Landscape Of Desire

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A thick formation composed of thin sheets of mud turned to stone. With a little rain the ancient mud revitalizes and oozes down the cliff forming drip castles and mud stalagmites.

*An Epic poem composed of thin sheets of mud turned to stone. With a little rain the ancient mud revitalizes and flows down the cliff forming drip castles and mud stalagmites.*

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A person with a clear heart and open mind can experience the wilderness anywhere on earth. It is a quality of one’s own consciousness.

—Gary Snyder

The hike to our next campsite takes us past a sign posted by the BLM.

“Wilderness Study Area. No motorized vehicles,” it reads, with red slashes through a jeep, ATV, and motorbike.

“What’s up with this?” asks Seeker angrily, pointing at the motorbike tracks that run right past the sign.

This image—a sign posted by the federal government containing the inflammatory word “wilderness” and the ORV tracks in flagrant disregard—underscores the deep rift in values that runs through southern Utah over how to best manage these lands.

Despite the ORV intrusions, the land behind the sign is recognized as having wilderness potential by the BLM and is managed as such. Although the agency recognizes the ORV problem and specifically recommends “that all vehicles should be confined to designated roads and trails . . . to prevent erosion and scarring due to overland vehicular traffic,” it neglects to take any enforcement action.

With the passage of the Federal Land Management Policy Act in 1976, Congress mandated the BLM to conduct a wilderness inventory of its lands, much the same way the Forest Service was required to do under the Wilderness Act. And much like the Forest Service inventory, the BLM inventory was fraught with problems. Although the agency was supposed to inventory all the areas that qualified, thousands of acres were omitted for political reasons or potential resource conflicts.

One glaring example was Mancos Mesa, a large (108,700 acres) roadless area in San Juan County. Janet Ross, director of the Four Corners Outdoor School, was one of those who did the wilderness evaluation. She reported that she and two other BLM employees were dropped off at various points...
on Mancos Mesa by helicopter. They were supposed to take a look around and then get picked up and fly to a new area. Janet was dropped off first. When the helicopter came back for her, they spent two hours flying around trying to find the other two employees. Then they had to return to Blanding to refuel. When they finally found the others, who had spent the whole time zipped up in their flight suits because the gnats were so bad, they had run out of time. On the basis of this survey, the BLM dropped all but 46,000 acres from wilderness consideration, stating Mancos Mesa lacked outstanding opportunity for solitude.

Out of 22 million acres of BLM land in Utah, the agency pronounced only 3.2 million acres worthy of inventory. Out of that they recommended 1.9 million acres be designated as wilderness. This paltry figure enraged Utah conservation groups who then conducted their own inventory and found 5.7 million acres of lands deserving wilderness designation, including Mancos Mesa and several units along Muddy Creek and the San Rafael Swell. In 1989 the citizen groups introduced their own wilderness bill into the U.S. Congress, and the battle began in earnest. Local and national conservation groups supported the designation of 5.7 million acres of BLM land in Utah as wilderness, while most of the state and local politicians were opposed. Currently, wilderness has wide support in Salt Lake City and along the urban Wasatch Front but faces fierce opposition in rural Utah.

Because the original BLM inventory was so flawed, in 1996 Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt ordered the BLM to undertake a new study. Simultaneously, the Utah Wilderness Coalition (UWC) also decided to update their original inventory. Oddly enough, the BLM’s new inventory unearthed 5.6 million acres of de facto wilderness. The UWC, on the other hand, extended their search to include the West Desert and turned up more than nine million acres of roadless lands. While Congress currently deliberates the fate of these lands, they remain in bureaucratic limbo. The areas that the BLM recommends as wilderness (a yet unknown portion of the 5.6 million acres inventoried) will become Wilderness Study Areas, managed as wilderness, until Congress makes a decision. The areas that the BLM deems unworthy will continue to be open for multiple-use, including mining and petroleum exploration, activities which would preclude future wilderness consideration.

Up to this point our journey has taken us through areas left out of the BLM recommendation, but included in the UWC proposal. Out of the 750,000 acres of wild lands in the San Rafael, the original BLM inventory omitted nearly half a million acres from wilderness consideration. In the Muddy Creek unit, the second largest tract of undeveloped BLM land in Utah, the BLM only recommended 56,000 acres.
However, as far back as 1935, the Utah State Planning board recommenced a 360,000 acre national park here. In 1973, the BLM itself suggested designating 630,000 acres of the Swell as a National Conservation Area, recommending that all vehicles be confined to designated roads and trails and closing any undesignated trails. Even the Emery County Development Council proposed a 210,000 acre national park in the 1980s. But by 1985 the mood had changed and the county backed off the proposal, stating instead that, “Restrictive park, monument, or wilderness management has to be viewed by the Commission as preemptive of local abilities and prerogatives to manage the lands for sustained yield, for preservation of the resource and for multiple beneficial use.”

Southern Utah is home to six national parks, two national monuments, and Glen Canyon National Recreation Area, all providing much needed boosts to the local economy. Wilderness, however, is seen in an entirely different way. According to the local mentality, wilderness is suitable only to backpackers, who as one county commissioner put it, “come into town with a set of clothes and a ten-dollar bill and don’t change either.” While many object to wilderness on economic grounds because it prevents resource extraction, in southern Utah, the wilderness debate is intensified because it’s couched in a cultural and religious context.

“I just don’t get why people here are so opposed to this becoming wilderness,” says Seeker.

“Perhaps the schism is between rural and urban values. The people that live out here want to continue the lifestyle that was shaped by the land, while the urban population wants to preserve the land that shaped the culture,” I say.

“I think it’s more complicated than that,” says Metta.

“They don’t want to become another Moab!” offers Mud.

“Maybe wilderness symbolizes the shift from a resource-based economy to a service-based one. In the cities that’s already happened. But out here . . .” Huckleberry waves his hand at the emptiness.

“Yeah, I’d rather be a cowboy than a burgermeister,” says Yucca.

“Like Brian,” Patience, Seaweed, and Mud sigh dreamily.

“I thought you could still graze cows in a wilderness,” says Patience.

“Yeah, but it’s the idea of wilderness, the notion that the federal government is going to come in and impose restrictions.” I indicate the sign.

“Guns or knives, Butch!” Bobofet proclaims waving his pocketknife.

Everyone stares at him.

“You know, from Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. The scene where Harvey Logan tries to take on Butch Cassidy and says, ‘guns or knives, Butch,’ and Butch kicks him in the nuts. I saw it six times before coming out here,” he says somewhat sheepishly.
“Was Robert Redford Butch or Sundance?” asks Patience.

Metta and I exchange glances. “I guess that means class is over,” she says. “Guess so.”

The notion of wilderness still circulates through my mind as I hike. A few years ago I had a Japanese graduate student who tried to translate “wilderness” into Japanese. The closest she could come was something like “transparent nature” because in Japan all of nature is infused with culture. All natural areas have people living in them or have a cultural element that often surpasses the natural element in the Japanese perception of place. This is why the Japanese are so enamored with the West; here they can experience nature in its pure state unburdened of culture. Have we actively created this notion of wilderness separate from ourselves by failing to acknowledge the dynamic interplay between humans and the landscape? Why do we insist on wilderness “as a place where man is a visitor who does not remain” while having sterile suburbs of strip malls and exotic grasses?

Perhaps what we need is an “infusion of arbor vitae in our tea.” While preserving wilderness on one hand, we could create working and dwelling places where wild nature is encouraged. Imagine wildlife friendly towns. Native fish in the rivers instead of car tires. Native grasses and forbs interspersed with community vegetable gardens instead of mowed parks and flower gardens sprayed with herbicides. Rooftop gardens. Paths and trails between neighborhoods where one encounters deer and woodpeckers instead of traffic.

Grazing and introduced species, such as African mustard, Russian thistle, and tamarisk have totally changed the vegetative communities along Muddy Creek. Numerous old road scars and mine audits appear throughout the area. Perhaps we need to rethink our idea of wilderness in the postmodern era when we’ve even changed the climate. Is there truly any place where “the impact of man is substantially unnoticed?” In French “wilderness” translates simply as *aire libre* or “open air.”

More than fifty years ago Aldo Leopold called for a land ethic. Wilderness is as close as we’ve yet come—a place where we take care, assess our impacts, and redress our ills. A place where we willingly limit our numbers, where we limit our technology and our cleverness and instead “seek sympathy with intelligence.” A place that we approach with restraint rather than with indulgent desire. The challenge is not in the wilderness itself, not in survival skills, nor rapelling down cliffs, shooting rapids, nor living without TVs, hot showers, and espresso. The real challenge is how to take the lessons of the wilderness with us when we return to the unreal world.

Interestingly enough, one of the definitions for wilderness in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is, “a piece of ground in a large garden or park planted
with trees and laid out in an ornamental or fantastic style, often in the form of a maze or labyrinth.” Trying to define wilderness itself is a labyrinthine process.

To paraphrase Nietzsche, if wilderness did not exist, it would be necessary to create it. Although illusionary, wilderness is a fundamental component of the human psyche. Just as science has nearly succeeded in eliminating God, although not the need of, we’ve nearly destroyed wildness but increased the need for it. As vast tracts of land become parcelled, tamed, drawn, mapped, and quartered, we lose that which reminds us of who we are by everything we are not. Identity depends upon other. The world apart, flourishing with no regard to our existence, allows us to define ourselves. Without wilderness, real or imaginary, we inhabit a human vacuum.

“What’s your definition of wilderness?” I ask the students when we gather after dinner.

“A place with big animals,” says Bobofet.

“Any place can be a wilderness, even your backyard,” insists Patience.

“A place where nobody lives,” says Sage.

“A place full of tourists,” adds Yucca.

“A place where nature is allowed to evolve on its own,” says Huckleberry.

“Some ecologists are defining wilderness as a self-sustaining, self-propagating complex system,” says Metta.

“Does that mean that, like, your intestines with all their bacteria are a wilderness?” asks Patience.

“. . . In accordance with the old meaning of ‘self-willed’ land,” Metta clarifies.

“One of the dictionary definitions is, ‘A region of a wild or desolate character, or in which one wanders or loses one’s way,’” I say.

“A refuge, a place of healing,” says Mud, adding her own definition.

“Wilderness is nothing more than a cultural construct, an artifact of western civilization,” says Seeker.

“What the fuck is this then?” asks Yucca, obviously put off by theoretical abstractions.

“The idea of wilderness is a cultural construct,” clarifies Seeker, glaring at Yucca.

“So, what isn’t? Even language is a cultural construct,” counters Sage.

“If anything is a cultural construct, it’s Wallyworld,” says Mud.

“Wallyworld?” I raise my eyebrows.

“Yeah, you know, the plastic world, box stores and strip malls, the burbs,” says Mud.
“You know, if wilderness is a cultural construct and so is Wallyworld, then maybe for every Walmart that gets built we could designate a wilderness area,” suggests Huckleberry.

“That would at least mitigate our aesthetic sin if nothing else,” adds Metta.

“According to Congress, a wilderness is ‘an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain. . . . an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without permanent improvements or human habitation,’” I say.

Although we each have different definitions, we all agree that Muddy Creek qualifies as a wilderness.

What do you think a wilderness is?” asks Patience.

“A place without maps,” I reply.

“Is there any place like that?” asks Bobofet.

“Not anymore.”

“So are you saying there’s no more wilderness?” inquires Seeker.

“Aldo Leopold said, ‘Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map,’” I respond, avoiding the question.