



Daniel J. Evans
School of Public Affairs

UNIVERSITY of
WASHINGTON

Working Paper #2007-07

The Moral Journey of Environmentalism: From Wilderness to Place

Andrew Light

Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs
University of Washington
208 Parrington Hall, Box 353055
Seattle, Washington 98195-3055

Tel: 206.543.4900 - Fax: 206.543.1096

Evans School Working Papers are available at

The Moral Journey of Environmentalism: From Wilderness to Place

Andrew Light

Like many environmentalists I am sometimes asked why I am an environmentalist. I find such questions annoying. They are particularly troubling when put in terms like this: “What were the experiences of your youth that led you to become an environmentalist?” The problem is that such questions seem too often premised on a set of assumptions about what it means to be an environmentalist. My specific worry is that those asking such questions presuppose that environmentalism is a kind of identity that one discovers about oneself that is supposed to come through some experience, usually an experience of connection to a wild, natural, other. Unlike similar questions that one might ask about a chosen career path – “At what point did you *know* that you wanted to become a doctor?” – the formidable experiences of the environmentalist are to be found in the realm of feeling or emotion rather than rational thought.

Now, certainly, one could answer the question about when one knew they wanted to become a doctor by pointing to a set of experiences that inspired feelings of wanting to care for others. And I, at least, would not endorse a distinction between the passions and reason which would deny rationality to the emotions. Still, there is something, especially in North America and other new world countries, to the worry that a draw to environmentalism is seen as a calling not unlike the ministry. We answer in this case not to a holy spirit but to

nature itself and thus come to embrace our commitment to our connection to the world. And when we make that commitment we ally ourselves with nature, and others like ourselves who have also answered the calling, against the unenlightened masses who are only concerned either with themselves, their families, or human social issues. So, not unreasonably, when a relative of mine who would not call themselves an environmentalist asks me the question with which I started I hear it as, "What made *you* one of *them*?"

To my mind we environmentalists brought this sad state of affairs on ourselves. For surely, concern for the environment is a concern that we should all have and that concern cannot be easily (if ever) divorced from concern for one's self, one's family, and the welfare of humanity. The environmental literature however is rife with the myth of the environmentalist as the person who goes out into the world to connect with nature and thus has the experience that allows admission to the tribe.

Thoreau had his hut where he went to distance himself from his fellows. And even though readers quickly learn that Walden wasn't really that far removed we can take solace in his overly excitable experience on Mt. Katahdin ("Contact! Contact!").¹ More recently that Norwegian environmental export, deep ecology, was spread by some of its American adherents as practically requiring a conversion experience of sublime proportions:

Most people in Deep Ecology have had the feelings – usually, but not always in nature – that they are connected with something greater than

their ego, greater than their home, their family, their special attributes as an individual – a feeling that is often called oceanic because many have it on the ocean. Without that identification, one is not easily drawn to become involved in Deep Ecology.²

While the influence of deep ecology has waned in the last ten years, many would still embrace those such as Julia Butterfly Hill, sitting in her redwood Luna for 738 days to save the 1000 year old tree and a three acre buffer zone around it, as an example that should be seen as exemplary. Describing her initial view of these trees, Hill says, “When I entered the majestic cathedral of the redwood forest for the first time, my spirit knew it had found what it was searching for. I dropped to my knees and began to cry because I was so overwhelmed by the wisdom, energy and spirituality housed in this holiest of temples.”³ No emphasis is necessary.

I am not alone in maintaining that environmentalism needs a new set of faces and a new ethos if it is to survive as anything more than a special, clubby, somewhat anti-social interest.⁴ To expect environmentalists to be, quite literally, converts baptized through wilderness experience, is to exclude many from the beginning, including myself. For, by those standards, I am an aberration. I never had a profound wilderness experience. I didn’t take my path after reading a Muir or Leopold who did. And while I would maintain in the end that what is needed is a model of environmentalism, or at least a motivation for better environmental regulation, which is not premised on any particular kind of

experience, what experiences I can recall that made me care about the non-human world were much more prosaic. As a child I spent just about every afternoon playing at a place called Flat Rock Creek in the little town that I grew up in outside of Atlanta. It ran behind a row of suburban houses wedged between old farmland which would eventually become a golf course after my family moved away. Though a place like this certainly can be huge for a little person, in my case it didn't take me outside of myself but rather became the first place that I ever cared about. And while some of that caring came through moments of solitude more of it came through recognition that it was the place that knitted together my community of pre-teen friends. Flat Rock Creek was as much a part of our circle as any one of us was. It was not soul satisfying but rather an integral part of community building.

While I am loathe to make predictions there are signs that North American environmentalism is leaving its romantic experiential idealizations of the wild behind in favor of a focus on encouraging a more common, local, attachment to place. I believe that such local connections, be they rural, suburban, or urban, are a necessary first step to building the critical mass of those across ideological lines which will be necessary to get traction on the global environmental challenges that we currently face. My reasoning is simple. An attachment to place is not only an attachment to a nature external to us but to the people with whom we inhabit those places. If environmentalism is to avoid becoming a special interest then environmental concern must not only be about

our connection with the natural world but our connection with people, and hence based in our understanding that environmental problems go hand in hand with human social problems rather than representing a moral realm outside of those problems. By way of making an argument that this should indeed be our path I will first offer a very brief tutorial on American environmentalism. I will then consider the question of how recent critiques of the very idea of wilderness have changed our understanding of the appropriate limits of what we consider when we want to make a contribution to environmental protection or restoration. It is in this new domain of an expanded understanding of the environment of interest for environmentalists where we will see a growing chorus of others claiming that concern for the environment can never be isolated from other human concerns if it is to be meaningful and effective.

What is Environmentalism About?

Imagine opening the front page of your favorite daily paper and seeing a headline announcing a new report by an environmental group critical of some government's environmental policies. Before reading further, what do you expect the report to be about? Who do you expect it to be from? If it was about Friends of Wildlife bemoaning the lack of collaboration between the governments of three Western states on the reintroduction of wolves into Yellowstone would you be surprised? If it was about Greenpeace's

condemnation of an emissions trading plan for power producers would it meet your expectations? If it was a local group called More Gardens! demanding municipal protection of community gardens would it seem more appropriate for the city section? Historically, environmentalists have gone back and forth in understanding their priorities and even the scope of their labor as embracing one, two, or all three of these sorts of issues. With these shifts in focus over the years it is no surprise that those not seeing themselves as environmentalists have also changed their expectations on what counts as an environmental issue.

The first wave of American environmentalism is often marked at the beginning of the twentieth-century as the “conservation wave.” This is the period dominated by figures such as Theodore Roosevelt, John Muir, Gifford Pinchot and later Aldo Leopold.⁵ Most of their efforts have been characterized as the work of white Eastern establishment elites calling attention to the critical decisions that would have to be made about the future of the grand wilderness areas of the American West. Leopold, Bob Marshall, and Benton MacKaye founded the Wilderness Society as a small, invitation only organization aimed in part at limiting automobile access to the new national parks.⁶ According to Paul Sutter’s exceptional history of the founding of the Wilderness Society, each of these figures saw very different things in the value of wilderness that needed to be preserved and different opportunities that the preservation of wilderness would create. While Marshall saw the value of wilderness in its potential for solitude and exertion – an alternative to the “effete superstructure of urbanity” –

Mackaye saw the wilderness as a buffer from the individualism of the cities and a place where a new form of communal living could be created in quasi-socialist work and art camps.⁷ What is important for my purposes here is that all of these figures saw wilderness as a thing that actually existed that needed protection. And while some like Aldo Leopold would later revise his view of the relative wildness of some areas (for example, his first forays into northern Mexico convinced him of how domesticated his old stomping grounds in New Mexico actually had become) by the end of this period Leopold's son, A. Starker Leopold, would set in motion an orthodoxy concerning wilderness that would have ramifications to this day.

During the winter of 1962-1963 the National Park Service incurred adverse publicity following a large removal of elk from Yellowstone National Park. After the population in the park had risen to about 10,000, about twice the estimated carrying capacity of the range, and because of projected food shortages that year, the NPS culled 4,283 animals. To justify these actions then Secretary of the Interior, Morris Udall, commissioned Starker Leopold to lead a blue-ribbon panel of scientists to assess the NPS policy. The committee endorsed the action as justified, given the possible degradation that the overpopulated elk would cause to the park, but then went much further.

In order to assess the culling of the elk the committee recommended first a general statement about the goals of ecosystem management in the parks. While extensive, one of the most important claims created a default definition of

wilderness: "As a primary goal, we would recommend that the biotic associations within each park be maintained, or where necessary recreated, as nearly as possible in the condition that prevailed when the area was first visited by the white man. A national park should present a vignette of primitive America."⁸ Wilderness could now be historically located as the thing that existed in the new world prior to white contact. The environmental community enthusiastically endorsed the report and on May 2, 1963 Secretary Udall ordered the NPS to incorporate its philosophy and findings to the administration of the parks and "maintain or create the mood of wild America."⁹ What would this mean? A number of things including maintaining successional communities in the parks, removing exotic species, minimizing observable artificiality, rationing tourists, and, perhaps most importantly, resumption of fire suppression practices, all designed to get the parks back to their "natural" state.

Unfortunately, as we will see later, what counted as the natural state of the parks, or at least their pre-Columbian state, was severely limited given the lack of accurate information on the conditions of the pre-Columbian Americas.

The second wave of environmentalism symbolically begins with the first Earth Day on April 22, 1970, though its origins certainly precede this date. The focus of much of the activity at this time, up to the 1980s, was on the creation of a series of legal protections for the environment aimed at insuring greater provision for clean air and water, and the reduction of the human and larger ecological health effects of toxic chemicals and radioactive materials. In addition

to figures like Rachel Carson, whose landmark *Silent Spring* helped to shape this movement, other important intellectual leadership was provided by Paul and Ann Ehrlich, Barry Commoner, and David Brower, though these figures, especially Commoner and the Ehrlichs, differed sharply on their interpretations of the causes of environmental problems and their appropriate resolution.¹⁰

What is most striking about this period of environmental activity is the sheer amount of important federal legislation passed: 23 acts in ten years. These included the Wilderness Act (1964), the Clean Water Act (1965), the Clean Air Act (1967), the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act (1968), the National Environmental Policy Act (1970), the Water Pollution Control Act (1972), the Endangered Species Act (1973), and perhaps the biggest and most far-reaching, the "Superfund" Act (1980).

The lasting effect of all of this activity continues to be debated in the U.S. today, and since the end of the presidential administration of Jimmy Carter many of these laws have suffered the winds and tides of the various presidential administrations which have inherited their enforcement. Still, in 1970 an impressive 53% of Americans viewed "reduction of air and water pollution as a national priority," and environmentalism successfully overcame its earlier, turn-of-the-century incarnation as the purview of select wealthy citizens to become a public social movement in its own right.¹¹ At this time we see the creation and flourishing of many of today's major environmental NGOs, including the Environmental Defense Fund, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the legal

arm of the Sierra Club, as well as more radical environmental groups such as Greenpeace.

Depending on one's views though, environmentalism remained a fairly narrow movement even as its intellectual horizons expanded. One reason is that the dominant focus of much work in this area, even with the variety of issues represented in the environmental legislation of the 1970s, was on questions concerning wilderness, now understood as those vast untrammeled swaths of what is presumed to be original nature.¹² Here we see a constant return to the first wave of the movement with its roots in nineteenth-century romantic thought, including Thoreau (though there is reason to believe that he is misunderstood as a wilderness advocate), and later John Muir. We ought not to be surprised by this focus. The North American environmental movement has long been dominated by concerns over wilderness, and even given the diversity of issues addressed by the movement in its second wave, the focus on less controversial issues of wilderness advocacy re-emerged to dominate the agendas of many environmental organizations after the election of Ronald Reagan. A new third wave of "beltway" environmentalism emerged in the 1980s in response to an antagonistic White House intent on rolling back the legislative successes of the 1970s. The so-called "Big 10" mainstream environmental organizations at this time abandoned most controversial environmental issues involving regulation of industry to focus on cute and fuzzy animal preservation priorities and those bits of land that looked best on Sierra Club wall calendars.¹³

But why is this focus on wilderness controversial, let alone distressing? Before getting into the conceptual problems with defining what wilderness is, one answer is that the resulting lack of attention to human communities, especially cities and postindustrial landscapes, and the unique environmental challenges and possibilities they face in achieving sustainability, created a disastrously incomplete picture of the scope and complexity of environmental problems. Politically, an answer to these concerns came with the rise of various Environmental Justice movements in the 1990s, which argued that mainstream environmentalism had left behind people of color and people in general, no matter where they lived, in its focus on natural resource conservation and the value of nature outside of its human cultural context. One charge was that even though environmentalism had become a social movement in its own right, it had too narrow an agenda, and hence too homogenous a constituency. Criticism of this sort is exemplified in Dorceta Taylor's remark that:

If it is discovered that birds have lost their nesting sites, environmentalists go to great expense to erect nesting boxes and find alternative breeding sites for them. When whales are stranded, enormous sums are spent to provide them with food . . . But we have yet to see an environmental group champion human homelessness or joblessness as issues on which they will spend vast resources. It is a strange paradox that a movement that exhorts the harmonious coexistence of people and nature, and worries

about the continued survival of nature . . . somehow forgets about the survival of humans . . .¹⁴

As a result of this retreat from the problems of the human-made environment we have lost sight of the fact that some of the most pressing ecological issues also raise questions of distributive and participatory justice.¹⁵ In October 1991 when the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit passed its “Principles of Environmental Justice,” it was based on a variety of claims that the burdens of environmental pollution were inequitably distributed. According to Mark Dowie’s history of North American environmentalism such claims included arguments that: 57% of whites reside in counties with federally substandard air quality while 65% of blacks and 80% of Hispanics live in communities with worse conditions; enforcement of the Clean Air act may benefit 78.7% of white communities and only 14.2% of black communities; 50% of all African-American infants tested for lead contamination have higher levels than tolerated by US standards; three out of four toxic waste dumps not in compliance with federal regulations are in black or Hispanic neighborhoods; and more than 200 million tons of radioactive waste lie in tailings piles on Indian reservations.¹⁶

While the research behind such figures has been called into question, the rise of the movement for environmental justice and the debates over its legitimacy had a good effect on the environmental movement. While there is still a good deal of work to be done there is at least a firm foundation now

established for criticizing environmental organizations that do not address questions of environmental justice. On February 11, 1994, President Clinton signed an executive order requiring the EPA and other federal agencies to make “achieving environmental justice part of its mission by identifying and addressing, as appropriate, disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects of its programs, policies, and activities on minority populations and low income populations” in the U.S. and its territories. The impact of this executive order and its successful implementation (even during the Clinton administration) is, of course, in question.

From Nature to Place

This redirection of environmentalism, encouraging a greater integration of social and environmental concerns, has, nonetheless, been incomplete. Against the backdrop of the environmental movement’s focus on wilderness the activities of these organizations is still the exception rather than the rule. As the environmental justice movement became stronger it became tempting to react against it by insisting on the separation of two realms of environmental problems: those in cities and other areas which involved humans, or at least specific human communities, and what many persisted in claiming were the “real” environmental issues involving the wild places unsullied by human

intervention, which deserved an unassailable priority as the core focus of the movement.¹⁷

Such a distinction however had its own challenge from those who had long insisted that such a dualism between nature and culture was unwarranted. This position achieved its most eloquent rendition in and outside of environmental circles through the publication of William Cronon's landmark 1995 essay "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature" in *The New York Times Magazine*. There, Cronon, one of the most important contemporary environmental historians, argued that wilderness was a myth that not only rested on an unsupportable metaphysical distinction between culture and nature, but also had led to very bad management policies. The historical argument was straightforward enough – wilderness was an ethnocentric concept which Europeans had mistakenly used to describe North America, a land that appeared wild and "untrammelled," but which was in fact highly cultivated by Native Americans before European settlers ever arrived. For example, the enormous prairie ecosystem that dominated the middle of the continent was the size it was due to intentional burning. Aboriginal peoples actively burned the prairie in order to get young succulent plants to grow, thus attracting buffalo to new feeding grounds. Other agricultural practices created similar ecosystems and so what many regarded as the rich variety of biomes in North America was evidence not of the lack of human habitation and use but of its presence. The only true wilderness in 1492, Cronon argued, was Antarctica. When we fail to

recognize this history we embrace the false hope that it is possible to escape from responsibility for what we have done, “to,” as Cronon put it, “somehow wipe clean the slate of our past and return to the *tabula rasa* that supposedly existed before we began to leave our marks on the world.”

Even further, if we accept the arguments of those such as archaeologist Henry Dobyns and geographer William Denevan, that the native population of the Americas prior to 1492 may have been as high as 115 million (higher than the population of Europe) rather than the previously accepted figure of 8.4 million, with only about 1.75 million in North America, the existence of pre-Columbian wilderness gets even more complicated. Very persuasive arguments that smallpox, hepatitis, tuberculosis and other deadly diseases had wiped out as many as 80-100 million Indians prior to the larger European settlements and incursions of the 17th century means that the first significant wave of European immigrants would have not seen the civilization that actually existed here.¹⁸ Hence they would have bequeathed to us a legacy prime for mis-identifying the pre-settlement landscape as “wild” if by that we mean untrammled. Thus, if we really want a pre-Columbian Yellowstone, we may well have to move permanent Indian residents into it rather than restrict the activities of visitors.

In terms of management policies, the idea of wilderness, as understood in the Leopold Report, has been unhelpful because it has led to a policy of preservation tantamount to freezing a swath of nature in time. Rather than allowing ecosystems to grow and evolve it picked one moment and anointed it as

the time at which a particular landscape would stand as a museum piece for future generations to enjoy as wild. This led to disastrous decisions, especially the resumption of fire suppression in national parks mentioned above, thereby stopping a natural ecological process which keeps some forests healthy and immune to catastrophic burning which can happen when too much organic ground litter builds up over time. Cronon and others argued that this policy in part led to the devastating western fires of 1988 and 1997 that destroyed enormous parts of these parks.

Many more details could be added to make this history more complete, for certainly, in each of these waves of the history of environmentalism there were minority voices arguing for something different, but the reverberations of what some of my colleagues termed “the great new wilderness debate” created something of a crisis in the environmental movement. If wilderness was really a myth, a cultural construction amenable to deconstruction, then what would environmentalism focus on? One could answer by simply saying “nature,” but such a term seemed as difficult to define as wilderness. If true, then how could environmentalism change, evolve and adapt so as to make a stronger contribution to the fashioning of a more environmentally sustainable world?

While debates among academics can easily fall on deaf ears, especially when their terms are mired in the obscure *lingua franca* of the ivory tower, this one did not quickly go away. Cronon and his allies published the highly regarded volume *Uncommon Ground* (1995) continuing to challenge the sacred

cows of traditional environmentalism. The founder of the field of conservation biology, Michael Soulé answered with other anti-constructivists in *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction* (1995).¹⁹ The poet Gary Snyder joined Earth First! founder Dave Foreman and others in answering Cronon in the pages of the popular magazine *Wild Earth*. Park Service employees and rank and file members of Greenpeace joined others on one or another side of a growing divide and wondered about the effects of these positions on their own work. The debate eventually made it to the front page of the *New York Times* in April 1999. Cronon's intention was surely not to undercut the ground for all environmental protection, but the effect of his argument was to demolish the accepted claim that the environments of importance to environmentalists could conveniently be delimited by the rough and convenient boundaries of city and countryside. Or, at least, the effect was that one could not make this distinction without defending it.

I remind us of this debate because it shows how environmentalists, in their recent history, were faced with the challenge of either thinking of the scope of their concerns as limited by what one would consider as "nature" or "the natural" or else expanding it to encompass broader human social arenas which could be better captured in other language. If we could not easily designate a landscape as worthy of environmental protection merely by labeling it "wild," "pristine," or even "natural" then we needed some language that was less controversial, more meaningful, and flexible enough to refer to the variety of

environments that environmentalists had historically been engaged with. The goal of such a task is not to take a position for or against Cronon or his critics but simply to recognize that we cannot expect to make much progress on any particular environmental issue in isolation from others. We cannot preserve the Grand Canyon without considering urban growth in Arizona. Nor can we take up the issue of asthma hotspots in inner city Chicago without attending to land use patterns in the counties surrounding Lake Michigan. But doing this is not easy. Cronon himself commented in one of the stories on the controversy surrounding his work that even though he loved Manhattan and Yosemite, when he is in either of these places “it’s hard to see how Manhattan is implicated in Yosemite or how Yosemite is implicated in Manhattan.”

One possible alternative can be found in the language of place: not simply the sense of place as mere location, but a more psychologically robust and even morally loaded conception of location imbued with a storied relationship between people and the things around them. Discussions of the importance of place have long been evident in the environmental literature, and if there is any common thread to them it is that the description of the importance of a place is always presented from the perspective of a specific individual or a community of valuers. As opposed to the more abstract language of wilderness, wildness, or natural value, when we say that a place is important in this context we cannot divorce it from an understanding of how it is valuable to some people.

Writers such as William Whyte had long advocated the importance of architecture, planning, and land management in strengthening the quality of the ties between people and their local communities.²⁰ In Whyte's vision, and that of other regional planners such as Lewis Mumford, clear connections could be made between the local public park, the wilderness area out of town, and the private plots of land in between. Even the smallest woodlot or roadside patch could be a "tremendous trifle," as Whyte put it, worthy of protection because it could anchor an individual or communities' devotion to a place. The small stream running near my childhood home was not wild, nor probably natural to many people, but it was a place that I cared for, and in caring for it I came to shape an identity as someone concerned about the care of other places. But, again, since Whyte focused in part at least on the environments of cities and suburbs, which he saw as increasingly threatened by bad planning and sprawl, his work on the value of place is rarely if ever included among the canonical works of environmentalism.

Cronon's thesis, the rise of the Environmental Justice movement, and other landmarks of recent environmental history which could also be mentioned, encourage us to not only recover the work of people like Whyte, but also to return to those environments which have been at the periphery of environmental concern. Some more traditional environmentalists may find fault with my reasoning here and see little by way of force of argument to convince them to reassess their priorities. But surely those who took such a position would not

claim that more humanized environments are unimportant in the search for a more sustainable society. In the rare instance where protection of a relatively pristine area conflicts with that of a more settled landscape we may need to go back to these debates, but in most cases we should be able to agree that there are more than enough environments, more than enough places, and more than enough connections between them, to warrant some active struggle for protection. In the end too we can assume that any expansion of environmental concern to refer to more places can only help to broaden the fold of those who would call themselves environmentalists. If I can get my neighbors to consider the importance of volunteering in the renovation of our local park, to facilitate the delivery of some critical ecosystem service, then I am more likely to be able to convince them that other, broader environmental concerns are important as well.²¹

How to achieve such attention to the importance of our local places will require new skills for the environmental community. It is not simply a matter of lobbying, writing letters, or living in a tree for several years, but of community building toward the goal of helping people to understand that their future is dependent on that of their local environment. One brief example of such a project is New York City's Bronx River Alliance, a project of the City of New York Parks and Recreation Department and the non-profit City Parks Foundation. The Alliance is organized by paid city employees who have brought together and coordinate 60 voluntary community groups, schools and businesses

in direct projects to clean up the 23 miles of the Bronx River. The focus is not only on the environmental priorities of the area, but also the opportunities afforded by it to create concrete links between the communities along the river by giving them a common project on which to focus their civic priorities. In the words of the alliance, the project is to “restore the Bronx River to a Healthy Community, Ecological, Economic and Recreational Resource.” The activities of the Alliance are thus jointly civic and environmental and the scale of the environmental problem, crossing several distinct communities, helps to create a common interest between them. The environment in this case becomes a place, or perhaps civic space, which glues together various local publics.

Like the creek I fell in love with as a boy, the Bronx Rivers is not wild and it is far from pristine. But both are places that have been lived in, worked, and made into a home, a source of both economic and social capital. Recent trends in environmental art may also provide alternatives which highlight the importance of place in ways not limited to the traditional tools of resource management, such as biological surveys, and the concomitant arguments that something should be preserved because it is rare. Artists and designers may be uniquely suited for this kind of project. Artists are mediators between the realms of subjective experience (even when that experience is purely conceptual) and techniques for representing that experience to others. At bottom, the same is true of an expression of the importance of a place. To tell you why some place is important to me I must find some way of expressing it that can, in the end, be

meaningful to you. As John O'Neill, Allan Holland and I argue in a recent book, all landscapes are landscapes rich in human narrative, either as a place that has been inhabited or one that has been set aside and preserved.²² It is these narratives that need to be revived and revisited in order to make these places important for the people who inhabit them now.

If a new focus for environmentalism is to get beyond the debates of the past and develop a more comprehensive notion of place then it must not repeat the mistakes of the older focus on wilderness. As the importance of place is tied to the stories we can tell about it then our understanding of the importance of place must change with new experiences. Place cannot become static. It is ever changing and malleable as new experiences are garnered and as our own experience of places change as we are drawn into the discussion of its importance with others. When we value a place because it is important to us, and not simply because an argument can be made about its environmental value in the traditional sense, then we must accept that the ground for that value can change. We may be called to the task of its preservation using the resources at hand, but must accept that our claims about the importance of any place are only as good as the arguments we can mobilize in support of them at a given time. We all pass on and can only hope that we have left a mark for others that is vivid enough to last as an impression of why we think something is important.

This is all by way of saying that if the value of place is to be found in its importance to valuers like us then its importance is also as impermanent as we

are. I learned this lesson most clearly in May of 1997 when I was traveling through the west coast of Newfoundland and had the pleasure of spending an evening with the people of a small fishing village working to preserve their sense of place. This place, like many small fishing communities in Newfoundland, was dying. With the collapse of the cod industry, people were leaving the community to seek work elsewhere. To try to articulate the importance of their community to others, the remaining people of the village put together a video with the help of local environmental activists which tried to “map” the values of the community, focusing on the land and sea around them and the role that it had played in giving them a home and a source of work and leisure. One thing was clear: these people deeply cared about the place that they had made their own. They wanted to preserve it, protect it, and insure that it would be a living community into the future. The stories they told were profound. They did not consist of a list of traditional environmental amenities suitable for ecotourism, but rather, of an account of experiences – a first kiss and then a marriage proposal at a small inlet; a spot favored by a deceased loved one that had become a burial ground.

But at the same meeting where I saw the video I also learned that recently, when a huge nickel deposit was discovered in Labrador and a competition was announced for the location of a nickel smelter in the area, the people of this village stepped forward to make a bid on putting the smelter in their community. They knew that placing the smelter there would seriously jeopardize the natural

and communal values that they had articulated in their video, but they also knew that without new jobs for the community, their village would die. They knew that even if the smelter could be made safe, using the best available environmental science and technology, it would certainly have a negative effect on the natural and community values of the place. It would make their village less special and potentially destroy the traces of the important moments of their lives that had made that place so valuable to them. The choice to make a bid on the smelter was nothing less than tragic, and the people of this village knew it. But the creative act of helping this community articulate the importance of this place to them in terms of the stories that they had to tell about the place was perhaps the best way for them to fully understand the depths of the tragedy unfolding before them and, perhaps, to keep it from happening. And in creating the tools to understand the importance of the place to them they also created a tool that could convey the importance of this place to me. In turn, I came to care about their small community and was motivated to help to protect and preserve it. But perhaps most importantly, because they had shown me how important this place was to them, I was now in a position to ask them why they would put it in jeopardy? At the very least they now had to defend this decision to an outsider as uncomfortable as it might be to do so. The conversation of the future of this place had been broadened by its own inhabitants and so a focus on locality had not made this decision more insular, but actually less so. For a community to open themselves up to the outside in this way was more inspiring

to me than any number of lone people having a transcendent experience of humility on an empty ocean, or anywhere else for that matter.

We cannot live in most places and “leave only footprints,” as we are advised to do when entering a national park. Whether we destroy or merely transform our places into something different, possibly something better, is a choice that we have to make every day. We make these choices in the best way however when we have visions of alternative possibilities of how the future can relate to what has gone before. Many will see this vision of environmentalism as fundamentally flawed. If we base our claims to preservation or restoration of a place on human desires and preferences, then will we not always in the end choose short-term development over long-term protection? We have ample examples of the successes of the new integrated environmentalism not to worry overly much at such a hasty conclusion. But we should also remember that even when such failures occur we have something larger to gain: not just the preservation of bits of nature on the periphery of civilization but the creation of an intentional community of people dedicated to the places around us as an extension of themselves.

¹ In full the quote is: “What is this Titan that has taken possession of me? Talk of mysteries – Think of our life in nature – daily to be shown matter, to come in contact with it – rocks, trees, wind on our cheeks! the solid earth! the actual world! the common sense! Contact! Contact! Who are we? where are we?”

Henry David Thoreau, *The Maine Woods*, ed. Joseph Moldenhauer (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 5.

² Bill Devall and George Sessions, *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1985), p. 76.

³ See www.circleoflife.org/inspiration/julia/. Also see Hill's book *The Legacy of Luna* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2000).

⁴ Michael Schellenberger and Ted Nordhaus have made one of the most damning cases for this sentiment in their paper, "The Death of Environmentalism." Available through the Breakthrough Institute website at www.thebreakthrough.org. While I do not endorse all of the sentiments of their paper I found it a welcome wake-up call to the problems environmentalists face in order to get traction on critical issues like global warming. The two are currently finishing a book extending the argument of this paper that I hope will be similarly enlightening and am sure will instill some healthy debate.

⁵ See Mark Dowie, *Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982) and David Schlosberg, *Environmental Justice and the New Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁶ See Paul Sutter, *Driven Wild* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002).

⁷ *Ibid.* The apparent anti-urbanism of Marshall here is troubling as he was also a keen advocate for bringing together environmental interests with social justice concerns. Many commentators, including Dowie, *op. cit.*, have argued that had Marshall not died very young his legacy might have been to anticipate the turn to environmental justice in the last two decades.

⁸ The report, "Wildlife Management in the National Parks," can be found on the NPS website at www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/leopold/leopold.htm. The other authors of the report were Stanley A. Cain, Clarence M. Cottam, Ira A. Gtabrielson and Thomas L. Kimball. This quote from p. 32.

⁹ National Research Council, *Science and the National Parks* (Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1992), p. 44.

¹⁰ For a discussion, see Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (London: Routledge, 1999), chapter three.

¹¹ Dowie, p. 32.

¹² See Andrew Light, "The Urban Blind Spot in Environmental Ethics," *Environmental Politics* no.10, vol.1, 2001, pp.7-35.

¹³ See Dowie, chapter three.

¹⁴ Dorceta Taylor, *Proceedings of the Michigan Conference on Race and the Incidence of Environmental Hazards*. No publisher, (1990). Cited in Dowie.

¹⁵ See Robert Figueroa and Claudia Mills, "Environmental Justice," in *A Companion to Environmental Philosophy*, edited by Dale Jamieson (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2001), pp. 426-438.

¹⁶ Dowie, p.145.

¹⁷ See, for example, W.E. Rees, "Life in the Lap of Luxury as Ecosystems Collapse," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, (July 30, 1999), p. 1.

¹⁸ See Charles Mann, *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006).

¹⁹ See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness," in *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*, edited by William Cronon (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1995), pp. 69-90, and *Reinventing Nature? Responses to Postmodern Deconstruction*, edited by Michael Soulé and Gary Lease (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1995).

²⁰ See William H. Whyte, *The Last Landscape* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002 [1968]).

²¹ The literature on place in geography, and increasingly in philosophy, is immense. I won't attempt here to summarize it all. For starters though one could look at Tony Hiss, *The Experience of Place* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), and Andrew Light and Jonathan M. Smith, eds., *Philosophies of Place* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1998). Also see my journal, co-edited with Jonathan Smith, *Ethics, Place, and Environment* (Routledge Publishers).

²² John O'Neill, Alan Holland, and Andrew Light, *Environment and Values* (London: Routledge Press, 2008).