

Wilderness Character, Untrammeled, Human Knowing, and Our Projection of Desire

BY ED ZAHNISER

We must remember always that the essential quality of the wilderness is its wildness.

– Howard Zahniser, 1953

Wilderness Character

The crux of wilderness character and of the 1964 Wilderness Act itself lies in the word *untrammeled* and its caveat that we must not project our human desires and mental constructs onto designated wilderness. *Untrammeled* says, as Howard Zahniser wrote, that with wilderness we should be guardians, not gardeners. *Untrammeled* says that the so-called management or stewardship goal for designated wilderness, again as Howard Zahniser wrote, is to leave it unmanaged. *Untrammeled* is a hard teaching for scientists and natural resource managers, especially when we are desperate to see public lands management otherwise generally guided by “good science” rather than ideology, magical thinking, or wishful thinking.

But if wild, wildness, and wilderness embody the meaning of self-willed, how else can we read *untrammeled*? Given the Wilderness Act’s intent of a wilderness-forever future, we are impelled to read *untrammeled* as an urgent plea for an ethic of profound restraint and uncharacteristic humility. This is the human challenge – to preserve the self-willed-ness of the land untrammeled in perpetuity, forever, into the eternity of the future.

You may object that the Wilderness Act is ignorant of, if not naive about, invasive species, effects of fire suppression on native vegetative regimes, or the effects of extirpated apex predators and introduced so-called sport or game fish, mammals, or birds on native ecological regimes. You may object that the act is ignorant or naive



(Left to right) Charlie Ott, Mt. McKinley National Park Maintenance; Adolph Murie; Olaus Murie; Stephen Griffith; Ed Zahniser; Howard Zahniser. Photo courtesy Zahniser family.

about acid precipitation, climate change, or the recent distinction drawn between natural and wild.

But the Wilderness Act may offer the rejoinder – that much of its putative ignorance and naïveté results from the best science of our recent past. Our past wildlands-managing colleagues suppressed fire because it was then the best science not to let fire destroy good forests. Louis Marshall, father of wilderness champion Robert “Bob” Marshall, defended the “forever wild” clause – now Article SIV Section 1 – of the New York State Constitution. Louis Marshall once chided the New York State Conservation Department for letting fire destroy an Adirondack

lakeshore landscape of forest preserve land for the lack of a \$35 pump. He offered to buy the department such a pump to fight future fires.

Our natural resource management colleagues in the past exterminated predators and introduced invasive species because it was the best science of their day to maximize humanly desirable species. Aldo Leopold underwent a slow conversion about predator control that he would liken to watching a wolf's eyes' fierce green fire die.

You may object that our past colleagues' science was not *good* science because *they* were ignorant of the co-evolution of forests with fire. *They* were ignorant of the interspecific dynamics of the health of animal populations and of ecosystems.

However, poet William Bronk objects that we humans live, *always*, in "the permanence of ignorance." Human knowledge is always temporal and provisional: human knowledge is bound by the time in which we live, and what we think we know is only true provided that most everything else we think we know is also true.

As Bill McKibben writes, this question is at least as old as the Hebrew scriptures' book of Job. The book of Job was one of the favorite works of literature of Howard Zahniser, primary architect of and chief lobbyist for the 1964 Wilderness Act. In the book, God questions Job's knowledge and understanding. God asks Job: "Where were you when I drew a circle on the face of the deep?" "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the Earth?" As Hebrew scriptures scholar William P. Brown points out, God then takes Job on a journey to visit Leviathan. There, as Brown emphasizes, God tells Job that he, Job, was not cre-

ated *apart* from Leviathan but *with* Leviathan.

Human knowledge is temporal and provisional, and science is not a smooth progression of knowledge such that errors of temporality and provisionality eventually will no longer occur. As philosopher and historian of science Gaston Bachelard has shown, the history of science is a history of epistemological breaks or ruptures. Science moves forward with episodic contradictions of its past.

Untrammeled

The epistemological question that *untrammeled* asks of those who steward – whose etymological roots include wilderness warden and guardian – is this: To what future are we the past and a past that may well be contradicted? Does our generation *alone* not live in the permanence of ignorance? If not, we must be "guardians not gardeners," as Howard Zahniser wrote. We must protect wilderness at its boundary. Humility must be our portal for entering any wilderness.

In "The Upshot" section of *A Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold calls for humans to relate to the land – Leopold's shorthand for the entire biota – as a member of that community, not its master. In this sense the Wilderness Act furthers Leopold's project to enlarge the boundaries of the community, to extend our ethical regard to the entire biota. Indeed, in relation to those wild fragments of our federal public lands legacy, the Wilderness Act exists to de-center the human. It exists to de-center us, just as Henry David Thoreau wrote that Walden Pond came to de-center him. The Wilderness Act exists to de-center, epistemologically, the *sapiens* aspect of our self-styled *Homo sapiens*. William Blake as Romantic

and William Cronon as postmodernist share a profound distrust of the Enlightenment project of control through knowledge.

The Wilderness Act was framed as an antidote to that human propensity to trammel the land, the entire biota.

That distrust places *untrammeled* at the heart of "wilderness character," at the heart of the Wilderness Act and how it de-centers the human – ethically and epistemologically – in relation to the National Wilderness Preservation System. Howard Zahniser wrote that a potential benefit of experiencing wilderness is how it can convey to us the reality that we are dependent and interdependent – as well as independent – members of the whole community of life on Earth that derives its sustenance from the Sun. We may come to recognize, he wrote, that we truly prosper only as the whole community of life on Earth prospers. In this sense, the Wilderness Act takes an important sociopolitical step toward Aldo Leopold's land ethic.

Human Knowing

To assert that we live in the permanence of ignorance is not to assert nihilism or to call for a fundamentalist rejection of good science. It is rather to call for a profound humility before wilderness and the wild. As theologian Sallie McFague suggests, we need not stay stuck in our subject-to-object relationship with the world's otherness. We have options. We have the option of a subject-to-subjects (plural) relation with that wonderful otherness that Howard Zahniser

described as the whole community of life on Earth.

McFague forwards what she calls an “attention epistemology,” a way of knowing that feminist Marilyn Frye likens to the loving eye: “The loving eye knows the independence of the other ... It is the eye of one who knows that to know the seen, one must consult something other than one’s own will and interests and fears and imagination. ... The science of the loving eye would favor the Complexity Theory of Truth ... and presuppose the Endless Interest-iness of the Universe.”

Allen Ginsberg taught that English poet and engraver William Blake saw the human world system composed of the body, emotion in the body, imagination, and reason, with reason personified by the character Urizen in Blake’s *Book of Urizen*. “Blake’s concept,” Ginsberg said, is that if one aspect takes over “all four parts of the human universe fall out of balance. ... Urizen [represents] the principle of excessively cutting intellect.” Urizen’s downfall to error involves his “desire for total mental control of nature.” Blake illustrated Urizen’s overweening hyperrationalism by painting him “bound in the hoary fishnet of his own thought-forms,” Ginsberg relates.

An old meaning of *trammel* is a fishnet. So *untrammelled* here implies absence of human mental control of nature. We can illustrate our own history of projecting human desire and mental control onto the more-than-human world with the rectilinear, Jeffersonian grid superimposed onto the American West with no regard for topography or hydrology – like a hoary fishnet or trammel.

In his essay “Poetry, Language, Thought,” Martin Heidegger parallels Blake’s critique but in terms of human

willing – as “Purposeful self-assertion in everything.” “What has long since been threatening [humans] with death,” Heidegger writes, “and indeed with the death of [their] own nature, is the unconditional character of mere willing in the sense of purposeful self-assertion in everything.” “Self-willing [humans] everywhere [reckon] with things and [humans] as with objects,” Heidegger writes. “What is so reckoned becomes merchandise.”

The Wilderness Act was framed as an antidote to that human propensity to trammel the land, the entire biota. The Wilderness Act is meant to protect the wilderness character of a fragment of our federal public lands’ legacy as untrammelled. Following Jack Turner, David Cole has interpreted *untrammelled* to mean “wild, self-organizing, autonomous.” To protect wilderness character is to protect these qualities of wildness.

Projection of Desire

In caring for designated wilderness, we must be alert to avoid projecting onto the wilderness our thought forms, desires, and penchant to assert destructive mental control, willing, or purposeful self-assertion. We can readily image such human control – or human *desire* for control – projected onto nature with the Jeffersonian grid across the American West. The grid has no regard for ecological coherence. The grid manifests our propensity to trammel the land, to project onto it human desire and total mental control.

Wilderness management is of course an oxymoron, because *wilderness*, as David Cole, following Jack Turner, writes, means “self-willed land.” Ideally, such land is untrammelled. It is not subjected to the projection of our human desires. We can’t *manage* anything without pro-

jecting our human desires onto it. If wilderness management or wilderness stewardship is not about managing wilderness itself – how can we do it?

Chapter 29 of the *Tao Te Ching* advises: “If someone wants to rule the world, and goes about trying to do so, / I foresee that they simply will not succeed. / The world is a sacred vessel, / And is not something that can be ruled. / Those who would rule it ruin it; / Those who would control it lose it.” Hear that morsel of ancient wisdom: “Those who would control it lose it.”

The commentary on that *Tao Te Ching* passage then says that

“the oppositions that exist among things in nature resolve themselves into a self-adjusting balance and harmony. The spirituality we find pervasive in nature, far from being a gift bestowed by some external source, is rather the flowering of this thriving harmony. In fact, this harmony is not only autogenerative and self-sustaining, but persists only as long as it remains free from calculated manipulation, well-intended or otherwise.”

We no longer talk of a “balance” of nature. We now think more in terms of interpenetrating dynamisms – which can also be left to their own thriving harmony that “persists only as long as it remains free from calculated manipulation, well-intended or otherwise.” In fact, wilderness stewardship asks us to work ingeniously so that nothing happens that would not happen even if we were not there. This is the ethic of restraint embodied in the Wilderness Act and its resolve that our civilization “not occupy and modify all areas within the United States and its possessions.”

But it goes against the grain of our species to *not* do: We class

ourselves not only as *Homo sapiens* but as *Homo faber*, humankind the maker, the doer. Freeman Tilden, who taught how to interpret the values of our protected public lands and cultural heritage, dramatized this. He once gave what he called an “un-illustrated lecture” titled “The Constructive Aspect of Inactivity.” For his audience of would-be viewers, Tilden carefully describes the slides he decided *not to use* to illustrate his lecture – whose point quickly becomes that we humans, as *Homo faber*, preserve things best through *inaction*. That sounds odd at first, but it is empirically and historically true. We preserve things best through *inaction*.

Tilden put a twist on advocating the wisdom of humility when it comes to preservation – which is this task of stewardship-in-perpetuity that the Wilderness Act requires. In the 1940s, Adolph Murie published *Ecology of the Coyote in the Yellowstone* and *The Wolves of Mount McKinley*. His writings were instrumental in turning federal policy away from exterminating predators. Later, Adolph Murie would echo Freeman

Tilden’s nonlecture, writing that “administrators should be told that their success will be measured, not by projects accomplished, but by projects sidetracked.”

The role of humility in caring for wilderness lies in recognizing, first, that we do not know all the parts, and second, that we do not understand all of their interrelationships and interpenetrating dynamisms. Nor may this be, as Wendell Berry maintains, a question of our simply not-knowing *yet*. We may never fully know. We may never fully understand. As Howard Zahniser wrote in a 1953 speech to a committee of the New York State Legislature, all in one paragraph:

The wilderness character of the Forest Preserve must be guarded with great care – that quality of the wild out-of-doors which is so easily destroyed by roads, by buildings, by the motorized transportation which is so welcome in getting us away from the city. . . . Such intrusions would damage the very thing we seek to protect. Most assuredly these Forest Preserve areas that are being cherished as wilderness must

be protected from timber cutting and from all commercial uses. The resources of the wilderness are not commodities for the market. But we must not only protect the wilderness from commercial exploitation. We must also see that we do not ourselves destroy its wilderness character in our own management programs. We must remember always that the essential quality of the wilderness is its wildness.

The *wilderness character* of designated wilderness is its wildness.

ED ZAHNISER speaks and writes about the Wilderness Act and the work of his father, Howard Zahniser, the act’s primary author. In 2013 Ed retired as senior writer and editor with the National Park Service Publications Group. In May 2014 he received a New York State Wilderness Stewardship Award and the U.S. Department of the Interior Distinguished Service Award. Ed and his sister, Karen Bettacchi, edited their mother Alice Zahniser’s 1956 journal of the family’s five wilderness trips in Minnesota, Montana, Wyoming, and Washington State as *Ways to the Wilderness* (2008).

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