human assistance or management. Size is important for the flourishing of wild nature. Larger natural areas can harbor and retain more species, subspecies, and populations of plants, animals, and other life-forms. Relatedly, bigger areas protect a greater variety of habitats. Expansive and unbroken wildlands are also imperative for large predators, who need sizeable territories for their livelihoods and who prosper in areas secluded from modern human activities and infrastructures. Wilderness stands as the last bastion against civilization’s invasions for agriculture, pasture, resource extraction, hunting, fishing, and settlements. All these developments hinge on the habitat fragmentation that infrastructural sprawl effects via roads, canals, dams, fences, power lines, and the like. Thus, one of the chief goals of rewilding is not only to halt more infrastructural penetration into wildlands, but to undo already existing infrastructures in many natural areas.

Rewilding is the aspiration to set natural areas and processes *free* to express their inherent, creative manifestations. By robustly protecting expansive and unfragmented wilderness, and multiplying rewilding projects around the globe, we can halt the extinction crisis and avert a human-driven mass extinction event. Studies are also increasingly showing that large-scale nature protection and restoration will contribute substantially to mitigating global heating and thus averting many ecological and social disasters in its wake. Importantly, the rewilding vision also moves us toward creating a new existential and ethical foundation in the relationship between humanity and Earth: one built on the virtues of restraint, reciprocity, love, and awe for the flourishing of all life. These virtues are inherent in human nature—indeed recognized and valued by all human cultures and religions—yet they have been severely diminished by the human arrogance that the domination of nature vaunts.

To get to the heart of the disjuncture between the new environmentalism’s deprecation of wilderness and the aspirational vision of rewilding, I believe we must go deeper into their rift. Opposing stances toward humanity’s expansionism constitutes the core difference between the two platforms. Human growth trends include global population increase, expanding economies and trade, rising consumption of food, freshwater, energy, and materials, intensification of industrial animal and crop agriculture, and burgeoning networks of industrial infrastructure. These trends underlie a multidimensional and catastrophic ecological situation, including rapid climate change, global toxification, acidifying and depredated oceans, and extirpations of life-forms, populations, and ecologies that are prefiguring a mass extinction event. New environmentalists acquiesce to the human expansionism underlying these disasters, for growth appears to them as either freighted with human benefits or having too much momentum to challenge. Thus, the new environmentalism prefers to tout solutions within the framework of techno-managerialism: improved management, better governance, more efficiency, as well as technological fixes, breakthroughs, and transitions by which problems will purportedly be solved.

For rewilding advocates, opposing human expansionism is key to healing the natural world and our relationship with the earth. Attempting to work with and around the growth trends will not avert the massive ecological repercussions here and on the way. Ironically, many new environmentalists suspect the same: for example, their receptivity to climate geoengineering and their painting a “bright side” to a mass extinction event appear as implicit confessions that a profoundly impoverished Earth lies ahead.

Accepting civilization’s expansionism and hoping at the same time to retain Earth’s remaining biodiversity is foolhardy when we consider how biodiversity is faring in a not fully global economy of eight billion people. The aggregated biomass of humans and livestock today dwarfs the biomass of wild vertebrates by 96 percent to 4. This infamous metric starkly captures the planetary consequences of growing human numbers, rising consumption of everything, exploding global trade, and infrastructural sprawl. This being the picture today, what awaits in the

near future where the global population is projected to climb to some eleven billion people, who will have (or desire) a middle-class, commodity-saturated lifestyle, and be connected in a more tightly knit global economy? Setting aside what such a world bodes for humanity—hardly looking like “a good Anthropocene”—what, might we extrapolate, awaits the wild nonhuman world?

Rewilding advocates argue that we must not head in that direction to find out, let alone welcome going there. It is vital to degrow and restrain the human enterprise. Embracing limitations involves scaling down our demographic presence, economic activity, and reach of technosphere, while simultaneously generously protecting unfragmented wildlands and rewilding the planet, thus allowing the vibrancy of terrestrial and marine wilderness to flourish again. For the Rewilding movement, holding a positive view of wilderness is paramount in order to fire up the human imagination and engage humanity’s emotional intelligence. Our curiosity and love for wild nature and wild beings can inspire us to recoil from surrendering to a human-dominated and human-defined age. In moving toward a rewilded planet, not only can we avert dire ecological and social disasters on the way, we can also aspire to restore the biodiverse and lively planet that Earth inherently is.