

On Writing *Wilderness Ethics*

Some Further Musings on the “Spirit Of Wildness”

BY LAURA WATERMAN

I was recently introduced to a Maasai man from Kenya. Erick Kasana, a conservation officer, was in the United States to attend a conference at Harvard University about creating solidarity at the community and grassroots level. My friend, Kate, a Harvard student who had helped to organize the conference, brought Erick up to Vermont to experience snow for the first time. Following an afternoon of sledding we settled into my house for dinner.

“Here’s Laura and Guy’s book I was telling you about,” Kate said, handing Erick *Wilderness Ethics* (Waterman and Waterman 1993).

During dinner Erick explained to me the complex situation of land pressures the Maasai now feel as a result of colonialization. “Our economy,” Erick said, “that is our cattle, needs a natural resource base.”

“You mean grass? The grasslands?” I asked.

“Yes,” Erick said. “And grazing creates a pressure and threat to wildlife and flora. But it’s more complicated than that. What appears as over-grazing is the result of complex pressures from people that have forced the Maasai onto marginal land.”

When we said good night, Erick took *Wilderness Ethics* with him, and I noticed his light was on for some time. But what can he be finding, I wondered? Our focus in that book is the northeastern U.S. Our forested land, our mountains are so unlike his grasslands. Then I began to think about what had caused us to write the book in the first place.

Like Erick, Guy and I spent a lot of time on the ground. We took every opportunity to be in the mountains, and in fact quit our city jobs, bought land in the country and began to homestead so we could structure a life lived outdoors with plenty of time for hiking and climbing. We moved to Vermont in 1973 and for nearly the next thirty years the White Mountains of New Hampshire became home to us as well.

We needed to earn a little money, and continuing as writers seemed like a good way to supplement what we could grow in our vegetable garden. We connected with a Boston-based magazine called *New England Outdoors* and the editor, a fly-fisherman named Mike Pogodzinski, offered us a monthly column on camping and hiking. This continued for the next five years.

In these columns we wrote about what we observed on our trips to the mountains. Often, it seemed to us, that values were in conflict in the backcountry. Here are three examples.

1. On a hike into a lean-to beside a mountain pond that we’d recalled as being an idyllic spot just a few years earlier, we now found a crowded and heavily used site. Wood railings were erected to discourage hikers from cutting through the woods every which way, and a board pathway had been laid down on the wet trailbed around the pond. The managers were trying to “protect the resource” here, but in the process had turned this beautiful place into a woodsy suburbia. It struck us that the same results could be achieved by blocking off access to the trampled spots with boulders or rotten logs, and using rough-hewn planks not store-bought lumber, to create a treadway over the muddy path skirting the pond.



Laura Waterman climbing in New Hampshire in 1989. Photo by Chuck and Barbara Kukla.



Figure 1—Guy and Laura Waterman in the Presidential Range of the White Mountain National Forest. Photo courtesy of Laura Waterman. Photo by Jean Cooley.

2. Once on a bushwhack up a stream valley we came across a flattened clearing with a net work of trampled paths. We saw the charred remains of numerous campfires. The woods appeared denuded of down trees, and the spruce and fir were stripped to head height of all their lower branches. Along the stream we saw evidence of heavy tramping, with some of the banks caved in. We later learned that this was the location for a wilderness course for a nearby school. Every November for the past 24 years about 100 students, in groups of 10 with two adult leaders, went out backpacking for two weeks along a craggy and forested ridgeline. At the end of the course, each student was sent off into the woods

to experience the solitude of a three-day solo. They were expected to keep a journal and take a close inward look at themselves, while keeping outwardly warm with a campfire. The twenty teacher/leaders were camped also, and also kept a campfire going. This was seen as a priceless experience for young people. On our hike we had stumbled across the results of its impact on the forest.

3. With a few friends we had climbed to the summit of a remote New Hampshire four thousand-foot peak by a steep, trailless route. The hike had proved harder and longer than expected, and we arrived on top late in the afternoon. The plan was to take the trail down, but we'd have to move fast to avoid

being benighted. We all felt the thrill of climbing this isolated peak by a route that took all our skill with map and compass, not another party in sight all day. The view before us showed only mountains. So we were a bit taken aback when a member of the group pulled out his cell phone. "Hi honey, just calling to let you know I'm safe. We're on the summit and are about to take the trail down. Guess I'll be late for dinner though." That's not putting it strong enough. We were aghast! That single call smashed through the fragile fabric of wildness. In fact that phone's presence made a travesty of our climb where we had felt so committed, so on-our-own in the wild.

From these, and many other similar experiences, we began to see that highly desirable goals like education, safety, and protecting areas from impact can have an adverse affect on other, equally important, and sometimes fragile or vulnerable values. We began to realize what was most at risk wasn't necessarily the physical, but a spiritual quality as well. We began to call this elusive value the spirit of wildness.

The Spirit of Wildness

Our thoughts about the spirit of wildness grew when we began a tenure of trail maintenance on the Franconia Ridge. This is a 1.8 mile section that traverses several White Mountain summits and lies entirely above treeline. Guy and I were privileged to have this responsibility from 1980 to nearly 2000, the year of Guy's death. Our main concern was to take care of this popular trail in such a way that would protect the precious alpine plants, yet not interfere with the hiker's

sense of freedom. We thought it essential that our trail work not stand as a barrier to hikers experiencing the wildness of this Ridge.

Reading Aldo Leopold's (1966) *Sand County Almanac* influenced our thinking also. Leopold's cry is that only when we stop looking at land as commodity, will we see the land has value in and of itself. Only then will we treat land with true respect. Leopold called this new way of seeing a "new land ethic." We sought to carry this a step further in relation specifically to wild land. In *Wilderness Ethics* we proposed that some roughhewn wilderness ethic was needed that spoke for the spiritual side of wild. The intangibles, the subjective elements, we saw as being even more fragile and threatened than the physical. We were pleading for respect for the mystery of wildness.

Our question to readers was: once the land has been saved from development—the strip mining, logging, dam construction, second homes—then what? "Profound theorists," we wrote, "we are not. We're just two people who spend a lot of time in the woods and on the mountains; who have observed a few things and asked ourselves a few questions about wildness, and who would like to invite you to share our thoughts and think about some practical questions yourself:

- What are we trying to preserve?
- What are the threats to the wildness in wilderness?
- What can we do about it?"

We wanted to write a book that alerted readers to the fragility of wildness and how easy it was to erode it away by building a hut at some quiet view spot, or locating a trail up a hitherto pathless ridge, or constructing a bridge where none has been deemed needed before, or calling out the helicopters, or traveling in large groups, or whipping out a cell phone. Wild-

ness can be easily overlooked by hikers and managers alike; wildness is expendable, and once spent, we can rarely call it back.

It seemed to us a question of values. We were asking hikers and managers to think about what was important. What was at stake? What mattered? If wildness was an important value, we could view questions from whether to construct a new trail to tramping through the woods in large groups through that lens.

Another way to approach thinking about what kind of backcountry we wanted was from a love of land. We hoped hikers and managers would be guided by a concern for the land's well-being and would approach the care of land with a spirit of humility. That, too, was a way to keep the spirit of wildness alive.

It seemed to us that this meant a real change of thinking if we were to exercise this kind of restraint, respect, and responsibility. This was more than a question for the managers—the hiking clubs, the Forest Service and the Park Service—to grapple with. We were asking every hiker and backpacker and climber, fisherman and hunter—all outdoor people to think about backcountry in terms of values when we asked ourselves the question: what kind of backcountry do we want?

Musings on Wildness

One of our favorite quotations is often attributed to conservationist Geza

Teleki: "Everything is less important. Career is less important. Science is less important. Fame is less important than doing the right thing when you're dealing with the natural environment."

Guy and I admired Teleki's words for their humility. As we learn to put them into practice, we turn ourselves into stewards of the land in the sense Leopold had hoped for. Humility seems key to how we relate to land. If we were more humble, all of us, wouldn't the spirit of wildness stand a better chance?

Much has changed since Guy and I wrote our early columns for *New England Outdoors*, Land managers have come a long way toward learning how to "protect the resource" in ways that are in keeping with the quiet nature of the woods. Schools and clubs who offer outdoor programs are learning how to clean up their act. But many threats remain such as cell phones, radios, and the persistent use of helicopters. Managers still upgrade backcountry facilities in ways that seem out of step with a wilderness experience. And more people keep coming. With *Wilderness Ethics* we hoped to begin the conversation. Now it depends on the hikers and managers to keep the dialogue alive as we make decisions for the future.

It seems to me that Erick Kasana faces many of the same issues we do here in the northeast. For us, the land faces the pressures of people—we

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hikers and climbers. For the Maasai, pressures came from their colonial legacy, present-day tourists, as well as their own growing population with the result that the Maasai's cattle are increasingly crowded, leading to overgrazing.


Erick and Guy and I look for a response—as well as solutions—to land issues from those to whom the land matters most. Our hope is that our grassroots efforts will have that ripple effect of a large stone dropped into the center of the pond: we want to see the ripples widening out and out, far beyond the point of impact, far beyond the limits of our vision.

Guy and I desired to make room for the spirit of wildness. This was our message we tied around the stone we dropped in the pond. Giving room to what nurtures our spirits when we go to the mountains is, it seems to me,

the ultimate challenge as we stride into the twenty-first century.

We need mountains and wild country more now than ever, and more pressures are being put upon the land as people come in droves, looking for solace and solitude, spiritual renewal and strength, exercise and just plain fun. We wrote *Wilderness Ethics* because it seemed to us that it was terribly important to save this elusive thing we cannot see, this spirit of wildness that is so essential to our human souls, the underlying reason, whether we are aware of it or not, why we seek the wild places.

I would venture to say that Erick and Guy and I are all concerned with the same values here: the physical and spiritual aspects of the land ethic. The Maasai have an immediate need to address the physical, but I would guess that a spiritual ethic is critical to them as well, and that their own culture is

grounded in a spiritual connection to the land. Whether Maasai or American we all need a land ethic that is physical and spiritual, and as a community of people on the earth we need to think about what this means, define it for ourselves (there is no formula, no easily applied blueprint) whether we live in the northeast, the west, or in Africa. 

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