pp. 1–15 to Nov (Deer + Abbey) + July 5/22/96
15–19 to July (Church + State)
23 – end to Wilderness

About 7725 words

19–23 to → Ranching / farming

[This essay contains themes pulled from October & other chapters for a writers' conference.]

Balance of nature Share?

THE NATURE OF LIFE

last Part of 19/20 to → July?

> I have never espoused any ideology, dogma, or doctrine -- left-wing, right-wing, or any other closed, ready-made system of presuppositions about the world.
>
> Václav Havel, What I Believe[1]

(This does not yet contain the revisions made in November chapter.)

The Marxists offered a beautiful future, during the cold war. They held out for virtue and we for profit; they for a world that ought to be and we for a marketplace chaotic as the universe. In the West, we like to think that we won the battle of ideas, and it is true that the despots we opposed were not benevolent. What mattered more, however, was the battle of economies. Theirs failed.

The cold war is over now, but it lasted long enough to equip us veterans with gas-detectors sensitive to ideology, dogma and doctrine. Václav Havel, writer/President of the Czech Republic, explains: "Though my heart may be left of centre, I have always known that the only economic system that works is a market economy.... This is the only natural economy,... the only one that reflects the nature of life itself."

If Havel is right about the nature of life, then the lessons of the cold war might inform the environmental disputes that divide America along ideological lines.

> I gave up hunting deer. I had no need. Every time you eat a cow, I tell myself, you are saving the life of an elk, or two muledeer, or about two dozen javelina. Let those wild creatures live. Let being be....
>
> Edward Abbey[2]

I spend a month each fall counting the does in my hayfield and hoping that I will not have to shoot any of them. There are plausible excuses, but Edward Abbey's is not among them. His beautiful prose led him to a policy that was self-defeating.

In this market economy, consumption provides an incentive for production. When my wife and I need transportation, for example, several makers jostle to sell us a truck and manufacture another for the next buyer. When we want strawberries, there is a farmer eager to take our money and invest part of it in the next crop. And when we buy beef, we give ranchers an incentive to raise cattle. Is this the outcome Mr. Abbey wanted?

Well, no. "Overgrazing is much too weak a term," he wrote, for the "cowburnt" public lands in the West. He saw cattle as "a pest and a plague."[3]

Why, then, did Mr. Abbey consume the rancher's product? If he had eaten venison instead, he might have increased the deer population instead of cattle population. The fee for his hunting

license would have gone in large part to wildlife management and habitat. The price of his hunting equipment would have included a 10% tax earmarked for the same purposes.

These programs have worked. Since the Pittman-Robertson Wildlife Restoration Act became law in 1937, white-tailed deer have gone from scarcity (one-half million) to abundance (eighteen million). Success has also been dramatic for elk, wild turkeys, and pronghorn antelope -- once on the edge of extinction. (There have been collateral gains for non-game wildlife too, but not enough attention to species depending on special habitats. We ought to focus similar energy, knowledge, and funding on birds that nest deep in the forest, for example.)

Suppose that Mr. Abbey had gone farther, acquiring land as wildlife habitat. He would have spent more -- by an order of magnitude -- but he could have had as many elk, deer, or javelinas as his forage would support. He might have eaten venison in perpetuity while nature produced more of it, and the land would have remained wild.

It is important, here, to stay on track. The question is not whether the writer wants to hunt a deer or eat a cow. He is entitled to his personal reasons. As to their economic consequences, however, he is off by 180 degrees.

> The faster we move toward corporate farming, with its industrial use of the land as a disposable commodity, the faster we move away from an America we profess to value....

Jane Smiley[4]

Edward Abbey's example of backward economics may seem egregious, so let me cite another. The valley in which my wife and I live produces grain, beef, and wild food, but not many green things to round out the dinner. Ours is not a vegetable sort of climate. Our family diet includes broccoli year-round, nevertheless, because my wife is fond of broccoli and I am fond of my wife. Other people we know like vegetables so much that they eat little meat. And still others are vegetarian for ideological reasons, believing (like Edward Abbey) that their diet is virtuous.

Whatever our motives, the consequences of our diet are the same:

- We consumers of vegetables are supporting the trucking industry, which uses fossil fuel to bring produce to Montana.
- We are rewarding farmers who have turned the Central Valley of California from wildlife habitat into vegetable habitat.
- And because vegetables drink more than wildlife, we are encouraging vast irrigation projects.

We are in short, paying for an outcome that we profess to deplore. We are supporting the most intensive kind of food production: the kind with least room for wildlife. Deer and cattle can mix, but deer and broccoli -- no.

What's going on here? How can people who love Nature blink the nature of life?

> The old people, the old cultures, knew something about consequence that the new ones don't. What the old ones really knew in their bones was that death exists, that all life eats and kills to eat, that energy goes on. They knew that humans are participants, not spectators.
>
> Steve Bodio[5]

Time out for bias identification. Economics as ideology holds no more interest for me than for Václav Havel. I don't want to beat the Marxists at their own game but to switch games entirely, and mine is played on a green field with a stream winding through it. In a time of scarce public funding, the market can help to preserve such places. It can also turn open countryside into suburbs. The market has no ethics. It is a not an objective but a process.

During most of history, mind you, the market process has not been good for nature. This planet's thin layer of life would be in better shape if the beasts that walk in the night had eaten us before we got them surrounded; or if, having developed sharp spearheads, we had been content to stay with a primitive economy. Even then we made an impact on nature -- but as hunter-gatherers, we could not have produced capitalism. It was farming that changed our economy, changed our mythology, and turned nature into a commodity.

No wonder, then, that lovers of nature are suspicious of market values, as opposed to those that we rank higher. The case for the market is not that it is good but that it is the only economic system that works. If we can't make it work for nature, nature is in trouble.

Population vs. Individual

> "To speak of 'harvesting' other living creatures, whether deer or elk or birds or cottontail rabbits, as if they were no more than a crop, exposes the meanest, cruelest, most narrow and homocentric of possible human attitudes toward the life that surrounds us. The word reveals the pervasive influence of utilitarian economics... and of all the sciences, economics is the most crude, obtuse as well as dismal.
>
> Edward Abbey[6]

Every steward of land discovers that economic costs collide with values of other kinds. You don't bother to ask yourself, for example, whether you want your stream to recover its health. Of course you do. But good intentions cannot save the banks from too many cattle, sheep, domestic geese, wild elk, or muskrats -- whichever may be turning the banks into mud. Protection for the stream will cost money, time, or (if you are a steward of public land) perhaps even your job. How much can you afford? What are your priorities?

To ask such questions is to violate Edward Abbey's code of ethics. It is wrong, he argues, to apply "utilitarian economics" to the "life around us." But you, the steward, do it constantly, whether your ecosystem be a ranch in Texas or a ranch house in

the Connecticut suburbs, whether you herd cattle or cockroaches. You make economic decisions by reason or emotion, determination or default, but you do it, every day, as surely as you eat. Why should anyone find this hard to accept?

It turns out that while there is (as Havel writes) only one natural economic system, our role in it is guided by two codes of ethics, and they pull in different directions. The tension between them is profound, poorly understood, and responsible, I think, for the rift between humans who get involved and those who dream of a Nature free to manage herself.

- **The ~~hunter-gatherer's myth~~** links you, the human, to another creature seen as a spiritual entity. You may be anyone -- angler or hiker, cat-owner or bird-feeder, bushman with poison arrow or advocate of animal rights -- so long as you see the animal as an individual to whom you have obligations. This view of Nature is utopian in the sense that it recalls a spirit-world painted on the walls of caves ~~30,000 years ago~~.
- **The Land Ethic** applies to populations of animals rather than individuals -- economic rather than spiritual entities -- and was articulated by Aldo Leopold, father of wildlife management. It reflects, he wrote, "the existence of an ecological conscience, [which] in turn reflects a conviction of individual responsibility for the health of the land. Health is the capacity of the land for

self-renewal. Conservation is our effort to understand and preserve this capacity."[7]

Of these two ethical codes, the hunter-gatherer's myth has a monopoly on shivers. Look at those most ancient of paintings in the Chauvet cave. No one has ever put more emotion into art.

In contrast, the land ethic is a product of reason, observation, and science. Conservation became a popular cause only in this century, though nature was on the run long before we understood the damage we were doing.

The old myth resonates even for city-dwellers. It is felt, not thought; emotional, not economic. It is the shining cross that St. Hubert saw between the antlers of a stag. The land ethic, on the contrary, starts with facts that must be demonstrated. It makes sense even to the Cartesians who would see my dog as a machine.

The old myth is so universal that it may (my guess) reflect properties of the human brain, as do our language skills. The land ethic is still groping for a language and coming up with words that Václav Havel might not like -- the kind that end in ism.

You might suppose that the myth would lose force in a West that has traded the spirit-world for economics and prospered thereby. On the contrary: a vast social shift from farm to city has freed Americans to dream of the countryside as Utopia lost. With too much food -- a revolutionary problem -- we can afford to take Nature for spiritual sustenance. We live in town and sojourn

on vision-quests. And we want to feel good about ourselves. That's a phrase that defines a period.

The old myth has this tragic flaw: It shows how to love Nature but not how to save her. Hunter-gatherers from Asia would have hunted each mastodon with respect, no doubt, and eaten it gratefully, and propitiated it in death. But the species went extinct. That old-time religion had left no breeding population.

> All things in common nature should produce
> Without sweat or endeavor. Treason, felony,
> Sword, pike, knife, gun, or need of any engine,
> Would I not have; but nature should bring forth
> Of its own kind all foison, all abundance,
> To feed my innocent people.
>
> Shakespeare, The Tempest

You feel that you are "letting being be" when you spare a deer's life. Gonzalo says so in The Tempest, and Edward Abbey, and millions of vegetarians -- drawing on an intuition evolved in the centuries before science. Death is a yes/no question and you are a life-affirming person (another defining phrase). How, for Christ's sake, could you shoot something so beautiful?

When you accept stewardship of a piece of land, however, nature provides the reality check that intuition always needs. "Conservation is paved with good intentions which prove to be futile, or even dangerous," writes Aldo Leopold,[8] "because they are devoid of critical understanding."

Are your young buffaloberry bushes browsed to the ground, thorns and all? On a winter night, does your hayfield look like a

deer pasture? Your whitetails are eating up their habitat, and that of the other wildlife on your place. You could "let being be," in Abbey's term, and just watch the deer eat. Or you could face up to your responsibility.

You love the individual. You manage the population. Hardly anyone in America was aware of the difference, before Leopold, and legions of his admirers would still prefer not to choose between the life of one deer and the health of its ecosystem. The decision comes hard humans because we humans have changed the rules, for ourselves. We have dropped out of nature, and so far it's working -- for us. Deer haven't caught on.

The Myth

> "We never fool around ... with animals because they have a spirit...." At first this seemed inconsistent, given that the Koyukon people live mainly by hunting and fishing. But later, as I learned more about the code of respect ... I realized that ... My Koyukon teachers held a spiritually based covenant with all members of their natural community.
>
> Richard Nelson[9]

The white-tailed deer are native to America and even to Montana, but in my valley they are exotics. They moved in after large predators had been eradicated and agriculture had become big business. The truly native mule deer still appear now and then, but they may not find much browse left to eat.

When time comes to thin the whitetails, however, you cannot treat them as if they were domestic cattle. They would not let

you round them up and send them to a slaughterhouse, even if you wished to do so. You have to hunt for just one deer -- the right one.

Odd things happen then. Abundant as the whitetails seem when you drive by, they make themselves scarce when you are afoot. Great hunters have failed to find the deer they wanted, on this sixty acres. But then they have been fussy, like me, looking for a doe on her own.

The other odd thing happens in your consciousness. The savage in you has never quite been eradicated, as Thoreau said. You may have done time away from nature, but you have not been bred away from it like a sheep. You find yourself scrambling down through layers separated by thousands of years. The modern land ethic told you what do; the hunter-gatherer's myth tells you how to do it. Your prey is not a population. It is an individual, and not one willing to die for a concept, like a human. A deer, to my knowledge, never takes comfort from the thought that its death will leave more food for its family to eat.

What you feel is what your ancestors felt. "Buck fever," it is called, though she is a doe. You wait till the shakes stop, because you want to kill cleanly. And having done it, you do not need to be told to respect your prey in death.

That's you lying there, eyes clouding, all fears come to pass.

The Devil is in the Entrails

> And every hunter, in his sacrificial killing, is in the role of Kaggen himself, identified with the animal of his kill and at the same time guilty, as the god is guilty, with the primordial guilt of life that lives on life.
>
> Joseph Campbell[10]

You sit for five minutes, watching till the deer no longer twitches and you no longer shake. Your emotion is inappropriate but there it is: Euphoria. You did this right, so far. The feeling lifts you, drops you, recycles. You don't unsheathe a sharp knife till you settle down. Then you turn the deer on its back and make it into venison.

It starts with a cut from chin down the neck, over the ribs, through the belly skin (but not the paunch) and on to the tail. You cut around the anus and reproductive apparatus, split the ribs with your saw blade, and loosen the diaphragm. Then you pull out the innards from jaw down, using the windpipe as a handle.

That's how you intend to do it, anyhow, but you are not a butcher by training and your hands are cold and red and this is a bloody mess. What is a person with your education doing in a body cavity anyhow? Why would a decent, sensitive guy turn a beautiful doe into a gut pile?

Shut up, Adonis, and sever that deer's tongue at its base. You are elevating squeamishness into a principle. Find the heart now and save it too. You are sorry for yourself, not your prey. Reach into the guts and cut out that liver. It's about time you learned where your dinner comes from.

find a "balance" epigraph

The Balance of Nature

to July

> Vast chain of being! which from God began,
> Natures aethereal, human, angel, man,
> Beast, bird, fish, insect, what no eye can see ...
> Where, one step broken, the great scale destroyed
> From Nature's chain whatever link you strike,
> Tenth, or ten thousandth, breaks the chain alike.
>
> Alexander Pope, Essay on Man[11]

Suppose that you and your friends take three whitetail does from the herd in October. Each of them might well have been pregnant with twins, in a few weeks. You may have reduced pressure on the habitat by nine deer.

But wouldn't Nature have done the same job, eventually?

Maybe, maybe not. Bucks tend to starve first because, at the beginning of every winter, they dissipate their energy in battles over breeding rights. And their deaths do little to reduce the herd. If you shot every buck you could find, the does -- even some of the female fawns -- would nevertheless give birth next spring.

You could wait till disease strikes, but it might kill too many deer, and too slowly. I don't care to see another epidemic. (Seems perverse to call a rifle more humane, and at worst it's not. Aimed right, it is instant oblivion.)

But is it not arrogance to take such decisions on yourself? If Nature is not kinder, is she not at least wiser?

She is -- to a point. I cannot see and don't want to imagine the biota in my own body, and yet they live, die, and interact while their ecosystem (me) carries on. After some decades of this

I remain alive and, on occasion, bouncier than my wife would wish.

If I am still around, however, it is because my mother's father, a physician, got in Nature's way. You would call a doctor too, if your child had scarlet fever and pneumonia.

Today I know the acres on which we live almost as well as I know my own body, which is to say that I am an ignoramus who can spot poison hemlock and knapweed -- Eurasian plants roughly the equivalent of scarlet fever and pneumonia.

Nature is not going to take the weed problem off my hands. Ask Aldo Leopold. "The image commonly employed," he wrote, "is 'the balance of nature.' ...this figure of speech fails to describe adequately what we know about the land mechanism."[12] Biologists agree with Leopold, generally, and journalists follow the research. So do farmers and gardeners -- whose business has always been to change the course of nature.

If you want to know what the public thinks, however, don't ask the experts. Subscribe to a real newspaper or two (mine come from New York and Montana) and read letters to the editor. You may find that the writers are still bound by the great chain of being. And no wonder. Why settle for chaos when you can insert order? The Balance of Nature is beautiful, comforting, orderly. Why not see living creatures as "conductors of divinity," like John Muir?

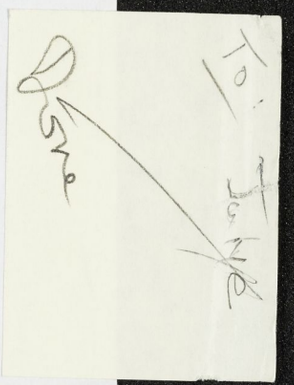
Because it does not work. Nature is beautiful to me, but not balanced -- not in microcosm here on the home place; not during

the evolution of life, which has been untidy; and certainly not in the macrocosm of the universe, which is a mess. Find me links that have not been broken, added too, subtracted from, or reforged.

There are, of course, processes out there, whatever you call them and wherever you start them. Take sunshine, say. It moves through the aspens, is consumed by deer, appears on the table, then returns to fertilize the soil. It is a beautiful system -- better than anything man-made. But that's an opinion from the top of the food chain. It's easy to be aethereal up here.

As a steward of land, however, you consult the facts, not the ideology, dogma, or doctrine. You observe, minutely, and draw conclusions. You don't want to be the quack who treats cancer with herbs and potions. You want to the physician who makes sure of his diagnosis and then orders chemotherapy.

There are rewards. Nature is just as beautiful when you learn the language of her demands. She does, however, give you a lot more work.



Separating Church and State

> The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposed ideas in the mind at the same time, and still retain the ability to function."
>
> F. Scott Fitzgerald

This United States has been operating under two opposed ideas since we adopted the Constitution. Keeping church and state apart is difficult but we decide, in every generation, that a

nation so founded should long endure. The most convincing argument is a good look at strife between zealots around the world.

Just now there is enough tension between church and state, even in America, that a caption in the New York Times reads: "Scientists Deplore Flight From Reason."[13] The concerned scientists, doctors, philosophers, and educators gathered at the New York Academy of Sciences "to counterattack against faith healing, astrology, religious fundamentalism and paranormal charlatanism. But beyond these threats to rational behavior, participants at the meeting aimed their barbs at 'post-modernist' critics of science who contend that truth in science depends on one's point of view, not on any absolute content."

People will have beliefs. I believe that we need both spirit-world and real world. But if we are to hang on to fragments of nature, as opposed to the Nature that is a point of view, we must understand that the two are distinct.

Church	State
myth	science
traditional ethic	land ethic
individual animal	population of wildlife
belief	observation
Nature	nature
Balance of Nature	stewardship
what ought to be	what works

meat from God crop

Whether these decisions correspond to right and left hemispheres of the brain, I don't know, but we humans are in some way equipped for two very different kinds of thinking. The constitution shows the way -- and so does the duck in my south 40.

For economic purposes, a wild mallard is as clearly a crop as the grain on which it fattens. Without this farm on which to breed and feed, there would be, say, a hundred fewer ducks to fly south next winter. And without thousands of other such wetlands in the northern states and Canada, whole species of ducks would be in danger. If they are doing reasonably well today, it is because there have been major public and private investments in wetlands and nesting areas.

For spiritual purposes, on the other hand, the mallard I eat is "meat from God" -- a quotation from Aldo Leopold.[14] A hunter who does not feel what Leopold felt ought to consider taking up golf.

Good scientists are all good at observation, by definition, and those who work in nature often understand values of the spirit. Read Edmund O. Wilson, for example, and Stephen Jay Gould, and Aldo Leopold. And spend a lot of time with Henry Thoreau, who lived intensely in the worlds of both church and state.

Edward Abbey does not seem capable of facing realities and

measuring consequences -- matters of state -- but he is wonderful on sensations and emotions. His is a vein as old as Aesop. Is it not good to interest readers in Nature -- any Nature they are willing to see? Even if she is distant from the real thing?

Any old Nature seemed good to me when I was growing up, and I had the good fortune to be exposed to both kinds. We lived in town and bought our food, but Uncle Bob carried a romantic musk of the swamps. A cycle of nature-fakery[15] early in the century had made an impression on my father, who sat me on his knee to read William Long's fables of gentle little creatures in the woods. Sunday dinner, on the other hand, involved a real cockerel. We did not kill him as a European cook might have done it, slitting his throat in the kitchen and saving his blood, but we did chop his head off, pluck him, and draw him. A child involved in that process knows where dinner comes from.

Nature-fakery is more dangerous today because, with more and more people pressing on land that is less and less wild, it is possible for a post-modernist public to imagine any Nature it wishes. There is no Uncle Bob, for most children today, no chicken flopping headless. There is a Disney-deer who talks and has little friends from other ethnic communities.

I suspect that the market has become a natural force stronger than the rest of nature. Want Utopia? You can visit a theme park with happy endings. Want virtual reality? We've got the technology. Want to see a bear? Stop at the Park's entrance and catch Yellowstone, the movie.

For now, then, church and state are at odds. In the pews are sensitive, largely urban, life-affirming persons, and how could they not extend their values to all of Nature? In barns and fields, meanwhile, death-accepting stewards of nature wonder what's coming next. Do not dismiss these as mere political differences. They are tectonic plates drifting apart, creating another of the chasms that divide America.

The Incentive

> RANCHERS! Spraying sagebrush will at least double grass production. It's like buying land for $11.00 per acre while still paying the same tax and not having to maintain any more fence.
>
> Advertisement in Big Timber (Montana) Pioneer

Humans are good at recognizing incentives -- and picking a code of ethics that does not get in the way. Thus a writer for the general market may pick the traditional ethic and stick with it, because it carries emotion. Animals as individuals are far more appealing than animals as economic entities.

Writers whose subject is fly-fishing, on the other hand, have taken to the land ethic (alias "stream ethic" or "catch-and-release ethic"). It is a good way to manage many trout streams, including my own. Fish have to be seen as populations, when you are a manager, subject to economic decisions. And besides, the stream ethic lets you hook lots of trout without guilt.

This is, nevertheless, a blood sport. Fishing (fly-fishing especially) is a form of hunting and ethically indistinguishable. You don't harvest trout collectively like grains of barley. You stalk them one by one, like deer or ~~ducks~~ grouse. The old hunter-gatherer's ethic would provide a tighter set of rules, treating each trout as a sentient being.

A farmer may or may not see himself bound by any of this. If he were to treat every stupid cow as a spiritual entity, he would crack up. This is why there is so much tension, and so much value, in children's 4-H projects with animals designed for slaughter. Look closely at the conflict within the child and you will see, again, the chasm between urban and rural America. On the one hand you have city, suburb, and exurb, all hungry for meat plastic-wrapped. On the other you have a farm girl in the barn, ~~taking a hard decision~~ with a lamb she raised.

The land ethic comes easier at a distance too. I could wish that it bound all Americans, farmers included, but creditors send a different message. Nature is nice -- hence the trees around the house -- but the other 2,559 acres have to service the loan. Better to cut the hedgerows and drain the marshes than see the place auctioned off. Call it the bank ethic.

A farmer has his own indicator-species. He knows his land better than anyone else, as he will tell you, but (like the rest of us) sees it through a cultural filter. I see native sagebrush as habitat for sage grouse and pronghorns. The rancher may agree. Then again, he may see a field that would hold more cattle if the

sage were sprayed. Why should he not follow his incentives like the rest of us? Why should he not do what you and I are paying him to do?

Cattle habitat is called "range," which is -- according to the dictionary -- "an extensive area of open land on which livestock wander and graze." When some ranchers say that the range is in good shape, they mean that there is enough grass. The sagebrush may be gone and the draws dry, but the cattle are getting what they need.

If you think that tunnel vision is limited to ranchers, however, talk to a biologist who studies ungulates on Yellowstone Park's northern range. Then check his opinion against, say, that of another scientist who studies grouse, beavers, aspens, willows, or chokecherries. It may be that the elk are doing all right while other wildlife is in trouble.

It is hard to see what you're not trained to see; harder yet to see what you have an incentive not to see. One experienced farmer and all-around good guy told me, fervently, that cattle never harm streams. At the time we were standing within sight of a spring creek that was wide, shallow, filled with silt, and denuded of vegetation on the banks. Cows were in the water even as we talked, stirring the mud.

Edward Abbey had a point, then. You don't have to look far, in the arid west, to find land that is (his term) "cowburnt." But what do you do about it? What policy do you push?

Abbey recommended opening a hunting season on cows. That's a

feel-good proposal -- the kind that cuts off discussion.

There is another way. You don't have to look far to find farmers and ranchers who take care of their land. The worst-kept land in Montana may be in private hands, but so is the best.

Not far from Yellowstone Park's overgrazed northern range, for example, are prairies that Lewis and Clark would recognize. Cattle replace the bison, but many of the grasses are native. We see pronghorns on every walk. The draws have running water for my dogs to drink, even in September, and if I look closely I might spot little native trout dashing for cover. There is a good population of native sharp-tailed grouse. Some of the stream bottoms and slopes are crowded with aspens of all ages. You would not see that on the northern range, where elk and bison have eaten anything they could chew.

The core problem, for farmers, is that long- and short-term incentives ~~are often~~ may be in conflict. In the long term, healthy land is good for you and your family. In the short term, however, you go bust if you can't service your debt. A few farmers may avoid debt because they own the land outright and buy used machinery at foreclosure auctions. On average, though, you can't expect people who live on the land to be luckier or smarter than the rest of us. The vision thing is a scarce commodity.

Incentives, on the other hand, ~~always~~ work reliably when you get them right. The Conservation Reserve Program has paid farmers to take erodible land out of production for ten years -- enough time to bring back the grasslands and the wildlife that needs them.

Sharp-tailed grouse are abundant, now, in counties where they had almost disappeared.

I have a bias. Farm land looks promising to me, even when it is not in good condition, because at least it is open. It may have more wildlife than wilderness. If not, it is at least capable of turning back into cover for wildlife. Given a little help from us humans, the change can come quickly.

Will it happen? I am an optimist by nature but a pessimist by observation. The voters want jobs, which come with economic growth, to which new houses contribute. The highest and best use of land, from this point of view, is to fill it with people. In places where they want to live, most of the private property will be divided into building lots. Public policy could block subdivision but won't. And land cut up for houses is not likely to become open space ever again, not in this geologic age.

In my valley, development looks hard to stop.

Wilderness

...the great fresh unblighted wilderness.

John Muir (1890)

Only to the white man was nature a "wilderness".... To us [Indians] it was tame.

Luther Standing Bear (1933)

WILDERNESS -- LAND OF NO USE

Montana bumper sticker (1998)

So far this chapter has walked through farm country -- a middle-land between city and wilderness. Our home acres and others like them are not urban but still part of the greater economy. I have tried to be rational about the farm, advancing propositions that could be demonstrated.

Wilderness is different. It is the oldest of lands, newest of myths. Wilderness was not valuable to our Judeo-Christian ancestors because it was abundant. It was a place for wolves, not milk and honey. Even Henry Thoreau did not worry about the difference between wilderness and wildness. A distinction would have been unnecessary, when Concord was wild and Maine a wilderness larger than any we now have, in the lower forty-eight states.

Between Thoreau's death in 1862 and John Muir's death in 1914, wilderness must have become a spiritual need. It did not and still does not override the need to make a living, as witness the ranchers who, quite reasonably, fear the return of the wolves. But for most of us, wilderness is scarce and good. I live near it but can't get enough of it.

The trick is to confess which need is being addressed, and which language is appropriate. (Most poetry is in prose these days, making the distinction less clear than it once was.) For me, wilderness is church, not state -- Nature at her most natural. She makes me work hard to get snowed on over the fourth-of-July weekend. I spend a few days with her every year,

hike more than a few miles, and find a place in the dream time.

The appeal, then, is not rational. Wilderness is not a commodity. It is the best of land because it has least economic activity. It has nothing to do with income and everything to do with the soul. I cannot even say that wilderness provides extra joy, because nothing could make Huckleberry and me happier than we are, sometimes, when we hike back muddy from the wild fragments near home.

I can't quantify wilderness at all.

Let me not count the ways, then. Wilderness is what I want to believe. It's not the fish I catch but where I catch them. I don't have to weigh and measure when I'm up on those mountains. I love wilderness because it is the wildest of the wild, scarcest of the scarce.

But having got that off my chest, I still aim to define the wilderness. If anyone else has done this, please excuse me for not knowing. [Will check to see how the law defines wilderness. Have I missed other sources?]

1.Size. Wilderness is extensive, minimum area depending on the ecosystem. Flat desert wilderness needs more space than, say, a mountainous tropical island with greater density of life.

Compare a wilderness to the small wild place where three springs flow down to Humility Creek. This shard has kept its original character because, I suppose, it was always too wet to plow and too brushy for cattle. It probably looked little

different when the Indians were in charge, and might not have qualified as wilderness even then. It has more wildlife than the wilderness areas nearby -- if only because they have been pushed back to high places with short growing seasons. When I sit in my cottonwoods, however, I can hear traffic going by on the gravel road, and much of the wildlife (plant and animal) is not native. I can't get lost. This is oasis, not wilderness.

And yet: In my oasis animals are all around me, doing what they have always done, eating or being eaten, reproducing or failing. There are lakes in the wilderness area with tents all around, anglers in the water, and human wastes thinly buried. ~~This~~ My wild mite of land and water turns out to be wilder than that tame piece of wilderness. (Subjective. Size alone won't do it.)

2. Cycles. Wilderness has, or should have, forest fires like the one that fried Bambi's buddies. It needs an intact food cycle too, myriad small things eaten by larger and so on up to the bear who goes bump in the woods. Forget food chain. It's a bad metaphor. The grizzly sits atop a food pyramid of millions of individuals, from ants up to moose and including, possibly, his own cubs. He's fat because he's the one who doesn't have to run. I reckon I'm in wilderness when I find myself checking the pepper spray and looking for ~~a~~ good climbing trees.

There are wild areas that never had grizzlies, though, and cabins near town that bears ransack. There are even suburbs in California where you can get eaten by a mountain lion. Even the great predators turn out to be a wilderness in my mind -- a

conceit, if you want to be brusque.

3.Economy. Now we are getting close. Wilderness has a hunter-gatherer's economy -- the kind that seemed wild, for John Muir, but tame for Luther Standing Bear (an Oglala Sioux).

"Bands of hunter-gatherers need something like ten square miles per person; farming communities average a tenth of a square mile per person. And that intensity of settlement and the growing population ... guaranteed that the old way of life was doomed." So writes Stephen Budiansky.[16] It was not that the first farmers were better off, he explains. On the contrary, they "worked harder, ate worse, and suffered more." They had a much less interesting job, too. But with a hundred farmers against every hunter-gatherer, the outcome was predictable. It is still predictable, for land that lacks permanent legal protection.

Today, then, wilderness is a paradox -- maximum sustained imponderables. It contributes to the economy by remaining outside of it. The more it is visited, the more its currency depreciates. Investors stay away because, with a hunter-gatherer's economy, how would wilderness provide a competitive return?

On its periphery, however, wilderness has economic impacts. It raises the price of contiguous private lands and supports outfitters who lead tourists inside.

Management of the wilderness costs something, too, and its users should be willing to help with the expenses. The fire-cycle has been interrupted, the aspen reproduction stopped, and the

plant succession altered. Cattle have grazed here for years. Even the cold, pure trout are invasive aliens. Where feasible -- in lakes and small streams above waterfalls -- biologists are right to restore endangered native trout and eradicate the exotics. Rangers are wise to burn stands of old aspen.

Such work comes as a bargain to me, the taxpayer. My wilderness is beauty without responsibility. There are large parts of it where I don't even have to bend over and jerk a knapweed.

Another paradox: Wilderness is a commons that discriminates against common folk. The "Land of No Use" sticker appears on the bumpers of loggers and miners who would like to earn wages. Access is limited by one's ability to shiver, sweat, appreciate, and forgo payment for hard work. The energy is by shank's mare. The economy of production and consumption has not changed fundamentally since the last glacier melted.

Purism is not the point, however. The wilderness is a work in progress, not a museum. You don't have to hike in moccasins, catch your trout by groping under rocks, or shoot your grouse with an arrow. The wilderness is not quite what it was in Indian times, and neither is the human, but the relation is the same.

And so you dine on brook trout and whortleberries, now and then. The meal is labor-intensive, meaning that your belt comes in a notch; but land-extensive, meaning that the ecosystem is not changed. There may be more or less trout and whortleberries in the wilderness next year, but the decisions will be taken by

nature alone. As always.

The virtue of this meal will bear scrutiny. It could have been eaten by your ancestor a hundred years ago, or by an Indian a thousand years ago. There has always been a human in the wilderness, and a wilderness in the human.

From another point of view -- that of the bumper-sticker -- your wilderness meal is selfish. The trees under which you camped could have built a house in the suburbs. The land that fed a single hunter-gatherer might have fed several city-dwellers -- not a hundred of them, probably, from such high, cold, rocky land -- but more than just you. Short as it is, the growing season produces grass for cattle during a few weeks.

Or suppose that the land were auctioned off to the highest bidder. Wilderness-lover and rancher would both be squeezed out, I suspect, by summer cabins with spectacular views. The change would not matter so much if you could reverse it in another generation, but you can't. Wilderness improved is wilderness lost.

I love wilderness as one loves an endangered species. We have held back the assault, but it is inevitable under the pressure of population growth. My successors will look to the wilderness for food, jobs, or at least the kind of recreation that a media generation can understand. It will become a place of adventure travel -- another of those defining phrases. Nature will be an animated cartoon populated by animals who talk, but don't die.

The environmental battles are for good reason, then. Nature's lovers are losing the war. We would do better if we fought on the same side, but we have some excuse for flailing around. We know we're being overrun, and it's not just the fin de siècle. It's the end of an epoch.

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NOTES

(1) Summer Meditations. NY:Vintage, 1992. p.60.

(2) In Foreword to Bourjailly, Vance. The Unnatural Enemy. University of Arizona Press, 1984. p.x.

(3) One Life at a Time, Please. NY: Holt. p.9.

(4) "Back to Our Classical Roots." Civilization magazine, July/August 1995, p.83.

(5) Northern Lights quarterly. Winter 1994.

(6) p.xi of the Foreword to Bourjailly.

(7) Leopold, Aldo. A Sand County Almanac. NY: Oxford, 1949.

(8) A Sand County Almanac. NY: Oxford, 1949. p. 225.

(9) The Island Within. NY: Vintage, 1991. p.160.

(10) Historical Atlas of World Mythology. NY:Harper, 1988. Vol.I, Part 1, p.93.

(11) For this poem, and much of what follows in this section, I am indebted to a paper by Dr. Mark Sagoff of the Institute for Philosophy and Public Policy. His paper is dated 5/27/93 and titled "Biodiversity and the Culture of Ecology."

(12) A Sand County Almanac. p.214.

(13) Language in this paragraph is drawn from a report by Malcolm Browne in the New York Times of June 6, 1995, on a conference of scientists launching a "crusade against quackery."

(14)A Sand County Almanac. p.viii.

(15) See Lutts, Ralph H. The Nature Fakers. Golden, Colorado: Fulcrum, 1990. This work is deeply researched, balanced, and easy to read.

(16) The Covenant of the Wild: Why Animals Chose Domestication. NY: Norton, 1977.