The Unexpected Environmentalist
Building a Centrist Coalition

Ted Kerasote

Ted Kerasote’s books include Bloodties: Nature, Culture, and the Hunt; Return of the Wild; The Future of Our Natural Lands; Navigations: One Man Explores the Americas and Discovers Himself; Heart of Home: People, Wildlife, Place; and Out There: In the Wild in a Wired Age, which won the 2004 Natural Outdoor Book Award for Literature. His work has appeared in more than fifty periodicals and a dozen anthologies, including Audubon, Outside, National Geographic Traveler, The Nature of Nature, and The Best American Science and Nature Writing 2001. He has written the environment column for Sports Afield since 1987.

Since its beginnings in the late 1800s, the movement to preserve nature has been divided into two camps: the strict protectionists and the more liberal utilitarians. As a way of illuminating that division and proposing a way to heal the rift between the two camps, I would like to tell a story about two of the movement’s leading figures, whose differing beliefs continue to shape our views about our place in the natural world.

In August 1897, John Muir, fresh from a trip in southeastern Alaska, stepped off his steamer at the dock in Seattle and headed for his hotel, where he picked up a newspaper. Scanning the columns, he found an article about the nation’s new forest reserves, the predecessors of what today are known as national forests. His jaw clenched, his blue eyes narrowed in anger, and then—in one of those synchronicities that determine the future of land and people and animals—he looked up and saw Gifford Pinchot, America’s leading forester, standing across the lobby. It was Pinchot’s words, quoted in the newspaper, that had so angered Muir.

The two men were already well acquainted. Both had been members of a National Forestry Commission the previous summer, created by the secretary of the interior to investigate the condition of the nation’s western woodlands. Also among the eight-man panel was Arnold Hague, an engineer from the U.S. Geological Survey and a member of Theodore Roosevelt’s newly formed Boone and Crockett Club. A hunting and
conservation organization, the club had made protection of the nation’s forests one of its primary goals. Charles Sprague Sargent, the grand old man of American botany and the director of Harvard University’s arboretum, was also on the commission, and so was John Muir, already famous for his explorations of the mountains of California. He was now president of the four-year-old Sierra Club, which, like the Boone and Crockett Club, had placed forest preservation at the top of its agenda.

The group zigzagged throughout the West, Sargent and Muir quickly taking a preservationist stand and arguing that the nation’s new forest reserves, initially created by President Benjamin Harrison in 1891, be given full protection. Hague, a political animal who was well aware that western timber interests were horrified over withdrawals of federal land from the public domain to create the reserves, and Pinchot, trained in the French and German schools of tree farming, campaigned for opening them to regulated grazing and logging.

Despite their differences, a grudging respect developed between Muir and Pinchot. While camped on the rim of the Grand Canyon, the forester listened in wonder to the explorer’s tales of Yosemite and Alaska and was amazed that Muir, in all his wanderings across America’s backcountry, had “never carried even a fishhook with him.”1 Muir, who was running his father-in-law’s fruit ranch in Martinez, California, in addition to traipsing around the Sierra, found himself praising Pinchot as a man of practical forestry, one who had shown that state woodlands don’t have to “lie idle” but can be made to “produce as much timber as is possible without spoiling them.”2

Nonetheless, the commission remained split along its initial philosophical lines, Sargent and Muir advocating total protection of the forests by army patrols, Hague and Pinchot urging the creation of a civilian forest service which would oversee the management of the reserves. They struck an uneasy compromise: the commission’s report supported military control only until a federal Forest Bureau, subject to civil-service regulations, could be established. Impressed with the document, President Grover Cleveland withdrew another twenty-one million acres of forests into the reserves during the final weeks of his administration.

Westerners, witnessing what they understood to be the theft of their land by the federal government, went berserk. A bill restoring all forest reserves to the public domain passed the day it was introduced to the Senate, and Pinchot, seeing his dream of managing the nation’s forests slipping away, closeted himself with Hague and John F. Lacey, a congressman from Iowa. A longtime naturalist, hunter, and angler, Lacey had authored the Yellowstone Protection Act of 1894, which made the park an inviolate wildlife refuge. He was a protectionist but one with strong pragmatic leanings.
Together the three men fashioned House legislation that authorized the secretary of the interior to protect forest reserves as well as allow timber sales and mining leases within their boundaries—very much the national forest system as it stands today. The purists cried shame; Congress adopted a version of the Lacey bill; Cleveland addressed it with a pocket veto; and the new president, William McKinley, was handed the entire boiling pot.

Pinchot and his cronies in the U.S. Geological Survey—Hague, and, more significantly, the survey’s director, Charles Walcott—went into hyperdrive, lobbying Rocky Mountain and West Coast legislators with the message that forest reserves, properly managed, could be a tremendous asset to their regions. The subtext was obvious: if the forests remained open for lumbering and mining, what difference did it make if they were called forest reserves or public domain?

Muir, watching from his California ranch, vacillated. After all, he was making more than a substantial living doing a branch of tree farming, growing grapes and pears while driving himself so hard that he was chronically tired and plagued with an unrelenting bronchial cough. The only way he could restore his health was to repair to the wilderness for several months each year, and his essays from that time, written for Harper’s Weekly and the Atlantic Monthly, reflect the balance he was trying to strike between an aesthetic and a utilitarian appreciation of nature. At one point, he waxes elegiac: “The whole continent was a garden, and from the beginning it seemed to be favored above all the other wild parks and gardens of the globe.” At another, he sounds like a chamber of commerce and an apologist for his ranch: “I suppose we need not go mourning the buffaloes. In the nature of things they had to give place to better cattle, though the change might have been made without barbarous wickedness. Likewise many of nature’s five hundred kinds of wild trees had to make way for orchards and cornfields.”

The rancher in Muir finally won. He suggested that through selective logging, woodlands could “yield a perennial supply of timber . . . without further diminishing the area of the forests. . . .” Nevertheless, he was still Yosemite’s most caring son and made a distinction between good ranchers like himself and “wealthy corporations” that were using the needs of poor settlers as a smoke screen to open the forests to unbridled use. Muir was also furious that prospectors and stockmen continued to torch the woodlands to lay rocks bare for excavation and create trails for sheep. “Let right, commendable industry be fostered,” he thundered, “but as to these Goths and Vandals of the wilderness, who are spreading black death in the fairest woods God ever made, let the government up and at ’em.”

His words came a little too late for the legislators. The day before his Harper’s essay appeared, and while his Atlantic essay was still in
manuscript, Congress passed the Forest Management Act, suspending all but two of Cleveland’s reserves for nine months pending further study. Secretary of the Interior Cornelius Bliss appointed Pinchot to carry out the investigation, and with Pinchot’s approval, Bliss let sheep into the Oregon and Washington reserves.

It was this news that so infuriated John Muir as he passed through the doors of his Seattle hotel. Not only did he detest sheep more than any other creature, calling them “hoofed locusts” for the way they had destroyed Yosemite, but he was also now stunned that Pinchot had been quoted as saying sheep did little harm. Spying the forester’s aristocratic form at the other end of the lobby, Muir strode toward him, brandishing the newspaper.

“Are you correctly quoted here?” he demanded. Pinchot could only nod, and before he could muster a reply, Muir lashed out. “Then, if that is the case, I don’t want any more to do with you. When we were in the Cascades last summer, you yourself stated that the sheep did a great deal of harm.”

Pinchot tried to backpedal—both to Muir as well as in print. “Overgrazing by sheep does destroy the forest,” he agreed after his next fact-finding trip to the Southwest. “Not only do sheep eat young seedlings, as I proved to my full satisfaction by finding plenty of them bitten off . . . but their innumerable hoofs also break and trample seedlings into the ground. John Muir called them hoofed locusts, and he was right.”

But did the smarmy Pinchot then ban sheep from the reserves? Hardly. When “young trees are old enough,” he went on to explain, “grazing may begin again.” For Pinchot, protection on one hand, use on the other, was the ultimate win-win solution: the resource could be sustainably harvested, commercial interests could be served, and the greatest good for the greatest number could be achieved. As for the question of forests maintaining a complex age structure of trees, solitude, and a large array of flora and fauna (the term biodiversity had not yet been coined), Pinchot gave a succinct and utilitarian answer: “Forestry is Tree Farming. Forestry is handling trees so that one crop follows another. To grow trees as a crop is Forestry.”

Muir did not take this sort of language sitting down. In his next essay for the Atlantic, he sounded a panegyric to aesthetic, nonutilitarian values: “Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.”

From this moment on, men who had considered themselves united by a love of nature hardened their stances over the issue of how wildlife and wild landscapes should be passed on to future generations: the multiple-use conservationists on one side of the divide and the forever-wild preservationists on the other. Pinchot’s ideas became institutionalized in the U.S.
The Unexpected Environmentalist

Forest Service, and, with the help of Theodore Roosevelt, in the National Wildlife Refuge System and the Bureau of Reclamation. Muir’s legacy took shape in organizations like the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society. Today the divide that separated the two groups remains in place, pierced by valleys through which some of us travel, continuing a century-long tradition of negotiating a détente between these two factions and uniting them in a common cause—a healthier natural world.

In my own work, I’ve used three approaches to try to bring about the end of this impasse: first, recounting the lives of historic figures, like Theodore Roosevelt, who embraced both sides of the fence; second, trying to demonstrate the existence of like interests between the two groups; and third, creating stories about wildlife that dissolve ideological barriers by appealing to one of the most fundamental of human emotions—sympathy for fellow beings who are caught in what the nature writer Henry Beston called “the splendour and travail of the earth.”

I’d like to spend the rest of this essay to describe each approach in more detail to further discussion among other writers, educators, environmentalists, and politicians. Through our joint efforts, we may be able to motivate individuals who, though thinking differently about the natural world, can nonetheless form a political coalition whose power to preserve that world would be enormous.

❋ ❋ ❋

First, let’s consider the legacy of environmental protection that hunters and anglers have left us. Even though a large part of the public would point to the 1960s and 1970s as the birth of environmental consciousness—a time that saw the publication of Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* and Congress’s passing of the Wilderness and Endangered Species Acts—hunters and anglers had been at work preserving nature for seventy years before this epochal time.

George Bird Grinnell, who helped found the Boone and Crockett Club, was not only an avid hunter and ethnologist but also the founder of the Audubon Society and one of the chief movers behind the creation of Glacier National Park, the protection of Yellowstone’s wildlife from poaching, and the inauguration of forest reserves themselves. His accomplishments might be more widely recognized if his contemporary Theodore Roosevelt had not been such a giant in the field: doubling the size of the national forests and setting aside five national parks, sixteen national monuments, and fifty-free national wildlife refuges, some at Muir’s request after the two men camped together in Yosemite.

On the heels of Grinnell and Roosevelt came Aldo Leopold—angler, hunter, forester, wildlife biologist, and ecologist—whose work and thought...
has formed one of the most well-traveled valleys between the protectionist
and utilitarian camps. An advocate of protecting roadless land, Leopold
convinced his superiors at the Gila National Forest in New Mexico to set
aside 574,000 acres as a wilderness area in 1924, the nation’s first. He then
went on to work for the Sporting Arms and Ammunitions Manufacturers’
Institute, producing a national survey of game conditions, a study which
led to his publishing *Game Management* in 1933, a book that remained the
standard text of the wildlife manager into the 1960s. Yet, while advocating
the sustained yield of upland birds and deer for the hunter’s gun, Leopold
counseled that predators, especially wolves and grizzlies, be left alone. A
founding member of the Wilderness Society, Leopold made his most no-
table contribution in *A Sand County Almanac*, a book whose themes began
to change, as Leopold put it, “the role of *Homo sapiens* from conqueror of
the land-community to plain member and citizen of it.”

Olaus Murie, the great wildlife biologist of Alaska and Wyoming and
one of the founders of the Wilderness Society . . . Sig Olson, who fought
to save Minnesota’s Boundary Waters . . . Stewart Udall, secretary of the
interior during the Kennedy and Johnson administrations and a constant
wilderness advocate . . . and Jimmy Carter, who added fifty-six million
acres in Alaska to the National Wilderness Preservation System—all these
individuals were hunters. In addition to the efforts of these luminaries to
protect habitat, the rank-and-file members of hunter/angler organizations
have also contributed significantly to preserving North American land-
scapes. In fact, in the last seven decades, these groups have set aside 112
million acres of land, 18 million more acres than in the National Wildlife
Refuge System. Individually, Ducks Unlimited has spent 1.4 billion dollars
to protect 10 million acres; the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, 154 mil-
lion dollars to buy or enhance 3 million acres; the National Wild Turkey
Federation, 120 million dollars for 2.2 million acres; Pheasants Forever, 70
million dollars for 2 million acres; The Ruffed Grouse Society, 7.2 million
dollars for 450,000 acres; Quail Unlimited, 6 million dollars for 400,000
acres; and Trout Unlimited, 4.94 million dollars, and the Izaak Walton
League of America, 75 million dollars for the restoration of thousands of
miles of streams.

Concurrently, the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Act (commonly
known as the Pittman-Robertson Act) has taxed firearms, bows, and am-
munition. The Sport Fish Act and its Wallop-Breaux Amendment have
taxed sportfishing equipment, electric trolling motors, and motorboat fuel.
Together these excise taxes on sportsmen have generated billions of dollars
for habitat purchases and restoration, wildlife research, and education.

Strict protectionists, of course, criticize this brand of conservation be-
cause of its self-serving nature—hunters and anglers are only preserving
habitat because it generates more wildlife for them to shoot and catch. Though this is partly true, one must consider that protecting habitat for one species like elk, ducks, or trout protects it for other species like sage grouse, badgers, whitefish, sandhill cranes, avocets, and beaver. Protecting ruffed grouse habitat simultaneously protects a home for golden-winged warblers, common yellowthroats, and towhees.

And habitat protection hasn’t been the only legacy of hunters and anglers. Before the Endangered Species Act was ever a legislative notion, sportsmen of the early 1900s set about to rectify the staggering slaughter of wildlife for the market that had taken place in the previous century. Their restoration efforts helped to take elk, numbering fewer than 41,000 in 1907 to 1.2 million animals today. Turkeys, down to 30,000 birds in 1890, now have a population of 5.6 million. Bighorn sheep had been reduced to fewer than 10,000 individuals in 1900—there are 230,000 today. Deer, down to fewer than half a million animals in 1899, now live from coast to coast and at 36 million animals have become so numerous as to be nuisances and hazards in many suburban and urban places. Trout, salmon, and bass have also been reintroduced to countless bodies of water.

Again these efforts can be looked upon as self-serving and sometimes mistaken, for example, introducing brook trout from the East and rainbow trout from the West into Rocky Mountain waters where they were not native. Yet I would suggest that those of us who are not hunters or anglers—who only like to hike in undeveloped country and watch wildlife—have richer lives today, in part, because of the work sportsmen did during the last century.

Recounting these kinds of stories, I believe, does two things: first, protectionists may see that they haven’t cornered the market on caring about nature and that consumptive users of wildlife may actually be allies in the fight to preserve nature; in turn, hunters and anglers may realize that they have a rich history of habitat protection and that they have made a contribution to preserving and restoring ecosystems as well as to growing more targets for their guns and rods. This is a message that hunters, in particular, need to hear. Beleaguered by bad press and shouldering a substantial amount of guilt for the scofflaws in their midst, many of them have retreated to a paranoid and uncooperative position vis-à-vis what they think of as “environmental groups.” Validated, they can come to the table with something more than suspicion and a poor self-image.

On the political front, some have taken these ideas and turned them into a proactive campaign. One has been Tim Richardson, a media and political-affairs consultant, who in the 1990s pulled together an unlikely group of organizations ranging from the Sierra Club and Audubon Society on one side and the National Rifle Association and Safari Club International
on the other. The group signed off on a plan to protect 376,000 acres of privately owned wildlife habitat in the Kodiak Archipelago using money from the Exxon Valdez spill fund. Under their fiduciary responsibility to turn a profit from these lands, Native corporations had planned to develop this key salmon and brown-bear habitat with luxury hotels and fishing camps.

At the tail end of this unprecedented achievement, Richardson and conservationists from sporting organizations like the Mule Deer Foundation, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, Trout Unlimited, Wildlife Forever, and the Wildlife Management Institute thought that they could use a similar approach on national-forest issues by conducting outreach to fellow sportsmen. The organization Richardson and his colleagues created was named the Theodore Roosevelt Conservation Alliance (TRCA) after America’s first conservationist president. The Pew Charitable Trusts endorsed the concept behind TRCA—anglers and hunters being rallied to protect wild country and wildlife habitat in national forests—and came through with a two-year, 2.3-million-dollar grant that has since been renewed for a third year. More than eight hundred affiliate organizations and sixty-five thousand individuals have joined, and today more than 50 percent of the public comments from hunters and anglers on recent forest plans across the nation have been generated by TRCA. Last August Forest Service Chief Dale Bosworth received a letter signed by more than four million TRCA hunters and anglers during the public comment process on amending the Roadless Area Conservation Rule, a landmark effort conceived under the Clinton administration that would prevent road-building in 58.5 million acres of the agency’s roadless areas that haven’t been designated as wilderness. The Conservation Rule has not been supported by the Bush administration.

Should we be sanguine about TRCA and its efforts to preserve wildlands? Isn’t it just another Johnny-come-lately among the hundreds of nongovernmental organizations that have blossomed under the Save-the-Something banner? Richardson, one of the more astute political analysts around, suggests that TRCA, as well as another public-lands sportsmen organization, Wildlife Conservation Partners, should be watched very closely. He explains,

The margin of partisan control in the 107th Congress is more narrowly divided than in any other Congress in the nation’s history. Democrats control the Senate by 1 vote out of 100. The GOP margin in the House is 6 votes out of 435. All Senate and House committee chairmanships—in other words, control of the entire congressional agenda—can change overnight with the change of 7 out of 535 seats in the Senate and House. This unique set of circumstances affords extraordinary leverage to any
Enter the sportsmen vote. Classic swing voters, nonaligned and non-partisan, sportsmen are populists: against big business as much as against big urban politics. They can also be blue-collar independents and eccentric Bubba-Thoreaus, predominantly white and male, bringing along their voting spouses and children. Finally, they can be Reagan Democrats, but they know that the traditional Democratic establishment’s fixation on inner-city homicides makes it hostile to the rural use of firearms for hunting. Thus, their affiliation goes to the NRA. However, if the issue of gun control can be put to rest, sportsmen’s votes are up for grabs.

The most recent demonstration of this scenario took place in the 2001 Virginia gubernatorial race, where a Democrat, Mark Warner, won a Sun-belt governorship by championing gun rights and thereby keeping the NRA out of the election. The NRA backed no candidate because it had nothing to fear from this Democrat. In a race won by around 4 percent, the sportsmen vote, particularly in Virginia’s southwestern, ancestrally rural Democratic counties, was enough to determine victory.

Richardson goes on to say that the results of the Virginia gubernatorial election were hardly a fluke, and he offers a reasoned “proof,” based on simple electoral mathematics, why its outcome could be repeated in other close races across the nation. Hunters and anglers, he notes, make up 17.5 percent of the U.S. population or fifty million individuals. But given their older-than-average-median age and predominantly white racial background, the voting presence of sportsmen represents more like 22 to 25 percent of the voting population nationally. In rural areas, the hunter/angler constituency represents between 30 and 50 percent of the electorate. Indeed, the sportsmen swing vote was a bigger factor in defeating Al Gore than was Ralph Nader’s candidacy. This occurred because sportsmen were motivated by fear of gun control. If pro-environment Democratic candidates could soft-pedal this issue, the 80 percent of sportsmen who support keeping roadless areas undeveloped would vote Democratic. This in turn would lead Republicans to compete for their votes by promoting far more moderate environmental positions than are found in the Bush administration. The result would be the reliable election of conservation-minded candidates no matter their party affiliation.

If one looks at House and Senate seats where the victor won by 56 percent of the vote or less, and if one also factors in how many of these seats could be determined by a 7.5 percent turnout of sportsmen (the number of hunters and anglers who might be termed truly “activist”), one has to admit that Richardson’s electoral mathematics are compelling. In 2002, for
instance, 73 House seats out of 435 and 23 Senate seats out of 34 could be decided by what he calls a virtual “third party” of sportsmen. Forty-eight of these swing House seats are rural, and all 23 Senate seats have significant rural election turnout. There’s one more factor to consider. Thirty-eight of the forty-eight predominantly rural swing districts lie east of the hundredth meridian, crowded places where hunters and anglers have realized that the biggest threat to their pastimes is the loss of wild places.

I offer Richardson’s analysis of environmental politics in such detail because his coalition-building tactics provide us with a model that could break the current legislative stalemate between out-of-power preservationists and in-power utilitarians, the latter viewing unrest in the Middle East and worldwide terrorism as perfect opportunities to take energy profits from the nation’s public lands, despoiling them in the process. He also refocuses our attention on preserving wildlands when some of that endeavor’s energy has been siphoned away by the environmental-justice movement, birthed in 1982 when the state of North Carolina tried to build a PCB dump site in a rural and mostly African American county. Five hundred people protested what they defined as the state’s environmental racism, and their actions inspired the creation of numerous grassroots environmental-justice organizations around the nation. Ten years later President Clinton formed the Office of Environmental Justice under the EPA, outlining its charge as the “fair treatment for people of all races, cultures, and incomes, regarding the development of environmental laws, regulations, and policies.”

During the subsequent decade, environmental justice has evolved into a broad-based coalition of organizations representing people of color, church and civil-rights groups, Native Americans, and unions. They have directed their attention to toxic wastes, pesticides, occupational safety and health, Native land rights, networking with solidarity and human—rights movements abroad, and the effects of corporate globalization on the environment. As one exponent of environmental justice put it, “While there is no doubt that ecological problems would be much worse absent the mainstream environmental movement and current system of regulation, it is also clear that the traditional strategies and policy solutions being employed are proving to be increasingly limited.” This author, Daniel R. Faber, the director of Northeastern University’s Philanthropy and Environmental Justice Research Project, goes on to say that no other force within grassroots environmentalism offers the same potential for bringing new constituencies into environmental activism while creating “innovative and comprehensive approaches to environmental problem solving.”

I think it’s important, though, to bear in mind that many of the constituencies that make up the heart of the environmental-justice movement
are not focused on preserving natural landscapes. They emphasize the disproportionate negative effects of toxins on the poor and people of color. While we need to support this fight, we also need to be clear that a society that respects both human rights and natural landscapes won’t be created solely by the environmental-justice movement joining forces with traditional environmental-advocacy organizations. Between the two remains a vacant niche, occupied by many of the readers I often address in magazines like *Sports Afield* and *Bugle*, the journal of the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation. These individuals lack affiliation with either environmental-justice or environmental-advocacy groups; by and large they are not concerned with issues of human health, equity, or the preservation of wild places for their beauty, peace, and harmony.

Yet, like Tim Richardson, I believe this group of people could be instrumental in protecting wild places, particularly when their environmental cohorts are either making little headway in that endeavor or not directly addressing it. In this regard, I’ve shamelessly milked the connection between healthy wildlife and healthy wild places, pointing out to these sportsmen that they won’t continue to enjoy their favorite shootable or catchable species without undeveloped wildlands. After this nod to their hedonistic self-interest, I’ve also tried to demonstrate how all of us, whether we’re land preservationists, wildlife conservationists, or human-rights environmentalists, have similar stakes in the natural world. I’ve done this by writing about ecological services, that is, the natural processes and species that sustain human life, and how expensive they are to replace by technological fixes. These services include purification of air and water, mitigation of floods and droughts, detoxification and decomposition of wastes, generation of soil, pollination of domestic crops and wild plants, control of agricultural pests, moderation of temperature extremes, protection from ultraviolet rays, and maintenance of biodiversity, from which we derive a great variety of indispensable agricultural, medicinal, and industrial products.

This may seem like a simplistic approach for those who take for granted that the idea of our utter dependence on the natural world has embedded itself in the cultural consciousness. Perhaps, as an abstract notion, it is becoming part of the zeitgeist. But if we ask ten people in Los Angeles where their tap water comes from, I bet not more than two can answer that some of it comes from the Green River above Pinedale, Wyoming, not all that far from where we gathered for this symposium. Connecting urban people—whether they are preservationists, conservationists, or neither—back to the nearby and distant wildlands that support them is a way of building a common language and concern about the environment.

The notion of connection has also figured in the work I’ve done as I try to nudge sportsmen toward a more holistic environmental position. Using
terminology with which they’re familiar, like *habitat fragmentation* rather than *land preservation*, I’ve introduced the ideas of the Wildlands Project, an organization that is working to maintain and enhance the connections between still-functioning ecosystems like the northern woods that stretch from Maine to the Adirondacks, and the basins and mountains that lie between Wyoming and the Arctic Ocean, a project known as Yellowstone to Yukon or Y2Y. For sportsmen, the motivation for supporting these initiatives is better hunting and fishing, and the language they find most compelling highlights restoration rather than preservation. In places like the Great Plains, now emptying of people, this sort of language can be an attractive tool, motivating sportsmen to literally roll up their sleeves, take down fences, and help bring back free-roaming antelope, bison, elk, and perhaps, in another generation, even wolves and grizzly bears.

The idealists among us may balk at joining forces with these sorts of unexpected environmentalists, people who will then shoot or catch what they’ve just preserved. But the bottom line of the matter is that these individuals can help protect habitat, which then safeguards populations of wildlife if not individual animals themselves. The nonhunter John Muir recognized that this was sometimes a necessary bargain to strike. While unhappy with his friend Theodore Roosevelt for going off on an African safari after his second presidential term, Muir nonetheless kept Roosevelt’s photograph hanging on the wall of his study above his desk.

It is this fundamental life choice—that I believe can often be one of the more divisive elements among people who call themselves lovers of nature, in particular between hunters and anglers on one hand and animal-rights supporters on the other. To soften the animosity between these two groups, I’ve tried to demonstrate that we’re all consumers of sentient beings. Some of us do it quite directly, by hunting and fishing. Some of us do it secondhand, by eating domestic meat. Some of us do it third hand, by being vegetarians and supporting an agricultural system that inflicts death and mayhem upon all sorts of wildlife through pesticides, cultivation, harvesting, and transportation. None of us are exempt from participating in this ongoing cull, and some forms of taking life, for instance, hunting and fishing locally, can have more positive ecological consequences than importing domestic meat or vegetables from afar. Elk and deer, for example, grow themselves without the addition of fossil fuels, don’t produce feedlot wastes, and don’t change natural landscapes into rows of monoculture vegetables. To cite one graphic statistic, an average feedlot steer will consume in his lifetime 284 gallons of oil, most of which was used to grow the corn that has fattened him.\(^{22}\)

Individuals who are deeply committed to protectionist animal-rights positions will of course not suddenly turn around and support hunting
and fishing after hearing arguments such as these. But if they’re willing to listen to a rigorous examination of hunting and fishing along these lines, it becomes much more difficult for them to stereotype hunters and anglers as knuckle-dragging Neanderthals out solely for the kill or amusement.

With the playing field thus somewhat leveled by appealing to the record of history; the like interests of all people, regardless of their stances on the environment; and the ecological costs of our various lifestyles, I’ve tried to strengthen a centrist coalition by telling stories about wildlife, especially mammals, that show how human and nonhuman animals share many traits and behaviors, including, as Charles Darwin noted, “love and the distinct emotion of sympathy.”

One of my favorites stories has been about watching a pack of four wolves in Yellowstone National Park kill a recently born elk calf. The calf’s mother comes to its rescue a few seconds too late, and over the space of an entire day, she exhibits virtually all the reactions humans display when faced with the loss of a loved one: denial, anger, depression, and acceptance. The only stage of grief she omits is bargaining with the wolves. Instead, she expresses her anger by attacking them. They drop her calf and retreat to a safe distance; she sniffs at the carcass, and, overwhelmed with what any of us would instantly recognize as profound grief, trots off, dazed, only to have the alpha male make a risky dash to the carcass and grab it.

As I say in my original essay:

[The wolf] runs several hundred yards before slowing and coming to rest in the grass. Glancing over his shoulder, he begins to nip at the calf with tender little bites. The mother elk stares at him, then retraces her route up the hillside, sniffing here and there before coming to the spot where blood stains the bunchgrass. She stops directly over the site of the kill, looks back to the wolf, and begins to grunt mournfully, her sides contracting and her muzzle elongating into the shape of a trumpet. A moment later her bellow of loss and frustration floats down the hillside to us. Again and again she calls.

The black wolf glances one more time at the grieving elk before standing and getting the calf set comfortably in his jaws. He trots in a straight line toward the forest and his den. He has made his meat, and six new pups are waiting to be fed.

We watch the elk watching the wolf disappear into the trees, and she continues to cry out, turning this way and that, sending her dirge in every direction as the morning heat rises and the light becomes glaring. I would like to see how long she remains there, but we have to head downvalley to locate other wolves.
On our return at sunset, fifteen and a half hours after her calf was taken by the Druid Pack, we see the mother elk standing on the very spot it was killed, a monument to fidelity in a natural world that barely blinks at such recyclings of protein. She looks weary and beaten, her head at half-staff. She also appears immovable in her resolve to guard the site, or stand witness to what has occurred, or to continue to hope for her calf’s reappearance. Who can know what is in her mind, except perhaps another mother elk? Perhaps a wolf, determined to bring meat back to his pups, might know.23

My hope in telling such stories is that hunters and anglers will come to see wildlife as creatures with intricate emotional lives and decide that if they are going to take these lives, whether they be an elk, a trout, or a wolf, they ought to have very good reasons. On the other hand, my hope for protectionist readers is that after reading such stories, they may have a better understanding of nature in all its interplay of light and shadow: sometimes Edenic, sometimes a place of violence where accident, tragedy, and death come to all its citizens, just as in human life.

For both sides, I hope to point out that in North America the wild and the civilized have increasingly porous boundaries. The Rockies are being avidly settled, bringing people close to cougars, grizzlies, and wolves. The East and the Midwest are seeing a florescence of Canada geese, snow geese, sandhill cranes, moose, and deer.

In this more highly mixed human/wild culture, one great challenge will be to find language that convinces the hunter and angler descendants of Pinchot to support vast habitat-protection schemes that eliminate some human use, particularly motorized access. Our other great challenge will be to convince those who have followed in John Muir’s idealistic footsteps that hunters and anglers hold one of the more important cards for land preservation on a national scale. Note carefully the terms of discussion I’ve used for each group: habitat protection, land preservation. They’re different languages but have a common theme: creating a world where people can join the wild without overwhelming it, protect it without becoming mere observers of its creatures and their lives.