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Epilogue

The idea that we are entering a new millennium is, of course, a contrived, Christian way of marking time passages. But it still affords a badly needed invitation to ponder the big picture of historical change. Just the idea of a thousand years should challenge us to move beyond our chronic myopia and lift our eyes to the far horizons of planetary possibility.

As for wilderness, we have seen it as the unrecognized and unnamed environmental norm for most of the earth’s history, created as a concept by civilization, thereafter widely hated and feared, and quite recently and remarkably, appreciated. Relative scarcity helped wilderness gain value, but there was a price to pay: wilderness is now an increasingly endangered geographical species. The spectrum of environmental conditions has been tilted sharply toward the civilized end. Only about 2 percent of the contiguous forty-eight American states is legally wild—the same amount that is paved! Much of the American landscape has been modified to some degree. But in fact the United States is a leader in the establishment of national park and wilderness areas and is only a little more than a century beyond its frontier era. In other, older nations (Japan, for instance, or France), environmental control is near total. At least in the temperate latitudes, we are dealing with remnants of a once-wild world, and we face irreversible decisions about their future on a planet that suddenly seems small and vulnerable.

There are some certainties out there. Unless it is sharply restrained, civilization will continue to modify the Earth’s environment. Wilderness will be a casualty of this process; indeed, it could disappear. For perspective, consider that just a little over a century ago scholars were documenting the end of the American frontier. Wild Indians were still a “problem,” and personal transportation meant horses. Today there are four times as many of us on the planet. We are armed with an increasingly potent technology, and our ambitions are on the rise as well. Recent observers such as William McKibben and Carolyn Merchant are raising the prospect of “the end of

1. See above, p. 6, for the “spectrum” idea.
nature" and the "death of nature" or are calling, with John Terborgh, for a "requiem for nature." What they mean is that the conditions that nurtured us for millions of years through the course of our evolution are disappearing. What this implies is no more wilderness.

There are two ways of thinking about how this might occur. One is the wasteland scenario. It anticipates human growth and environmental modification to the point of disfunction and breakdown. Civilization proves, as some now fear, to be cancerous and unsustainable. We end up with a ravaged planet—paved, poisoned, and populated by remnants of a desperate species that have brought their ecosystem crashing to its knees. Or perhaps, in a thousand years, the earth has been used up and discarded. A vanguard of humans, no wiser for historical experience, moves on through the stars in search of new frontiers to plunder. Except in the very long, post-civilization run, there is no place for wilderness in this nightmare future. It dies with the prophesied whimper or maybe with the big bang of a nuclear war.

The garden scenario is another possible future. Imagine a thousand years from now, human control of nature is also total, but this time it’s beneficent. The environmentalists have been heard: we occupy a bounteous, beautiful, sustainable garden. The fertility of the soil is well maintained; carefully managed rivers flow clean and pure. Population is not a concern because technological breakthroughs


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enable people to live pole-to-pole: in the deserts, under the sea, in the air. Many people have followed the advice of the neopastoralists and left the cities to live on either real or "hobby" farms. Some eat what they grow or gather; of course, they meet their neighbors on the ridge tops doing the same thing. It's a planet-wide extension of Europe! But out there in the fourth millennium we conceivably control weather, genetic codes, ecosystems, evolution. New Noahs, our species determines who boards the ecological ark, and there isn't much room for "wildor" or "self-willed land" after the satisfaction of human demands.4 The gardeners of the planetary Eden have been efficient in weeding out forms of life incompatible with our tastes and needs. It's ecosystem management on a planetary scale. Inconceivable? Think about it. Television, computer communication, and moon walks were just as fanciful to people in 900 or even 1900. Don't bet that in another thousand years wilderness will be protected by the lack of human capability to control nature.

Defenders of wilderness have traditionally considered proponents of environmental planning and management as fellow travelers if not comrades in arms. But a second look is disturbing. Wilderness is in just as much trouble in the planetary garden as it is in the wasteland. The problem, of course, is that pastoralism is a form of control. Wilderness, remember, began where the Garden of Eden ended.5 "Good" kinds of human habitat expansion and "smart" or "sustainable" kinds of growth are just as invasive of wilderness as the bad kinds. A planet saturated, however wisely, by civilization has no place for wilderness and the nonhuman beings that live there.

Discouraging as these possible futures are to those who care for wilderness on Earth, there is a third vision. I call it Island Civilization.6 It envisions high technology actually reducing the impact of civilization. The key is implosion. A thousand years from now human beings (hopefully fewer of them) could occupy several hundred concentrated "habitats" ("cities" cannot begin to describe the new living

4. Recall the discussion of the derivation of the word "wilderness," pp. 1-2 above and in the preface.
5. See above, p. 15.
arrangements that tomorrow’s motivated planners might create. Integrated into each of them would be enormously efficient, closed-circle technologies for producing food, water, and energy, and for disposing of waste. The rest of the planet, indeed almost all of it, would be left alone, uncontrolled, and wild. Instead of dominating Earth, people and their works would occupy small niches in an interconnected, wild ecosystem. Instead of islands of wilderness (or parks) in a civilized matrix, it is civilization that is contained. Boundaries, in other words, would be drawn around the technological human presence, not around wild nature.

As I imagine it there would be no need for terrestrial interconnections like roads, rails, or wires among the self-sufficient habitats of the future. New technologies far beyond our present imagining would permit their residents to travel without environmental impact to other human communities and to live the kind of stimulating life that comes from well-designed proximity to other people. Island Civilization should not raise images of New York housing projects; think about Greek city-states, medieval monasteries, pueblos of the Southwest, the best of malls, and redesigned inner cities. It means clustering on a planetary scale—building in rather than building out, controlling civilization instead of wilderness.

The beauty of Island Civilization is that it permits humans to fulfill their evolutionary potential while not compromising or eliminating the chances of other species fulfilling theirs. Of course there is some reduction in accustomed human freedom. Just as with John Locke’s social contract, humans give up some options—to live in sprawling suburbs, for instance, or to herd cows on vast ranches—out of respect for the existence rights of other members of the larger natural community. I think of this as an ecological contract: natural rights extended to the rights of nature. Conservation biologists see their

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dreams come true. The frontier reappears, but this time it's permanent. Rivers, full once again with salmon, run unimpeded by dams, and buffalo roam unfenced plains. As they were ten or fifteen thousand years ago, before herding and agriculture, humans are once again good neighbors in the biotic community.  

But what, the question always seems to be, are your options if you don't want to live on densely populated islands in a matrix of wilderness? The short response is that if you want to live a highly technological lifestyle, you would not have a choice. The motivation for Island Civilization is an expanded environmental ethic that functions as a restraint on human freedom in regard to nature, just as our present social ethic limits our relationships with other people. Slavery, for instance, is now unacceptable in most of the world's societies. A thousand years from now I hope that the unconditioned ownership and abuse of nature will have been similarly outmoded.

One of the most compelling reasons for Island Civilization is that it respects the existence rights of the other species occupying this planet. Another is that it assures the continuation of wilderness, and not just as a hand-off museum. People living on the island habitats could leave them to enjoy minimum-impact vacations in the surrounding wild matrix. They could even live there—for a while or forever. The proviso is that they would have to do so as wilderness people. I am assuming here that human integration into an environment that remains wild works only as long as people are wild, too. That means camping: a resumption of the ancient, pre-pastoral, hunting and gathering ways. Humans of the distant future could choose (perhaps on an annual basis) between ways of life centered around computers or campfires.  

There are exciting possibilities for existences divided between quality wilderness and quality civilization. Isn't this one way to approach Henry David Thoreau's preferred "half-cultivated" or "border" life? The trick, Thoreau knew, was to find a way to live "to secure all the advantage [of civilization] without suffering any of the disadvantage."  

8. Recall the discussion of the impact of herding and agriculture on human attitudes toward nature in the introduction of this book, pp. xi-xiii.

9. For anticipations of this idea see the work of Gary Snyder and Paul Shepard, see above, pp. 246-47 and 383-84.

10. For references to and discussion of Thoreau, see above, pp. 98-99; also review the proponents of a balanced lifestyle in ch. 13.
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I have obviously not done more here than paint in very broad, visionary brush strokes (and I don’t know exactly how to make the dream come true), but Island Civilization seems to me worth considering as one way of fitting increasingly technological human beings into the rest of nature. People would not be masters or “stewards” or even “eco-managers” but, following Aldo Leopold, plain members and fellow citizens of the community of life. It permits us to do our increasingly sophisticated thing as a species while respecting the opportunity of all other species to do theirs.

Island Civilization obviously focuses on the extremes of the spectrum of environmental conditions. It challenges the classically American idealization of the “middle” or pastoral landscape as it has been celebrated in art, letters, and planning for three centuries. Rural conditions were said to offer the best of both the wild and the civilized worlds. But isn’t it conceivable that the rural option has been, in fact, the worst of both worlds, lacking both those campfires and computers? Paul Shepard, for example, argues that “peasant existence is the dullest life man ever lived,” and there are abundant critiques of isolated ranch existence and suburbia on the same grounds. The alternative, implicit in the idea of Island Civilization, is to offer each person the option either of returning to the hunting way of life they lived for millions of years or of passing into a beneficent form of highly technological concentration that may be our best bet for living millions more.

An imploled human presence is one way to save wilderness. But why, in the end, give a damn? Why not open the throttles on planet-scale control of life and the environment? Isn’t it conceivable that the need for the wild is a transitory, frontier-related enthusiasm that Americans will eventually outgrow, as other older cultures already have? The wilderness experience, like the horse and buggy, might already be a quaint historical artifact—charming but inessential to a society whose needs and perceptions have changed. In this possibility is the greatest sadness for wilderness advocates: working so hard to protect something posterity will find irrelevant. These questions bring us back full circle to an examination of Thoreau’s axiom about

11. See above, pp. 6–7.
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wildness being the preservation of the world.\textsuperscript{14} What is the contemporary and future meaning of this idea?

A starting point for this discussion might be the criticism leveled at wilderness in the concluding years of the twentieth century. Some of it is essentially an extension of old-style pioneer bias salted with large doses of digitally fueled technological optimism. The message is that wilderness still "lurks" out there, and civilization can't relax its guard. Added to this is the reasoning that expanded control and exploitation of nature is necessary if the entire human population is to enjoy the "good life" of well-to-do people in the first world.\textsuperscript{15} Objections that there are already too many humans making too many demands on natural systems are met with cries of racism and "environmental justice." Moreover, the optimists add, our ingenuity is capable not only of solving all environmental problems but, if we need it, of creating surrogate wilderness. Walls can be built for rock climbers, artificial rapids for river runners, and mazes for people who like to, on occasion, get lost.\textsuperscript{16} The possibility of engineering genetic codes opens astonishing new vistas for human ingenuity and human intervention. If you miss wild creatures, why not just create them, as explained to great popular acclaim in Michael Crichton's \textit{Jurassic Park}? And, some believe, the future can always fall back on the virtual reality of the computer screen. A digital "wilderness experience" is just a point and click away.

The basic rebuttal is that nothing technology creates can ever be wild, and that wilderness is likely to have increasing value in an older and more complex civilization. At least the present should consider its responsibility to allow the future to experience the past. At the most basic level, wilderness preservation means keeping options open. Rather than inheriting one from us, let posterity decide if it wants to occupy a controlled, developed, and biologically impoverished planet.

Other recent critics of wilderness come from within the "green"

\textsuperscript{14} See above, p. 84.

\textsuperscript{15} For example, see Mark Dowie, \textit{Losing Ground: American Environmentalism at the Close of the Twentieth Century} (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); Ron Arnold, \textit{Undue Influence: Wealthy Foundations, Grant-Driven Environmental Groups, and Zealous Bureaucrats That Control Your Future} (Bellevue, Wash., 1999); Gregg Easterbrook, \textit{A Movement on the Earth: The Coming Age of Environmental Optimism} (New York, 1995).

camp and bear some intellectual kinship to the garden earthers previously noted. They base their argument on the assumption that wilderness and its preservation accentuates the human/nature dualism that lies at the root of so many environmental problems. Such scholars as William Cronon and J. Baird Callicott allege that designated wilderness, national parks, and even the idea of wilderness are unnatural, irrelevant, old-fashioned, and elitist. A better environmental model, they contend, would be one that does not exclude people and their civilization from nature. Wilderness is not helpful, in other words, in the quest for the integration of human beings and all the other beings.

The rejoinder should begin with the thought that it is technological power and human greed, and not the idea of wilderness and wilderness preservation, that separate people and nature. Sure humans are “natural,” but somewhere along the evolutionary way from spears to spaceships they dropped off the biotic team and, as Henry Beston recognized, became cosmic outlaws. Maybe, as suggested at the start of this book, it was twelve thousand years ago when herding and agriculture replaced hunting and gathering. Or did it start late in 1999, when the human population topped six billion (and counting, at the rate of about ten thousand new human lives each hour)? Perhaps the parting of the ways has something to do with global climate change or with a human-caused rate of species extinction thousands of times higher than historical norms. The reality is that as the twenty-first century begins, civilized humans are no longer thinking or acting like a part of nature. Or, if we are, it is a cancerous one, growing so rapidly that it endangers the larger


whole. It is hard to deny that our species has become a terrible neighbor to the thirty million or so other species sharing space on this planet. How many of them would applaud an endangered species act for us? Right now we desperately need a “time out” to learn how to be team players once again. We need to learn how to live responsibly in the larger neighborhood called the ecosystem, and the first requirement is to respect our neighbors’ lives.

What wilderness provides is precisely this “time out” from the civilized juggernaut. Its presence reminds us of just how far we have distanced ourselves from the rest of nature. Wild places, remember, are uncontrolled, “self-willed,” where the “wild” are. We didn’t make wilderness; it made us. In it we stand naked of the built and modified environment, open to seeing ourselves once again as large mammals dependent (at the real bottom line) not on our technological cleverness but on the health of our habitat. This is where wilderness assumes not only ecological but ethical value. Because this is country we don’t own or use, we are open to perceiving its intrinsic value. The concept of wilderness helps our kind better understand the rights of other kinds to a place in this planet’s community of life; the actuality of wilderness provides that place. By definition we don’t dominate wilderness, and so it suggests the importance of sharing, which was, after all, the basis of the ethic of fair play that we did not learn very well in kindergarten. On a species level, fair play or unselfishness seems to many to be the key to effective global environmentalism. This kind of ecocentrism is not “against” humans; it transcends them and subsumes their interest in that of the larger whole.

What William Cronon and those of his persuasion think is “the trouble with wilderness” relates to the fact that arguments for its appreciation and preservation have traditionally been cast in anthropocentric and utilitarian terms. The association of wilderness with national pride, with spirituality and beauty, and with nostalgia for a vanishing frontier all had an obvious human slant. So, of course, does the philosophy of “recreation.” This book endeavors

20. See the introduction, above, and pp. 1–7.
22. It gives me pleasure here to recognize my father, Jay B. Nash, formerly a department chairman at New York University, whose *Philosophy of Recreation and Leisure* (St. Louis, 1953) capped a career devoted to defining and planning a major component of modern life. His service on the Outdoor Recreation Resources
to demonstrate that Americans began to do something for wilder-
ness when they perceived that it could do something for them. Even
the recent discussion of wild nature as a safe-deposit box for other
species can have a strong utilitarian connotation. We know it best
as the cure-for-cancer argument. No apologies necessary here! In-
strumental values like scenery, recreation, and economics (tourists
spend money) worked well as the nineteenth-century foundations of
wilderness appreciation and motivated the early preservation ef-
forts. But Cronon should be more aware that in the last quarter-cen-
tury a new biocentric or ecocentric rationale for the meaning and
value of wilderness has gained an impressive following among both
philosophers and activists.23 Human interests led the wilderness
charge in the last century, but respect for nonhuman life and for
ecological processes will assume increasing importance in the next
one.

This ecocentric argument for wilderness centers on the proposi-
tion that human interests are not the paramount concern. Wilder-
ness is not for us at all. We should allow it to exist out of respect for
the intrinsic values of the rest of nature and particularly for the life
forms dependent on wild habitats. The idea of integrating humans
and nature is acceptable to a degree, but it doesn’t work with a pow-

Review Commission, established by Congress in 1958, was one of the influences
on my decision to begin a study of the cultural significance of the American
wilderness two years later.

23. In fairness to Cronon, his longer essay, but not the New York Times piece
that many of his critics quote, recognizes that wilderness is a “corrective to human
arrogance” and “an important vehicle for articulating deep moral values regard-
ing our obligations and responsibilities to the nonhuman world”: Cronon, Un-
common Ground, p. 87. His conclusion, however, must be that these ideals can best
be furthered in an inhabited, gardenlike environment.
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deed be more. We do belong, but not everywhere. To choose not to inhabit part of the planet demonstrates that we have finally understood what the ecologists have been trying to tell us for a century: that we are members, not masters, of the life community.

Just as fences and dams once proudly testified to our ability to control nature, the protection of wild country now symbolizes our determination to control civilization. The frontier has had its day in the sun. Pioneer, growth-oriented attitudes worked well when the human presence was relatively small and nature seemed vast and inexhaustible. But the evolutionary tide has turned. Growth has turned out to have ironic or self-defeating consequences. The environment is vulnerable. As the new millennium opens before us, it's time for new frontiersmen who understand that what really needs to be conquered is not nature but ourselves. Wilderness can be an intellectual and a biological starting point for putting human needs into ecological balance with those of our fellow travelers on spaceship Earth.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as environmental ethics gained attention, many defenders of wilderness shifted to this kind of biocentric, ethical argument under banners such as “deep ecology,” “environmental ethics,” “conservation biology,” and “rewilding.” The common denominator is respect for the existence or intrinsic rights of other species and of ecological processes. Ethics, many now believe, must be extended beyond the human-to-human level to include our species' relationship to nature. As I detailed in The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics (1989), the roots of this ethical expansion in American culture ran back to the natural rights tradition, Thoreau, John Muir, the science of ecology, and especially Aldo Leopold and his "land ethic." By the end of the twentieth century, philosophers and theologians had begun to recognize the ethical relevance of the environment in general and of wilderness in particular. There was growing realization that of all the forms of pollution,

24. I have described the emergence of the concept that nature should be included in the moral community in The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics (Madison, Wisc., 1989). The documentation in this book suggests the very large literature that has accumulated around this idea. Representative titles are Bill Devall and George Sessions, Deep Ecology: Living As If Nature Mattered (Salt Lake City, 1985); Carolyn Merchant, Radical Ecology: The Search for a Liveable World (New York, 1992); and Christopher D. Stone, Earth and Other Ethics: The Case for Moral Pluralism (New York, 1987).
that of the *mind* was the most serious. Correcting it meant changing values and attitudes, and wilderness was of major help here not only ecologically but intellectually as well. Its preservation is not only one of the best ideas American culture ever had; it may be a better one than we ever knew.

When Thoreau wrote in 1851 about wilderness being the preservation of the world, he did not mean merely the human component. People could benefit from wilderness, of course, but nonhumans were also part of the picture. "What we call wilderness," Thoreau explained a few years later, "is a civilization other than our own." At the heart of the new, ecocentric rationale for wilderness is respect for this larger community of life and process. So wilderness preservation has become, finally, a gesture of planetary humility.