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# Ecofeminism and Wilderness

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## Introduction

A basic tenet of ecofeminism holds that the patriarchal domination of women runs parallel to the patriarchal domination of nature (Warren 1994). Both women and nature have been controlled and manipulated to satisfy masculinist desires, we say; both have been denied autonomous expression and self-determination. But what, then, shall we make of wilderness? In the United States alone, nearly a hundred million publicly-owned acres—close to three percent of the nation's land mass—has been given wilderness designation by the federal government, ensuring that at least some of nature's processes will be left alone to unfold in their own way (Watson 1993).

For those of us who cherish particular wilderness areas as a result of our experiences there, or who simply find comfort in the thought of uninhabited spaces, it is tempting to imagine that wilderness exists as an exception to the rule of patriarchal domination, that it has somehow been overlooked. There is a small degree of truth in that fantasy: much of the land that originally received wilderness designation under the Wilderness Act of 1964 was land so remote, inaccessible, or rugged that attempts at cultivation, resource extraction, or settlement would have been futile anyway. But the preservation movement has grown dramatically in the past thirty years, and, increasingly, the land set aside as wilderness is land that developers, mining interests, timber companies, and motorized recreationists claim has "higher" and "better" uses, another way of saying that it is land that is amenable to control.<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the continued existence of wilderness is no oversight: it is, instead, the outcome of often bitterly fought campaigns between passionate rivals.

Nevertheless, we also cannot lull ourselves into complacently thinking that the preservation of wilderness is the result of the "good guys" winning, or of the obvious moral superiority of arguments in support of ecological integrity. However committed to natural diversity and biocentrism some environmental activists may be, the ultimate authority to create wilderness is in the hands of Congress and the President—the same people who have willingly authorized nuclear waste dumps, destruction of old-growth forests, diversion and damming of rivers, draining of wetlands, and countless other environmental abuses. Either this is inconsis-

tency on a massive scale, or else—as I argue—wilderness protection is somehow an integral part of the overall scheme of domination. Ecofeminists have been largely silent on the issue of wilderness in the United States, preferring to focus on problems that appear more immediate and pressing. Insofar as we have considered wilderness at all, it has usually been in the context of the so-called Third World, where wilderness set-asides have displaced traditional populations or have severely impeded basic sustenance activities, usually those carried on by women.<sup>2</sup> In the United States, we seem to think, wilderness is both a nonissue from a feminist perspective and one that, in any event, is being well attended to by wilderness advocates. But as I demonstrate in this article, we are missing the real point. The issue for us is not the amount of land which is set aside but rather the conceptual foundations on which wilderness protection currently rests. These foundations are the same ones that support the rationalist project of controlling nature and, by extension, the project of controlling women, and they are therefore wholly antithetical to ecofeminist philosophy. Moreover, competing conceptions of the value and desirability of wilderness, particularly those advanced by Deep Ecologists, are similarly incongruent with ecofeminist aspirations. The adage “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” is a good one, but as ecofeminists we apply it to wilderness at our own peril. Until the basis for wilderness protection is radically reconceptualized, the task of stopping environmental degradation in nonwilderness areas will become increasingly Sisyphean.

## The Culture of Nature

Say “wilderness” in the United States, and familiar landscapes spring to mind: the snow-capped mountains of the West, the multicolored expanse of the Grand Canyon, the deep forests and lakes of the North, the sprawling tundra of Alaska. Even though, in real life, such landscapes often abut intense urban and commercial developments, and are themselves likely to be dotted with tents, packtrains, canoes, and hordes of adventurers and tourists, in our imaginations wilderness is still untouched and unpopulated. Indeed, as defined in the Wilderness Act of 1964, wilderness,

in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is . . . an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. . . . [It is land which retains] its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural condition, and which (1) generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work’s substantially unnoticeable.” (Sec. 1131[c])

Although the act further stipulates that wilderness “*may* also contain ecological, geological, or other features of scientific, educational, scenic, or historical value” (sec. 1131 [c]), it is clear that the defining feature of wilderness is the absence of humans.<sup>3</sup> Wilderness is distinguished much less by what it *is* than by what it is *not*: a place of human abode.

If wilderness were merely a category of land use, like, say, industrial parks, defining it by the absence of humans might not be problematic. Whether or not we approve of processing plants, refineries, and large-scale power generating facilities, we can generally agree that they are best situated at a remove from dense human settlements. But wilderness is more than a land-use designation: it is the part of our environment that is idealized as “perfect nature,” as, indeed, the highest or purest form of nature we have. In defining wilderness by the absence of humans, we are saying, in effect, that nature is at its best when utterly separated from the human world. The idea of wilderness is thus an extreme manifestation of the general Western conceptual rift between culture and nature.

Still, as Val Plumwood has pointed out, separation of the spheres of nature and culture is not in itself a bad thing; the problem is dualism, which she describes as

a relation of separation and domination inscribed and naturalised in culture and characterised by radical exclusion, distancing and opposition between orders constructed as systematically higher and lower, as inferior and superior, as ruler and ruled. (48)

Given the status accorded wilderness in contemporary America, one might conclude that no such dualism can be said to be operating in the case of wilderness; if anything, the “perfect nature” represented by wilderness is constructed as above and superior to human culture. However, such a conclusion would be premature. What operates here is not a simple higher-lower dualism, with culture on top and nature on the bottom; another dualism nests within the first one. Just as certain forms of culture are considered “low,” or “inferior,” and thus scorned, certain forms of nature are either elevated or denigrated. The problem lies in the premise that wilderness equals nature. Like the True Woman or the Noble Savage, wilderness is a construction of patriarchal thinking that defines an Other in ways that serve patriarchal interests while marginalizing all manifestations of that Other which exist outside the desired norm. Idealizing wilderness as “pure” or “perfect” nature ensures two things: first, that a privileged few will always be able to shake off the yoke of civilization—usually defined by reference to its “lower” aspects—and revert to a temporary state of primal purity where they can be appropriately humbled in the presence of God’s creation then return restored and refreshed to the challenges of the human world; and second, that the inferiority of all other expressions of nature will be reinforced, thereby justifying continuing

domination of them. Thus ecosystems that have been heavily influenced by human activities—precisely those ecosystems most in need of remedial attention—are doubly inferiorized. In the nature-culture dualism, they are not-culture; in the wilderness-domesticated dualism, they are not-good-nature. Even environmentalists, many of whom would reject the claim that human interests should always trump nature's, will often yield in situations where humans have already prevailed. For example, proposals to log ancient redwoods receive national attention, and draw protestors from around the country: untouched forests, as examples of "untrammelled nature," are everyone's concern. But business-as-usual timber sales, grazing, and mineral exploration ventures in areas of the national forests already designated for multiple use—despite the loss of habitat, stream degradation, soil erosion, and species displacement that these often entail—receive little or no attention except from those immediately affected. Similarly, while wilderness areas often use quotas to minimize human impact and maximize conditions of solitude, nonwilderness recreation lands in the public domain are often managed as "sacrifice areas," where any amount of use is acceptable.<sup>4</sup>

Idealized wilderness furthers dualistic thinking in other ways as well. In addition to hyperseparation of culture and nature, the valorization of wilderness contributes to what Plumwood calls the "logic of colonialism" by denying all human dependence on nature. If wilderness is pure nature, and if it is defined by the absence of humans, it follows by inference that humans can exist independently of nature. Ironically, this inference is reinforced by the "wilderness experience" itself. In their efforts to preserve the wild quality of wilderness areas, land managers have promoted the philosophies of "leave no trace," and "pack it in, pack it out," advising the would-be wilderness sojourner to carry with her all that she might need—food, shelter, protection from the elements—and to take nothing but photographs and memories from the experience. At the same time, manufacturers of high-performance outdoor clothing and equipment have reaped huge profits with products that ensure she will be impervious to the elements: water- and windproof clothing and tents, insulated sleeping pads and bags, sun blocks, water purifiers, insect repellents, "second-skin" blister and burn patches, freeze-dried food, global positioning devices, altitude sickness remedies, and so on, all so light in weight and small in bulk that they can be carried with only minimal effort in an ergonomically designed backpack. While all of these precautions no doubt *do* minimize human impacts on fragile ecosystems—as anyone who has seen the amount of destruction that can be wrought by backpackers intent on "roughing it" can attest—they also serve to reinforce the idea that humans are essentially alien to, and independent of, the natural world, and that human ingenuity can overcome all of nature's challenges.

Moreover, by pretending that human influence is manifested only by

human artifacts, as is done in the Wilderness Act, the very real impact of humans on wilderness areas—pollution, species extinction, fire and disease suppression—is trivialized or dismissed. Nature is reduced to a landscape, a backdrop; as long as human actions are invisible, they can be ignored.

Other elements of Plumwood's logic of colonialism are also evident in the mainstream cult of wilderness. In addition to hyperseparating oppositional categories and denying relations of dependence between them, the creation of dualism relies on incorporation, homogenization, and instrumentalization. In incorporation, the Other's autonomy is denied; it is defined only in relation to the master's Self, with the qualities "attributed or perceived [being] those which reflect the master's desires, needs and lacks" (Plumwood 52). To define wilderness in terms of human absence, rather than, say, in terms of the presence of healthy, complete, functioning ecosystems, is to incorporate or assimilate that absence into the center. Similarly, through homogenization, all differences in the inferiorized group are ignored. Thus, although wilderness ecosystems may include deserts, subalpine forests, and wetlands, this diversity is far less significant than the absence of humans. Instrumentalization completes the colonialist project by objectifying the Other as a means to the center's ends. Wilderness exists not for itself but for the recreational, scientific, life support, aesthetic, and spiritual needs of humans.<sup>5</sup>

When the *actual* condition of wilderness in this country is considered, rather than its *idealized* condition, its colonization becomes even more evident. In the legal definition of wilderness I cited above, a wilderness is an area of land that "generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature." Appearances are everything in the idea of wilderness, because there is no place in the lower forty eight states free from the deleterious impacts of human activities. Air pollution has led to the acidification of even remote alpine lakes; large predators such as grizzlies, mountain lions, and wolves have been all but eliminated; alien species of fish and animals have been intentionally introduced for the amusement of human hunters and anglers; nonnative plants such as dandelions and thistles have taken over mountain meadows; whole ecosystems have been altered by the suppression of fire, insects, and disease; an extensive network of trails has been established; human waste has contaminated lakes and streams; river channels have been altered by downriver dams and irrigation projects; and military and commercial aircraft fly overhead day and night. Add to these impacts the effects of the grazing, mining, logging, homesteading, and road building activities that preceded wilderness designation—and the mining and grazing activities that were "grandfathered in" under the 1964 act—and you have a wilderness that is far from "wild."<sup>6</sup> Instead, it is land frozen in time, retaining the appearance it

had for the first white settlers but held and managed as a storehouse of resources by and for the colonizer. Even where mineral and timber extraction have ceased, they have been replaced by the extraction of pleasures, which proceeds in relative safety now that dangerous natives, both human and animal, have been expelled. Some visitors to wilderness merely marvel at its Otherness, its mystery, its darkness, allowing themselves to "go native" for a while before returning home with their experiences as booty. But others profit from it, turning recreational challenge, spiritual uplift, and aesthetic beauty into goods for market. Wilderness supports whole industries: specialized backpacking and climbing gear designed to minimize all reliance on nature and all unpleasant experiences brought on by cold, rain, snow, insects, or sun; vision quests, challenge programs, and ecotourist offerings that promise to help us commune with our spirit guides, our higher powers, our inner selves, or with the essence of nature itself; and publishing empires that churn out a multitude of calendars, notecards, coffee table books, and posters that, like "soft pornography," act as a constant reminder of what real nature looks like.

As befits a colony, wilderness is governed by a whole bureaucracy of backcountry rangers, archaeologists, fisheries and wildlife specialists, range technicians, hydrologists, fire management officers, recreational planners, and outfitter-guide liaisons, all of whom are charged with determining what will and won't occur, what can and can't be taken into or brought out of wilderness, or what animals may and may not live in wilderness and in what numbers. And all the while they themselves live comfortably on its edges in an approximation or re-creation of "civilization"—which, of course, they lament, wallowing in an imperialist nostalgia for the "good old days" before tourism and second home development "ruined things."

It's true, of course, that wildness has not been completely colonized: wind and water still shape the rugged mountains and canyons of wilderness, melting snowpack and underground springs still feed the rivers, and countless species of plants, insects and small animals still live, reproduce and die in wilderness areas. As Tom Birch has pointed out, however imperfect wilderness areas may be, there's still a certain subversive wildness to be found therein.

This residual wildness, this independence of nature from human designs, has been the basis for Deep Ecology's love affair with wilderness. However, as I will show in the next section, Deep Ecology's philosophy of wilderness rests on many of the same colonizing distinctions that it claims to reject.



## Deep Ecology and Wilderness

Deep Ecologists have long criticized United States wilderness policy as hopelessly inadequate and wholly anthropocentric. Wilderness, they insist, should exist *not* as a playground, botanical warehouse, museum of natural history, or reserve of natural resources for humans but rather as a place where ecosystems and their nonhuman populations can enjoy self-determination (Devall and Sessions 1985). Nonhuman nature, they assert, has an inherent or intrinsic value;<sup>7</sup> its preservation and protection should not be conditioned on human needs, desires, or preferences. Using this ecocentric position as a starting point, they have concluded, quite accurately, that the current wilderness system is neither large enough nor diverse enough to provide for the self-determination of all living things.

Deep Ecology's limitations derive from its prescriptions for escaping the shallow ecological worldview of anthropocentrism. According to Deep Ecologists, the path to biospherical egalitarianism lies in self-realization, the process whereby the narrow boundaries of human consciousness are extended outward to the natural world. As Arne Naess describes it,

The requisite care [for the nonhuman world] flows naturally if the self is widened and deepened so that protection of free nature is felt and conceived of as protection of our very selves. (Seed et al. 1988, 29)

In this approach, the hyperseparation of humans and nature so evident in mainstream conceptions of wilderness is eradicated in one fell conceptual swoop. When we achieve self-realization, free nature is no longer Other, but Self, and we respond to its needs, desires, and interests as though they were our own. But note the qualifier here: "free" nature, nature that has not been colonized, that is rugged, independent, self-determining—a nature, in other words, that sounds suspiciously like the idealized Western Man. Through this process of identification, Deep Ecologists merely move from an idealized Other to an idealized Self; and egoism remains the basis for ethical action (Cheney 1989). Indeed, by denying otherness, Deep Ecology makes it impossible to see, let alone respond to, those situations in which the interests of others and the interests of one's self may be in conflict (Plumwood 1993, 178). *I* may value both my own life and that of humans in general, and on that basis may conclude that California condors, whooping cranes, Florida panthers, and other endangered fauna would endorse, if they could, the heroic efforts being made to keep them alive through captive breeding programs, planned releases, and high-tech monitoring and tracking. But I don't *know*: perhaps in a world where only fragments of hospitable habitat are possible any longer, some species might choose extinction. Perhaps ancient redwoods tire of the relentless passage of seasons, year after endless year, and long for the cataclysmic drama of a hurricane, or a logging



operation; we have no way of knowing. It is morally preferable, I suppose, to ascribe some independent interests to nature, rather than to assume that nature exists only to satisfy short-term human interests, but to assert that we know what those interests are, on the basis of our own culturally bound values, seems hopelessly arrogant.<sup>8</sup>

Merging with free nature doesn't end human-nature dualism, then: it merely changes its terms. Once again, certain aspects of nature are relegated to the margins. By emphasizing "free nature," Deep Ecology excludes the interests of "colonized nature." Domestic livestock, city parks, agricultural belts, urban wildlife, nonnative species, and artificial wetlands are thereby rendered insignificant except insofar as they constitute impediments to or opportunities for the territorial expansion of wildness. And by taking on the interests of free nature, Deep Ecologists also dismiss the interests of humans. Christine Cuomo, commenting on Arne Naess's proposal to reduce the human population to an "ecologically friendly" 100 million people, observes:

Naess and other Deep Ecologists . . . appear to register the ill-effects of an enormous human population as part of a battle between the human species and the Earth. . . . Sorely lacking is critical analysis of the universe of human social factors, many of which are related to issues of gender and oppression, contributing to the size of human populations, and of the assumptions about the nature of human impact on environments. (1994, 93)

Disregard for issues of interhuman oppression is further evidenced by Deep Ecologists' proposals for increasing wilderness areas in the United States to a size that would allow for the flourishing of nonhuman populations and the restoration of natural processes. Reed Noss (1991a, 1991b), for example, has argued that setting aside 50 percent of the United States would not be too much. Naess (1988) proposes only a third of a given country's territory for wilderness but suggests another third should be a "buffer zone" of land where some humans could live, although ecological processes would predominate; concentrated human population and activities would be limited to the remaining third of the geographic mass of the country. Assuming for the moment that these assessments of the amount of land necessary for ecosystem health are accurate, the question still remains, How would the human-occupied land be organized and divided? Without radical changes in economic systems, without the resolution of race, gender, and class oppression, without revolutionary upheavals in political structures, one can only assume that the interhuman relations would take the same form they had in the past, though in a smaller area, and that the burden of restoring ecosystem health would continue to be displaced onto those who are already most disenfranchised.<sup>9</sup> No wonder Deep Ecology is dominated by Euro-American males: it's one thing to accept the interests of free nature as your own when

gender, race, and economic status confer on you the same sorts of freedom you wish for cougars and grizzlies; it would be quite another when your circumstances dictate that you will pay the price for nature's freedom through your own continued dispossession, degradation, and suffering.

## Respect for the Other

Is it possible to have an ethic of respect for nature without assimilating it to Self? Put another way, can we accept that nature is indeed Other and yet not inferiorize it? Peter Reed, a critic of Deep Ecology, believed that the problem was not that humans viewed wild nature as Other but rather that we failed to value it for that otherness:

It is our very *separateness* from the Earth, the gulf between the human and the natural, that makes us want to do right by the Earth. . . . [N]ature is a stranger. It seems to me that recognizing the moral distance between ourselves and the world helps us recognize the values in nature that are totally independent of what we humans think is beautiful, right and good. . . . If we turn our attention . . . to a universe vast beyond our ability to comprehend, we might treat the Earth a little less arrogantly. (1989, 56)

Respect for nature as Other is, I think, preferable to a respect for nature as Self, but it still leaves us in a problematic position: in addition to running the risk of creating a schism between a "pure" nature defined by its Otherness and autonomy and a "tainted" nature characterized by interaction with humans, the radical Otherness approach proposed by Reed leaves open a danger of alienation, a sense of being apart from the world or of being homeless in it (Plumwood 1993, 162).

Plumwood argues that there must be a middle ground between characterizing nature as Other/different or as Self/same and suggests instead that we abandon hyperseparation in favor of a relationship that recognizes both continuity and difference between the natural and human worlds:

A theory of mutuality which acknowledges both continuity and difference provides an alternative way to view wilderness, recognising it as the domain of the uncolonised other. In this framework, "wilderness" does not designate an excluded place defined negatively, apart from self, alien and separate. Nor is wilderness assimilated to self. It is a domain where earth others are autonomous or *sovereign*, free to work things out according to self-determined patterns, which may be those of sameness or difference. (1993, 163)

Plumwood's characterization allows for a continuum of relations, a way of seeing the human and nonhuman worlds as sometimes overlapping, sometimes separated, but always operating within a larger flux of interdependence and interaction. It offers the intriguing challenge of

identifying and mapping the parallels and intersections between our worlds so that we might reveal the myriad connections, the kinds and degrees of our dependencies, the complexity of our relations (and of the natural world itself), and the simple truth that nature does not exist just to serve human ends. But Plumwood still misses the point when it comes to wilderness. “Uncolonised others” exist everywhere: the viruses and bacteria in our bodies are just as wild as the wolves that still roam the arctic tundra. And by the same token, the introduced elk and mountain goats and bighorn sheep that graze the alpine meadows of the Rocky Mountain wilderness areas are not much less colonized than the horses and cows grazing in the fenced pastures of the valleys below.

Ecofeminist silence on the matter of wilderness stems, I think, from this mistaken belief that wilderness in fact corresponds to some condition of wildness, some absence of colonization. If that were true—if wilderness were genuinely “the domain of the uncolonised other”—and if wilderness areas themselves were really separate from the human world, we might put the whole question of wilderness aside unless and until there were immediate threats to the sovereignty prevailing therein. But wilderness *is*, as I’ve shown, quite thoroughly colonized, even with its current protected status. So where does that leave us in our quest for an ecofeminist understanding of wilderness? In the final section, I argue that we need to jettison the whole Self-Other debate when speaking of wilderness. Indeed, I conclude, we may need to dispatch the idea of wilderness altogether.

## Ecofeminism and Wilderness

Any ecofeminist analysis of wilderness has to begin with a close examination of the very idea of wilderness and a challenge to the connected ontological claims that wildness exists, and is evidenced by an absence of humans. Wilderness is a cultural construction, after all, and as such is dependent on a particular matrix of historical, cultural, social, and economic factors. In the United States, where wilderness protection as we know it originated, wilderness is a product of several related beliefs, attitudes, and values that have evolved over time. For example, the fact that wilderness areas are by and large found in the Western United States, and are almost exclusively mountainous regions, is due less to any objective quality of wildness existing in abundance there than to historical patterns of land settlement by Euro-Americans whose agrarian ideals led them to establish human communities in valleys and grasslands. Similarly, the idea that wilderness is defined by the absence of humans is rooted both in Judeo-Christian theology<sup>10</sup> and in the simple consequences of geography: most of what we call wilderness isn’t amenable to human settlement due to extremes of climate and topography. And from a par-

ticularly ecofeminist standpoint, as shown earlier, the idea of wilderness originates at least in part in ideologies of conquest and domination of nature and of clearly demarcated boundaries between self and other.

Examined in this light, wilderness ceases to be an absolute and becomes a contingency, remarkable not for its separateness from human culture but for its connectedness to it. To use the language of post-modernism, wilderness is a site on which cultural patterns are inscribed. What we designate as wilderness, the activities we allow or forbid there, and the value we place on it are all parts of the script of human culture and cultural relations. If we stop imagining that wilderness equals nature, we can see and assess it as we would any other cultural manifestation. That would mean looking at the relationships that produce, define, and are dependent on the idea of wilderness and assessing their appropriateness in light of the vision of interdependence and nonexploitation that ecofeminism promotes. To illustrate this, let me use three examples of "problems" currently associated with wilderness and show how the application of an ecofeminist analysis differs from the analyses used by mainstream land managers and by Deep Ecologists.

1. *Grazing.* Because existing grazing permits were allowed to continue in effect under the Wilderness Act (as a result of pressures from Western congressmen), sheep and cows are still summered in many wilderness areas in the United States, often in wet meadows and alpine basins where the short growing season, compaction from the animals' hooves, and poor rotation practices combine to produce severely damaged vegetation, especially around the edges of lakes and streams, which in turn suffer from sedimentation (due to loss of soil-holding vegetation) and nutrient imbalances (due to urine and feces pumping nitrogen into the water), all to the detriment of fish and invertebrates. Mainstream responses range from increasing permit fees to reflect restoration costs to restricting grazing within 200 feet of lakes and streams. Deep Ecologists, by contrast, propose eliminating all grazing in wilderness areas, and sometimes on all public lands (although their concern is rooted as much in a philosophical conviction that domestic animals have no place in wild areas as in a concern with the immediate impact of grazing). From an ecofeminist perspective, however, all these proposals beg the essential question, which is Should animals be ontologized as meat and subjected to the oppression of domestication?<sup>11</sup> The issue of livestock in wilderness, from an ecofeminist viewpoint, is inseparable from the larger issue of human-animal relations in all settings; the problem is not *where* domestic livestock should be grazed but whether the category "domestic livestock" should exist at all.

2. *Recreation.* It is widely accepted among wilderness managers that current recreational trends will lead to "overcrowding" in wilderness; in particular, they worry about their inability to ensure that wilderness will continue to provide the "outstanding opportunities for solitude" that the

1964 act identifies as a signifier of wilderness. Proposed solutions include permit systems, abandonment of trails and signs, reduced search and rescue efforts, increased public education in no-trace camping, and more recreational opportunities on nonwilderness public lands. Deep Ecologists are often contemptuous of the whole notion of managed recreation in wilderness, and would happily do away with all signs, established trails, safety patrols, guidebooks, and the like; without a high degree of risk, many would argue, there is no wildness involved (Snyder 1990). Here too, ecofeminists might find larger questions. Ecofeminists may agree that solitude and isolation, physical challenge, opportunities for unmediated contact with the spiritual realm, re-creation of pioneers' experience, and appreciation of the aesthetics of nature are all values that may be realized in wilderness, but we should take the matter a step further and ask: Just whose values are these? What do they assume about experience, and whose experience is the norm?<sup>12</sup> What other social relations depend on or produce these values? What is their historical context? I would argue that wilderness recreation "re-creates" more than the self: it also re-creates the history of the conquest of nature, the subjugation of indigenous peoples, the glorification of individualism, the triumph of human will over material reality, and the Protestant ideal of one-on-one contact with God. And as for the elements of physical challenge and risk, I think it goes without saying that they appeal most to those for whom day-to-day mobility is a given, and for whom danger isn't always close at hand.

3. *Biodiversity*. Wilderness ecosystems have lost diversity as a result of predator control, fire suppression, aquatic pollution, and the introduction (both intentional and accidental) of nonnative species. Proposals for increasing diversity differ in their anticipated time frame, but most involve some combination of eliminating nonnative species and reintroducing historic ones, as well as allowing natural processes like fire to occur unchecked (Noss 1991a). The differences between the solutions proposed by land managers and those of Deep Ecologists are largely matters of degree: while land managers, conscious of their constituency, are loathe to recommend reintroducing top-level predators near human settlements, Deep Ecologists would like to see species such as grizzly bears, mountain lions, and wolves returned to their original range. An ecofeminist position, in contrast, would encompass a concern for biodiversity but would nevertheless seek to understand the context in which a loss of biodiversity has occurred before moving directly to remediation. In what ways have patriarchal attitudes and practices such as hunting shaped predator control policies and the introduction of nonnative fish and animals (rainbow trout, bighorn sheep, Rocky Mountain goats, and, recently, moose have all been introduced into Western wilderness areas)? What kinds of backlash will occur if predators are reestablished on the edge of human communities? To what extent do activities in adjacent areas affect biodiversity

in wilderness? For example, how do rural development patterns, in part shaped by the economic and recreational opportunities created by wilderness, affect the seasonal migration of elk or put excessive demands on water supplies or cause losses of habitat for those plants and animals whose range does not include wilderness? How does wilderness preservation affect the cultural diversity of Western rural communities, as wealthy Anglos displace Native Americans, Hispanics, and poor Euro-Americans?<sup>13</sup> And where do the people and problems that get displaced end up? Without understanding the context in which problems have arisen, we have no context in which they can be solved, and acontextual solutions, as we should know, have a limited likelihood of success.

As is evident from even these three brief examples, an ecofeminist approach to wilderness issues involves considerable complexification, and presents an immediate challenge to the tidy category of wilderness. Nearly thirty years ago, second wave feminists coined the phrase “the personal is political,” recognizing that inequality and disenfranchisement were not simply problems of the so-called public sphere. Just as freedom afforded women in “the private world” was largely illusory, so the freedom of nature in wilderness is far more mythic than real.

I am not proposing that we end efforts to preserve whatever remnants of healthy, functioning ecosystems we have, whether they exist inside or outside wilderness areas, nor do I think we should abandon all attempts to restore ecosystem integrity to areas where it has been compromised. But I think that the conceptual category of wilderness, understood as a place apart from humans, is as inappropriate for the United States in the twenty-first century as it is for the so-called developing nations. It can serve only to distract us from what ought to be our focus: the relationships of domination that intrude on all our interactions, whether among humans or between humans and the non-human world. To imagine that there is a place which is free from those relationships, where all problems are reducible to a simple self-other dichotomy that can be overcome by a trick of consciousness, is at best self-deluding and at worst an act of capitulation to patriarchal ideology.

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## Notes

1. Recent examples of “useful” lands being designated as wilderness and/or being protected from development would be the Mojave Desert in California and the Escalante Canyon area in southwestern Utah. The Mojave was a



popular area for motorized recreation; the Escalante region was targeted for mining and other commercial development. Anyone with an interest in the various wilderness battles being fought should look to current and back issues of *Sierra*, *Audubon*, and, for particularly thorough coverage of Western areas, *High Country News*. Many activist groups, from the Sierra Club to the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, also maintain Web sites on the Internet where up-to-the-moment reports can be found.

2. For a trenchant discussion of wilderness protection in the so-called Third World, see Gomez-Pompa and Kaus 1992. Lorentzen (1995) carries the discussion to Third World women.
3. Although some commentators (e.g., Rohlf and Honnold) argue that this last stipulation indicates a Congressional desire to preserve wilderness because it represents a "healthy, natural ecology," implicitly recognizing "that natural communities have an inherent right to exist" (1988, 255), the plain language of the Wilderness Act indicates otherwise. Appearances are everything in the *Wilderness Act*, and in the practice of wilderness management. The standard text on wilderness management is Hendee et al. 1978; while Hendee himself appears to agree that wilderness preservation should have ecological health as a goal, the bulk of the text is devoted to managing recreational and commercial use so that evidence of humans is minimized. During four summers (1992–95) as a wilderness ranger in southwestern Colorado, my work was primarily cosmetic: cleaning firepits, removing garbage, encouraging backpackers to choose campsites screened by trees from other campers, and so forth. I frequently scandalized Outward Bound participants during my "ranger talks" by telling them I was the land-management equivalent of a cheap pimp, trying to sell a tired-out old whore as a virgin, over and over and over. It always got their attention.
4. This is even true *within* wilderness areas, which are often divided into management categories of "pristine," "primitive," "semi-primitive" and "high-density day use." "Pristine" areas are maintained in a trail-less condition (which is generally why they have remained pristine), while "semi-primitive" areas feature established and maintained trails, direction and mileage markers, registers, information posters at trailheads and wilderness patrols, and they are usually well identified in publicly and privately published recreation guides, all factors that increase use.
5. Rolston (1988) and Sessions (1992) discuss these values, which Sessions and other Deep Ecologists term "anthropocentric."
6. For a more detailed exploration of human impacts on wilderness, see USDA 1988 and 1989.
7. There is some debate over the question of *intrinsic* versus *inherent* value. Although the terms are sometimes used interchangeably, Paul Taylor (1986) argues that "intrinsic" value depends on a human valuer, while "inherent"



value exists independently. Deep ecologist George Sessions accepts Taylor's taxonomy and opts for "inherent" to describe the nonanthropocentric value of wilderness. Dave Foreman (1991, 3–4) argues that all living things have "intrinsic value, inherent worth," and that "[e]ven more important than the individual wild creature is the wild community—the wilderness, the stream of life unimpeded by human manipulation." Given that the concept of wilderness is a distinctly human creation, it is puzzling, at best, to say that it has value apart from human valuers.

8. Another instance of this dilemma can be found close to home: extreme animal rights advocates often argue that the keeping of pets is oppressive because it fosters a relationship of dependency, while moderates claim that dogs and cats, at least, have apparently chosen domestication. If we cannot even know with certainty the desires of our closest nonhuman companions, how can we purport to know the interests of animals we may never even have seen?
9. For instance, George Sessions, identifying human population factors as a major contributor to California's environmental problems, opines that "the main factor preventing California, and the rest of the United States, from stabilizing its population is immigration, both legal and illegal. . . . Viewed ecologically, immigration only adds to the cumulative impact of existing human population on the affected ecosystems. As Gary Snyder points out, one of the first principles of bioregional living is to 'Quit moving—stay where you are!'" (1992 121–23).
10. Both Oelschlaeger (1992) and Nash (1982) trace the religious roots of the idea of wilderness.
11. See generally Adams (1994) for a discussion of these questions.
12. Murphy and Dattilo (1989) raise issues of accessibility to wilderness, arguing that current ideals exclude those with disabilities.
13. No statistics I know of measure the population draw afforded by wilderness areas as such, nor am I claiming that wilderness alone induces people to settle in rural communities. Instead, it is part of an overall image of the "quality of life" in nonurban, recreation-rich rural settings, such as Summit or San Miguel counties in Colorado, whose population increases between 1990 to 2000 are projected at 73 percent and 64 percent respectively (Cannon 1996). While some economists (Power 1996) argue that the influx of affluent newcomers will resuscitate crumbling economies and create environmentally friendly employment opportunities (as opposed to jobs in mining, ranching, and lumbering), past experience shows that traditional populations are generally shunted into low-paying service jobs when an economy shifts from extraction to tourism. Moreover, growing economies, especially in areas where much of the land is owned by government and thus unavailable for residential development, translate to increased housing costs, higher property taxes, and a disincentive to keeping land in agriculture.

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