Soul of the Wilderness

Can We Stop Trying to Control Nature?

BY JAMES M. GLOVER

Scientists in particular are uncomfortable with the wilderness idea because it seems so subjective, soft, and nonquantifiable.

—Reed Noss

Author's Note: Reed Noss's observation (IJW, vol. 2, no. 2, 1996) should not be surprising, since the purpose of Western science has always been to control nature, not leave it alone. And so, in the following essay, I'd like to examine our compulsion to control nature, see how it conflicts with wilderness preservation, and propose we view wilderness as a healthy form of noncontrolling, "nonaction."

The Great Western Dream of Controlling Nature

The Western obsession with controlling nature goes back at least to the 11th century, when water power was applied to industrial processes (White 1994, p. 11). For several centuries, however, progress was slow because technology and science remained somewhat apart. Technology was largely the domain of working-class toolmakers and craftspeople, while science was the ivory-tower business of the intellectually-curious and radical academic philosophers (White 1994; Mumford, 1970). But this was changed forever in the 1600s, especially by the writings of two European intellectuals, René Descartes and Francis Bacon.

Article author James M. Glover.

Starting with the now famous statement, "I think, therefore I am," Descartes tried to build a system of knowledge based purely on rational thought. He ended up with a view of the universe as a colossal machine, all functions of which could be measured. Today, a mechanistic worldview is still known as "Cartesian," and the belief that all questions can be reduced to calculation is, of course, a hallmark of modern scholarship and problem-solving.

Descartes also contributed to the conceptual separation of humans from nature: The quest for pure objectivity requires a kind of godlike detachment on the part of the observer (humans) from the observed (nature). This separation also made nature an object of possession, control, and exploitation. As Descartes himself put it, the whole point was to "render ourselves the lords and possessors of nature" (Descartes 1960 [1637, 1641], p. 45).

But the man who really linked science and technology was Francis Bacon. His book, *New Atlantis,* was a utopian vision of a research community churning out all manner of data to "the effecting of all things possible" (Bacon 1942 [1627], p. 288).

Following Bacon and Descartes come a long line of individuals—from Ben Franklin and Dr. Pavlov to B. F. Skinner and Bill Gates, and institutions, from the Hudson Bay Company to the National Air and Space Administration—to further "the effecting of all things possible." Thus having

been increasingly about power and control, Western science has furthermore been a patriarchal institution—funded by men with power motives and conducted almost exclusively by males in highly competitive milieus.

Do these "masculine" qualities also characterize the applied-science fields of resource and wilderness management? Perhaps not as extremely as, let's say, physics, which in the telling parlance of scientists is the "hardest" discipline, while others, like biology and, even more so, behavioral/social sciences, are considered "softer." On the other hand, most natural resource fields (forestry, fish, wildlife, range management) remain highly male-dominated and pride themselves on rational or scientific approaches to their work. They perhaps have more to do with "conquering" or "controlling" nature than they care to acknowledge.

A Cutting Example

The "control of nature" then, is a doctrine that has so permeated Western culture as to almost define it. A fundamental acceptance of the doctrine, I believe, explains the strong resistance by many—including resource managers—to any more land preservation beyond the 4% or so in the United States that's presently set aside in wilderness and parks. And an intuitive resistance to controlling nature explains not only the persistence of mainstream preservationists, but also the seemingly more extremist views of those who protest, picket, and practice civil disobedience at various controversial sites.

A good example is occurring in the Shawnee National Forest in southern Illinois, near my home. Forest officials there have been trying for several years to cut and sell some mature pine trees that, in the 1930s, were planted on ridgetops in a part of the forest called the Bell Smith Spring area. The U.S. Forest Service (USFS) originally proposed cutting the pines as a routine commercial harvest. Environmentalists stopped it on the grounds that it was clearcutting. The USFS then slightly altered the plan, called it something else, and tried again. It was successfully blocked again, so USFS came back for a third time and called it "ecological restoration." This time, they explained, the pines needed cutting to restore the area to hardwoods, which had dominated before the land was cleared for farming about 100 years ago (USDA Forest Service 1996). This move, however, cost the agency credibility, for hardwood saplings were already filling the understory of the mature pines, and everyone agreed the ridgetops would revert to hardwood on their own in another 20 years or so, as the planted pine trees died.

Smoke at Yellowstone National Park. Photo by James M. Glover.

The plan included a great many other interventions, ranging from tree-girdling to road construction, all in a 27,000-acre parcel that even without improvements had already been declared a National Natural Landmark. In other words, to skeptics it seemed mostly like a plan to control nature for the sake of controlling nature, especially since nature was pursuing the same trajectory on her own.

In fairness to the USFS, the arguments put forth by environmentalists were equally specious. Using what the law gives them, they identified certain of the state's rare or endangered species that might occur in the area and might be somehow dependent on those pines that had been planted some 60 years ago. They even found themselves arguing in favor of a rather noxious exotic plant, Japanese honeysuckle, which a state-threatened mammal, the golden mouse, has come to rely on (Race et al, 1996). These individual species, of course, were not the objectors' major concern. I doubt many protesters knew about them before they went looking. I believe

A Crane admires his reflection in the Florida Everglades. Photo by James M. Glover.

A moose hip-deep in vegetation at Yellowstone National Park. Photo by James M. Glover.

these objectors were mainly rebelling against a culture that has raised rationalism to an irrational level. They see our drive to control as a kind of cultural neurosis, the group equivalent of an overbearing, obsessive-compulsive personality. They are not necessarily, as often accused, looking for a place they imagine has never been disturbed by humans, free from original sin, the Garden of Eden. They just want a few places left alone. They want a little chaos left behind as, out of necessity, we become more organized and systematized in order to deal with the crowdedness and dangerous machinery with which our science has presented us.

A pair of swans in Yellowstone National Park. Photo by James M. Glover.

I believe that was Thoreau's (1993 [1862]) main point in his famous essay, "Walking," when he said, "I wish to speak a word for nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil … for there are enough champions of civilization: the minister, and the school-committee, and every one of you will take care of that" (p. 49).

That essay is a rebellion against too much rationality. At one point in it, Thoreau describes how he roots for a neighbor's cow that breaks out of its pasture in the spring, boldly swimming the swollen river, reasserting its "native rights" (p. 66). This, of course, is a metaphor for the modern human condition. For humans, Thoreau believes, can also be overdomesticated. They need an environment not totally tamed and they need to behave not always rationally.

Wilderness Deconstruction

The moral imperative to control nature, and its corollary, the fear of letting nature run wild, runs so deep that there's currently an intellectual reaction against too much preservation. Environmental historian Michael P. Cohen calls this "the [recent] deconstruction of the 'wilderness idea' of the 1950s" (1996, p. 41).

Perhaps the most prominent (and unlikely) of these deconstructionists is William Cronon, a prizewinning historian and member of the governing council of The Wilderness Society. In 1995 Cronon published an essay, "The Trouble with Wilderness," that has already appeared in one journal and three different volumes of essays (Callicott and Nelson 1998; Miller and Rothman 1997; Cronon 1996), and has been referred to by the chair of history at Yale as "already classic" (Winks, 1999). Cronon emphasizes that "wilderness" is a cultural construct stemming largely from European romanticism and Americans' infatuation with the frontier. Our concentration on it, he says, distracts the environmental movement from its larger mission, which should include developing sustainable economies and making the nonwilderness environment—the one we truly inhabit—healthier.

Those points, it seems to me, are good ones and worth our consideration. But they do not justify Cronon's ultimate vision of wilderness, which is very controlled. He predicts, in effect, that biological diversity will in the future be sustained not by protecting ecosystems but by "the most vigilant and self-conscious management" of them (a view not all ecologists agree with, as we'll see shortly). Moreover, he uses the image of Aldo Leopold's famous attempt at restoration to invent a new definition of wilderness, which is really a garden. In the film *Wild by Law* (Hott and Garey 1991), Cronon says:

> *For Leopold, the conservationist, the person preserving land—leaves a mark on that land, manages it toward the health of the community. To have as many creatures, as many organisms, living on that land as possible. So that it really is possible to manipulate wilderness, to make it more wild. And that seems paradoxical for people who imagine that wilderness is a place you just let be and let go just by itself. That's not what Leopold did.*

Well, that's not what Leopold did *there*. But it's news to me that Leopold was creating wilderness at his Sand County farm, or that he thought he was. (It was certainly different than the Gila Wilderness he helped create.) I guess I'm one of those surprised people who do "imagine that wilderness is a place you just let be and let go just by itself." I always thought that was the point. The fact that it has to be "managed" (mainly to minimize recreational impacts) doesn't change the essential goal of letting its natural processes occur with the least human interference possible.

In any case, to at least one observer, Cronon sounds like he may not exactly want to control nature, but is rather afraid to leave it alone. He feels we must "make our mark" on it, nurse it back to health, make it "wilder," maximize the number of species on it. In short, he views it mechanistically. It's like a beat-up old machine that won't get working again without a good mechanic, a lot of new parts, and a lot of human labor.

And that, I think, underlies the shaky support that wilderness preservation still enjoys: After centuries of nearly total commitment to controlling nature, we are still very afraid to set aside a small percent of it and just leave it alone. The endless list of proposed reasons why we'd better not leave it alone is itself testimony to this fear. The list includes, at various places, perceived overgrazing by certain megafauna; the need to burn certain areas on a scheduled basis either because indigenous people once did or to maintain someone's vision of what should be growing there; "ecological restoration" in general; getting rid of exotic species; facilitating more recreational access; improving hunting, fishing, or birding; and—not to be forgotten—to extract raw materials that otherwise might avoid service to the industrial economy.

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One hates to sound cynical about ecological restoration; it's a bit like opposing dental hygiene or sober driving. My skepticism, however, is threefold: First, as we've seen, ecological restoration can be a nice-sounding phrase for business-as-usual. Second, it can easily become a short-term substitute for the sounder solution to ecological stability, which is to preserve larger areas with connecting corridors. And third, while it may make us all feel good because we're doing something, it is not clear at all that a lot of it will work.

In *The Sixth Extinction,* Richard Leakey (1995) refers to the discovery that ecological restoration is hugely difficult once a system has become sufficiently unraveled. Ecologist Stuart Pimm calls this the Humpty Dumpty Principle. Leakey cites the North American Prairie and Florida Everglades as two examples. There, and other places, says Leakey, "Ecologists' inclination was simply to gather the requisite species for the ecosystem they were planning to restore, and then let them loose in the chosen habitat. They were puzzled when they repeatedly discovered it didn't work" (p. 167).

Nonaction

There's an old Eastern idea, sometimes called *wu-wei,* which, roughly translated, means nonaction. On a personal level, it means taking some time to do nothing, and just be, to trust things will be OK without relentless effort to control them. As Alan Watts (1989 [1957], p. 18) puts it, it's to restrain from "'action,' 'making,' 'doing,' 'striving,' 'straining,' or 'busyness.'" Or, as Lao Tsu some 2,300 years ago, put it in the classic *Tao te Ching:*

> *Less and less is done*
> *Until non-action is achieved,*
> *When nothing is done, nothing*
> *is left undone.*
>
> *The world is ruled by letting*
> *things take their course*
> *It cannot be ruled by interfering*
> *(Lao Tsu 1989, p. 50).*

Treetop conference in the Florida Everglades. Photo by James M. Glover.

On a cultural level perhaps it would be worthwhile to view wilderness as the *wu-wei* of resource management. If, as individuals, we can be healthier doing nothing with some of our time, perhaps as a species we can also be healthier by doing nothing with some of our space. The ecological results might be less important than what such a notion does for us. For it reminds us that we need not be striving, improving, and controlling all the time and every place. We can accept some places just as they are, live with certain processes without trying to channel them, watch events happen without judging them. For a culture so enraptured with doing and achieving, the spiritual and symbolic implications of such nonaction are large.

The Western dream of controlling nature is deeply ingrained. Even in wilderness areas, it seems, we can't stop trying to control. I believe we need to take a lesson from Lao Tsu and other Eastern sages and recognize that the world cannot be ruled by interfering. **IJW**

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DIRT
by Sarah Johnson

Dry clots measure the paces between
catclaw, yucca, fierce bands of cactus,
shreds of grass pitched up a slope:
this is Earth, here
where I plant my boot-at-a-time
and from the boots, ankles upward, rise
among serpent shoulderings of air
through channels of warmth, fire, relief,
to my hair flapping free of my hat—
to my height—
my eyes, my straight-edge mouth
dubbing the figures around me:
prickly pear, pincushion, staghorn cholla;
from waist-high neighbors to utmost guarded
pale protrusions through mountain miles of dirt—
dirt that is everywhere, that needs no name,
is merely skin and fiber and sinew,
commonplace secrets of the body.