



THE REWILDING INSTITUTE

Issue No. 48

May 8, 2013

Around the Campfire

with Uncle Dave Foreman



Wilderness: Self-Willed Land

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

Section 2(c) of the 1964 Wilderness Act.

Next year (2014) will be the 50th Anniversary of the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act, the strongest and most visionary step in history for protecting and keeping wild neighborhoods for the many Earthlings. Over this fifty years, the acreage of federal land in the United States set aside in the National Wilderness Protection System has gone from some 9 million to over 107 million. Folks in all nooks of America have fought hard and selflessly to gain this outstanding win for wild things. The Wilderness Act stands with the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights as a great gift from the United States to the world.

As we make merry for the Wilderness Act, let us keep the hard truth in the forefront: Protected areas, the tougher the better, are the best way to keep and hold the Tree of Life and its ongoing evolution.

In this and the next issue of Around the Campfire, I'll look at what wilderness truly is and how the Wilderness Act sees it.

Wilderness and Will

The beating heart in the clash between Nature conservationists and resource conservationists (resourcists) is wilderness. And the ways of thinking about wilderness in this brawl swirl around will. Whose will? Man's will over the land—domesticating, taking, plundering, blighting? Or will of the land—wilderness, Nature? Man's will over animals—taming, yoking, or killing? Or self-willed animals—wildeors, wildlife?

As I stumble beyond forty years in the fight for wild things, I've come to believe that conservation boils down to how far and deep Man's will should spread over Earth and its wild things.

In our slacker time, when toughness in thought and standards is too much to hope for, we often get into a snarl because of badly cast words. Bud Man on his motorized tricycle^[1], academic grandees, and just about everybody in between sling the word *wilderness* in sloppy ways, muddying the wrangle about land.

One who is not sloppy, historian Roderick Nash, writes that the word *wilderness* comes from the Old English *Wil-deor-ness*: "place of wild beasts." ^[2] *Wil*: Wild, or willed. *Deor*: Beast, or deer. *Ness*: Place, or quality.

In a 1983 talk at the Third World Wilderness Conference in Scotland, philosopher Jay Hansford Vest, another thoughtful and careful scholar, also sought the meaning of wilderness in Old English and further back in Old Gothic tongues. He believed that wilderness means "'self-willed land'...with an emphasis on its own intrinsic volition." He interpreted *der* as of *the*, not as coming from *deor*. "Hence, in wil-der-ness, there is a 'will-of-the-land'; and in wildeor, there is 'will of the animal.' A wild animal is a 'self-willed animal'—an undomesticated animal—similarly, wildland is 'self-willed land.'" Vest shows that this willfulness is up against the "controlled and ordered environment which is characteristic of the notion of civilization." These early northern Europeans were not driven to wholly lord over wild things; thus, wilderness "demonstrates a recognition of land in and for itself."^[3]

In Old English an animal was a *deor*, which holds on today as *deer*, only one of many deors. After the Norman Conquest, *deor* was shoved aside by *beast* (Norman French), which was later mostly swapped for *animal* (Latin). Each of these word-steps, I think, is a further jump away from the breathing being and thus holds less feeling for it—and for the beat of free life within it. With *deor*, we likely think well of the being; but through *beast* then *animal*, we steadily think less of it as it becomes more abstract. *Beast* and *animal* show far less heedfulness for self-worth than does *deor*; the word *wildeor* more than *deor* holds an understanding of the free self a wild thing has. *Wildeor* is a word we need today if we are to find inborn good in wild things. To me, at least, it is a nod that another has a freestanding self and calls for you to think well of it, unless you are to show yourself as an unworthy wight.^[4] The meaning of *wildeor* is the bedrock for how we must deal with other Earthlings—lest the Anthropocene harshly and madly prunes it of leaves, twigs, and even great limbs. Lovers of wild things should take the word *wildeor* to heart and to tongue. The zeitgeist of *Conservation vs. Conservation* is that the struggle between wilderness/wildlife conservationists and resourcists in the twentieth century is over will in Earth. Indeed, the whole tale of Man is over such will. The answer to *whose will?* is not only two sides in the American public lands fight, but the underlying question of Man in its behaviorally modern kind of the last 50,000 years.

Founder of The Wilderness Society Bob Marshall saw will of the land in wilderness. In 1930, he wrote that wilderness has "its entire freedom from the manifestations of human will."^[5] Two hundred years ago, George Gordon, Lord Byron, understood this, too.

*Where things that own not man's dominion dwell,
And mortal foot hath ne'er or rarely been...* ^[6]

This self-willed-land meaning of wilderness overshadows all others. Wilderness means land beyond Man's will.^[7] Land beyond Man's will is a slap in the face to the arrogance of humanism—elitist or common man, capitalist or socialist, first worlder or third—and for the new *überarrogance* of the Anthropoceniacs; for all, it is also something to fear.^[8]

Wilderness and Evolution

Over sixty years ago, Aldo Leopold saw wilderness as the "theater" for the "pageant of



Boundary Waters Wilderness

evolution.”[\[9\]](#) Evolution is self-willed. [\[10\]](#) The land where evolution can happen is self-willed land, outstandingly for big wildbeasts. Ecologically, Wilderness Areas are “self-regulating ecosystems” in the words of Michael Soulé, the conservation biologist who best knows and understands wilderness.[\[11\]](#) Self-willed land is another way of saying self-regulating ecosystems.

Among the more thoughtful ecologists of our time were two National Park Service biologists, George Collins and Lowell Sumner. In 1952, they flew into the eastern Brooks Range in Alaska to weigh that little-known landscape of millions of acres without roads or hamlets.

Though the eastern Brooks Range never became a National Park, in 1960 after a long back-and-forth it was set up as the nearly 10 million-acre Arctic National Wildlife Range (now Refuge) by President Eisenhower. Aldo Leopold thought Sumner the best field naturalist he knew, but Sumner with his friend Collins was also a wilderness thinker at Leopold’s top rung on the ladder. It’s a shame neither of them wrote books. After wandering the landscape and talking around the campfire that summer, Sumner and Collins called for northeastern Alaska to be set aside as a wilderness—foremost a landscape-big wilderness where evolution could have “freedom to continue, unhindered and forever if we are willing, the particular story of Planet Earth unfolding here...where its native creatures can still have the freedom to pursue their future, so distant, so mysterious.”[\[12\]](#) Here they built on Leopold’s thought of wilderness as where “the pageant of evolution” played.[\[13\]](#)

The tie between evolution and life and land being self-willed is strong, indeed it may well be the bedrock way of seeing wilderness.

Happy trails,

Dave Foreman
Sandia Wilderness Area



© Nancy Morton

Adapted from Chapter 1 of my forthcoming book *Conservation vs. Conservation*.

[\[1\]](#) Now with four wheels, I know.

[\[2\]](#) Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 1967), 1-2.

[\[3\]](#) Jay Hansford C. Vest, “Will of the Land,” *Environmental Review* (Winter 1985), 321-329.

[\[4\]](#) *Wellthoughten* (thought well of) is Old English for *honored, respected*. *Wight* lingers yet from Old English to mean an *individual, Man or deor*.

[\[5\]](#) Robert Marshall, “The Problem Of The Wilderness,” *The Scientific Monthly*, February 1930, 145.

[\[6\]](#) Quoted in Paul Shepard, *Man in the Landscape: A Historic View of the Esthetics of Nature* (University of Georgia Press, Athens, 2002), 181.

[\[7\]](#) Aldo Leopold defined “land” as a community of soils, waters, plants, and animals, in other words as an ecosystem. Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK 1989 [1949]), 204.

[\[8\]](#) Among those who think we should now call our geological age the *Anthropocene*, are some who grieve over how far we’ve gone in wounding and taking over Earth and all Earthlings, and some who make merry over our new-gained godlike might and lick their lips at being free to remake Earth to their wishes and wants. This latter bunch I call *Anthropoceniacs*—a blend of Anthropocene and maniac.

[\[9\]](#) Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 199.

[\[10\]](#) Because it is not driven from outside; nor is it teleological (goal-directed).

[\[11\]](#) Michael Soulé, pers. corres.

[\[12\]](#) Roger Kaye, *Last Great Wilderness: The Campaign to Establish the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge* (University of Alaska Press, Fairbanks, 2006), 21. Kaye quotes Lowell Sumner, “Arctic National Wildlife Refuge Address,” which Sumner sent to be read at the 25th Anniversary of the Refuge.

[\[13\]](#) Leopold, *Sand County Almanac*, 199.

Boundary Waters drawing by Susan Morgan



<http://www.rewilding.org>

To receive "Around the Campfire," contact Susan Morgan at:
rewilding@earthlink.net

Please forward "Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire" to conservationists in your address book and to conservation discussion groups to which you have access.

We apologize if you receive multiple postings.

Permission is given to reprint "Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire" so long as it is published in its entirety and with this subscription information. It will make a good regular feature for your group's newsletter, either printed or electronic. Please contact Susan Morgan before reprinting it, particularly if you want to print a shorter version.

"Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire" also appears on The Rewilding Institute website; past issues are archived there and available.

The blog feature on The Rewilding website also posts comments from readers. "Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire" has no subscription charge. It is funded by Rewilding partners who are donors to The Rewilding Institute.

If you like "Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire," please go to <http://www.rewilding.org> or click on the link above for information about how to support the work of The Rewilding Institute.

The Rewilding Institute, P.O. Box 13768, Albuquerque, NM 87192
www.rewilding.org

[Click to view this email in a browser](#)

If you no longer wish to receive these emails, please reply to this message with "Unsubscribe" in the subject line or simply click on the following link: [Unsubscribe](#)

P.O. Box 13768
Albuquerque, 87192
US

[Read](#) the VerticalResponse marketing policy.

