

# HOLDING COMMON GROUND

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THE INDIVIDUAL AND PUBLIC LANDS  
IN THE AMERICAN WEST

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## FULL-STOMACH WILDERNESS AND THE SUBURBAN ESTHETIC

*Harold Fromm*

These wild things, I admit, had little human value until mechanization assured us of a good breakfast. . . . When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect. There is no other way for land to survive the impact of mechanized man, nor for us to reap from it the esthetic harvest it is capable, under science, of contributing to culture.

—Aldo Leopold, from the Foreword to *A Sand County Almanac*

I was inducted into the environmental movement in the early seventies as a result of an idiotic move to a seemingly idyllic farm located only fifteen miles south of the steel mills of Gary, Indiana. In those days I was not alone in being innocent of the fact that pollution traveled not just fifteen miles but fifteen hundred miles and more. But the resulting nightmare, illnesses both bodily and psychological, transformed my life and recruited me into the ranks of the ecologically committed. I wrote about and waged campaigns against air pollution and the general depredations of corporate environmental destruction. After an escape to the northwest suburbs of Chicago in North Barrington, Illinois, I continued my activism, this time not only with regard to industrial pollution but to pesticide spraying for mosquitoes, leaf-burning, water contamination by run-offs into wells and aquifers, and so forth. The village trustees hated me. But despite this ecological commitment, I never identified with terrorist types—animal-rights fanatics who destroyed laboratories and opened cages on family farms, ruining multiple lives in the process, or Earth First! types who spiked trees climbed by actual human beings like us, who are maimed for life. I found Dave Foreman's remark that he would sooner shoot a man than a grizzly rather far over the top (though Foreman, like other radicals from the sixties

and seventies, has since morphed into a pussy cat). To me, these were self-involved narcissists, no better than the bombers of abortion clinics and murderers of physicians.

But it's probably safe to say that even extremist types have done some good in jump-starting the reforms of society. The trouble for me is that relentless one-string activists approach too closely to religious fanaticism; they are too certain of pious absolutes that tomorrow will be seen as personal pathology. Ecological Jerry Falwells are just not my thing. So when it comes to wilderness, I'm suspicious of uncompromising purities—even when they come from Thoreau or Leopold. I've said and written before that I don't believe anything human can ever be other than anthropocentric—and that biocentrism is just anthropocentrism in pious drag, like Jerry Falwell telling us what God wants, a God who always turns out to have the atavistic brain of Jerry Falwell. Of course, there are different varieties of anthropocentrism, some more benign than others.

So the sentimental extolling of wilderness found in a book like Max Oelschlaeger's *The Idea of Wilderness* never really appealed to me, and his golden-age view of hunter-gatherers seemed preposterous. Still, wilderness was a fairly abstract thing during my thirty years in Chicagoland's prairies, and it was not until my move to Tucson in 1998 that it became a concrete reality intersecting with daily life. If I was skeptical then about *wilderness = pure; society = impure*, I am now a total nonbeliever. I live on a ridge in the foothills of the Santa Catalina Mountains north of Tucson, where every day and every sunset are spectacular. I can testify to the fact that Tucson is surrounded by vast areas of wilderness, most of it quite inaccessible, despite the foot trails that afford entry into the mountainous areas closer to town. Between my home northwest of the city and the Pinal County seat of Florence, southeast of Phoenix, lies a forty-five-mile stretch of back-roads desert that is unsettled enough for me finally to have bought a cell phone. In the event of an auto breakdown, a scouting party attempting a rescue will not have to discover my bleached bones.

The Coronado National Forest spreads its discontinuous immensity all over southeast Arizona, and vast national parks and Indian reservations occupy much of the state. Between Phoenix and Flagstaff and Prescott lie

additional uninhabited and majestic vastnesses. The eastern United States may be packed, dense, and built out with habitation, but once you cross the Mississippi, the wide-open spaces are not purely mythic. Much if not most of this area will never be hospitable to settlements, and the environmental mentality that bit by bit is spreading its influence offers greater and greater resistance to wildcat development, even if it's too late to save Phoenix. Tucson has been remarkably resistant to freeways and massive urbanization. Even today it has qualities of paradise, plunked as it still is in the middle of wilderness, though a realist view would prepare for its inevitable San-Diegoization, as the pace of building speeds up along the beckoning corridor to Phoenix. But what's left is immense nonetheless.

It has become a truism that the wilderness is a modern invention, an esthetic object, a rhetorical device that didn't exist for people who inhabited it when there was nothing else. When I drive around the Tucson suburbs and view the astonishing beauty of the mountains or hike in the trails of the Catalinas, I am struck by the fact that it is often suburban development that has freed up, even created, the breathtaking vistas for which Tucson is famous. The fabulous sunsets seen from Gates Pass Road and the shimmering beauty of monsoonal fogs on the Catalinas have been made visible for us by the accomplishments of pampered, technocratic, impure bourgeois like ourselves. In contrast, to walk through the ruins of the Hohokam Indians (500–1500 A.D.) in Catalina State Park is to marvel at a life that appears almost impossibly brutal amidst the dry, burning summer heat and seeming absence of shade, water, food, and websites. Could there have been substantial periods of “quality time” during which these environmentally challenged people sat around and exclaimed over the scenery like us, while shamed by their good luck at being mostly skilled farmers instead of full-time hunter-gatherers? Or, too oppressed for leisure, did they instead secretly harbor inchoate longings to become twenty-first-century bourgeois—connecting with enough “nature” at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum followed by high tea at the Tohono Chul Tea Room—that they could really begin to enjoy the wonders (instead of the obstacles) where they lived?

I contrast the fears of that primitive habitat with the undeniable appreciation of their surroundings displayed by the residents of my commu-

nity of SaddleBrooke, nestled in the Catalina foothills about twenty-five miles from downtown Tucson in the outermost fringe of suburban development. Retired into the leisured life of affluent bourgeois, they seem to have world enough, food enough, and time enough, given our extended life spans, to appreciate the value of the “unspoiled,” of the “domesticated sublime,” as William Cronon aptly describes it in his definitive essay, “The Trouble with Wilderness.” I marvel at the paradox: as suburban development spreads into the wilderness, it both destroys and produces it at the same time; as the wilderness recedes further and further, it becomes an object of contemplation to be valued rather than feared. Only then do mountain lions and bobcats acquire an autochthonous beauty that fills us with Prufrockian guilt about disturbing “their” universe. How beautiful could it all possibly have been to the Donner party, trekking from the Midwest to the West Coast without sports energy bars, SUVs, cell phones, or coats of Polartec fleece from Lands’ End? Those who survived needed to be us to appreciate the beauty that sheer surviving made impossible for them to see.

Nowadays, some of the most remote and undeveloped wilderness can be explored and enjoyed through the prostheses afforded by contemporary technology, from motorized vehicles (a blessing as well as a curse), water purification equipment, and space-age clothing, to freeze-dried food, propane cookers or sun-ovens, and cell phones, conjoined with the reassuring sense that one has a home elsewhere, a safe haven, when supplies run out. When all else fails, helicopter rescues are yet another twenty-first-century entitlement of Everyman. Thus, the social and the technological give us more and more of a highly valued wilderness they seem to be pushing further and further away. (I refer the reader to Cronon’s essay for an exemplary account of the myth of purity and pristinity that undergirds the putative sanctity of the untransgressed.)

An open-ended negotiation between development technology’s creative and destructive forces may be the only resolution of what qualifies as cohabitation with “the natural.” And even what constitutes creation and destruction is hardly self-evident or clear. As I emerge from the supermarket to sensational mountain vistas, or sip beer with my pals at the outdoor tables of my favorite brewpub against the panorama of Pusch Ridge, I feel

that these wonders have been produced for me by the very forces I have given others money to suppress. What counts as creation or destruction, however, is based on values springing from ever-changing human subjectivities, with their subterranean desires and unexpressed ideologies. (Yesterday's sickies are today's cultural heroes—and vice versa.) The only plausible moment of pristine innocence must have been the microsecond before the Big Bang—and even that looks to be a bit suspect, if it was capable of producing a corrupted something out of a pristine nothing.

Despite the environmental setback of a president who comes off as a reincarnated Saudi oil prince, underwriting corporate greed while the well-being of American life is compromised by handouts to industry, we know from the Reagan era that a period of ecological reaction is destined to set in, and of course it is happening even now. But first, more damage than necessary will evidently be done, leaving more to be corrected afterward. Gas mileage, air-conditioning, seasonal energy efficiency ratios, alternate energy subsidies, etc., have all had recent setbacks from Republican rapacity and short-sightedness (not that the pusillanimous Democrats are so much better). But human life requires limitations to survive urban and suburban development, and once we are personally developed enough to become bourgeois, esthetic needs kick in as well, which increase the desire for limitations. Valuing nature is a middle-class enterprise, and even those putative despisers of American middle-class life who claimed to be rescuing the world for the rest of us, like Bernadine Dohrn, Sara Jane Olson, and Ted Kaczynski, turn out, in one way or another, to be products of bourgeois amenities. It's only after a full stomach has been assured that we are suddenly open to a whole spectrum of salvific epiphanies, not the least of which is the fantastic realization that the spotted owl, *c'est moi*.