

Appreciating Wilderness

BY SUSAN P. BRATTON

From the scenic wonders of designated wilderness areas to the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs that link them in a natural tapestry, the entire network is an important spiritual resource, an interactive exercise in understanding God's will and original intentions for creation.

The concept of a designated wilderness is among the most American of environmental values. It's been embraced by governments on all continents as they struggle to provide recreation for their increasingly urban populations and mitigate the impacts of human development on the earth's many ecosystems.

The modern wilderness movement, much influenced by Romanticism, arose in response to nineteenth century urbanization and the closing of the western American frontier. Today when someone mentions a "wilderness" we visualize the sunset over Yosemite Half-Dome, a quiet paddle in the Boundary Waters Canoe Area, or a Kenyan safari with lions prowling around the camp. In the post-industrial western mind, wilderness is a protected natural area that is as free as possible from human development, providing a respite from the demands of technology.

As many countries expanded their efforts after World War II to protect relatively undisturbed lands and waters with high biological diversity, environmental historians and philosophers began to critique Christianity as antagonistic to wilderness. They argued the Old Testament is anthropocentric and awards humans the right to extract any and all natural resources from Eden onward. Furthermore, these critics said, Scripture treats wilderness as hostile to human endeavor, and even demonic: for instance, that Christ's ascetic confrontation with Satan occurs in the desert and on the

mount may lead Christians to fear and devalue unoccupied terrains. Roderick Nash, in his much reprinted volume *Wilderness and the American Mind*, famously cites the Puritans' belief that they were overcoming the wilderness and replacing it with a New Jerusalem as evidence of deep-rooted Christian theological suspicion of uncultivated forests and peaks.¹

Yet these arguments are far from persuasive. For example, the Puritan influence on the modern wilderness movement is much more complex. As dour a figure as the fiery preacher Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) strolled through the rolling woodlands in the Berkshire Mountains, at the edge of the frontier in western Massachusetts, in order to appreciate God's handiwork and to find quiet places to pray. By the mid-nineteenth century, the Puritan intellectual lineage had generated New England Transcendentalism, which encouraged appreciation of natural areas. In the same era, Christian cosmology inspired the landscape paintings of the Hudson River School: the canvases of Fredric Edwin Church (1826-1900), a Dutch Reformed deacon, implied the hand of God was painting the brilliant sunsets over Mount Katahdin, the Maine peak that is the current northern terminus of the Appalachian Trail. Indeed, as historian Mark Stoll points out, many American environmental leaders from John Muir (1838-1914) to Rachel Carson (1907-1964) had Calvinist backgrounds.²

The first step in sorting out the question of Christian relationship to wilderness is to understand the modern term is multi-faceted. Its meanings have expanded far beyond the original Anglo-Saxon implication of a wild and savage land, its use by the editors of the King James Version of the Bible to translate words which meant desert or open grazing land, and its historic American context, with its unfortunate implication that lands held by Indians were in essence unoccupied. The wilderness as free of humanity is a construct of colonization and industrialization. For instance, Moses, who guided his sheep through the wilderness of Sin and was busy with his flocks when he encountered the burning bush on Mount Horeb, did not have the entire Sinai to himself. The U.S. Army removed the remaining Blackfeet from Yellowstone in order to create the first U.S. National Park. Today, legally designated wilderness, such as the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area, bans wheeled vehicles and must meet minimum acreage criteria. We use the term much more broadly, however, to describe natural areas with little human development. The managers of the Appalachian Trail, for example, honor wilderness values, even if most of the trail does not traverse "legal" wilderness.

The second step is to identify the relevant Christian traditions that generate wilderness and preservationist values. The Old Testament associates intentional journeys into the wilderness – such as Hagar departing from Abraham's camp and Elijah removing himself from the ire of Jezebel – with opportunities to escape threat, gain courage, and communicate with God. Prophetic wilderness sojourns often incorporate a theophany, a direct

encounter with God or God's messengers, such as Hagar meeting an angel at the spring, or Moses listening to the voice of God from the burning bush. A second theme of the Torah and the historic books is acquiring the courage or obedience to face adversity or to accomplish God's will. The Exodus was both a cathartic and a nation-building experience for God's people. David's early service as a shepherd where lions roamed grew into his team work

The Scriptures may not be explicitly preservationist, but they do proclaim God's role as Creator and utilize the wild as an example of God's providential care for all creatures, his joy in what he has made, and the beauty of God as emanating from creation.

with Jonathan who climbed sheer cliffs in order to raid enemy military camps. The New Testament continues the concept of the theophany or encounter with the otherworldly in isolated spots or on a high mountain, and of the obedient servant as victorious, when Christ rebukes Satan for tempting him to turn the stones to bread, and toward the end of his earthly ministry appears transfigured to his

loyal disciples on the mount.³ The Scriptures are pre-industrial and do not explicitly forward a preservationist ethic. Throughout they proclaim God's role as Creator and utilize the wild as an example of God's providential care for all creatures, his joy in what he has made, and the beauty of God as emanating from creation. The wisdom literature and poetic books, with texts such as Psalm 104 and God's speech from the whirlwind in Job 38-41, are exceptionally rich in imagery of the wild.

Fourth-century Christian ascetics withdrew to the deserts of Egypt and Palestine in order to free themselves of temptation, concentrate on godly tasks such as hand copying Scriptures, and maintain their continual prayers and praise of God. Elderly monks allowed lions and wolves to share their caves. St. Antony struck a compromise with the wild asses raiding his garden. The passion for the desert spread north with Christian evangelists to boreal forests and chilly lochs. The eighth-century artists and scholars who produced the Celtic high crosses and illuminated manuscripts, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Book of Kells, valued time spent alone in a hermitage above a lake or on a small island with only the sound of the breakers and sea birds for company. Pursuit of holiness required time alone with God. The northern monastics protected wildlife around their sanctuaries from hunting. The tales of St. Cuthbert relate that when he finished praying standing in the North Sea, two friendly otters came to warm his feet.⁴

While the first non-conformist Protestants rejected the monastic vocation, they accepted Sunday strolls as a legitimate break from the week's

labor and for enjoyment of creation. Much American valuation of wilderness has grown out of an aesthetic that assumes God's immanence is evident everywhere in nature. In some cases God's presence is symbolic or metaphorical, such as in paintings by Thomas Cole (1801-1848) where a jutting peak as the residence of God rises above a rich Eden, or showers over a New England river point to God's providence and blessing. Such images argued for protection of scenic landscapes and the last "untrammelled" remnants of the frontier. Paintings of Yellowstone by Thomas Moran (1837-1926) were shown in eastern cities just prior to the designation of the first National Park.

For Christians today, the question becomes: is wilderness still an important site for spiritual practice? The theophanies of the Bible were unique events in sacred history and, with the exception of the Exodus, concerned only prophets and leaders. Nevertheless, the central role of wilderness religious experience in these keystone texts implies its continuing relevance.

The managers of U.S. wilderness areas have always considered personal spiritual use of these spaces as legitimate, even if they are somewhat unsure what this actually means. Most academic studies of the benefits of wilderness recreation have engaged religious motives in passing, if at all. Yet on the Christian side, mindful walking or going on a walking "pilgrimage" has experienced a mild revival. In the United Kingdom, the countryside path system includes right of ways for "saints" roads. Linking historic monastic sites, St. Cuthbert's Way from Melrose Abby, in Scotland, to Lindisfarne (Holy Island) in England, for example, has been so popular, that St. Oswald's Way now heads south along the coast from Holy Island to Durham. While not wilderness by U.S. standards, walkers on these saints' paths traverse heath-covered ridges and cross the still dangerous pilgrim sands, hopefully at low tide. The sands are symbolic of the death of the old self and the new life of baptism. In the United States, a trail intended to celebrate inter-religious use recently opened in the Rockies.

In *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail* I describe the spiritual and religious experience of twenty-first century long-distance backpackers.⁵ In my surveys of hikers, interviews, and review of hiker journals, I have found few reports of intense numinous experience, visions of God, or direct encounters with the divine. However, reports of a heightened perception of the presence of God or of the divine in nature are common.

For many who hike the Appalachian National Scenic Trail, which extends almost 2200 miles from Georgia to Maine, it is a "one step up" form of spiritual development. Many of the twenty-something hikers were out for challenge and did not articulate religious goals or perceptions. Around a quarter of Christians with a denominational affiliation, in fact, did not think of the trek as a spiritual or religious venture. In contrast, some hikers without a religious background began to think about their own spiritual potential when on the trail. Nominal Christians reported thinking about God and specifically God's hand in creation. Committed Christians tended to explore

their care for others and their potential for improving their relationships and service.

Martin Robinson portrays Christian pilgrimage as progressing through four stages: the call of God, the encounter with God, the beckoning God, and finally traveling for Christ.⁶ The Appalachian Trail hikers of all religious backgrounds that I surveyed were, indeed, at different stages,

While a few large areas of wilderness are critical to protecting the planet's biodiversity, the stepping stones and linkages between them also play a critical role, and these are likely to be in our own backyards.

although they might be better titled: exploration (examining the spiritual self), relation (recognizing and accepting the transcendent), maturation (growing in understanding), and incorporation (thinking about ministry to or care for others).

The Appalachian Trail adventure did, on average, promote spiritual wellness in multiple domains for

successful long distance travelers. Hikers, religious or not, enjoyed new friendships, savored the beauty in nature, and improved their physical fitness. Communitarian engagement, rather than appreciation of isolation, was among the most prevalent outcomes. Significant proportions reported assistance in emotional or physical healing, accomplishing a life transition such as leaving college or getting over a divorce, or improved self-esteem.

Interestingly, both pre-trail and on-trail levels of prayer or meditation were correlated to multiple positive outcomes, particularly in the personal domain. Greater frequency of prayer, while not influencing perception of nature, generated feelings of peace and harmony. The level of religious and spiritual engagement with the Appalachian Trail was notably correlated to a perceived increase in positive feelings about the meaning of life. The ancient concept that prayer is valuable and even necessary preparation for a wilderness sojourn proved valid for post-modern backpackers. Many studies of wilderness recreation have emphasized "peak experience" — the rush of plunging down the Colorado River rapids on a raft, or of summiting on Mount Rainer. Yet on the Appalachian Trail a number of key spiritual outcomes improved with mileage and took two hundred miles or more to fully initiate. Wilderness and effort, either in terms of spiritual practice or of literal climbing, still go together.

The effects of frequent prayer and greater mileage were largely on different areas of hiker perception. This implies, and it is certainly my own experience, that at least some of the benefits of wilderness are available during short excursions. For those who are comfortable outdoors, wild nature

offers isolation and time free from human pressures. Woods and river banks offer quiet places to pray and to listen to God, just as they did for Jonathan Edwards. Recent research suggests that exposure to nature can stimulate a sense of humility⁷ and elicit thoughts of caretaking.⁸ Just as the first Christian monastics believed, wild nature itself is effective in countering acquisitiveness and materialism. Wilderness offers beauty and value beyond the things and goods we personally own or control.

Since spending time surrounded by wild nature has moral and spiritual value for postmodern Christians, I believe we have a special obligation to care for the wild. Just before I wrote this paragraph, a large flock of sand hill cranes flew above my home within the Waco city limits. They were high overhead, but their guttural voices echoed down to my lawn. The cranes are a reminder of how integrally linked one part of the natural world is to another. The gaunt grey birds, with their distinctive red crowns, overwinter in the wetlands on the Texas coast. Now an uncommon sight, they once were frequent visitors along the Brazos River as the seasons changed. Along with the endangered, and even taller, whooping cranes, they take advantage of northern summers and the rich food resources the ponds and marshes of formerly glaciated landscapes provide. Not just their magnificent frames and wing spans, but their complex migration routes and graceful dances on their breeding grounds are works of God. They are our equivalent of the scene described by the psalmist:

The trees of the LORD are watered abundantly,
the cedars of Lebanon that he planted.
In them the birds build their nests;
the stork has its home in the fir trees.

May the glory of the LORD endure forever;
may the LORD rejoice in his works....

Psalm 104:16-17, 31

The future of the sandhills and whoopers rests not just in the larger nature reserves – such as Aransas National Wildlife Refuge near Rockport, TX, or Wood Buffalo National Park, one of the largest parks in Canada – but on care for our rivers and for many smaller wetlands and watersheds in between. While a few large areas are critical to protecting the planet's biodiversity, the stepping stones and linkages also play a critical role, and these are likely to be in our own backyards.

One argument often made against setting aside wilderness and natural areas is they undermine the economy and take away jobs. That is, they harm people in the process of sequestering the undeveloped. This conclusion, however, is very superficial. Large parks, such as Yellowstone, are often more economically productive than using the same lands for ranching, due to the parks' value to tourism and attracting seasonal residents. Even small,

if carefully selected, bird reserves in south Texas draw bird watchers from throughout the United States, aiding business development in rural towns. The urban park near my home has over four hundred acres, much of it still in forest and cliffs. In 1910, a thoughtful local family with civic-minded supporters set some logged-over cedar stands and pastures aside as a “green belt.” Today the park receives hundreds of visitors each week representing a full span of socio-economic backgrounds. The “regulars” range from families with strollers to serious mountain bikers.⁹ The same area utilized as a woodlot would not have even a shadow of the park’s social and economic value. Wilderness and natural areas play subtle roles in our sense of community and our commitment to democracy. They also encourage physical fitness and peaceful avocations, such as fly fishing and kayaking. Again the entire network is important – from the international gems with their scenic wonders, to the ordinary oak forests and cattail marshes adjoining suburbs. Commitment to natural area conservation provides not just for sandhill cranes, but for children on their first camp out. Justice requires providing access to wild nature for families who cannot afford to see the Alps or stay at a lodge at the Grand Canyon.

From a Christian perspective, we need to recognize not just that God values the biodiversity found in the many species of birds, whales, and wildflowers, but that creation is an interactive exercise in understanding God’s will and original intentions. Wilderness and natural areas provide ecosystem services, such as sequestering carbon, protecting water quality, inhibiting flooding, and even moderating microclimate. Just as in our other relationships – those with God and people – when we care in a thoughtful and informed way, we receive much joy and beauty in return and our own lives are much enriched by the effort.

In conclusion, for today’s Christians wilderness still provides an opportunity for reflection and allows us to tap the deepest roots of our spiritual heritage. God’s providence still flows through the wilds, just as it did in the days of the psalmist. We should join the Lord in loving all creation, and incorporate wilderness preservation into a biblically sound environmental ethos, as the earth’s ecosystems suffer ever-increasing stress.

NOTES

1 Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1967).

2 Mark Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997). See also Belden Lane, *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988), and Barbara Novak, *Nature and Culture: American Landscape and Painting, 1825-1875* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

3 Susan Power Bratton, *Christianity, Wilderness, and Wildlife* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009). See also Susan Power Bratton, *Environmental Values in Christian Art* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008) for a discussion of natural imagery including wild animals in Christian art.

4 Ibid.

5 Susan Power Bratton, *The Spirit of the Appalachian Trail: Community, Environment, and Belief* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2012).

6 Martin Robinson, "Pilgrimage and Mission," in Craig Bartholomew and Fred Hughes, eds., *Explorations in a Christian Theology of Pilgrimage* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 170-183.

7 Salif Mahamane and Wade Rowatt (mentor), "The Effect of Photographic Depictions of Nature on Positive/Negative Affect and Humility," poster presentation for Baylor University Scholars Week, 2009.

8 Netta Weinstein, Andrew K. Przybylski, and Richard M. Ryan, "Can Nature Make Us More Caring? Effects of Immersion in Nature on Intrinsic Aspirations and Generosity," *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 35:10 (2009), 1315-1329.

9 Mark E. Firmin, *William Cameron Park: A Centennial History, 1910-2010* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).



SUSAN P. BRATTON

is Professor of Environmental Studies at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.