Saving Nature, Saving Ourselves: The Importance of Wilderness

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> What I want to speak for is not so much the wilderness uses, valuable as those are, but the wilderness idea, which is a resource in itself. Being an intangible and spiritual resource, it will seem mystical to the practical minded—but then anything that cannot be moved by a bulldozer is likely to seem mystical to them.
> —Wallace Stegner, "Wilderness Letter," 1960

> Nature has healed many of the scars on this once harried land. Perhaps she may be capable of performing a similar miracle for the world-weary traveler who seeks peace and solitude in this magnificent wilderness.
> —U.S. Forest Service report on wilderness, 1950s

For nearly 30 years, my wife Barbara and I have lived in northern New Mexico in the foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains near Santa Fe. As American cities go, Santa Fe is ancient. Most Americans don't realize it was founded by Spanish settlers in 1610, a decade before the Pilgrims ever laid eyes on Plymouth Rock.

I recently gave a fundraising talk for one of Santa Fe's community charity organizations that serve seriously ill individuals and those nearing the end of life. My lecture dealt with the nature of consciousness. (Santa Feans are keenly interested in psychospiritual and transcendental matters, whether or not they are approaching life's end.) The lecture involved the evidence for the fundamental and nonlocal or infinite nature of the mind. This concept is ancient, I explained, and is sanctioned by luminaries such as Plato, but also by several giants of 20th-century science, such as the Nobel physicists Max Planck and Erwin Schrödinger, Nobel neuroscientists George Wald and Sir John Eccles, the eminent physicist David Bohm, and many others. This view endorses an aspect of consciousness that, evidence suggests, is fundamental and unconfined to specific points in space such as brains and bodies, and unlimited to specific points in time such as the present. The implication is that consciousness is temporally unrestricted, therefore, infinite in time and thus eternal and immortal.[1]

I had the impression during my lecture that I was preaching to the choir and that my comments simply affirmed what nearly everyone in the audience already knew. So I was not surprised when, following my talk, a woman approached and said with a mischievous grin, "Dr. Dossey, of course I'm delighted to learn that I'm immortal. But I live in northern New Mexico. Why would I want to go to *heaven*?" This playful comment was not that of an unreconstructed, derelict flower child left over from the 60s, but of a confident veteran of life, a journeyer who had come through. In linking her beliefs to the geography of northern New Mexico, she was expressing why so many of us are drawn to this particular patch of earth—the beauty and power of the natural environment, and the magical way in which certain places contribute to one's psychospiritual equipoise.

We bantered. "I'm not giving up these forests and hiking trails for streets of gold," she joked. "I'm not trading my turquoise-and-silver jewelry for heavenly diamonds. And I'm not particularly fond of harp music."

"I understand," I added. "If there are no trout in heaven, I'm also not going. If trout don't go to heaven, then when I die I want to go where they went."[2]

"Oh good!" she grinned. "Let's stay here!"

WALLACE STEGNER AND WILD PLACES

Wallace Stegner (1909–1993) would have understood our conversation. He was one of the great champions of wild places in 20th-century America, and he believed humans need wildnerness to be whole psychologically and spiritually. Stegner was a literary giant who was called "the dean of Western writers." Over a 60-year career, he wrote more than 60 fiction and nonfiction books. Among his honors were the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. Stegner's family was peripatetic, moving around the West throughout his childhood as his father chased opportunities in North Dakota, Washington, Montana, and California. This shaped Stegner's writing and conservation ethic. He taught at the University of Utah, the University of Wisconsin, Harvard, and Stanford. Stegner was also a committed conservationist. He served as assistant to Stewart Udall, the secretary of the Department of Interior under President John F. Kennedy.[3]

Unlike the woman following my talk, Stegner never said the great natural world is better than heaven, but he came close. In 1983, he famously wrote, "National parks are the best idea we ever had. Absolutely American, absolutely democratic, they reflect us at our best rather than our worst."[4]

Stegner entered the conservation movement in the 1950s while fighting the construction of a dam on the Green River in Dinosaur National Monument. In 1960, he wrote his famous "Wilderness Letter" on the importance of federal protection of wild places. He stated, "Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed; if we permit the last virgin forests to be turned into comic books and plastic

cigarette cases; if we drive the few remaining members of the wild species into zoos or to extinction; if we pollute the last clear air and dirty the last clean streams and push our paved roads through the last of the silence, so that never again will Americans be free in their own country from the noise, the exhausts, the stinks of human and automotive waste…"[5] This letter, included as an addendum below, was used to introduce the Wilderness Act, which the U.S. Congress passed in 1964.

This historic legislation was strenuously opposed by the mining industry and other extractive interests, but was eventually signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. Its stated purpose —"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."[6]

OUR AMERICAN WILDERNESS

"Wilderness" is a type of protection given to the most pristine wildlands—areas within national parks, forests, recreation areas, and other wild places where there are no roads or development. These officially designated wilderness zones are the last remnants of the wild landscapes that once stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific coasts.

The immediate impact of the Wilderness Act was the designation of 54 areas as wilderness, constituting 9.1 million acres in 13 states, as part of the National Wilderness Preservation System. Since 1964, the NWPS has grown almost every year and now includes 765 areas (109,129,657 acres) in 44 states and Puerto Rico. In 1980, the passage of the Alaska National Interest Lands Conservation Act (ANILCA) added over 56 million acres of wilderness to the system, the largest addition in a single year. 1984 was the year in which the most new wilderness areas were added. Overall, only about 5% of the entire United States is protected as wilderness, an area slightly larger than the state of California. Because Alaska contains just over half of America's wilderness, only about 2.7% of the contiguous United States is designated as wilderness, which is an area about the size of Minnesota.[7]

Wilderness areas range from the smallest—Pelican Island Wilderness in northern Florida, at 5.5 acres—to the largest, Wrangell–Saint Elias Wilderness in Alaska, at 9,078,675 acres. Numerically, most wilderness areas are found in California, Arizona, Nevada, Alaska, and Oregon. The states with the most wilderness acreage, however, are Alaska, California, Arizona, Idaho, and Washington. All states have wilderness areas except Connecticut, Delaware, Iowa, Kansas, Maryland, and Rhode Island. The newest wilderness areas, designated in 2015, are the Hemingway–Boulders, White Clouds, and the Jim McClure–Jerry Peak Wildernesses in central Idaho.[8]

Critics often claim that wilderness is an economic dead zone and a drain on the nation's economy. Not so. Wilderness areas are a major source of economic activity, especially in the rural communities that surround them. Outdoor recreation contributes more than $646 billion annually to our nation's economy, supports 6.1 million jobs, and generates nearly $80 billion in federal, state, and local taxes.[9]

FEDERAL LANDS

Many people confuse designated wilderness areas with federal lands. The Wilderness Act, as mentioned, birthed wilderness areas in 1964. Federal lands are as old as America itself, having been established by the U.S. Constitution. Federal lands are lands in the United States for which ownership is claimed by the U.S. federal government, pursuant to Article 4, section 3, clause 2 of the United States Constitution.[10] The United States Supreme Court has repeatedly held that this section empowers Congress to retain federal lands, to regulate them such as by limiting cattle grazing, and to sell such lands. According to the Interior Department, as of March 2012, out of the 2.27 billion acres in the United States, about 28% of the total is owned by the federal government.[11] The United States Supreme Court has upheld the broad powers of the federal government to deal with federal lands, having unanimously held in one case that "the complete power that Congress has over federal lands under this clause necessarily includes the power to regulate and protect wildlife living there, state law notwithstanding."[12]

WILD PLACES AND SPIRITUALITY

> [G]oing to the wilderness to escape from something is no certain way of actually being in wilderness at all … More realistically, the true wilderness experience is one, not of escaping, but of finding one's self by seeking the wilderness.
> —Howard Zahniser, "The Need for Wilderness Areas"[13]

The contribution of wilderness to spirituality has been recognized since antiquity and is sanctioned by all major religious traditions. In the New Testament we read, "And it came to pass in those days, that [Jesus] went out into a mountain to pray (Luke 6:12, KJV)." The Buddha and Mohammed also retreated to wild places. It's a recurring theme–spiritual seekers finding in the solitude of deserts and mountains insights that are rarely attained in peopled places.

A recent example of the healing power of wilderness is Cheryl Strayed's 2012 bestselling memoir *Wild: From Lost to Found on the Pacific Crest Trail*.[14] At 22, Strayed's life was a wreck. In the wake of her mother's death, her family scattered and her marriage fell apart. After four years of reckless, destructive behavior, with nothing more to lose, she made a rash decision. With absolutely no experience or training, driven by sheer determination and a mysterious compulsion to immerse herself in wilderness, she hiked more than a thousand miles of the Pacific Crest Trail—alone—from the Mojave Desert through California and Oregon to Washington State. After making nearly every beginner's mistake possible, she persisted on a journey that strengthened and ultimately healed her. Her daring journey is the subject of a movie starring Reese Witherspoon.[15]

The variations of how wilderness contributes to psychospirituality are infinite.