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Around the Campfire with Uncle Dave Foreman



Faraway and Nearby

A tired old broadside against Wilderness Areas goes something like this: “By working to shield and set aside far-off lands as Wilderness Areas, conservationists shun the land where people live and work.” I heard this back in the 1970s from urban environmentalists. Wilderness deconstructionists picked it up twenty years later. Whether they knew it was an old slap or thought it was a new insight of theirs, I do not know. Nonetheless, it needs to be answered.

A leading wilderness deconstructionist writes:

Idealizing a distant wilderness too often means not idealizing the environment in which we actually live, the landscape that for better or worse we call home. Most of our most serious environmental problems start right here, at home, and if we are to solve those problems, we need an environmental ethic that will tell us as much about using nature as about not using it. The wilderness dualism tends

to cast any use as ab-use, and thereby denies us a middle ground in which responsible use and non-use might attain some kind of balanced, sustainable relationship.[\[1\]](#)

The wilderness idea is half of an either/or dichotomy: either devote an area to human inhabitation and destructive economic development, or preserve it in its pristine condition as wilderness.[\[2\]](#)

Both of these shots are made up out of thin air. They are mist and froth. There is nothing true behind either. The dichotomies are all in the heads of the writers; they are not in the history of conservation. The first statement is a playback of a Golden Oldie environmentalist swat at conservation, which said “Wilderness, when you get down to it, is of piddling worth alongside the threats that could harm Man and where we live. It’s just not *relevant*, man.” The writers also thoroughly muddle the work of conservationists over scores of years. They downplay the wounds Man has wreaked upon the land and seem to think we can live anywhere and everywhere.

I think we are on shaky ground to “idealize” any kind of land or water, whether a faraway self-willed landscape full of wildeors or a human-willed woodlot where the biggest wildeor is a raccoon. We don’t need to idealize to find Nature of however many acres or depth of wildness lovely and enthralling. We need true-to-life knowledge and time to watch and think. This is not a new catcall that I need to answer. It has been a tired whine from urban environmentalists against wilderness and wildlands conservationists for more than forty-five years. It is an old environmentalist vs. conservationist wrangle to say that our “most serious environmental problems” are at home.

This slam is all make-believe. I’ve been kicking about the wilderness field for a mighty long time and I don’t really know anyone who thinks as we are drawn by the academics quoted above.

Moreover, wilderness deconstructionists seem to think that it is unfair to say Man harms Earth. If so, they must be putting blindfolds on so they don’t feel bad about themselves. They are also looking at Man’s world instead of the wild world.

Nonetheless, these outlandish, make-believe falsehoods roll out one kind of enviro-resourcist belief. In thinking we back an “either/or dichotomy” (zone the land as protected Wilderness Areas, or zone it as sacrifice areas where industrialism can run mad), such scholars thoroughly misunderstand the work of the conservation clan. We have fought for Wilderness Areas, yes; we have also fought like hell for thoughtful, careful, even-handed stewardship of other lands. We have fought to keep wild rivers free from dams; we have also fought to keep pastoral valleys free from dams. We once sought to bring “sustainable” and ecological “timber harvesting practices” to the National Forests until we woke up to see how hopeless it was given who was running the National Forests. We have worked to make livestock grazing on the public lands more ecological. We have fought for good caretaking of the wildlands and the somewhat-tamed lands all about the wilderness. The conservation team that is damned for only looking at Wilderness Areas in truth worked hard in the 1960s and 1970s for the Land and Water Conservation Fund Act (LWCFA), National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), Federal Lands Policy and Management Act (FLPMA), National Forest Management Act (NFMA), Resources Planning Act (RPA), and Endangered Species Act (ESA)—all of which dealt mostly with careful, more-ecologically grounded stewardship of non-wilderness lands. For scores of years, we have been doing what we are now asked to do. Where have these chiders been? Once again, the wilderness deconstructionists make-up a phony target to back their tale, and once again they show they have not bothered to learn much about the history of the wilderness and wildlife network. They kick a conservation clan with which they have never worked, about which they know little, and which they reshape into a slow, fat target.



Why we keep going back to Wilderness Areas is that every stab at “reform,” from NEPA to NFMA to RPA to FLPMA, gets gutted in the true world by agencies who believe in the righteousness of logging, livestock grazing, oil drilling, roads, and industrial play from downhill skiing to knobby tires. We have worked, my goodness, we have worked to get good stewardship on the land. The failure of wildlovers in earlier years to make logging and grazing on public lands less harmful is much of why many conservationists today

Shenandoah National Park Wilderness Area,
less than 2 hours drive from Washington, DC.
© Dave Foreman.

rightly call for an end to nearly all extraction on National Forests and BLM lands.[\[3\]](#) The free-for-all of the Bush Junior gang to shred ecological management policies and laws for the public lands screamed the truth of this; as now does the tenderfooted Obama administration, which has done so little to clean up the Bush mess. This is not a blast at all who work for the Forest Service and its sibling agencies. Among the conservationists I hold high, mind you, are scores of agency staffers who love wild things and who take their public trust to heart—notwithstanding diktats from higher-ups to break or bend laws to help landscaling businesses fleece the commonwealth.[\[4\]](#)

To understand why Wilderness Areas and other tough wild havens must be the heart of conservation strategy, one needs to spend time on the front lines, fighting Forest Service timber sales, staving off BLM oil leasing in roadless areas, going toe to toe with loggers and snowmobilers, filing appeals and lawsuits against agency “development” ransacking, and lobbying members of Congress to keep wilderness and wild things alive.

The Wilderness Act was not so much reform legislation as a monkeywrench in the gears. It says, “We know you (Forest Service, Park Service, other agencies) cannot on your own keep wilderness and wild things hale and whole on the lands with which you are entrusted. Therefore, we are tying your hands in these ways on our last wilderness: no roads, no motorized vehicles or equipment, no logging, no developments.” Through long years of hard work, knowledge, and bitter letdown, winning conservationists have taken off the Pollyanna glasses after starting out believing their civics textbooks’ model of how democracy was meant to work.



I think we should keep working for better stewardship of what is nearby. However, I am much less hopeful than are guileless wilderness deconstructionists as to what we will gain. One says that “alternatives to industrial agriculture should be encouraged through policy changes”; that urban sprawl should be brought in line by “planning and zoning”; that timber should be “harvested ecologically and sustainably.” This is something new? All that has been our work for more than a hundred years. We’ve gotten our

Sycamore and Saguaro in Pusch Ridge Wilderness Area, which is accessible by Tucson city bus service.
© Dave Foreman.

noses bloodied from running into swinging ax handles. You think Wilderness upsets the yahoos? Try talking zoning, planning, and “alternatives to industrial agriculture” to the property-rights militia and agribiz plowboys if you want sparks.

We've been through all this a thousand times before; we're still working for better stewardship on the land.

“Sustainable use” is not a good stand-in for Wilderness Areas—even in its flawless embodiment, much less in the run-of-the-mill gobbling that calls itself sustainable. Though to be straight, I can't dredge up any good cases of *long-term* sustainable resource use—if wild things are weighed.

Twenty years ago, J. Baird Callicott came up with a “sustainable development alternative” to Wilderness Areas. On one hand, I was only bothered by the either-or. What he offered didn't need to be in *competition* with Wilderness Areas; it could have been offered in *complementation* to Wilderness Areas. He didn't need to knock the Wilderness Idea at all. He could have said, “We need to protect existing Wilderness Areas and expand their size and number; we also need to manage the lands around them in a way informed by ecology and based on maintaining biodiversity and sustainable human communities.” In other words, what he offered could have been wholly upbeat—and not bear the likelihood for mischief that makes his path so worrisome for the Tree of Life.

The way to go about this was better shown by a wide sweep of wildlovers in the southwestern United States and northwestern Mexico at the turn of the century.

In 2000, The Wildlands Project and other groups offered the Sky Islands Wildlands Network (SIWN), a blend of Wilderness Areas and compatible-use areas on the United States-Mexico border, both public and private, that cares about the whole landscape and the folks on the land. I was the lead author. SIWN debunks the either/or put-down of wilderness since it is grounded (in Dave Brower's words) on both/and.[\[5\]](#)



As for working on faraway, romantic wilderness and shunning our backyards, Samuel Hays rightly writes that “most wilderness engagement does not look toward some remote area, but toward the area of one's personal experience—my backyard.”[\[6\]](#) While I have fought for Wilderness Areas all over the world, one of those I have worked hardest on is truly my backyard—two suburban blocks away. The 40,000-acre Sandia Mountains Wilderness Area in the Cibola National Forest comes down to the city limits of

Jack Kutz and Jay Sorenson at memorial for Phil Tollefsrud in Sandia Open Space. All three were key players in designating the Sandia Wilderness Area and then gaining the city open space along the western border. All three are now sadly departed.
© Dave Foreman.

Albuquerque. I go there three or four times a week. Most grassroots wilderfolks I know have I likewise fought for their backyards, the wildernesses they can get to quickly and that they go to often. However, the wilderness deconstructionists are dealing in thoughts, not in the ground. After the Albuquerque backers of a Sandia Wilderness got a law in 1978, they began to work on getting the city and county to buy a strip of undeveloped private ranchland between the sprawl and the Cibola National Forest. Instead of being another suburb, that strip is now open space buffering the Wilderness from the city. When I first drafted this, an Albuquerque City Councilor, Martin Heinrich, who started work as a wilderness booster when he first came to Albuquerque, was putting another square mile of land into the open space. So much for the misunderstanding that wilderfolks do not work on backyard lands. (Shortly after his work on the open space, Heinrich was elected as Albuquerque's member of Congress. After serving two terms, he was elected as a United States Senator from New Mexico in 2012. I can think of no one who can match him for hands-on knowledge of wilderness in the Congress. Nor do I know of anyone else in Congress who has spent the time he has in wilderness.)

Another way to look at this "distant wilderness" is to reckon just how far away designated Wilderness Areas (including California, New York, and Alaska state Wilderness Areas) are from our cities. In the West, if we call a metropolitan area of 100,000 residents a city, how many are more than an hour away from a Wilderness Area? I find two: Boise and Spokane, both of which are about an hour and a half away (although undesignated wilderness is closer). In the East? You may be happily taken aback to know how many cities are within a two-hour drive of a designated Wilderness Area: Burlington, New York City, Albany, Philadelphia, Washington, Richmond, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, Asheville, Columbia, Charleston, Atlanta, Jacksonville, Orlando, Tampa-St. Petersburg, Ft. Myers, Miami, Birmingham, Little Rock, Memphis, Knoxville, Louisville, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Oklahoma City, Houston, just for starters.[\[7\]](#) Can we now say that we have brushed away this mistaken slap at Wilderness?



Recently, a civil rights activist chided Wilderness Areas for being discriminatory because they were too far away for inner city folks to get to on public transportation. Now, I sympathize because I very much want to get inner city folks outside to feel the wild. But this is another groan pulled out of thin air. Just down the street from my house is a city of Albuquerque bus stop—about one hundred yards from a Sandia Wilderness trailhead. Moreover, public transport can take

Sandia Foothills Open Space
© Dave Foreman

one to Wilderness Area trailheads in Tucson and—goodheavens—the Los Angeles metro area! Others cities with easy access to Wilderness Areas include San Diego, Reno, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Salt Lake City, and Anchorage. In these cities one can take public transportation to trailheads into designated

Wilderness Areas.[\[8\]](#)

Despite the muddled ones who create false dichotomies, there is nothing wrong with working to keep wild faraway landscapes where one will never set foot. Such wild landscapes are the best neighborhoods for true wilddeors. Working for wilderness you may never see on the ground is the most selfless, high-minded work a wildlover can do.



Dave Foreman at a Sandia Wilderness strategy meeting in the 1970s.

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[\[1\]](#) Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," 85.

[\[2\]](#) Callicott, "Critique and Alternative," 57.

[\[3\]](#) See Dave Foreman, *The Great Conservation Divide* (Raven's Eye, Durango, CO, 2014) to understand this.

[\[4\]](#) Todd Wilkinson, *Science Under Siege: The Politicians' War on Nature and Truth* (Johnson Books, Boulder, CO, 1998), gives the when, where, who, what, and why of how government biologists and others have been beaten up by politicians and agency heads for doing their job. Jim Baca, former director of the Bureau of Land Management and likely the most honest agency head I've known, wrote the Introduction.

[\[5\]](#) Dave Foreman, Kathy Daly, Barbara Dugelby, Roseann Hanson, Robert E. Howard, Jack Humphrey, Leanne Klyza Linck, Rurik List, and Kim Vacariu, *The Sky Islands Wildlands Network Conservation Plan* (The Wildlands Project, Tucson, AZ, 2000). An overlook is Dave Foreman, Barbara Dugelby, Jack Humphrey, Bob Howard, and Andy Holdsworth, "The Elements of a Wildlands Network Conservation Plan: An Example from the Sky Islands," *Wild Earth*, Spring 2000, 17-30. Several other articles in this special issue of *Wild Earth* look at other sides of the Sky Islands Wildlands Network.

Send five bucks (to cover postage and handling) to TRI, POB 13768, Albuquerque, NM 87192 and we'll mail you a copy of that classic issue of *Wild Earth*.

[\[6\]](#) Hays, "The Trouble with Bill Cronon's Wilderness," 30.

[\[7\]](#) If you know of other cities where one can get to a Wilderness Area in two hours or less, please send me their names.

[\[8\]](#) If you know of other cities, even those with fewer than 100,000 folks, where public transportation

can get you within easy walking of a designated Wilderness Area, please send me their names and any other information.



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