



August 20, 2009  
Opinions, U.S.

## The value of wilderness

Our concept of energy and our definition of wilderness seem to go hand-in-hand more and more these days; whether we are speaking about natural gas extraction methods or mountaintop coal mining or concentrating solar arrays in the desert or windfarms or biofuel agriculture, the value that we place upon wilderness is essential to defining our path forward in terms of sustainable energy for our growing global population.

The Wilderness Act defines wilderness as places that are ‘*untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor and does not remain*’. That said, how do we place a value upon something that intrinsically, when left untouched, has no monetary value? When we place a monetary value upon the wilderness, we tend to take away its most valuable characteristic; that is, wilderness as a functioning whole in totality is what creates and sustains life. What monetary value can we place on life?

When we look at forests in terms of board-feet, and mountains in terms of coal deposits or natural gas pockets, and rivers in terms of cubic feet per second, and acres of land in terms of agricultural energy yield, and wind in terms of Kilowatt hours, we lose focus of the interdependent community that functions quite separately from human consciousness. There is a value of wilderness that cannot be quantified in terms of a human-centered approach. These forests, mountains, rivers, air, and land support a rich array of plants and animals that are held together in a fragile arrangement, a web that supports our own human civilization. To threaten these wild places is to threaten the continuance of ourselves.

To address the reasons why we should preserve wilderness first requires us to look at some different ways in which we value it, because without placing a value on wilderness, there is no reason to preserve it. According to [a paper by William Grey in Environmental Ethics](#) <sup>[1]</sup>, there are four ways in which we can place a value on wilderness.

The *Cathedral View* is based upon aesthetics; it espouses the idea that wilderness areas revive the spirit and regenerate the soul. Without these areas, humankind would lose some level of consciousness and connection to the natural world from which we evolved, and hence, lose some insight into who we are and why we are here. The *Cathedral View* was not brought into mainstream consideration until the [Romanitcs](#) <sup>[2]</sup> began shattering the biblical view held for centuries that wilderness was a frightening arena filled with demons and unholy mysticism. In fact, many of the early churches used stain glass windows to block out the majesty of the natural world so practitioners were not distracted from church dogma by a natural landscape that was both more inviting and more beautiful than anything constructed within the walls of worship.

The second view of wilderness put forth by William Grey in his paper is the *Laboratory View*. This value system placed on wilderness defends the idea that wilderness areas are places of study in which to understand our own biology better. Darwin’s evolution theory sprung forth from

untrammelled wilderness and gave humanity the capacity to see out species in terms of part of a holistic environment rather than the center of it. By understanding the interdependencies of nature and the inherent characteristics of plants and animals, we are able to advance our own technological society. If wilderness areas are destroyed and species (of plants and animals) are allowed to unnaturally advance toward extinction, we lose our classroom from which the modern world was born.

The third view expressed by Mr. Grey is the *Silo View*, and simply states that nature is a giant storehouse of resources for human use. This is seemingly the dominant view of the modern world and the underlying philosophy which is being called into question by the current environmental crisis we face. What happens if we use up all of our resources in a few generations? If there is nothing left for those who will come after us, then the *Silo View* is a fleeting value system, and therefore, unsustainable. What if our giant 'agricultural experiment' goes terribly wrong like it is threatening to do? Will we have a natural ecosystem to fall back on; one that was as abundant as the one from which modern civilization was born? The *Silo View* can either be used by societies to consume resources at an unprecedented pace, or it can get us to consider the value of preserving plants and animals for their future value to future generations. What future cures for disease or microbial enzymes are being destroyed with the forests that are being burned and clearcut in search of short-term monetary gain? How will future generations sustain themselves in a resource depleted world?

The final view brought forward by Mr. Grey as a reason for placing a value on wilderness is the *Gymnasium View*. This is the idea that, for some, wilderness is a place of recreation and a source of happiness; and according to our Declaration of Independence, in America we are promised '**life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness**'. Not everyone likes to recreate in wilderness; in fact, many enjoy recreating in homes that require energy which need resources from wilderness areas in order to operate. The question often asked is whether or not we take away one individual's right to happiness in order to provide happiness to another?

It seems as though our economic systems of thought are driving our collective view of wilderness. How much money something is worth tends to determine whether it is preserved or not. An individual who defaces a skyscraper in Manhattan is charged with vandalism and sentenced to some kind of punishment, while a corporation that uses dynamite to 'blow up' a mountain is paid handsomely for their 'work'.

Are we near a point where a human-centered view of valuing wilderness is evolving to consider other non-human rights? Do animals have rights? Do forests have rights? Do mountains have rights? Do humans have a moral obligation to look after the welfare of more species than their own? Do natural systems and wilderness have their own intrinsic value apart from our economic examinations of them? Would our species benefit from a more preservationist attitude toward resources? If we have 100 years of natural gas reserves in our country, should we use it all up in 100 years, or should we combine methods of energy generation so as to preserve wilderness AND meet our needs?

Once wilderness is separated out into its related components, it loses its dynamic nature. By taking out fossil fuels or overusing water for energy gain without consideration to the effects that has on the entirety of the natural ecosystems, we are cutting out whole segments of the circle of life. Once the circle is broken, it begins to straighten into a line. Should it really be considered progress to destroy our living environment?

We don't need to preserve wilderness for wilderness' sake; it is becoming apparent that when we look at this problem of dissecting the the natural landscape into monetary figures with a human-centered approach, we begin to see that destroying our functioning ecosystems is also threatening our own human society. We already see that mistreating animals is ethically wrong, so in a sense, we have already begun to expand our sense of responsibility past human society to include some members of the animal kingdom. Can we extend that compassion to plants or even mountains? Will we collectively find a way to do this before it is too late?

Placing a value on wilderness that incorporates more than just human needs is essential for modern civilization to find a sustainable path forward.

John Guerrero

[examiner.com](#) <sup>[3]</sup>

19 August 2009

---

URLs in this post:

[1] a paper by William Grey in Environmental Ethics:

**<http://www.uq.edu.au/%7Epdwgrey/pubs/vow.html>**

[2] Romanitics: **<http://faculty.pittstate.edu/%7Eknichols/narciss.html>**

[3] examiner.com: **<http://www.examiner.com/x-2903-Energy-Examiner~y2009m8d19-The-value-of-wilderness>**

---

This article is provided as a service of [National Wind Watch, Inc.](#)

<http://www.wind-watch.org/news/>

The use of copyrighted material is protected by [Fair Use](#).