Lecture 4: Wilderness: For and Against

• What is wilderness?
• Callicott’s arguments against wilderness preservation
• Noss’s arguments for wilderness preservation
Topics

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Lecture 4: Wilderness: For and Against

- Like ‘biodiversity’, the idea of a ‘wilderness’ that is worthy of being protected is a relatively recent one.
Wilderness Act 1964

- “...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain”
Biodiversity and Wilderness

• The goal of wilderness protection has mainly been pursued by the establishment of *national parks* where human settlement and economic activity is excluded.

• Even if the rest of the natural world is developed, at least these ‘pristine’ areas would be saved.
Contrasting definitions

- **Wilderness:**
  “...an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain”

- **Biodiversity:**
  Diversity at all levels of the natural world, including genes, organisms, populations, and ecosystems.
Topics

• What is wilderness?

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What’s wrong with wilderness?

• Callicott, J. Baird, “A Critique of and an Alternative to the Wilderness Idea”

• Callicott argues that wilderness protection should not be the primary goal of conservation and that the whole approach is mistaken.
Divergence

1. Divergence between wilderness protection and biodiversity conservation

- Areas of wilderness and areas of high biodiversity aren’t necessarily the same.

- The Antarctic is more of a ‘wilderness’ than the interior of the Amazon rainforest.
What’s wrong with wilderness?

2. Wilderness protection is ‘defensive’ and a ‘losing strategy’

• When we protect the area within the park, are we practically conceding the area outside the park to development?

• For the purpose of sustainability we should be more focused on developing protocols for mixed-use lands (conservation and development)

• At the very least, wilderness is a limited strategy.
What’s wrong with wilderness?

• In Costa Rica in the 1990s, about 29% of the land area was officially designated national parks or reserves.

• However, about half of that land was unforested and provided no benefit to biodiversity.

• Moreover, the land outside of the parks was almost completely deforested. The system of national parks seemed to set up a ‘compromise’ in which development on non-national parks was left unregulated.
What's wrong with wilderness?

3. Wilderness protection has resulted in profound injustice and human rights violations

- In the 1980s, hundreds of so-called ‘poachers’ were killed in East Africa by governments which received funding from Britain, the US, and the World Wildlife Fund.
What’s wrong with wilderness?

4. Wilderness is euro-centric.
   - The romantic idea of wilderness reflects the experience of the first European settlers.
   - The ‘wild’ lands they saw had been densely inhabited for millennia
   - The indigenous population largely thinned out - hence leaving ‘wilderness’ - due to being killed by new diseases
   - ‘Wilderness’ reflects historical amnesia
What’s wrong with wilderness?

• Much of the interest in wilderness stemmed from the questionable idea that, when free from disruption, ecosystems would attain their natural ‘equilibrium’ or point of stability.

• Wilderness protection has been thought of as ‘freeze-framing’ nature in its ‘ideal’ state, but ecosystems are in constant fluctuation and change.
What’s wrong with wilderness?

6. The wilderness ideal is dualistic. It supposes that humans are somehow ‘different from’ or ‘other than’ the natural world.

• Humans not ‘natural’; therefore environments shaped by humans are ‘artifacts’ - thus we must ‘screen them off’ from ‘nature’

• A sharp boundary between ‘human’ and ‘nature’ doesn’t exist. This is a basic consequence of evolution.
Alternative to Wilderness?

- Callicott endorses ‘biosphere reserves’ which are mixed-use lands.

- In this view, indigenous cultures are encouraged to use their resources in a sustainable way - in a way that benefits and protects regional biodiversity.

- We need better paradigms of human-nature interaction - not ‘exclusion’.

- Question for Callicott: Why not both?
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• What is wilderness?
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What’s wrong with wilderness?

• Noss, Reed F., “Wilderness - Now More than Ever”

• He firsts lists some general virtues of wilderness then responds to Calliccott’s main points.
What’s wrong with wilderness?

• The value of ‘letting nature be’: establishing areas devoid of human inhabitants:

  1. Reference sites for restoration experiments: “How do we figure out how to manage nature sustainably without wild areas as benchmarks and blueprints?”
What’s wrong with wilderness?

- The value of ‘letting nature be’: establishing areas devoid of human inhabitants:

  2. Refuge for animals sensitive to human disturbance
What’s wrong with wilderness?

• The value of ‘letting nature be’: establishing areas devoid of human inhabitants:

3. Multiple-land use areas (integration of conservation and development) have failed. Whenever you give people license to develop then they end up exploiting the land: “Ecosystem management propaganda is being used to justify continuation of the status quo under a new guise”
Responses to Callicott

- Callicott: Historically, wilderness protected for psychological qualities - not necessarily biodiversity content. National parks today do not necessarily exhibit high levels of biodiversity.

- Noss agrees that this was true at one time but not any longer. Wilderness advocates today would promote protecting wilderness on the basis of biodiversity.
Responses to Callicott

• Callicott: The wilderness ideal is dualistic. It supposes that humans are somehow ‘different from’ or ‘other than’ the natural world.

• Noss: Agrees that people are part of the natural world. However, when people have unsustainable, overconsumptive lifestyles, then natural areas should be protected from them.
Responses to Callicott

- This is even true of some indigenous communities in developing countries who have acquired ‘guns, snowmobiles, ATVs, bulldozers, and modern medicine’
Responses to Callicott

• Noss claims that it was a ‘bad idea’ to dislocated indigenous communities to create national parks, but he seems to promote exactly this.

• “Now that you people have laptops, nature has to be protected from you...”
Responses to Callicott

• Callicott: Much of the interest in wilderness stemmed from the questionable idea that, when free from disruption, ecosystems would attain their natural ‘equilibrium’ or point of stability. ‘Wilderness’ preservationists accept this outdated myth.

Noss: There’s nothing inconsistent about both recognizing that ecosystems constantly change and at the same time wanting to protect them for their own sake.
Responses to Callicott

- Callicott: Wilderness is ethnocentric. The romantic idea of wilderness reflects the experience of the first European settlers. The ‘wild’ lands they saw had been densely inhabited for millennia.

- Noss: Native American usage (besides the extinction of megafauna) was more “in harmony” with the natural limits of the ecosystems that they lived in, and that we (non-indigenous) went beyond the limits.
Responses to Callicott

- First N. American settlers probably caused the extinction of ‘megafauna’ such as woolly mammoth.
Responses to Callicott

- Native Americans also transformed the ecological landscape of North America through intensive practices such as controlled burns.
Responses to Callicott

• Does Noss embrace the myth of the ‘ecologically noble savage’?
Responses to Callicott

• Callicott: why not encourage sustainable use than set aside ‘wild’ areas to be permanently free of human habitation?

• Noss: Perhaps with better training we can learn to become better stewards of land. However, we have a tendency to exploit and dominate our habitats and become, as he puts it, a kind of ‘tumor’. This reinforces the need for wilderness areas.
Responses to Callicott

- Noss shows *pessimism* about the prospects of sustainable land use or integrated conservation and development.
- Callicott shows *optimism* about these prospects.
Callicott: Main Points

1. It’s going to be more helpful for the long-term survival of species if we can encourage sustainable land use everywhere rather than setting aside a small fraction of the earth’s surface as ‘national parks’ and letting everything else outside the parks suffer.
2. Unlike North America – which is not densely inhabited – many of the biodiversity ‘hotspots’ that we’re interested in are very densely inhabited and the creation of a system of national parks would almost certainly require dislocating indigenous groups of people. That seems morally problematic – an issue of global injustice.
Noss: Main Points

1. Even though we should pursue mixed-use areas in addition to wilderness, we should be pessimistic about their success: “Ecosystem management propaganda is being used to justify continuation of the status quo under a new guise”
Noss: Main Points

2. It’s a good idea to train people to be better stewards of their land, but people appear to have a tendency toward overconsumption and exploitation. Therefore, nature should be protected from people.