

A Very Different Picture

Warm, sunny days were a rare event in the cool and rainy Montana spring, just left behind. And when they came, Montanans burst from their doors as if freed from long imprisonment. But rather than simply reconnecting with the outer world, these rare days as often gave us the opportunity to exercise urgent sovereignty over our outdoor domiciles. So for every city dweller seeking some reconnection with nature on the front porch, there was another grasping the chance to fire up the lawn mower, leaf blower, and, of course, the weed whacker.

How we tend to our outdoor property says much about our values and our tastes. The American domestic aesthetic is largely shaped by images of the English park and American golf course, with every blade of grass carefully coiffed, and no foreign plants tolerated. The lawn has been seen as a sign of affluence, and even moral rectitude.ⁱ To achieve that, we run fossil-fuel consuming machines, generate air pollution, disrupt the quiet of the neighborhood, and apply poisons to the soil. Yes, much of what we need to know about American values can be found spending a sunny, spring afternoon on the front porch.

The thing about such matters of aesthetics, like the American lawn, is that it is hard to argue against them. Some people like vanilla; others like chocolate. Some want snowmobiles in Yellowstone, others want silence. Around Missoula we now face a dispute over powerboats and jet skis on the Bitterroot River. And if such choices are *merely* matters of aesthetic preference, there is little room for rationality successfully making the case that one preference must be right.

Simply leaving the matter here, however, risks consigning important issues to the circus of American politics, or, to the judicial system. But perhaps not all is lost.

As a new summer dawns, we Montanans have the rare opportunity to travel only short distances to escape the domestic aesthetic of dominance by machine to see ourselves within a very different picture—within a portrait, so to speak, of humans in wild places. It is a portrait painted through direct experience of nature, and enhanced through literature, poetry, and even science. The English poet William Wordsworth writes:

“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with the joy
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime
Of something far more deeply interfused,
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns . . .
Therefore let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain winds be free”
To blow against thee.”

Philosopher Anthony Weston suggests that such lines—and the feelings and experiences they represent—do not offer us a rational argument for protecting the natural world.ⁱⁱ But they are nonetheless important for helping us understand ourselves and our place in it. The Greek

philosopher Heraclitus wrote, “Men have talked about the world without paying attention to the world, or to their own minds, as if they were asleep or absent-minded.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Paying attention to the world means cultivating a quite different experience than we typically get in our cities. It is one that recognizes our ultimate interconnectedness with nature. Such an experience *could* begin from the front porch, if we only turn our attentiveness from the lawn to the fragmentary wildness that yet remains there. We can observe, for example, the interplay of various bird species searching for food and mates, or note that dandelions appear at the time deer give birth to their young.

To escape from our civilized world entirely is a blessing on another level. Leaving machines and technology behind offers us not an experience of Eden, but of survival, as well as of beauty and humility. It is a more salutary way to attend to the world, accompanied by a silence and solitude that gives us a rare opportunity to reflect on our own minds and our interconnectedness with the wild.

Much of our Western tradition has taught us that we as the lone rational animal stand outside of nature as its master. In the end, however, science continues to partner with poetry to prove that we are not. And the increasing evidence from climate change scientists tells us that nature may yet teach us our lesson the hard way—namely, that not all aesthetics are created equal in the end. How we choose to picture ourselves in our world is not as harmless as the choice between vanilla and chocolate. It is among the most important things we can do.

I’m under no illusion that we will do away with weed whackers anytime soon. But if we allow a new aesthetic to inspire a very different set of feelings and experiences, we can generate more compelling arguments against the encroachment of the machine on wild nature, and even on our view from the front porch.

This is Mark Hanson, guest commentator for the Center for Ethics, at the University of Montana

ⁱ Virginia Scott Jenkins, *The Lawn: A History of an American Obsession* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1994).

ⁱⁱ Anthony Weston, “Beyond Intrinsic Value: Pragmatism in Environmental Ethics,” in *Environmental Pragmatism*, ed. by Andrew Light and Eric Katz (New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 298-303.

ⁱⁱⁱ Eric Reece, “Notes from a Very Small Island,” *Orion* (November-December 2008), p. 39.