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OPINION ARTICLE

Restoring the Narrative of American Environmentalism

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Abstract

The conventional narrative of American environmentalism is no longer very helpful for conservationists and restorationists seeking philosophical justification and guidance for their work. The tradition has often been cropped into a narrower and simplified account of the battle between the philosophies of wise use and preservation, a move bolstered by the turn to historical images of President Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir visiting California's Yosemite National Park in the early years of the twentieth century. This cropped conservation picture needs to be restored and widened to engage the pragmatism that has always been a part of the U.S. environmental tradition, but that became eclipsed by preservationist ideology with the rise of the fields of environmental history and environmental philosophy in the late twentieth century. Restoring this lost pragmatism to the environmental tradition will prove vital to recovering the value of environmental history and philosophy for conservation and restoration practice and to reclaiming a more holistic and useful narrative of people, culture, and environment.

Key words: conservation history, environmental philosophy, Muir and Roosevelt, pragmatism.

Dueling Images of Environmentalism

It is a canonical event in U.S. environmental history, complete with photo-op and caption. In 1903, President Teddy Roosevelt and John Muir traveled from Oakland to California's Yosemite Valley, a transect through a fast-industrializing America. At one point they camped by themselves and awoke amid a light snow. A classic image shows Roosevelt the President and Muir the Prophet standing atop Glacier Point with the great valley for a backdrop while beyond swell the granite domes of the Range of Light (Fig. 1). The caption, the story in cameo, tells how Muir convinced Roosevelt to commit the federal government to the protection of the nation's natural heritage. The origins of American environmentalism begin with that choice between the wild and the wrecked. The moment established a template: the century that followed has hewn to its narrative arc.

But the trip included a second moment, complete with an alternative image and caption. In it, Roosevelt and Muir stand side by side in front of Yosemite's Grizzly Giant, the oldest of the Mariposa Grove's sequoias. Unlike the backcountry panorama, only the trunk of the tree is visible, and unlike that Glacier Point image, the two men are part of a group that forces the scene to spread horizontally, against the upward thrust of the Giant (Fig. 2). Often the photo is cropped to repeat the simpler scene such that Roosevelt and Muir stand uprightly, aligning with the grain of the deeply furrowed Big Tree behind them. The inherited narrative remains the same, however. After all the giant sequoia was the catalyst for three of America's first four national parks.

What complicates that cropping is that another figure stands behind and between them. Typically, he is (figuratively) airbrushed out, but when cited is often misidentified as Gifford Pinchot. Pinchot was, of course, the other major player in this early environmental era and a rival for Roosevelt's attention. At the time of the photo, however, he headed the minor Bureau of Forestry. Two years later, Roosevelt transferred the forest reserves to that agency, which then became the Forest Service. In contrast to the nation's parks, which stood for the pristine and the preserved, the surrounding national forests argued for rational use under the aegis of conservation. In 1903, the two visions were broadly complementary as both contested against those who, in Roosevelt's striking phrase, "scalped" the land.

Within a handful of years, however, they became competitors over the question of whether to build a dam at Hetch Hetchy, Yosemite Valley's twin. Pinchot approved, and Muir protested. In 1913, the dam was authorized. That controversy established a foundational narrative for American environmental history and philosophy. It speaks of a rivalry between two seemingly incommensurate philosophies of public land use, of a quarrel between conservation and preservation, and of a hideous resolution leading to a dam and a martyred landscape. That observers try to insert Pinchot into the image is historically inaccurate but psychologically (and historiographically) perceptive, for he did seek to interpose himself between the other two.

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Figure 1. President Theodore Roosevelt and John Muir at Glacier Point, Yosemite in 1903. (Photo source: Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C. 20540, U.S.A. Public domain image).

What makes the image into a narrative anchor point is that the controversy would be reenacted 40 years later when a dam was proposed for Dinosaur National Monument. This time the preservationists won. They won again in the 1960s when they successfully opposed two dams considered for Grand Canyon National Park. By general consensus, the Echo Park and Grand Canyon dam controversies mark the start of the modern American environmental movement that updated Muir, Pinchot, and the politics that decided between them. Revealingly, the Sierra Club, founded by Muir, was at the political barricades. Those crises correspond almost exactly with the emergence of U.S. environmental history and philosophy. It all syncs nicely—the photo, the personified visions, the setting, and the story that links them. By cropping it is possible to make that second photo repeat the first, and in a real way that is what has happened to the narrative and philosophy of American environmentalism.

Cropping Environmental History

That cropping, however, does a disservice to the complexity of the event. The actual photo, taken by Joseph Leconte, centered on Teddy Roosevelt, and it included an entourage of which John Muir was but one member among 10. The man between TR and Muir was Dr. Presley Marion Rixey, Surgeon General of the Navy and Roosevelt's personal physician. To Muir's left stand Nicholas Murray Butler, President of Columbia University; William Loeb, Roosevelt's personal secretary; and Benjamin Ide Wheeler, President of the University of California. To Roosevelt's right are George C. Pardee, Governor of California; William Henry Moody, Secretary of the Navy; two Secret Service agents; and further hidden, two soldiers, unidentified but undoubtedly members of the U.S. Cavalry that ran Yosemite and other parks until 1916.

In brief, the visit was a political event by a head of state. It was one act of many that Roosevelt as President performed to advance the cause of state-sponsored conservation. The same year he visited Yosemite, he created the first wildlife refuge, and standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon declared it the "one great sight every American should see." In 1905, he transferred the national forests to the Bureau of Forestry and began cleaning up the General Land Office. In 1906, he signed the Antiquities Act, which allowed for the creation of national monuments by presidential proclamation. In 1907, he doubled, at one stroke, the size of the national forest system. In 1908, he established a Country Life Commission, chaired by Liberty Hyde Bailey, and then convened the Governors Conference on Conservation, making the program his last hurrah and political testament; the project went continental the next year with a North American Conference.

But the politics of state-sponsored conservation was itself intertwined with political and economic reform, the enlargement of American nationalism, and the projection of the United States as a global power. As president, Roosevelt promoted a "New Nationalism." He attacked trusts and monopolies as he did despoilers of the land. The year he visited Muir, he authorized the Panama Canal. The year of the Antiquities Act he received the Nobel Peace Prize for brokering an end to the Russo-Japanese War. The year he doubled the national forests, he launched the Great White Fleet. The meeting beneath the Grizzly Giant had a far wider context than an inspired campout with the charismatic John of the Mountains.

Not least, Roosevelt was an intellectual, highly educated, a naturalist, a historian, and a man attuned to the grand issues of his day. The Yosemite party, after all, included two university presidents, and the photo was taken by a professor of geology. This was an era of intellectual ferment as much as political reform. If the latter points to the Progressive Era, the former leads to Pragmatism, that creative outburst that led to an American school of philosophy as distinctive as sequoias. The year before Muir explained his spiritual interest in nature to Roosevelt, Philosopher William James published *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (James 1902), and as Roosevelt was enlarging the national forests and dispatching the Great White Fleet, James summarized his particularized formulation in the anthology *Pragmatism* (James 1907). As the old saw goes, there are as many creeds of Pragmatism as there are pragmatists, but that pluralism is of a piece with the pluralism that was also coming to define the national estate. The American experiment would not follow from the logic of first principles but from adherence to fundamental processes of thought and politics that judged ideas and practices by their outcomes rather than by their ideological character. James' epigram, "By their fruit ye shall know them, not by their

Figure 2. President Theodore Roosevelt's party at the Grizzly Giant, Mariposa Big Tree Grove, 1903 (Photo source: Yosemite NPS Library. Used by permission).

roots," suited a nation-in-the-making populated by immigrants and chock-a-block with ideas and creeds.

All this is lost in the Glacier Point image, and the omission matters because it changes the narrative. Begin, instead, with the Grizzly Giant photo, and the story is one of American innovations across the boards, from institutions to ideas, and of environmental reform within a broader program of a boisterous nationalism. Conservation had its origins in democratic politics as much as with intangible values. A commitment to patches of preservation does not lie outside of (or in defiance to) American experience any more than religion does. Instead, it thrives as part of American pluralism, as testimony to the abundance that made such practices possible, and as part of a national epic, the frontier, that threw the wild and the wrecked into stark confrontation. All the pieces did not mesh smoothly, any more than any other American experience did, but they were all part of what Roosevelt called a Square Deal.

Purifying the Narrative in the Late Twentieth Century

Where the narrative begins matters because it defines where it ends. The cropped photo leads like the trajectory of an arrow to the dam controversies, and the triumph of parks, preservation, and a more formal philosophy of the wild, the deep, and the non-human. Arguably, the foundational works for both environmental history and ethics in the United States appeared in 1967. Behind both lay increasing attention to Aldo Leopold's posthumous 1949 classic, *A Sand County Almanac*, which really found its readership in the 1960s (Leopold 1949).

Historian Lynn White achieved the widest reach with a polemical essay in the magazine *Science* that placed the blame for the emerging "ecological crisis" on the "anthropocentric" or human-centered Judeo-Christian worldview (White 1967). The charge that the root cause lay with flawed ideas about the world inspired a first generation of environmental philosophers to call for a nonanthropocentric ethics that would elevate nature as a bearer of moral value (Routley 1973; Rolston 1975, 1988; Taylor 1986; Callicott 1989). A field coalesced around a shared perception that humanity, or at least Western civilization, needed an alternative to its prevailing chauvinism toward wild species and landscapes, and its failure to respect the intrinsic value of nature. The obvious alternative was wilderness; a counter-ethos could align nicely with general enthusiasms that had led to passage of the Wilderness Act 3 years earlier. In the early 1970s, Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess expanded the realm with the first essay on deep ecology, perhaps the purest expression of the nature-centered worldview and a vision that would later shape wilderness and environmental activism in the United States, Australia, and Europe (Naess 1973).

The parallel project was to invent a narrative, and historians in the United States also acquired their origin story in 1967 with Roderick Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind* (Nash 1967) The book became a sensation, and it seemed natural that it placed the subject, one about ideas and spiritual values, within the realm of ideas. The history of American environmentalism became, by default, a history that traced the aftermath of that rendezvous atop Glacier Point. It helped that historical geography on the Sauerian model, which was

its natural rival in the academy, was imploding; in 1972, Alfred Crosby published *The Columbian Exchange*, which effectively exchanged what had belonged to geography with the new claims of history (Crosby 1972). What had been a story of European expansion of people with and against people was rewritten into one of people acting with and against nature. Nash later merged history and philosophy with *The Rights of Nature: A History of Environmental Ethics* (Nash 1989).

Wilderness, deep ecology, intrinsic values, nonanthropocentric philosophy, and a narrative to place them at the apex of environmental thought and ethics, all were bonded by a strong nuclear force. They did not play well with others: it was axiomatic, in fact, that the others were the problem, and that the whole enterprise had to be refounded on these newer ideological principles, much as ecological science looked to the pristine to furnish a baseline for natural processes, and as activists and philosophers turned to wilderness preserves as the purest and defining expression of environmental management.

The informing principles behind these concepts were not part of a larger cultural and political enterprise. They stood alone. They were, so advocates argued, the foundational charter from which all the others evolved and to which they had to return for renewal. Environmental history wrote people into the narrative only as enablers (or destroyers) of the vision. Environmental ecology struggled to incorporate people as agents. Nature-centered environmental ethics ignored its philosophical antecedents, including the humanist excursions of the American Pragmatists, and insisted that it, and it alone, held the keys to the kingdom. Conservation planners sought to create pristine preserves—not just remove people's bad practices but people themselves—as an axiom of environmental politics.

It has not happened that way. The American invention of wilderness, taken as an emblem of American exceptionalism, has not shown it can migrate successfully beyond the United States and has frequently led to charges of "green imperialism." More insidiously, the notion is increasingly troubled within its place of origin (Cronon 1995). The destabilizing begins with practice. Wilderness-as-norm is challenged by threats such as wildfires, beetle epidemics, and swarms of invasives many times larger than the preserves, by global-scale climate change, and by notions of working landscapes that may better advance ecological goods and services. Environmental reformers have discovered the vastly richer returns from a full-gamut spectrum of restoration projects, and view the human problem less as original sin or faulty premises than as bad choices.

The intellectual enterprise underwriting environmentalism is beginning to catch up. Environmental science realizes that it cannot, in the Anthropocene, ignore the commanding role of humans (Zalasiewicz et al. 2010). Environmental history, to survive as scholarship, has had to incorporate cities, agriculture, and social justice; the four elements that matter to the history profession at large are not earth, water, air, and fire but race, gender, ethnicity, and class (Steinberg 2008). The informing narrative is not simply one between the wild and the wasted, but between old and new economies, and between human health and nature. Environmental philosophy, however, as though emulating its favorite subject, has tended to stand apart and has been slow to absorb the experimental and pluralist experiments that increasingly define land conservation, restoration ecology, and adaptive ecosystem management (but see Norton 2005; Minteer 2012).

The Lost Pragmatism of American Environmentalism

Or to restate the issue, the prevailing picture of U.S. environmental history has been cropped too closely. The reality is, environmental concerns have always been connected with everything else in society (Fiege 2012). A more useful narrative would accept that pluralism—would accommodate a democratic politics, the swirl of ideas, the proliferating ethical creeds, and the many places and meanings of environment; would put the physicians, the bureaucrats, the politicians, the personal secretaries, the professors, the Secret Service agents, and even the dismounted cavalry into the narrative. To do so is, by default, to accept a pragmatic definition of environmental history. It says the Muir Moment was one event among many, and its narrative one subplot among milling throngs that populate the prevailing narrative. It also concedes that pragmatism was present at the creation.

American Pragmatism and American environmentalism coevolved. John Wesley Powell's *Arid Lands Report* (Powell 1878), to many minds the manifesto for state-sponsored conservation, was published the same year as Charles Sanders Peirce's "How to Make Our Ideas Clear," generally considered the originating essay of Pragmatism (Peirce 1878). John Muir was a contemporary of William James. The agrarian conservationist Liberty Hyde Bailey, influenced by Muir's biocentrism and the experimentalism of the Pragmatists, wrote of a "holy Earth" while at the same time celebrating the farmed landscape and the modification of nature for a sustainable society (Bailey 1915). In the interwar period, the forester-planner-conservationist Benton MacKaye proposed the Appalachian Trail, a bold wilderness plan that incorporated a concern for regional culture and a model of communal forestry and agriculture alongside more traditional wilderness values. In many respects, MacKaye's environmental vision echoed the work of his former teacher at Harvard, Pragmatist philosopher Josiah Royce, who extolled the virtues of the "wise province" and provided MacKaye with an ideal for knitting together wilderness and community life. Urbanist Lewis Mumford, a MacKaye colleague, advocated linking city planning to a more encompassing ecological region, an organic integration of wild, rural, and built landscapes (Minteer 2006). In the 1940s, Aldo Leopold's influential "land ethic" suggested a serviceable balance between wild and worked, utility and beauty, rather than a reduction of environmental values and commitments to a narrow preservationist ethos (Meine 2004).

What is astonishing is not the parallel chronicles of Pragmatism and environmentalism but that Pragmatism ebbed away during the hey-day of preservationism, and that complex

thinkers like Leopold have often been simplified into single-issue partisans. The cropped narrative became the only narrative. As a result, the cultural, social, and political complexity of the tradition was all but lost, papered over by historians and philosophers eager to find less complicated intellectual justification for the late twentieth century embrace of wild species and landscapes.

Conclusion: Restoration Work in Environmental History and Philosophy

Picking Glacier Point over Grizzly Giant, or cropping the crowd around the Big Tree, has served the preservationist cause well in American environmentalism. It has served all the other aspects of environmental concern (both in the United States and globally) less ably because the preferred narrative requires a stark frontier between the working and the wild, while the world of restoration is far more messy. It needs intellectual underpinnings that align with the actual tasks before it. The greatest is not preserving more fragments of pristine nature but renewing as much of the unreserved landscape as possible. Suburbs, golf courses, city parks, backyards and brownfields, overgrown woods, degraded pastures, extractive reserves, species lost and invasive, polluted air and water, impauperate working landscapes of all stripes, all need regeneration to enhance their resilience and upgrade their ability to deliver ecological goods and services. Call it restoration, in the loose sense of reinstating those damaged or lost processes that once sustained ecological integrity and allowed landscapes to function with fewer breakdowns. Or better yet, call it "intervention ecology," which signals a critical shift toward experimental and pragmatic manipulations of environmental systems to achieve socially desired ecological states (Hobbs et al. 2011).

But restoration is also the intellectual task before environmental historians and philosophers. For Americans it means reinserting the full complement of colleagues arrayed beneath the Grizzly Giant, all those competing claims for attention. It means reviving the processes of mind that had made environmental issues fellow travelers with the democratic politics and pluralistic pragmatism that characterized its origins. Good answers would not follow from rigid application of first principles, but from restoring those processes of reasoning and reconciling by which a citizenry can reach collective decisions. The truth is, practitioners and philosophers need each other, and they need a narrative to join them. Particularly in the case of environmental ethics, the alternative is to create enclaves of pristine thought, unmodified by human doings and subject only to occasional visits for recreation or contemplation.

There are good reasons to celebrate the preservationist experiment, and none to banish the philosophies and ethical tenets that have attached to it. As ideas and as places, they are part of America's democracy of the environment and of the ongoing American experiment in conservation and sustainability (Thompson 2010). But neither is there any reason to continue to let one creed crowd out all the others and to become, as it were, an established religion. Let the preservationist moment remain with John Muir on Glacier Point. Let the master narrative return to the Grizzly Giant and the unfinished work in conservation, restoration, and invention that, when he departed, President Roosevelt still had before him, for that agenda is today's as well.

Implications for Practice

- The traditional narrative and ethical framework of U.S. environmentalism have become increasingly irrelevant to much conservation and restoration practice.
- Pragmatism needs to be restored to the tradition, a way of thinking that was originally part of American conservation but that was swept aside by the rise of doctrinaire preservationism in the late twentieth century.
- Recovering this lost pragmatic tradition will help environmental history and philosophy build stronger connections with environmental practitioners seeking meaningful historical justification and philosophical guidance for their work.

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