

landscape filled with fields. It was a simplified woodland, made up largely of white pine trees, a drought-tolerant species with seeds easily dispersed by the wind. The reincarnation of New England as a white pine region was an artifact of its earlier creation as a land of fields and farms.

As the war against the woods ended, a new front in the struggle with nature was beginning to open. Thoreau lamented many aspects of what agriculture had done to New England but saved his greatest ire for the factories and railroads that soon intruded on the landscape. And yet, how ironic that this critic of progress should have earned a living as a surveyor, measuring the land into discrete parcels so it could be bought and sold. Indeed, he had surveyed Walden Woods so extensively that he once wrote, "I now see it mapped in my mind's eye . . . as so many men's wood lots." When he lugged his surveying equipment out to mark off the land, he participated in what became a major preoccupation for nineteenth-century Americans: the transformation of the earth—its soil, trees, and even water—into a set of commodities.

Humanity's Love of the Wilderness Is a Recent Development

Stephen Budiansky

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Budiansky places Henry David Thoreau's love of nature in its cultural context, showing how humans' love of wildness in nature is a fairly recent historical development. Budiansky explains that, for centuries, humans loathed or feared untamed nature, but with the advent of romanticism and transcendentalism, a cult of the wild sprang up, in which Thoreau plays a central role. Thoreau did not love the wild as an end in itself, Budiansky asserts, but as an escape from the travails of village life and the artificiality that he came to detest. Since Thoreau's time, the love of nature for its own sake has become a given among environmentalists, but according to Budiansky this appreciation of nature has taken its own artificial and absurd turns.

How have we come to believe things about nature that are so untrue? Young love always has a dash of infatuation, and our love for nature is young indeed.

In 1653 the English historian Edward Johnson took pen in hand to tell the world of the untamed forests of North America, so unlike anything that European settlers and travel-

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ers had known from the Old World. A "remote, rocky, barren, bushy, wild-woody wilderness," he called it. He did not mean it as a compliment.

The modern-day admiration of nature is so nearly universal that it comes as a shock to discover of what recent vintage these feelings are. For all but the last two hundred years of civilization, anyone expressing a conviction that wilderness contained anything admirable, much less that it was the embodiment of perfection, would have been considered eccentric, if not insane. Before the end of the eighteenth century, mountains were universally disliked. They were "warts," "wens," "the rubbish of creation," places of desolation suitable only, as in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, to guard the gates of hell. Dr. Johnson [English lexicographer and writer Samuel Johnson], in 1738, expressed the opinion that the Scottish hills "had been dismissed by nature from her care." Other seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers were no less contemptuous of the wild. The Alps were "high and hideous," "monstrous excrescences of nature," the place where nature had "swept up the rubbish of the earth to clear the plains of Lombardy." An early visitor to Pike's Peak wrote, "The dreariness of the desolate peak itself scarcely dissipates the dismal spell, for you stand in a confusion of dull stones piled upon each other in odious ugliness."¹ . . .

For the wilderness had long been viewed by most people with hostility for perfectly good reason. Mountains were places of wolves, bears, bandits, bad roads, and violent and unpredictable weather. The North American forests harbored wild animals and hostile Indians. To a farmer who needed to clear fields to feed his family and graze his livestock, the woods were a backbreaking obstacle; felling trees and pulling stumps was the most arduous job a settler faced. [As historian Roderick Nash has noted.] It was only "the literary gentleman wield-

1. Ronald Reese, "The Taste for Mountain Scenery," *History Today*, vol. 25, 1975: 305-312.

ing a pen, not the pioneer with an axe" who could think otherwise. To this day, farmers are not conspicuous among the backpacking set. . . .

When Henry David Thoreau wrote, "in wilderness is the preservation of the world" he was not talking about the role of tropical biodiversity in maintaining the life-support processes of the planet. By "the world," he meant the world of man—specifically the spiritual world of man. Nature mattered, not for its own sake, but for what it could do for man's soul. "I derive more of my subsistence from the swamps which surround my native town than from the cultivated gardens in the village," he went on to explain. "My spirits infallibly rise in proportion to the outward dreariness. . . . When I would recreate myself I seek the darkest wood, the thickest and most interminable and, to the citizen, most dismal swamp. I enter a swamp as a sacred place,—a sanctum sanctorum." His motive was a "desire to bathe my head in atmospheres unknown to my feet."

Here is where so much of the mischief begins. Thoreau's declaration that "in wilderness is the preservation of the world" is one of the most quoted in modern environmental writing. It is always interpreted as a precocious ecological insight, anticipating by a century the modern recognition of the environmental damage that pollution and development are wreaking. Few people recognize the fundamentally religious motivation that Thoreau's words gave voice to.

Thoreau's Escape to Walden

For Thoreau, nature's chief value was that it was not the town. The woods were an escape from social corruption, or, more to the point, people. "Society is always diseased, and the best is the most so," he wrote in *The Natural History of Massachusetts*. The conventions of social intercourse were stultifying [absurd] "Politics . . . are but as the cigar-smoke of a man." Commerce was frivolous. Labor was degrading, farming no

better than serfdom. Even man's amusements were nothing but a sign of the depths of his despair. "The greater part of what my neighbors call good I believe in my soul to be bad." The word *village*, he said, comes from the same Latin root as *vile* and *villain*, which "suggests what kind of degeneracy villagers are liable to." Thoreau wanted to "shake off the village," where men spent empty, monotonous, vacuous, and spiritually impoverished lives. "I confess that I am astonished at the power of endurance, to say nothing of the moral insensibility, of my neighbors who confine themselves to shops and offices the whole day for weeks and months, aye, and years almost together," he wrote. It was the freedom that nature had to offer that was its chief attraction. Thoreau went to live at Walden Pond, he said, "to transact some private business with the fewest obstacles."

If nature's value rested upon its being a refuge from the evils of society, then nature, by definition, meant separation, the absence of man. It was the very fact that man and all his follies were not to be found there that made nature estimable. What Thoreau disliked about man's presence was not that it would interfere with or degrade critical biological processes; what he disliked about man's presence was its presence. Thoreau disapproved of wealth, church, rules, voting, dinner parties, and young men not as smart as he who sought to join him on his walks. He would tell the last that he "had no walks to throw away on company." The link between environmentalism and escapism is an enduring one, and Thoreau's admiration of the wild as a place to turn one's back on the town can be heard in the words of David Brower, Bill McKibben, and other nature writers of our day.

Thoreau's aversion to society (and to holding down a regular job) readily explains some of the appeal that the woods held for him. But nature's stock was rising at this time for other reasons, too—all just as far removed from anything to do with ecological science, wildlife conservation, biodiversity,

or the other concerns that modern environmentalists try to graft upon the woodsy philosophy of Thoreau and his fellow travelers. Many of the early American nature worshipers, including Thoreau's fellow townsmen in Concord [American transcendentalist philosopher and essayist] Ralph Waldo Emerson and [American transcendentalist writer] Amos Bronson Alcott, were deeply revolved in a whole laundry list of reform-minded causes that all shared an antipathy to the corrupt social status quo. Temperance, the abolition of slavery, dietary reform, and alternative medicine may not seem at first glance to have much in common, but all were a rejection of evils that man appeared to have brought upon himself—and all saw salvation, spiritual and physical, in a return to nature. Just as "natural law" had shown the falseness of monarchy, slavery, and other political systems that denied men their God-given rights, so natural foods and natural healing would show the falseness of alcohol and artificial medicines that denied men their God-given health.

The Water Cure

This was an age of revivalism, millenarianism [the idea that there will be a great transformation in society], and utopianism, brimming with enthusiastic schemes for remaking the world. One scheme that managed to roll together several of these enthusiasms in one, with virtuous and uncorrupted nature at its core, was the "cold water" movement. Publications extolling the multiple virtues of cold water flourished in the early and mid-nineteenth century. *Water-Cure World*; *Water-Cure Journal*; *The Magnetic and Cold Water Guide* were but a few of many. The Hutchinson Family Singers, a musical family from New Hampshire whom one historian has called America's first pop singing group, took to the road in the 1840s with a homespun message blending denunciations of slavery, war, alcohol, doctors, tobacco, and the usurpation of Indian lands with paeans of praise to water:

Oh! If you would preserve your
health
And trouble never borrow,
Just take the morning shower bath,
'Twill drive away all sorrow.
And then instead of drinking rum,
As doth the poor besotter;
For health, long life, and happiness,
Drink nothing but cold water.
Yes, water'll cure most every ill,
'Tis proved without assumption;
Dyspepsia, gout, and fevers, too,
And sometimes old consumption.
Your head-aches, side-aches, and
heart-aches too,
Which often cause great slaughter;
Can all be cured by drinking oft
And bathing in cold water.

It was only later that temperance became the special domain of little old ladies and busybodies; in the early nineteenth century excessive alcohol consumption was a major social ill in America, and the temperance cause attracted broad support from the reform-minded intelligentsia. Skepticism about the cures offered by contemporary medical science was equally well founded in reality; it was not until the very end of the nineteenth century that a patient seeking the assistance of a medical doctor was more likely to be improved than harmed by the treatment prescribed. Most of the cures consisted of violent purging and vomiting, bleeding, blistering, and the liberal application of remedies containing opium and

alcohol or, with an alarming frequency, slow-acting poisons such as mercury and arsenic. A particularly favored cure-all was calomel, or mercurous chloride, a powerful purgative—as well as a central nervous system poison. It almost certainly hastened the demise of many in those days, including, in 1799, George Washington, who fell ill with a cold, was thoroughly dosed by his attending physicians, and promptly dropped dead. (Calomel was singled out for special excoriation in another of the Hutchinson Family's songs: "And when I must resign my breath, / Pray let me die a natural death, / And bid the world a long farewell, / Without one dose of Calomel.")

The Return to Nature

But the urge to look to nature for the answer went much further. Cold water was not just a wholesome substitute for intoxicating liquors; it was God's answer to man's ills. "The God of nature has never made—at least for the globe we inhabit—any other drink but water," extolled William Alcott, the physician cousin of Bronson. "Let us . . . abandon Satan's system of poisoning . . . and adopt God's system, based on truth—on the harmonies and congenialities of nature," wrote another water enthusiast. "Wash, and be healed," said yet another. This was more than a temperance campaign. This was the stirring of a new religion. Illness was the result of violating nature's laws. Good health could be obtained only by restoring harmony and balance. Spiritual health and physical health were inseparable, and both were linked to obedience to the lessons that nature taught, as a reflection of God's plan. Rather than try to rise above nature and the "brute" or "animal" instincts, as Christianity had so long seemed to urge, the message of these "Christian physiologists" was that man must give up the sinful luxuries and excesses of civilization and return to nature. Nature was not the fallen world of fleshly and unclean desires; it was the pure and uncorrupted creation of God. "Alas! the beast that roams the forest . . . may boast of greater consistency, of a more implicit obedience to the laws of Na-

ture, and Nature's God, than proud Man!" declared an article in one of the many publications devoted to the ideas of Samuel Thomson, a nineteenth-century herbalist whose *New Guide to Health* had sold one hundred thousand copies. "Those who live in the nearest state of nature, also approach the nearest state of perfect health." (Another reformer of this era who achieved contemporary fame marching an army of followers back to nature was Sylvester Graham, mostly remembered today only for the cracker that bears his name. Graham was an immensely popular preacher of the new gospel of salvation through hygiene; he blamed "crowded cities" for the ruin of the human family, and urged a return to that state of primeval simplicity "when man was free from disease, and a perfect stranger to vice." Graham preached a regimen that eschewed all "artificial stimuli" in favor of cold baths, fresh air, exercise, loose-fitting clothing, and a diet of nothing but coarse rye or wheat meal, hominy, and pure water.)

The new doctrine of dietary salvation that Graham and Thomson were offering up to their mainly Yankee audiences struck many familiar chords, with its emphasis on self-denial and Puritanism as the pathway to the kingdom of heaven. The Graham system of living was, like Christianity itself, a means to a higher spiritual end. True to the evangelical spirit of Graham's message, followers of the Graham diet offered up testimonials telling of the "flood of light" they experienced once they began eating coarse bread and taking icy baths. Indeed, some of the health-cure preachers who came to fame in the mid-nineteenth century ventured to suggest that eating right would not only unstop the bowels but bring the millennium [a thousand years of peace ruled by Jesus Christ].

Nature Worship

In worshiping nature as God's creation, these nineteenth century nature enthusiasts forged another link between the love of nature and the beliefs in its perfection and its possession of an innate purpose apart from man's. Thoreau was surely

speaking tongue in cheek when he and a few fellow dropouts from Concord society formed the Walden Pond Society as an alternative church for Sunday morning meetings and proposed plucking and eating wild huckleberries as a substitute for the more conventional sacrament of communion. But there was no hint of irony in Emerson's transcendental conviction that nature was the literal dwelling place of God: "The aspect of nature is devout. Like the figure of Jesus, she stands with bended head, and hands folded upon the breast. The happiest man is he who learns from nature the lesson of worship." Emerson believed that nature was both a source of moral instruction and discipline and the holy of holies where man would become "part or particle of God" himself.

This was but a prelude to the nature worship of [nineteenth-century naturalist] John Muir, who was to become far and away the most successful popularizer of the cult of the wild. The son of a stern Scottish Presbyterian turned Disciple of Christ, Muir brought the full force of his evangelical upbringing to his devotion to nature. His father was a thoroughgoing disciplinarian who discouraged any reading but the Bible and ordered the family to bed promptly after 8 P.M. prayers. He once set John to work for months on end digging a ninety-foot-deep well with nothing but hammer and chisel; he would be lowered in a basket in the morning and hauled up in the evening. Finally, at the age of thirty, Muir had had enough and, abandoning the family's Wisconsin farmstead, set out to walk to the Gulf of Mexico by "the leafiest and least trodden way" he could find.

Yet even as he rebelled, he could not shake his evangelical roots. Feeling the beauty of nature, he said, was to experience "a glorious conversion." Discovering Twenty Hill Hollow near Yosemite was "a resurrection day." The forests were "temples," trees were "psalm-singing," natural objects were "sparks of the Divine Soul." In the wild, indeed only in the wild, could one "touch naked God" and "be filled with the Holy Ghost." Once,

climbing a mountain, he slipped and nearly fell but was touched by a "blessed light" and saved; "had I been borne aloft upon wings, my deliverance could not have been more complete." Such a nature religion was incomplete without nature evangelism: "Heaven knows that John the Baptist was not more eager to get all his fellow sinners into the Jordan than I to baptize all of mine in the beauty of God's mountains," he wrote in his journals.

Unlike Thoreau, Muir does not in the least appear to be joking about his version of the communion sacrament:

Do behold the King in his glory, King Sequoia. Behold! Behold! seems all I can say. Some time ago I left all for Sequoia: have been & am at his feet fasting & praying for light, for is he not the greatest light in the woods; in the world. I'm in the woods woods woods, & they are in me-ee-ee. The King tree & me have sworn eternal love—sworn it without swearing & I've taken the sacrament with Douglass Squirrell drank Sequoia wine Sequoia blood, & with its rosy purple drops I am writing this woody gospel letter. . . . I wish I was so drunk & Sequoical that I could preach the green brown woods to all the juiceless world, descending from his divine wilderness like a John the Baptist eating Douglass Squirrels & wild honey or wild anything, crying, Repent for the Kingdom of Sequoia is at hand. . . . Come Suck Sequoia & be saved.

Even in his arguably more sober moments Muir's religion was unwavering. Nature was a place to find God; nature *was* God. As God was perfect and pure, so nature was perfect and pure. There is "perfect harmony in all things here," he wrote; nature is the "pure and sure and universal," the "Song of God, sounding on forever."

Modern Implications of Nature Worship

This sentiment survives virtually unchanged among the nature lovers of our day. Asked by the Canadian environmentalist Farley Mowat how they came to devote their lives to environ-

mental protection, one activist after another described a "conversion" experience. Mowat himself told how he "glimpsed another and quite magical world—a world of Oneness." All the more so because it did not include people: "When I came back from the Second World War, I was so appalled by the behaviour of modern man that I fled to the Arctic to escape him," Mowat wrote. "The world of non-human life became for me a sanctuary."

Such feelings toward nature are real and earnest and genuine. Thoreau and Muir struck a deep chord that resonates yet. Those who fight for more wilderness areas these days will speak of experiencing a sense of connection with something greater than themselves, something "primeval, threatening, and free of jarring reminders of civilization"; the defenders of the deer talk of feeling "close to nature" when they come across one of these wild animals in an urban park; even Harvard biologist and environmental advocate Edward O. Wilson punctuates 350 pages on biodiversity with the argument that it should be preserved because "wilderness settles peace on the soul." But none of this is a very good measure of what constitutes ecologically sound, or even ecologically feasible, policy. Religion answers a genuine human emotion, but it is not science. And even the most ascetic religion of salvation is not very far removed from self-indulgence, with all of the attendant dangers of that emotion. It is just too easy to mistake one's personal feelings of exaltation for some universal truth. Virtuous self-indulgence has been a foible of those who have been seeking salvation in nature from Thoreau's day to ours.

There are fewer true ascetics about these days; today's nature lover is more likely to try to save the rain forests by buying the correct brand of chocolate-and-nut-covered ice-cream bar than he is to try to save his soul by eating nothing but coarse flour for two years. But attitudes toward conservation practice remain entangled in a web of introspective human

sensations—the aesthetic love for nature's beauty, the spiritual search for solitude and peace and personal health, the nostalgic yearnings for a golden age.

Thoreau's Nature Was an Artificial Construct

Wright Morris

*Wright Morris was an American novelist, essayist, and photographer known for his works about the people and artifacts of the Great Plains. Among his books are *The Field of Vision* and *Plains Song: For Female Voices*, both of which won National Book Awards.*

According to Wright Morris, in Walden Thoreau's art is greater than his argument. Tapping into America's desire for escapism, or "flight," Thoreau creates a myth that he himself did not live out. Morris contends that Americans' love of nature was not new with Thoreau, but he gave it civilized respectability. Yet Thoreau himself did not flee to nature; he went toward places and facts, not from them. Thoreau left Walden to pursue other business but left no similar record of those pursuits. He said that his business was being a "saunterer," but according to Morris the true American saunterer is to be found in another of Ralph Waldo Emerson's followers, Walt Whitman.

I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach, and not, when I came to die, discover that I had not lived.

This statement, by one of the world's free men, has captivated and enslaved millions. It is a classic utterance, made with such art that what is not said seems nonexistent, civilization and its ways a mere web of *inessentials*, distracting man from the essential facts of life. The texture of this language and the grain of this thought are one and the same. To fall

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