

The American Wilderness Imagination

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The history of winning the 1964 Wilderness Act in the U.S. Congress is commonly seen as an eight-year legislative struggle. The first Wilderness Bills were introduced in Congress in 1956—in the House of Representatives by John P. Saylor of Pennsylvania and in the Senate by Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota. The Wilderness Act was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on September 3, 1964. My father Howard had died in May 1964. My mother, Alice Zahniser, stood at the White House for the signing, and President Johnson gave her a pen he used. All I ever got from President Johnson was a letter telling me to appear for induction into the U.S. Army!

I offer you not an eight-year legislative history, but a deeper glimpse of Wilderness Act history, the history of the American wilderness imagination. We are projected into the wilderness struggle today by the imagination of a great cloud of witnesses who not only *came* before us, but also *go* before us as we allow wilderness to accept us into itself.

We can frame the history of winning a U.S. National Wilderness Preservation System Act as a 100-year struggle, from 1864 to 1964. Two 1864 events launch such a history of the Wilderness Act. The first event

is President Abraham Lincoln's taking time during the Civil War to sign an act ceding certain federal public domain lands of Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees—Giant Sequoia trees—to the state of California for public parklands.

Also in 1864, George Perkins Marsh's published his book *Man and Nature*. Historian and planner Lewis Mumford, in the mid-20th century, deemed Marsh's book the fountainhead of American conservation. Marsh's book is subtitled: "The Earth as Modified by Human Action." The verb form of that word, *to modify*, occurs in the opening paragraphs of the Wilderness Act. This was no accident. My father, Howard Zahniser, chief architect of the 1964 Wilderness Act, closely studied the beginnings of American concern for wilderness. Zahnie, as friends and associates called my father, knew to begin at the beginning.

What George Perkins Marsh achieved in *Man and Nature* was a historical synthesis of global assaults on forests by humankind. The book is still in print. It has never been out of print. It went through some seven printings by 1873. Marsh wrote the book in Italy, where U.S. President Abraham Lincoln had posted him as a diplomat. Marsh had witnessed the destruction of Vermont's forests in his own lifetime. But it was Marsh's travels in the Mediterranean Basin that enabled him, gradually, to see the potential disaster in our wanton destruction of

forests. But Marsh's awakening was not instant insight. It was gradual.

In 1856, Marsh and his wife had traveled in North Africa, in the southern Mediterranean Basin. Marsh had been sent to North Africa by Jefferson Davis, who was U.S. Secretary of War then. Ironically, as Marsh wrote *Man and Nature*, Jefferson Davis was president of the Confederate States of America.

Jefferson Davis had asked Marsh to study the camel, which the U.S. Army was interested in using to fight indigenous American Indians in the Southwest. In North Africa, Marsh realized that many desert areas he and his wife traversed were former sites of great civilizations founded on great forests that had harbored elephants, not camels.

But it did not hit Marsh full-face just then. Marsh's 1856 book, *The Camel*, opens with the then prevailing notion that humans were not capable of significant impacts on God's creation. But then Marsh was posted to Italy by Abraham Lincoln. His travels there convinced him that formerly great civilizations of the northern Mediterranean Basin, such as Greece, also declined as their forests were cut down—just as Marsh witnessed forests of his home state of Vermont devastated. So, the subtitle of Marsh's 1864 book *Man and Nature*, "The Earth as Modified by Human Action," was both actually and metaphorically a

watershed event for Marsh's thinking. Forests were keepers of watersheds.

The text of the Wilderness Act begins: "An Act / To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people, and for other purposes. Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled." The text quickly moves to the policy statement, Section 2 (a) [quote] "In order to assure that an increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization, does not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions, leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition, it is hereby declared to be the policy of the Congress to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness."

Hear those phrases "does not occupy and modify all areas . . . leaving no lands designated for preservation and protection in their natural condition"

In its broadest sweep, the U.S. Wilderness Act is a statement of social ethics. It is about restraint and humility. It is about heeding this warning about forest values that George Perkins Marsh articulated 100 years

earlier, in 1864. The Wilderness Act is about restraint and humility for what we do not know about the land organism . . . about which ecologist Aldo Leopold wrote. The U.S. Wilderness Act is about restraint and humility for what we do *not* know about the land organism.

Acid rain forced us to understand soil relationships. We found in soils the same spiraling downward of complexity that the Hubble space telescope found spiraling outward as the complexity of the universe, or multiverse. Tachyons, which may be the same as neutrinos, for example, have a mass that is imaginary. Isn't that luscious science? The mass of tachyons is imaginary.

And what about these opening lines of the Wilderness Act? “An Act / To establish a National Wilderness Preservation System for the permanent good of the whole people . . .” For the permanent good of the whole people. I commend to your repeated close reading the text of the Wilderness Act. Find it at *wilderness dot net*. The Act makes its own best case for wilderness stewardship and wilderness education.

I belabor this conservation history and George Perkins Marsh's work—this 100-year history of realizing a Wilderness Act—to show that wilderness preservation was not a new idea in the 1950s. Wilderness preservation as a vision for the future of federal public lands has been

around a long time.

Directly across Lake Champlain from the George Perkins Marsh's home state of Vermont, the Adirondack Mountains region of New York State testifies to Americans' long-standing concern for wildlands. In 1872, the people of New York State began to move to create an Adirondack State Park. Their motivation is easy to understand. In 1871, New Yorkers suddenly found themselves net importers of wood fiber for the first time ever. Heeding Marsh's warnings in *Man and Nature*, New Yorkers, in 1872, moved to protect their remaining forests. They moved to protect the Adirondack Mountains watershed that supplied Erie Canal water.

Then, in 1885, New Yorkers created, on the state-owned lands of the Adirondack and Catskill state parks, their State Forest Preserve lands. Then, in 1894, New Yorkers inserted into their state Constitution the so-called "forever wild" clause. The clause says that those forest preserve lands will be kept [quote] "forever as wild forest lands."

A voting member of that 1894 Constitutional Convention was a lawyer, Louis Marshall. Louis Marshall was a great champion of Jewish civil liberties, immigrant rights, and the rights of all minorities. Louis Marshall led the floor fight at the 1915 New York State Constitutional Convention that stopped a move to gut the "forever wild" clause. In

American wilderness preservation history, Louis Marshall is also known as the father of Robert Marshall, the indefatigable Bob Marshall who labored within the U.S. Forest Service to protect forest wilderness. He died at an early age. His brother George Marshall, a member of The Wilderness Society Governing Council, was the first person to whom my father Howard Zahniser sent the very first draft of a Wilderness Bill.

The Adirondacks and Catskills still preserve—in their “forever wild” lands of the state’s forest preserve—the wildlands-protection impetus that led to creation of Forest Reserves on federal public domain lands. However, the Forest Reserves, originally true reserves, in which logging, mining, livestock grazing, and homesteading were prohibited, were subsequently redesignated as national forests open to logging, mining, and grazing.

New York State citizens were able to make stick, in their own backyard, a wildlands preservation impulse that conservationists such as John Muir and Robert Underwood Johnson were not able to make stick on U.S. federal public domain lands. Addressing members of New York’s State legislature in 1953, my father had called the Adirondack and Catskill forest preserve [quote] “Where Wilderness Preservation Began.”

I hope you will tuck this bit of U.S. Wilderness Act pre-history into your

mental backpack for your all-important wilderness preservation work in Europe.

The U.S. Wilderness Act is an ethical statement about human relations with what Aldo Leopold called the land organism. In fact, in Judeo-Christian thought, wilderness has a long, long tradition, of being prophetic of human culture. By “prophetic,” I don’t mean predicting the future. Prophetic here means a calling back to fundamental, right relationships. Wilderness has been the location for calling people back to right relationship both with the rest of the human community and with God. The wilderness sojourn of the Hebrew people fleeing 400 years of slavery in Egypt under the Pharaoh is reported in the Hebrew Scriptures’ Book of Exodus.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says the wilderness experience of the Hebrew people, as codified in their scriptures, furnished the building blocks of their national identity. The wilderness experience gave them their laws. The wilderness experience gave them the name of God. Other scholars echo Brueggemann’s assessment. As Biblical scholar Ulrich Mauser reads the New Testament Gospel of Mark, the ministry of Jesus embodies a new Exodus wilderness experience. In Mauser’s reading of Mark’s Gospel, Jesus of Nazareth works out highlights of his ministry in the wilderness, atop mountains, or on or by the sea.

In the language of modern psychology, Jesus works out highlights of his ministry in these natural settings known to produce the diminutive effect. These are wild settings that, like Gothic cathedrals, put us in spatial perspectives that impress on us our proper scale in the universal scheme of things.

Wilderness experience calls us back to what my father described as a sense of **dependence** and **interdependence** as well as **independence**. Wilderness experience calls us back to a right relationship with the whole community of life on Earth that derives its existence from the Sun. Wilderness experience calls us back to the realization that, as my father wrote, we prosper only as the whole community of life prospers.

Novelist Andrew Lytle writes that prophets do not come from the city promising riches and wearing store-bought clothes. No, prophets have always come from the wilderness, stinking of goats . . . and telling of a different sort of treasure. Wendell Berry writes that “If change is to come, it will come from the margins. . . . It was the desert, not the temple, that gave us the prophets.” In much original Hebrew scripture, the words for *desert* and *wilderness* are the same word.

This prophetic role of wilderness experience — how wilderness calls us

back to right relationship, to right living, to social justice — this prophetic role of wilderness also figures strongly in the history of the U.S. Wilderness Act. To see this we must step back before George Perkins Marsh and 1864, back to the 1830s, to the Transcendentalist reformers' era, the era of Margaret Sarah Fuller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau.

My father was a lifelong student of Emerson and Thoreau. He served a one-year term as honorary president of the Thoreau Society from 1956 to 1957. One of my father's public-school teachers had her students memorize an Emerson quotation each week. My father's interest eventually shifted more to Thoreau. It was Thoreau who, in his 1862 essay "Walking," inscribed the Zen koan-like rallying cry of conservation that ". . . in Wildness is the preservation of the World."

In his book of American scripture, *Walden*, in his posthumous books *Cape Cod* and *The Maine Woods*, and in his millionous well-polished words of Journals, Thoreau meditates on the utter necessity of wildness. Thoreau's essay "Walking" combines two 1850s lectures, drawn from his journals: "The Wild," and "Walking."

It's intriguing how Thoreau does not say we preserve wildness. He says wildness preserves the world. And for Thoreau, who read French,

German, Latin, and Greek, this word *world* is the Greek word *kosmos*, meaning not only world but also beauty, pattern, order . . . in Wilderness is the preservation of the World, Beauty, Pattern, Order. In Wilderness is the preservation of the World, Beauty, Pattern, Order. Isn't that amazing?

Until the recent resurgence in women's studies, Margaret Sarah Fuller was less known than Emerson and Thoreau. But many now credit Fuller as the greatest of Transcendentalist thinkers. Many consider Margaret Fuller's book *Woman in the Nineteenth Century* to be, still, the best statement on that subject. She edited the Transcendentalist magazine *The Dial*.

Margaret Fuller is important to Wilderness Act history because her reformist agenda in the 1840s has an uncanny, almost one-to-one correspondence with the legislative agenda of U.S. Senator Hubert H. Humphrey in the 1950s. Fuller advocated American Indian rights, ending slavery, women's suffrage, women's rights, education reform, rehabilitation of women prisoners, and more. Her Transcendentalist reform agenda and Senator Humphrey's legislative agenda, of which the Wilderness Act was one important element, show that wilderness is not at the periphery of society. Wilderness is a core concern of a truly whole society, holistically seen.

Fuller's and Humphrey's similar agendas round out the truth of Thoreau's assertion that ". . . in wildness is the preservation of the World." The Wilderness Act was part of a large legislative package backed by Senator Humphrey that included the National Defense Education Loan Act, Voting Rights Act, and the landmark Civil Rights Act. Wilderness and wildness are not at the periphery of a truly great society. They are at its core. Here you see the truth declared as the Wilderness Act opens—Congress construes the Wilderness Act Congress to be "for the permanent good of the whole people. . ." by a House of Representatives vote of 373 to 1.

In fact, Howard Zahniser was propelled from a secure job with the federal government into full-time work for wilderness in part by his grave disillusionment over the use of atomic bombs on Japan. If atomic bombs were the culmination of industrial technology, surely we must find a way to relearn the great lesson of our kinship with all life.

Wilderness and wildness are integral to what Farmer and Poet Wendell Berry calls the circumference of mystery. Wilderness and wildness are integral to what Poet Denise Levertov calls the Great Web. Wilderness and wildness are integral to what the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. calls "our inescapable network of mutuality". Wilderness and wildness, writes the Poet Gary Snyder, is the ordering of impermanence.

Wilderness and wildness are integral to what God describes to Job as the “circle on the face of the deep,” to the biosphere, to that circle of life, our circle of life. Life.

The prophetic call of wilderness is not to escape the world. The prophetic call of wilderness is to encounter the world’s essence, the Earth’s immortal genius, the planetary intelligence. Wilderness calls us to renewed kinship with all of life. We humans will extend ethical regard to the whole community of life on Earth only as we feel that we are a part of that community.

In Aldo Leopold’s words, we will enlarge the boundaries of the community, we will live out a land ethic, only as we feel that we are part of that community. By securing a national policy of restraint and humility toward natural conditions and wilderness character, the Wilderness Act has taken us one hugely significant sociopolitical step toward instituting a land ethic, toward enlarging, in humility, the boundaries of the community.

Go forth for the wilderness. Do good. Tell the stories. And bring back a different sort of treasure . . . for the permanent good of the whole people.