

In Defense of Wildness

Montanans are fortunate to live so close to wild places. And yet, as the story of Glacier National Park 100 years ago, and current battles over Senator Tester's Forest Jobs and Recreation Act attest, the struggle to preserve wild places lays bare a fundamental human confusion about these places and our relationship to them. It may be, however, that wildness is key to our future in ways that are not so obvious.

It was American naturalist Henry David Thoreau who once famously said, "In wildness is the preservation of the world." For him, wildness means to be free and self-willed, and thus author Jack Turner interprets Thoreau to be saying that living as a free, self-willed being in harmonious relationship with other such wild beings is central to preserving the wider world. But what does this mean?

Turner notes that battles over the preservation of wild places are often reduced to conflicts among potential users. Motorized enthusiasts stand under banners of "multiple use" while resisting restrictions advocated by hikers or skiers. Advocates for wilderness tourism stand in opposition to those who wish to use the land for purely economic gain.

But as Turner argues, both those who advocate for the preservation of wild places and those who oppose it ultimately see these places as commodities. Wilderness tourism, he argues, is largely about consuming the land for fun, equipping it with trails, signs, roads, and other markers of domestication. Opponents of preservation simply want the land for other ends. Thus, we have what seems to be a clash of tastes, lacking any more universal ground on which to argue why one preference should win out.

Turner instead suggests that rather than diminish wild places by claiming them for fun or work, we should recognize how they can provide us with a raw experience of wild nature, which then serves as a basis for seeing ourselves in new ways.

Thinking about what this might mean is worthwhile. Perhaps my greatest experience of the wild came backpacking into the Belly River area of Glacier Park. Although a trail and a few other amenities mitigated my sense of wildness somewhat, evidence of fresh grizzly bear scat and even sounds of a bear's movement in nearby trees awakened me to an important experience of the wild—namely, that I was among predators who could consider me as food, in the same way I was looking to nearby huckleberry bushes. I also heard the bugling of elk in their competition for mates. I observed the changing colors of Aspen leaves signaling the encroaching death of winter. I treaded lightly on loose rocks from mountains, crumbled by glaciers and time. As days passed, concerns of human civilization and personal affairs receded from my mind.

Spending time in such environments relocates oneself in relation to the world. The human quest for control and sovereignty over one's environment is subsumed to concerns of survival, in which one recognizes dependence on the wild place itself, one's limits in relation to it, and one's relationship to the other beings that inhabit this place within a cycle of life and death. Thus, the harmony of which Turner speaks is not that of Eden; rather, it seems to be something like finding a proper relation to the wild nature of which we are ultimately a part.

Returning to civilization, one becomes more aware of what was previously taken for granted: excessive consumption of our world; the translation of almost all things of value into economic terms; the incessant quest for greater security and control; the distance we place between ourselves and the natural world through the cell phone, automobile, and other forms of technology; the thoughtless ease with which we participate in systems of exploitation of nature and of our fellow human beings.

If experiencing the wild can bring us such perspective, preservation of the wild should be sought not merely because it has some value in itself or is a fun place to play. It should be saved because it is central to self-understanding and to finding a critical perspective that can indeed promote the preservation not just of the wild, but also of our world. That means there must be places that are big and wild enough to support this experience. They cannot be places of multiple use, for machines are simply incompatible with it.

There are not many places left in the world where we can truly experience the wild. Even most places designated as wilderness are not very wild. But we in the West have as good an opportunity as most to gain at least some sense of it. And as summer now begins and as we celebrate places like Glacier Park, more of us now can take the opportunity to experience wild nature, and then to see our world in ways that can help preserve it.

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