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PROTECTING THE WILD

PARKS AND WILDERNESS,
THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

I Walk in the World to Love It

EILEEN CRIST

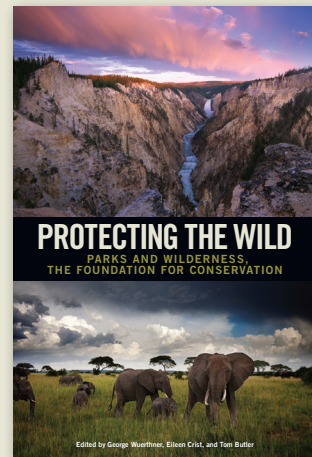
**PROTECTING THE WILD: PARKS AND WILDERNESS,
THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION**

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“THE WORLD TODAY is nothing if it is not sprawl,” writes nature poet Mary Oliver.¹ It was not until the nineteenth century that a minority of people glimpsed this eventuality, and it was only at the end of the twentieth and dawn of the twenty-first that the sprawl’s scope became fully transparent.

Today, knowledge of humanity’s impact on the planet’s systems—biodiversity, atmosphere, climate, freshwater, wetlands, forests, oceans, soil—is available to anyone interested enough to seek it. Two far-reaching consequences follow from our systems-level impact: Earth’s biological impoverishment, via the loss, degradation, and homogenization of its Holocene-rich diversity of life; and the transfiguration of the planet into what author Bill McKibben recently dubbed *Eaarth*. “The world hasn’t ended,” McKibben notes, “but the world as we know it has—even if we don’t quite know it yet. We imagine... the disturbances we see around us are the old random and freakish kind. They are not. It’s a different place. A different planet.”²

Despite the looming consequences, there are reasons to sustain hope. “The enormity of what we are doing,” as David Brower enjoined, is beginning “to pervade our thinking.”³ Many people are grieving but also taking action. Despite the downsides of the electronic revolution—extractive industries, e-waste pollution, and endless media distractions—in an interconnected world knowledge and information can spread. Human solidarity with the biosphere, and toward a life of human integrity within it, may yet be born because our connection with Earth is primal; in the words of E. O. Wilson, “despite all our fantasies and pretensions, we always have been and will remain a biological species tied to this particular world.”⁴

Another reason for remaining hopeful is the foresight, and equally the afterthought, of an always-ambivalent human establishment to exempt certain lands and (to a lesser extent) waters from the sprawl. Nature conservation “constitutes hope for an implacable counterforce to the momentum of totalizing imperial power”;⁵ as such, it has rarely been an uncontested or voluntary gesture. Its origins reach back to pioneer thinkers of nineteenth-century North America, who advocated and inspired a movement for protecting areas of the natural world so as to arrest the planet’s resource-hungry engulfment. Such pioneers understood that “nothing dollarable is safe” (John Muir). They also envisioned the ideal of every human habitat bordering the wilderness (Henry Thoreau): for the sake of diversity and balance, for the sake of beauty and quietude, for the sake of justice for nonhumans and respect for their homes.

The movement for free zones against human exploitation (as stingy and disputed as that movement tends to be) has spread around the world. Despite the fact that only about 13 percent of the land and 2 percent of the ocean are protected,⁶ in recent years the globalization of nature protection and especially of parks and wilderness preservation has been indicted as impositions of American ideals. As David Quammen summarizes this argument: “protecting landscape and biological diversity by creating national parks is [censured as] another elitist form of cultural imperialism.”⁷ This political critique of parks and wilderness reserves is off track for at least three reasons. For starters, it belittles the ability of all people, regardless of cultural background, to discern the obvious: that without formally agreed upon, legally binding, and enforced restraint to accessing certain parts of the natural world, the sprawl would not end until it had ended everything except itself.

Another reason that the condemnation of strict nature protection as a Western burden is amiss is that different cultures elaborate different aspects of collective and historical experience, and such diverse elaborations—if resonant with inclinations that are universal to the human spirit—become the common heritage, the *real* commonwealth, of humanity.⁸ (Thus, for example, millions of Westerners who do yogic practices today would not think of themselves as duped by a Hindu lifestyle and metaphysics.) It is true that the value of conservation (in its modern guise) was first nurtured on the North American continent. This occurred because a few people (partial to the European-rooted Romantic movement, the first Western intellectual platform to oppose human domination and hubris) stood witness to the breakneck pace and horrendous violence with which an entire continent—its people, plants, animals, forests, rivers, and rich ecologies—was desecrated. Of course, ever since the Neolithic period human beings have been overtaking large swaths of the natural world, but never before with such speed, arrogance (“Manifest Destiny”), deadly germs, high-impact technologies, and large-scale cruelty (witness the decimation of indigenous people, passenger pigeons, bison, salmon, wolves, among so many other natives) that occurred in North America, especially after industrialization and population growth took off.⁹ This continent-wide ecological blitzkrieg was a (world) historic wake-up call—for a minority, it is important to remember, and not for American culture as a whole.

The third reason that the critique of modern conservation as cultural imperialism goes astray is that closer

inspection of its “American” roots reveals that the sensibility of cherishing and protecting nature was hardly a strict Euro-American nineteenth-century innovation. Reading Thoreau’s *Walden*, one cannot but be struck by the repeated allusions to Eastern philosophy and contemplative practice—both of which exalt a cosmic view of nature’s primacy and power over the human realm. And Thoreau is *the* intellectual architect of the ideal of wilderness preservation as imperative for defending nature’s autonomy against human subjugation and instrumentalism. Indeed, it is not widely known that Thoreau first introduced the idea of a “park”—of nature free from relentless human use—as a preserved expanse to grace the environs of every human settlement. Muir may have been the great activist-writer, the sermonizer for parks. But the case against civilized man’s blindness to the magnificence of the more-than-human world, and to that world’s inspirational potential and inherent right to thrive, was unequivocally made by the still-unsurpassed blade of Henry’s pen. In making that case Thoreau drew from a repository of knowledge well beyond the Western canon. Indeed, citizens of India might relish that the man who so influenced Mahatma Gandhi’s activism had first been inspired by Gandhi’s own spiritual heritage. For example, Thoreau had this to say about one of India’s (and the world’s) most holy texts: “In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the Bhagvat Geeta [sic].” A few sentences later he adds: “The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges.”¹⁰

While the ideal and practice of safeguarding portions of self-willed nature from the sprawl is now a shared heritage—“truly a significant contribution to world civilization,” in the words of environmental philosopher Thomas Birch,¹¹—it must be admitted that in major ways the sprawl is already everywhere. Changing the planet’s atmosphere and climate as well as the global unleashing of biocidal chemicals attest to the sprawl’s life-menacing victory. What’s more, the sprawl has seized Earth’s best soil. The most fecund lands, the temperate grasslands, once rich in life-forms, ecological processes, and migrations (“moving ecosystems”) are mostly plowed under. “Agriculture gets what it wants,” as author Richard Manning nails it.¹² Indeed, along with the soil, agriculture has demanded much of the freshwater. Because protected areas are rarely large (or interconnected) enough to shelter entire river catchments, the loss of freshwater biodiversity has been enormous. (It has also been largely undocumented and blithely ignored.) According to biologist David Dudgeon

and colleagues, “fresh waters are experiencing declines in biodiversity far greater than those in most affected terrestrial ecosystems.”¹³

As insufficient, nonpristine, and ecologically and politically precarious as protected areas are, they still stand as safe havens where civilization’s invading tide, though far from halted, is kept at bay. While in today’s world even parks and wilderness reserves are losing species, the hemorrhaging is far slower than what is occurring outside protected areas. In a recent review of the status of biodiversity, conservation biologist Stuart Pimm and his coauthors write that “the rate at which mammals, birds, and amphibians have slid toward extinction over the past four decades would have been 20% higher were it not for conservation efforts.” “Protected areas,” they urge, “are essential for reducing extinctions.”¹⁴

Strictly protected areas—or biodiversity reserves, as I refer to them interchangeably—are sanctuaries safeguarding more than meets the eye. As noted, they protect species (as well as subspecies, varieties, and populations), especially those who are endemic, sensitive, or averse to people’s presence, wide-ranging and incompatible with human settlements and roads, or under dire threat of targeted slaying.¹⁵ Additionally, biodiversity reserves allow ecological dynamics to unfold without chain saws, drills, plows, pesticides, trawlers, and guns to disarray them; such ecological dynamics include, for example, the movements of large herds of mammals who need vast, unbroken spaces for their mobile or migratory life cycles.¹⁶ Protected areas are sanctuaries for animals, trees, fungi, and ecological communities, giving them a chance to ripen into old age: both for the sake of their own lives and for ecological effects uniquely shaped by larger-sized organisms, such as ancient trees.¹⁷ For wild animals, sheltered places avail them a chance to enjoy lives free from being shot, poisoned, snared, run over, hooked, netted, or caused to starve.¹⁸ Networked biodiversity reserves¹⁹ also serve as necessary refuges for the massive movement of life that will occur (and has begun) in response to rapid climate change; recent studies reveal that organisms are already availing themselves of protected areas disproportionately in their climate-change-induced peregrinations.²⁰ Importantly, protected areas are havens for biodiversity’s long-term potential, safeguarding the genetic variability required to keep viable the evolutionary promise of as many of Earth’s life-forms as possible.

Protected areas are sacred for people who want to preserve indigenous or create neo-indigenous wild life-ways—choices which, while likely to be eschewed by many,

remain the rightful heritage for those who now and in the future would embrace them. Biodiversity reserves also counteract what has been called “the extinction of experience” in the wake of the downhill spiral of generational ecological amnesia: This refers to the narrowing range of potent experiences of the natural world, accompanied by a cumulative collective ignorance of how rich life on Earth is when left free of human chiseling and hammering.²¹ “With each ensuing generation,” biologist John Waldman explains, “environmental degradation generally increases, but each generation takes that degraded condition as the new normal.” Conservation is thus vital for counteracting “the insidious ebbing of the ecological and social relevancy of declining and disappearing species.”²² Beyond protecting natural areas, actively restoring the wild can relieve what author George Monbiot calls “ecological boredom” in a humanized world.²³ Last but far from least, protected areas are sanctuaries of human dignity, for they affirm that we are not so deprived as to lay instrumental claim to every object, being, and place on the planet. The thought alone of humans causing a mass extinction makes most people’s conscience sting. In such conscious or subterranean desire to preserve life lies real hope, and protected areas are crucial for saving global biodiversity and averting a human-driven mass-extinction event.²⁴

Indeed, land and marine protected areas are so indispensable for the existential and experiential horizons of all life—nonhuman and human—that everything possible must be done to enlarge, restore, and interconnect them. This mandate necessitates the restriction of human access, for were people allowed to explore or live within strictly protected areas, the “impact on the fauna and flora... would be fatal to a large fraction of the species.”²⁵ Barring people from sources of livelihood or income within biodiversity reserves (prohibiting settlements, agriculture, hunting, mining, and other high-impact activities) needs to be offset by coupling conservation efforts with the provision of benefits for local people.²⁶ Conservation practitioners agree that this is not only the right thing to do but mandatory, for without people’s support “any conservation gains will be ephemeral,” as Paul Ehrlich and Robert Pringle note.²⁷

The long-term ecological and human possibilities ensured by wilderness preservation do not resonate with everyone immediately—though over time, new circumstances, changing values, and emerging economic opportunities can move (and in many cases have moved) societies toward deeper appreciation of protected areas.²⁸ To enlist the allegiance of local communities with conserva-

tion practice, tangible benefits of protecting wild nature must be both emphasized and generated (for all, not just local elites²⁹). Not only are the benefits economic (such as income created through ecotourism), they are also social, educational, and health-related.³⁰ For example, people often come to feel pride in their national parks, especially when these are well maintained, globally prominent, and protective of rare or widely valued species. Transboundary parks, also known as “peace parks,” can encourage good relations between neighboring countries, thus contributing to social and political stability.³¹ Additionally, conservation practice expands humanity’s knowledge horizons through fostering a dialogue between indigenous/traditional and modern scientific ways of knowing. Thus conservation programs that actively engage local people are crucial both for the long term success of conservation plans and for the growth and flow of biological knowledge.³² According to conservation scientists Clive Hambler and Susan Canney, conservation efforts that involve public participation and citizen science “enhance learning and engagement, and reduce feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.”³³

For these reasons, conservationists agree that the goodwill and participation of people living near biodiversity reserves need to be procured. Protected areas must be designed with the intention of supporting local communities and, more broadly, of enhancing the quality of human life everywhere.³⁴ Over the last few decades it has become clear that not only should human costs of conservation be avoided or compensated for, but public enthusiasm for protecting wild nature needs to be cultivated.

PROTECTED AREAS TODAY—especially reserves that tend to enjoy the highest levels of protection—may be regarded as an analogue to Tiananmen Square’s “Tank Man”: They represent bold and always-precarious action against nature’s final takeover by modern civilization. In a time of growing human numbers, escalating energy use, consumer accumulation of ever-more things, global trade, and technological somnambulism,³⁵ nature conservation constitutes “an essential holding action.”³⁶ Lisi Krall recently described conservation practice as *resistance* against the occupation of the natural world, defending its remaining free enclaves, wild stands, and nonhuman nations from the avalanche.³⁷ Appearances notwithstanding, I argue that the avalanche being resisted is not a human avalanche, *per se*, but more accurately the avalanche of history, driven by the mindset and ammunition of the civilized conqueror.

Since the end of the last century into the present, those

who campaign for biodiversity reserves safeguarded from all but our lightest-footprint activities (like walking or bird watching) have had to contend with the smear of “misanthropy” (literally meaning “hating man”).³⁸ Specifically, wilderness defenders who maintain that civilized people³⁹ need not, and indeed *should not*, be permitted full access to the biosphere have been critiqued as promoting two false, misanthropic views: one, that there exists a gaping dichotomy between humans and the rest of nature; and two, that humans defile or taint the natural world, which would remain pristine in their absence. A notable dimension of these allegations against wilderness advocacy is that those who level them regularly fail to foreground civilized humanity’s unrestrained expansionism over the planet, including mining sea beds, decapitating mountains, despoiling marine life, pervasive killing of wild animals, and appropriating the lion’s share of topsoil and freshwater (to mention some outstanding examples). Defending the world against such egregious occupation can only be an act of love, and to malign the defenders as misanthropes is a charge as damaging as it is incoherent.⁴⁰

Those who love the natural world—and want to protect its freedom, diversity, abundance, and inexhaustible beauty and mystery, as well as our covenant with all this which preceded and once surrounded our very existence—also, on pains of irresolvable contradiction, love human *being*. For as the natural world is foundationally good and beautiful, so does human nature contain the ingredients for an identity that is good and beautiful within the natural world. This perspective rings “romantic,” because that is exactly what it happens to be: It is heir to the worldview of Romanticism, informed additionally by ecological knowledge of nature’s integrated flows and often tempered (as in Thoreau’s case) by timeless spiritual intuition of nature’s unity. The Romantic worldview embraces the more *encompassing* truth of a positive understanding of the natural world—as emerging through reciprocal relations, the creation of abundance, the building of diversity, and the breathtaking forging of *umwelts*—over the *limited* truth of a killjoy understanding of the natural world—captured in such catchphrases as “nature red in tooth and claw,” “the selfish gene,” or “a dog-eat-dog world.”

The positive view of nature implies that it is highly unlikely that there is something inherent in human nature that makes it intractably adversarial to the more-than-human world. Of course our species—being generalist, brainy, and technologically dexterous—has the built-in capacity to be the proverbial “bull in the china shop” (as pre-

historic human-driven extinctions testify). But the gravest trouble lurks in how civilization has usurped the already bigger-than-life human animal, trapping him (us) into a calamitous identity that is conquering, instrumental, killing, inconsiderate, and controlling—in a word, supremacist. The human supremacist is conditioned to be myopically self-serving, co(s)mically conceited (in learned or lay fashion), and, delusions of grandeur notwithstanding, existentially constricted—he disparages dwelling from a sacred sense of wonder within the biosphere as secondary or superfluous by comparison to the compulsion to live in take/compete/survive mode most of the time.

Nature’s adversary is not human *being* in some essential sense, but the supremacist identity fashioned by the dark side of civilization. As dominant as this overlord identity has become, it is dangerously misleading to conflate it with human nature: To make that conflation is to distort and underestimate the human, “to confuse our ‘self’ with the narrow ego.”⁴¹ While our nature certainly seems susceptible to the supremacist persona, this identity has been socioculturally instilled, and historically hardened, from the inception of civilization onward. It was coeval with the spread of agriculture and domestication, the erection of walled city-states, the emergence of resource-driven wars, the construction of social hierarchy, the never-ending (to this very hour) deforestation, and the annihilation of indigenous (as well as less powerful) peoples and their ways. Perhaps most importantly, alongside the spread and variegated forms of entrenching the above, the overlord identity has been fashioned through a raft of philosophical, theological, political, and pseudoscientific ideologies—leached into commonsense—that have repeatedly (re)declared the human to be both superior to all life-forms and rightful user of the natural world. In brief, civilization (not wilderness protection) has long cultivated the human sense of being separate and supreme, and underwritten the still-reigning normative violence against the nonhuman world. It is this human identity that nature must be protected from, not some fixed essence of the human.

Thus advocacy for protecting, restoring, and interconnecting large swaths of nature, and exempting such places from all but our lightest presence, is not motivated by the alleged view that there exists a gaping dichotomy between humans and rest of the natural world. *That* dichotomy has been inflicted by the civilized human,⁴² who, having categorically disavowed his animal-being, has not sought to be integral with Earth’s life community but mostly to dominate and convert nature. Indeed, a human-nonhuman apartheid

regime conjured by historical humanity has legitimated our self-consigned prerogative to occupy, use, displace, and eradicate the natural world at will. The mainstay of the wilderness idea, and of the activism to preserve the wild, has been conscientious opposition to this rampage and to the human-nonhuman constructed hierarchy that underpins it. Protecting wild nature is thus *precisely* intended to shield the natural world from the invented, exploitation-facilitating human-nature split—and not to assert the existence of an essential separateness between people and the nonhuman world. Even so, since the 1990s, wilderness defense has been mindlessly disparaged as “self-evidently” propagating an artificial divide between people and the natural world, while the wilderness concept has been dismissed as a white-male-American social construct.⁴³

Rather than zooming in on the fact that occupying nature does not signal our unity with it, such critiques of wilderness silently press the interpretation that civilized humanity’s sprawl shows our inseparability from the natural world: thus are people befuddled into *confounding* swallowing-up-nature with being-at-one-with-nature. Simultaneously, those who defend the natural world from human assimilation are censured as believing in a human-nature dichotomy. This bogus reasoning has worked only to discourage deeper thinking about our relationship with the biosphere. For it requires virtually no thought to say, “Humans and nature are not separate, therefore no wonder everything looks the way it does.” But it requires critical reflection to discern that the millennia-old stance of human entitlement, with its proliferated conceptions of “the Human Difference” and its amoral instrumentalism, has all but utterly divorced humans from nature—*therefore no wonder everything looks the way it does*.

Slavery, racism, and discrimination against women and other groups, while persisting in the world, are today socially spurned; but not that long ago they were the norm, institutionalized by economic and political arrangements and upheld as self-evidently valid by mainstream opinion. Despite evidence for humanity’s moral evolution regarding members of our *own* species, human ownership of land and seas along with the virulent exploitation and/or displacement of nonhumans continue to rule, congealed into realities by economic, political, and ideational institutions, and endorsed by mainstream opinion as the way things self-evidently are, need, and ought to be.⁴⁴

Yet the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice. The time for justice for the nonhuman world—for the simple recognition of the goodness of letting places, processes,

and beings abide in their own natures free from excessive interference—is surely coming, though it may take another generation or longer. Some environmental observers, however, argue that this hoped-for extension of moral consideration to nonhumans and their homes is naive, failing “to recognize the depth of our own species narcissism.”⁴⁵ There are good reasons to disagree with such ripostes to the possibility of universal justice: Our own species narcissism does not have all that much “depth.” Real depth inheres in what ancient spiritual and indigenous traditions have directly recognized and Charles Darwin articulated with evidence-based precision: the knowledge that we are all family on this Earth plane. While human attitudes toward nonhumans and the natural world might always remain complicated, dissimilar, and even discordant, with time, humanity is apt to converge on a broad and lucid biocentric view: that all beings are better off wild, free, cared for (in the case of the domesticated), released from inflictions of unnecessary suffering and exploitation, living in accordance with their natures and life cycles, their habitats respected and unmolested, and their unknown evolutionary destinies valued and left unobstructed.

So here we can circle back to deepen the inquiry into the mandate of protecting “big chunks of linked wilderness,” as Brower colloquially put it.⁴⁶ The goal is not to maintain remnant “museum” pieces of the natural world to serve as vacation destinations, future resource reserves, science laboratories, roomy zoos, or ecological-service providers; in other words, the point is not to incarcerate portions of wild nature for various human purposes in perpetuity. In his celebrated paper, “The Incarceration of Wilderness: Wilderness Areas as Prisons,” Birch laid to rest such conservation rationales as alter exhibits of civilization’s vise-grip on the natural world. Were such rationales for parks and wilderness to prevail in the future, protected areas would indeed turn out to be glorified Disney Worlds—assigned proper uses in a world dominated and managed by modern humans. Protected areas for “epoch Anthropocene” would serve various consumer diversions, such as sighting exotic animals, trophy hunting, safari adventures, outdoor recreation, or stress release. This warped vision for conservation is consistent with a humanized world order, in which “wilderness and wildness are placed on the supermarket shelf of values along with everything else, and everything is enclosed *inside* the supermarket.”⁴⁷ A supermarket (overt or covert) rationale for long-term nature protection must be brought to light and discredited.

From a biocentric standpoint, protected areas are the

best shelters of Earth's biological wealth and evolutionary potential until the time when such areas will *no longer be needed*. The practice of conservation constitutes "part of a larger strategy that aims to make all land [and seas] into, or back into, sacred space, and thereby to move humanity into a conscious reinhabitation of wildness."⁴⁸ The entire Earth will then become what Brower envisioned as Earth Park, except that the word "park" will be as unnecessary as human-nature *de jure* boundaries. But protected areas are indispensable until that day when human beings share a sensibility that cringes at the mere thought of ivory, rhino horn, tiger bone, dried-up sea horses in "medicinal" ziplock bags, shahtoosh, snow leopard fur, all fur, trophy hunting, bushmeat, exotic pets, bear bile "farming," "performing" cetaceans and other animals, shark fin soup, tortoise/turtle shell knickknacks, wetlands for cane sugar, rainforests for palm oil or meat, prairies for corn and wheat fields, intact ecosystems for diamonds, gold, or oil, mountains for coal, sagebrush landscapes for natural gas, boreal forest for tar sands, and life-filled oceans for seafood. For the time being, though, nonhumans and their habitats must be shielded, sometimes with militant vigilance and force if they are to survive.⁴⁹

Parks, wilderness, and other nature preserves are biodiversity arks, protected for Earth's future restoration into wholeness when humanity will desire to be interwoven within Nature's expanse rather than establishing an imperial, parasitic civilization upon it. A key task for working toward that time is to "set aside the largest fraction of Earth's surface possible as inviolate nature reserves. One-half would be nice."⁵⁰

WHILE NETWORKS OF BIODIVERSITY RESERVES are needed more than ever in a time of extinctions and rapid climate change, they have been called into question by vociferous voices. Strictly protected areas like parks and wilderness have been denounced as "fortress conservation" that can displace people while also undermining their means to rise out of poverty.⁵¹ In response to such sweeping denunciations, recent research has revealed that systematic data about the impact protected areas have had on local communities worldwide (and under what conditions that impact has been beneficial or detrimental) is "seriously lacking."⁵² What's more, the overwhelming majority of the world's rural and urban poor do not live near wilderness areas.⁵³ But the shrill rhetoric of the fortress critique, along with the intimidating high moral ground of human rights it professes, have driven conservationists into the defensive

and induced an observable shift (in discourse and practice) toward "people-centered" conservation approaches.⁵⁴

While there is a broad agreement about the need to couple conservation efforts with active community involvement (as previously discussed), a vocal camp known as social (or new) conservationists⁵⁵ are contending that conservation objectives should primarily serve human interests—interests that are openly or implicitly equated with conventional definitions of economic development and prosperity. On this view, conservation practice motivated by wild nature's inherent value, and by the desire to save species and ecosystems, is shunted aside. As one observer naively phrases the supremacist assumptions underlying this perspective, "conservation is about people in relation to place; it is not only about the inventory of *objects* in nature."⁵⁶

The literature challenging traditional conservation strategies as locking people out, and as locking away sources of human livelihood, rarely tackles either the broader distribution of poverty or its root social causes; rather, strictly protected areas are scapegoated, and wild nature, once again, is targeted to take the fall for the purported betterment of people, while domination and exploitation of nature remain unchallenged. The prevailing mindset of humanity's entitlement to avail itself of the natural world without limitation is easily, if tacitly, invoked by arguments that demand that wilderness (the last safe zone for species, processes, ecologies, nonhuman individuals, climatic disruption, and indigenous ways) offer up its "natural resources"—in the name of justice.⁵⁷ The cause of justice, however, would be better served by opposing a dominant economic and ideological order which is constitutionally founded on the ceaseless exploitation of all nature (people included) in the pursuit of "prosperity"; a dominant order which, in the course of generating prosperity, spawns ecological impoverishment as well as both real and perceived human poverty.

As long as the reigning idea and reality of prosperity remain unchallenged, all calls for ending poverty willy-nilly echo the mainstream answer to poverty alleviation—namely, the obligation to raise all people into the consumer ranks.⁵⁸ But what counts as consumer prosperity is built on defining the living world as "natural resources," turning countless living beings (and their homes) into consumable dead objects, converting entire biomes for crops, livestock grazing, seafood, wood products, and freshwater use, and ramping up mining operations worldwide in the service of infrastructure expansion, insatiable energy consumption, and nonstop industrial and consumer product output. As environmental commentators Michael Shellenberg

and Ted Nordhaus correctly, albeit approvingly, state: “The degradation of nonhuman environments has made us rich. We have become adept at transferring the wealth and diversity of nonhuman environments into human ones.”⁵⁹ To remain untouchable, this prosperity-augmenting regime must perpetuate the moral invisibility of the more-than-human world, and it must obstruct from view the brutal practices, ecological ruins, as well as human indignities that prosperity’s coveted goods—from meat to cell phones, from palm oil to apparel, from sushi to automobiles, from roads to electricity generation—are beholden to.⁶⁰

Rather than dissecting the devastating consequences of global consumer society for the biosphere—and the demographic reality (current and projected) that immensely amplifies the ruination—social or new conservationists claim that protecting wild nature from human use is iniquitous. This perspective has gained traction not because it has any intrinsic merit but because it fits with—indeed perfectly echoes—a more general present-day trend: the mission to drive civilization’s parasitic tentacles more deeply into the natural world as the fundamental strategy for solving humanity’s self-inflicted challenges. Wherever we turn we find diverse expressions of this single strategy: whether it is the pitch for genetically modified crops to “feed the world”; the call for desalination projects to solve freshwater shortages; the increase of aquaculture operations (fish factories) to generate “protein” for people; the manipulation of atmospheric composition to rectify climate disruption; the expansion and diversification of biofuel production to gas up the growing global car fleet; *or* the pressure to surrender

remaining wilderness areas for people’s economic advancement. Unifying these superficially dissimilar projects is the human imperial mission to continue manipulating, invading, and unlocking the bounty of nature as *the* means to tackle humanity’s current and coming tribulations.

The civilization-as-usual mindset of always turning to use and take from nature blocks from view the more virtuous (and incidentally more effective) alternative of addressing our problems by choosing to change *who we are* and *how we live*: abandoning a conception of prosperity that is premised on colonizing the biosphere; prioritizing the humane, drastic reduction of our global numbers; embracing ecological models of food production; and envisioning bioregional ways of reinhabiting Earth as shared home, not resource satellite. Instead of entrenching the domination of nature to secure civilization’s future—and today extending the reaches of exploitation into genes and cells, biosphere-scale engineering and manipulation, and the final takeover of wild places—the biocentric standpoint advocates reinventing ourselves as members of the biosphere, to borrow Aldo Leopold’s classic phrasing.

Biocentrism rewrites civilization. Returning to the Stone Age is not required for making beautiful human habitation a reality. What is required is the will to live in reciprocity with the more-than-human world, not at its expense: the will to create a new humanity that respects nature’s freedom and desires to dwell within wild Earth’s unbroken, diverse, and life-abundant loveliness. “I walk in the world to love it,” writes Mary Oliver. Her words speak for the human spirit rising.

NOTES

1. M. Oliver, “Waste Land: An Elegy,” *Orion* 22 (September/October 2003).
2. B. McKibben, *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (New York: Times Books, 2010), 2. For a brief up-to-date summary of humanity’s global ecological footprint see D. A. DellaSala, “Global Change,” *Reference Module in Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences* (Elsevier 11 Sept. 2013), doi:10.1016/B978-0-12-409548-9.05355-0.
3. D. Brower, *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run* (Gabriola Island: New Society Publishers, 2000), 17.
4. E. O. Wilson, *A Window on Eternity: A Biologist’s Walk through Gorongosa National Park* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 132.
5. T. Birch, “The Incarceration of Wildness: Wilderness Areas as Prisons,” in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. G. Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), 339–55, 351.
6. While 13 represents the official approximate percentage of land protected worldwide, this inclusive estimate masks the fact that only about 6 percent of it is *strictly* protected from human use. D. Brockington et al., “Conservation, Human Rights, and Poverty Reduction,” *Conservation Biology* 20, no. 1 (2006): 250–52, (p. 250). The IUCN’s classification of Protected Areas divides them into six types, ranging from biodiversity-focused objectives like wilderness protection (strictly protected), to those incorporating human uses like “sustainable natural resource management.” For global data and trends regarding protected areas, see UNEP’s World Conservation Monitoring Centre, <http://www.unep-wcmc.org/>.
7. D. Quammen, “Hallowed Ground: Nothing Is Ever Safe,” *National Geographic* (October 2006).
8. Jack Turner makes this argument cogently in his essay “The Wild and the Self,” in *The Rediscovery of the Wild*, ed. P. Kahn and P. Hasbach (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 27–50.

9. See T. Steinberg, *Down to Earth: Nature's Role in American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); P. Shabekoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2003).
10. H. Thoreau, *Walden or, Life in the Woods* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991), 239.
11. T. Birch, "The Incarceration of Wildness," 339.
12. R. Manning, *Rewilding the West: Restoration in a Prairie Landscape*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), p. 6.
13. "Protection of freshwater biodiversity," they note, "is perhaps the ultimate conservation challenge because, to be fully effective, it requires control over the upstream drainage network, the surrounding land, the riparian zone, and—in the case of migrating aquatic fauna—downstream reaches. Such prerequisites are hardly ever met..." D. Dudgeon et al., "Freshwater Biodiversity: Importance, Threats, Status and Conservation Challenges," *Biol. Rev.* 81 (2006): 163–82, (p. 176); Stuart Pimm and his colleagues make the same point. "The Biodiversity of Species and their Rates of Extinction, Distribution, and Protection," *Science* (30 May 2014): 1246752-1-10, (p. 6).
14. S. Pimm et al., "The Biodiversity of Species and Their Rates of Extinction, Distribution, and Protection," *Science*, p. 5.
15. In many parts of the world, "protected areas support the last populations of many species." C. Hambler and S. Canney, *Conservation* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, Second Edition, 2013), 199.
16. See D. Wilcove, *No Way Home: The Decline of the World's Great Animal Migrations*. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2008).
17. "Why," asked John Muir, "are Big Tree groves always found on well watered spots? Simply because Big Trees give rise to streams. It is a mistake to suppose that the water is the cause of the groves being there. On the contrary, the groves are the cause of the water being there." See J. Muir, *Our National Parks* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1909), p. 243.
18. See B. Czech, "The Imperative of Steady State Economics for Wild Animal Welfare," in *Ignoring Nature No More: The Case for Compassionate Conservation*, ed. M. Bekoff (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2013), 179.
19. Climate change calls for "the careful design of dynamic conservation systems that operate on a landscape scale." L. Hannah et al., "Conservation of Biodiversity in a Changing Climate," *Conservation Biology* 16, no. 1 (2002): 264–68, (p. 265). Conservation biologists Camille Parmesan and John Matthews also emphasize the importance of "the design of new reserves to allow for shifts in distributions of...species." In C. Parmesan and J. Matthews, "Biological Impacts of Climate Change," Chapter 10, *Principles of Conservation Biology*, 3d edition, ed. M. Groom et al. (Sunderland, MA: Sinauer Associates, Inc., 2005), 333–74.
20. C. Thomas et al., "Protected Areas Facilitate Species' Range Expansions," *PNAS* 109 (28 August 2012): 14063–68. See also, "Think Big," Editorial. *Nature* (13 January 2011), 131; A. Johnston et al., "Observed and Predicted Effects of Climate Change on Species Abundance in Protected Areas," *Nature Climate Change* 3 (December 2013): 1055–61.
21. J. Miller, "Biodiversity Conservation and the Extinction of Experience," *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 20 (August 2005): 430–34.
22. J. Waldman, "The Natural World Vanishes: How Species Cease to Matter," *Yale Environment* 360 (8 April 2010).
23. See G. Monbiot, "For More Wonder, Rewild the World," TED Global 2013; G. Monbiot, *Feral: Searching for Enchantment on the Frontiers of Rewilding*. (London: Allen Lane, 2013).
24. Emphasizing strictly protected areas for preventing extinctions in no way disparages the critical importance of protecting biodiversity, and caring for landscapes, outside such areas. For elaborations of this point, see P. Ehrlich and R. Pringle, "Where Does Biodiversity Go from Here? A Grim Business-as-Usual Forecast and a Hopeful Portfolio of Partial Solutions," *PNAS* (12 August 2008): 11579–86; W. F. Laurance et al., "Averting Biodiversity Collapse in Tropical Forest Protected Areas," Letter to *Nature*, 489, (13 September 2012): 290–94.
25. Wilson, *A Window on Eternity*, 137–38. The exception is indigenous peoples who preserve their traditional lifestyles and population densities.
26. See M. Wells and T. McShane, "Integrating Protected Area Management with Local Needs and Aspirations," *Ambio* 33, 8 (December 2004): 513–19; A. Agrawal and K. Redford, "Poverty, Development, and Biodiversity Conservation: Shooting in the Dark?" Working Paper no. 26, March 2006, Wildlife Conservation Society. S. Sanderson and K. Redford, "Contested Relationships between Biodiversity Conservation and Poverty Alleviation," *Oryx* 37, 4 (2003): 389–90; D. Doak et al., "What Is the Future of Conservation?" *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*, 2013.
27. P. Ehrlich and R. Pringle, "Where Does Biodiversity Go from Here?" *PNAS*, p. 11582.
28. For examples, see D. Quammen, "Hallowed Ground: Nothing is Ever Safe." See also, B. Taylor, "Dangerous Territory: The Contested Space Between Imperial Conservation and Environmental Justice," *RCC Perspectives (special issue)*, eds. C. Mauch and L. Robin, Rachel Carson Center, 2014.
29. F. Berkes, "Rethinking Community-Based Conservation," *Conservation Biology* 18, no. 3 (June 2004): 621–30.
30. On the positive effects of natural surroundings on mental and physical health, see N. Schultz, "Nurturing Nature," *New Scientist* (6 November 2010): 35–37.
31. C. Fraser, *Rewilding the World: Dispatches from the Conservation Revolution* (New York: Picador, 2009).
32. P. Ehrlich and R. Pringle, "Where Does Biodiversity Go from Here?" *PNAS*.
33. C. Hambler and S. Canney, *Conservation*, 317. See also K. MacKinnon, "Are We Really Getting Conservation So Badly Wrong?" *PLoS Biol* 9, no. 1 (2011) [Accessed June 6, 2014], <http://www.plosbiology.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pbio.1001010>.
34. E. O. Wilson, *A Window on Eternity*, 141.
35. Langdon Winner coined "technological somnambulism." "Technology as Forms of Life," in *Philosophy of Technology*, ed. D. Kaplan (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004), 103–13.
36. T. Birch, "The Incarceration of Wildness," 351.
37. L. Krall, "Resistance," in *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, ed. G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2014), 205–10.
38. For a well-crafted response to the claim that wilderness advocacy is misanthropic, see P. Keeling, "Wilderness, People, and the False Charge of Misanthropy," *Environmental Ethics* 35 (Winter 2013): 387–405.

39. Wilderness defenders are not opposed to indigenous people's presence in wild nature. See H. Locke and P. Dearden, "Rethinking Protected Area Categories and the New Paradigm," *Environmental Conservation* 32, no. 1 (2005): 1–10. As Daniel Doak and colleagues point out, "indigenous groups and conservationists have...frequently formed alliances to protect lands and counter extractive industries." "What Is the Future of Conservation?" *Trends in Ecology & Evolution* 29 (2013).
40. In agreement with Paul Keeling, "standing up for wilderness against human control and domination of all the land involves a form of antagonism—namely, active opposition to that domination—by definition. But it is a mistake to confuse that opposition with hating humans." P. Keeling, "Wilderness, People, and the False Charge of Misanthropy," 404.
41. A. Naess, "Self-Realization: An Ecological Approach to Being in the World," in *Deep Ecology for the 21st Century*, ed. G. Sessions (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), 225–39.
42. David Johns elaborates this point in his essay "With Friends Like These Wilderness and Biodiversity Do Not Need Enemies," in *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, ed. G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2014), 31–44.
43. Wilderness is "entirely an invention of past and present cultures, or a socially constructed abstraction," in the words of Robert McCullough. "The Nature of History Preserved; or, The Trouble with Green Bridges" in *Reconstructing Conservation: Finding Common Ground*, ed. B. Minter and R. Manning (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2003), 33–42, (p. 33).
44. Here I echo Tom Butler's points in "Natural Capital' Is a Bankrupt Metaphor," a response essay to The Nature Conservancy's CEO Mark Tercek's "Money Talks—So Let's Give Nature a Voice." See http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/whats_a_tree_worth/.
45. D. Peterson, "Talking about Bushmeat," in *Ignoring Nature No More: The Case for Compassionate Conservation*, ed. M. Bekoff, 72.
46. D. Brower, *Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run*, 46; for scientific arguments in support of enlarging and interconnecting nature reserves, see M. Soulé and J. Terborgh, eds., *Continental Conservation: Scientific Foundations of Regional Reserve Networks* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 1999).
47. T. Birch, "The Incarceration of Wildness," 349, emphasis original.
48. T. Birch, "The Incarceration of Wildness," 350.
49. As journalist Mike Pflanz writes, "the illegal trade in wildlife... and body parts has never been more lucrative." M. Pflanz, "The Ivory Police," *The Christian Science Monitor* (2 March 2014): 26. A trained military response against poachers armed with sophisticated weapons and backed by criminal cartels is called for. See Damien Mander's International Anti-Poaching Foundation work and TED talk (<http://www.iapf.org/en/about/blog/entry/modern-warrior-damien-mander-at-tedxsydney>).
50. E. O. Wilson, *A Window on Eternity*, 132. On the movement to conserve half the world, visit: <http://natureneedshalf.org/home/>.
51. D. Brockington, *Fortress Conservation: The Preservation of the Mkomazi Game Reserve* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); M. Dowie, "Conservation Refugees: When Protecting Nature Means Kicking People Out," *Orion* (November/December 2005); M. Dowie, "The Hidden Cost of Paradise," *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Spring 2006): 31–38.
52. A. Agrawal, K. Redford, and E. Fearn, "Conservation and Human Displacement," in *State of the Wild 2008–2009*, ed. E. Fearn (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2008), 201. See also D. Wilkie et al., "Parks and People: Assessing the Human Welfare Effects of Establishing Protected Areas for Biodiversity Conservation," *Conservation Biology* 20, no. 1 (2006): 247–49.
53. C. Hambler and S. Canney, *Conservation*, 3338; K. Redford, M. Levy, E. Sanderson, and A. de Sherbinin, "What Is the Role for Conservation Organizations in Poverty Alleviation in the World's Wild Places?" *Oryx* 42, no. 4 (2008): 516–28.
54. See for example, P. Kareiva and M. Marvier, "Conservation for the People," *Scientific American* 294, no. 4 (October 2007): 50–57; P. Kareiva, R. Lalasz, and M. Marvier, "Conservation in the Anthropocene: Beyond Solitude and Fragility," *Breakthrough Journal*, Fall 2011, pp. 29–37. For some responses to so-called people-centered conservation, see S. Sanderson and K. Redford, "Contested Relationships Between Biodiversity Conservation and Poverty Alleviation"; S. Sanderson and K. Redford, "The Defense of Conservation Is Not an Attack on the Poor," *Oryx* 38, no. 2 (2004): 146–47; H. Locke and P. Dearden "Rethinking Protected Areas Categories and the New Paradigm"; Agrawal et al., "Conservation and Human Displacement"; M. E. Hannibal, "Sleeping with the Enemy," *Huffington Post*, 2 June 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mary-ellen-hannibal/sleeping-with-the-enemy_1_b_5423950.html.
55. Thaddeus Miller and his colleagues describe social conservationists as those "who advocate various forms of sustainable use and privilege conservation-oriented development and welfare-oriented goals such as poverty alleviation and social justice." T. Miller et al., "The New Conservation Debate: The View from Practical Ethics," *Biological Conservation* 144 (2011): 948–57.
56. P. Stokowski, "Community Values in Conservation," *Reconstructing Conservation*, ed. B. Minter and R. Manning, 292, emphasis added.
57. For an argument of why social justice cannot be built on a colonized Earth, see my "Ptolemaic Environmentalism," in *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*, ed. G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2014), 16–30.
58. On the deluded mainstream plan to pursue "sufficient economic growth for everyone to become rich" (in William Rees's words), see W. Rees, "Avoiding Collapse: An Agenda for Sustainable Degrowth and Relocalizing the Economy," *Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives*, (June 2014): 1–20.
59. M. Shellenberg and T. Nordhaus, "Evolve: The Case for Modernization as the Road to Salvation," in *Love Your Monsters: Postenvironmentalism and the Anthropocene* (Oakland, CA: The Breakthrough Institute, 2011 PDF e-book).
60. What Michael Pollan calls the industrial food chain's "journey of forgetting" applies to the entire gamut of modern material culture, which is always sourced from the natural world (without gratitude) and often at the cost of human impoverishment (with little compunction). M. Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma* (New York: Penguin Press, 2006), 10.