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*Distinguishing Experiential
and Physical Conceptions
of Wilderness* (2008)

TWO OF THE MOST serious challenges for wilderness as a philosophical concept are its apparent fundamental dependence on culturally relative perspectives and the perpetuation of a dualism between humans and nature. This essay explains how both challenges might be accommodated by working through the consequences of recognizing that “wilderness” actually represents at least two distinct concepts. First, *physical* wilderness is conceived of as a large landscape where ecological processes are thought to operate largely in the absence of direct human influence. Physical wilderness may or may not be officially or legally labeled or designated. Second, *experiential* wilderness is a constellation of psychological phenomena that may be usefully reduced to a physical stimulus, the perception of that stimulus, and the reaction to the perception. Perceptual elements of a wilderness experience may be negative, positive, or some combination of both.

The consequences of distinguishing experiential wilderness from physical wilderness include recognizing three things:

1. *Instances* of wilderness experience are culturally and individually relativistic, but the concept (i.e., the concept of a wilderness experience) itself is not. An important goal for the analysis of wilderness experience is an understanding of *how* cultural and individual perspectives affect the nature of individual instances of wilderness experience.
2. Neither physical wilderness nor experiential wilderness depends fundamentally on the human-nature dualism being an objective reality; rather, wilderness experience treats the *perception* of the human-nature dualism. Some wilderness experiences reinforce that perception, while others cause it to dissipate.
3. Experiential wilderness focuses on the *subject* (i.e., the experiencer), and physical wilderness focuses on the *object* (i.e., that which is experienced). Experiential wilderness can be formally related to other generic psychological phenomena, specifically, empathy, deprivation, suffering, and coping. Such connections make wilderness importantly and interestingly connected to some readings of Buddhist metaphysics and expose wilderness to analysis by methods used to study religion, epistemology, traditional psychology, and neuropsychology.

1.0. THE TWO CONCEPTS OF WILDERNESS

Wilderness entails two distinct concepts, each representing a quite different domain of inquiry and knowledge, and each important for our relationship with nature in different ways. One conception of wilderness refers to a physical place, more specifically, a large tract of land (or even sea) where humans have at most only modest influence on ecological-evolutionary states (e.g., abundance and diversity of species) and processes (e.g., nutrient flows, natural selection, and organismal rates of birth, death, and dispersal). Although terms such as “large” and “modest” are importantly relative and subjective, the states and processes of the landscape in question are importantly analyzable by scientific methods. As such, physical wilderness is importantly but not exclusively as-

essed by environmental and ecological sciences. Some have suggested that the concept of physical wilderness be reassociated with ecoreserve, biodiversity reserve, or some such label.¹ No conceptual confusion would seem to arise from such relabeling. Regardless of the label, the concept associated with “physical wilderness” is fundamentally important for understanding the *physical* relationship between human *society* and the environment.² A second conception of wilderness is primarily experiential and not uniquely dependent on an objective state of affairs.

This experiential conception of wilderness is also critically important and is not easily or usefully reassociated with any other convenient label. Wilderness concepts have been widely criticized because they carry cultural bias and baggage that distract from effective and just use of the concept. However, confronting and understanding this baggage is essential for gaining a more mature *psychological* relationship with nature. Banishing the word “wilderness” to resolve problematic aspects of our relationship with nature would be like banishing the word “nigger” or “racism” in hopes that doing so would solve the problem of racism.³ That a wilderness experience may be negative (from any perspective, cultural or individual) does not discredit the concept (of a wilderness experience), nor does it represent an occasion to banish the concept from discourse. On the contrary, more discourse and research are needed to (1) better understand the demarcation of a negative wilderness experience, (2) more clearly distinguish the causes from the symptoms of negative wilderness experiences, and (3) create methods for transforming negative wilderness experiences into positive ones. Analyzing, for example, the wilderness experiences characteristic of North Americans from the perspective of another culture would almost certainly help one to better understand the relationship between nature and North Americans. None of this would be achieved by simply banishing the concept from discourse.⁴

Experiential wilderness is important for affecting (positively or negatively) *psychological* relationships between *individuals* and nature. By contrast, the concept associated with “physical wilderness” is fundamentally important for understanding the *physical* relationship between human *society* and the environment.

2.0. AN EXPERIENTIAL CONCEPTION
OF WILDERNESS

Let us suppose that the concept of wilderness is meaningful only if humans are in some way distinct from nature. Moreover, suppose that culture (not culture per se but the unique degree to which culture is developed and expressed in humans) is the feature that distinguishes humans from the rest of the natural world.⁵ Taking this for granted, a simple and provisional concept of a wilderness experience would be *an experience deprived in some significant and general way of human culture*.

Given this conception, a wilderness experience may be had by any human, regardless of the historical or cultural context to which that human belongs (i.e., a wilderness experience would be a truly cross-cultural phenomenon). The physical conditions that stimulate a wilderness experience as well as the perception of and the psychological response to that experience may vary substantially among cultures and among individuals within a culture. Without disentangling physical wilderness from experiential wilderness this phenomenon is confused and even perhaps inaccessible. Confronting and understanding these variations is valuable because such understanding would likely lead to an understanding of and explanations for various cultures' relationships with nature (or the nonhuman world).

To illustrate this idea, compare and contrast these three wilderness experiences:

- (1) a backpacker burdened with a backload of high-tech equipment, hiking in a second-growth forest parsed into pieces by active logging roads and experiencing emotions of peace and oneness;
- (2) a seventeenth-century European colonist in North America with low-tech equipment, traveling through what by today's standards would constitute a first-rate physical wilderness area and experiencing emotions of angst and isolation;
- (3) a young person from an indigenous tribe who, upon reaching an age of maturity, is sent by tribal elders from the community (into the "wilderness") with the expectation of learning

something (perhaps via a bit of suffering) and returning as a hero, a rite of passage commonly referred to as a “vision quest.”⁶

Each of these experiences differs greatly in terms of physical circumstances and psychological effects. Nevertheless, the salient characteristic of each experience is the deprivation of human culture, and each experience is thus usefully considered a wilderness experience.

Example 3 may represent a category of phenomena that is quite general. It is illustrated by narratives and traditions from many cultures, including, for example, North American Indian, South Asian, and Eastern European.⁷ A brief exploration of one example might prove illustrative. Consider the famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s *Eulogy on Abraham*, in which Kierkegaard interprets Abraham’s near sacrifice of his own son Isaac.⁸ En route to following God’s commandment to kill his son, Abraham takes Isaac for three days through the desert wilderness to Mount Moriah. Kierkegaard asserts that the story represents Abraham’s passing from the Sphere of the Ethical to the Sphere of the Religious, which requires abandoning human culture. Kierkegaard also claims that only by abandoning human culture could Abraham justify doing something as insane as planning to kill his son and then not doing it.⁹ More generally, Kierkegaard says that passing from the Sphere of the Ethical to the Sphere of the Religious represents finding one’s truly free self, which requires leaving society behind. The salient point is that Kierkegaard provides an important articulation of the value of experiential wilderness (i.e., deprivation of human culture) for human psychological development.

Goethe’s *Faust*, written about fifty years before Kierkegaard’s commentary while Enlightenment thought was being eclipsed by Romantic thought, provides a similar but distinct account of wilderness’s effect on the human psyche. After becoming romantically attached to Gretchen, Faust retreats to a forest cavern. This short scene begins with Faust making extensive reference to nature’s beauty as a means of expressing his lust-inspired joy. After Mephistopheles mocks Faust’s expressiveness, Faust complains: “Can you not understand how my life’s strength increases as I walk here in these wild places?” Mephistopheles con-

cludes another round of berating with the words "How does the lofty intuition end?" which foreshadows the tragedy that Faust's infatuation for Gretchen becomes.¹⁰ Goethe's Forest Cavern scene conspicuously portrays wilderness as a place where the rational (Faust's professorial nature) may be sacrificed, with tragic effect, to the irrational (Faust's bargain with the devil).

3.0. THE ANATOMY OF A WILDERNESS EXPERIENCE

The experiential notion of wilderness can be usefully decomposed into three elements: (1) a physical stimulus significantly characterized by some nonhuman element; (2) a perception of the stimulus that may be negative, positive, or some mixture of negative and positive; and (3) a psychological reaction to the perception that may also be positive, negative, or some combination of positive and negative.¹¹ The following sections explore each aspect of a wilderness experience.

3.1. PHYSICAL STIMULUS

Wilderness experiences seem to be triggered by a wide variation of kinds and intensities of physical stimuli. This variation seems to be associated with one's individual maturity, one's past personal experience, and the norms of one's culture and subcultures.

3.1.1. Cultural variation. During the seventeenth century the North American landscape generally stimulated wilderness experiences for European colonists but not North American Indians. Why? Not because North American Indians were Noble Savages but because they would have been surrounded by all the human culture they had ever known.¹² Perhaps one cannot be deprived of the customs of another culture if one has never conceived of them. North American Indians certainly could have had a wilderness experience. It was just more difficult for European colonists to avoid a wilderness experience once they left the narrow confines of their settlements.¹³ This comparison seems applicable to the wilderness experiences of colonists and aboriginal peoples throughout the world and throughout history.

3.1.2. *Subcultural variation.* Consider a pleasant picnic on a remote lake arrived at by floatplane. This physical stimulus may not stimulate a wilderness experience for a life-long bush pilot, but it may do so for his or her urban client. Again, the primary difference may be the degree to which each is typically immersed in human culture. The urbanite is generally more sensitive to the deprivation of art museums, eight-lane highways, and Starbucks, whereas the bush pilot would tend not to be.¹⁴ Such considerations may partly reveal and explain the nature of wilderness experience for urbanites, suburbanites, and persons whose primary experience is rural and agricultural (crops or trees).

3.1.3. *Individual variation and past experience.* Consider two people, each of whom believes that the intensity of a wilderness experience can be judged by the level of suffering caused by being deprived of human culture. Consider also both of these people experiencing the same cold, rainy day without shelter. Both would seem to be having the same wilderness experience, that is, being deprived of shelter from the rain. Nevertheless, the intensity of the experience could be much greater for one than the other if one is accustomed to such conditions and knows of behavioral (or attitudinal) responses that reduce the suffering. Perception and reaction (both physical and psychological) seem to be fundamental elements of wilderness experience.

3.1.4. *Individual variation and sensitivity.* Compare the experiences associated with the sight and sound of a herring gull in a physical wilderness (i.e., an ecoreserve) and of a gull at a public beach. Many people realize empathy more easily for the ecoreserve gull than for the beach gull. What accounts for the difference? Certainly, the difference is not in the experience of the gulls. Inasmuch as we are able to perceive the experience of any gull (i.e., empathize with the gull), perhaps our perception of a gull's experience ought to be importantly independent of a gull's environment, urban or wilderness. Both gulls are acquiring food, struggling to survive the elements, and expending great energy (against great odds) to reproduce and rear offspring. Most simply, both exist and continue to exist. The difference between viewing a gull in a physical wilderness area and viewing a gull in an urban area is the psychological condition of the

person observing the gulls. In the ecoreserve, where human culture is sparse, some people find it easier to focus on nonhuman elements within their environment; it seems more difficult to do so at the beach.

3.2. PERCEPTION OF PHYSICAL STIMULUS

We consider an “experience” to include not only some physical stimulus but also the perception of that stimulus. In section 2.0 we provisionally defined wilderness experience as an experience of deprivation in some significant and general way of human culture. This definition represents wilderness experience too narrowly, that is, as a negative concept. A more general sense of “wilderness experience” would be *an experience for which the physical stimulus primarily entails the perception of nonhuman elements in one’s environment*.¹⁵

From this more general definition two categorically distinct perceptions arise: deprivation of human elements (negative) and enriched awareness of nonhuman elements (positive). Wilderness experiences may be closely related to other so-called deprivation experiences. For example, if backpacking is virtuous for the wilderness experience it provides, perhaps vows of silence and poverty are virtuous in similar ways and for similar reasons. The experiences had by backpackers, silent retreatants, and street people may be more similar than is generally recognized. What are the similarities and differences between experiences entailing so-called deprivation in environments largely devoid of human infrastructure (i.e., a wilderness experience) and so-called deprivation in environments saturated with human infrastructure (i.e., nonwilderness deprivation experiences)?¹⁶

3.3. PSYCHOLOGICAL REACTION TO THE PERCEPTION

Although psychological reactions to wilderness perceptions are diverse and nuanced, some categorization might be useful. For example, suffering is one important reaction to the negative perception of *deprivation of human culture*. If “suffering” is the “inability to cope,” then “coping” would be another important reaction to perceived deprivation. Coping may not be a positive reaction inasmuch as coping may represent the denial of suffering or the repression of psychological reactions that ought to arise from suffering. In any case, specifying a formal relation-

ship between wilderness and suffering is useful because it highlights the strong association that some people make between wilderness and suffering (see section 4.2.1). However, our analysis indicates that suffering is not a fundamental aspect of wilderness. It merely demarcates one of many legitimate *reactions* to physical wilderness.

An important positive reaction to the positive perception of wilderness (i.e., an experience focused on something unrelated to human culture) is empathy for that which is focused upon, namely, the nonhuman elements. Focusing on an object is a prerequisite for empathizing with an object. Empathy does not arise spontaneously even in people predisposed to empathy. Empathy requires active engagement and focused experiences with objects. The relationship between wilderness and empathy is important because empathy is entwined with compassion, respect, and love.

However, empathy is not a necessary reaction to positive perceptions of wilderness. More selfish reactions are possible. Consider someone for whom human culture is perceived to be a primary source of stress and dissatisfaction in life. Such a person would tend to perceive a wilderness experience as a focused experience on nonhuman elements in his or her environment rather than as a deprivation of human culture. However, this reaction may not entail empathy. The reaction may be merely recreative. Although recreation is important, its value is limited.¹⁷ At best, recreation generates respect for nonhuman elements, but only for their utilitarian or use value to the recreated self.

The relationship between empathy and wilderness may provide some explanation for the modern American wilderness experience. Since many average Americans are arguably not well endowed with (or even encouraged to develop) a rich sense of empathy, their wilderness experiences will tend to be negative.

4.0. IMPLICATIONS AND ELABORATIONS

4.1. HUMAN-NATURE DUALISM IN PHYSICAL AND EXPERIENTIAL WILDERNESS

As a preliminary, it seems useful to recognize a systematic relationship among various types of dualisms. First, consider the dualism between

us and *them* as an instance of a general dualism. Then consider various types of dualisms to be distinguished by what is included in the “us” category. In the mind-matter dualism “us” refers to one’s mind. In the subject-object dualism “us” refers to one’s self, the mind and body, or the subject. In the human-nature dualism “us” refers to a collection of human selves. The relevant point is that the human-nature dualism is a type of subject-object dualism manifest at the cultural level.

Previous conceptions of wilderness have been criticized for appearing to depend fundamentally on a human-nature dualism. Because such a dualism is, at least, difficult to defend and more likely an illusion, conceptions such as wilderness that depend on a human-nature dualism inherit the criticisms laid against the dualism itself. However, this is no more than a superficial criticism. With respect to physical wilderness, which concerns the physical relationship between society and the environment, the human-nature dualism is not fundamental. Without considering it a metaphysical reality, dualism can be a pragmatically useful and sensible way of relating things. For example, thinking that humans can *cause* environmental alteration (destruction) is useful but requires a dualistic framework.

With respect to experiential wilderness, the human-nature dualism is useful, provisional, and perceived but not fundamental. Recall that the experiential concept of wilderness is about the psychological relationship between individuals and nature. Inasmuch as the concept “relationship” is useful, so is the dualism. In some sense a relationship may not even be perceptible without perceiving a dualism between the relating entities.¹⁸ At its root the experiential concept of wilderness is about how one perceives the human-nature dualism. In this way wilderness does not depend upon the reality of a human-nature dualism; rather, it treats only the perception of a human-nature dualism. Wilderness experiences can lead to either the reinforcement or the dissolution of perceived human-nature dualisms.

Consider that a negative wilderness perception entails being deprived of human culture and that the root of the word “deprivation” is “private,” which means “of, or pertaining to, the individual.” By focusing on the self, the negative wilderness experience reinforces the human-nature dual-

ism.¹⁹ Positive wilderness perceptions also treat perceived human-nature dualism distinctively. Wilderness empathy, in particular, seems powerfully associated with the dissolution of perceived human-nature dualisms. Even dictionary definitions of empathy suggest a relationship between empathy and subject-object dualism: the “attribution of one’s own feelings to an object” and “the imaginative projection of a subjective state into an object so that the object appears to be infused with it.”²⁰

From some perspectives, the ability to avoid illusions of duality between one’s self and one’s surroundings is a mark of psychological maturity. In this regard, perceiving wilderness in terms of deprivation may be less mature, and reacting to wilderness with empathy may be more mature.

4.2. A SURVEY OF WILDERNESS EXPERIENCES

In the sections below we highlight a few archetypal wilderness experiences. They further illustrate the impact of experiential wilderness on one’s psyche and the importance of distinguishing between physical and experiential wilderness.

4.2.1. Adventure seekers. Some modern wilderness adventure seekers strongly associate wilderness experiences with suffering.²¹ For reference, pick up any copy of popular magazines such as *Backpacker* and *Outside*. Adventure seekers judge their personal development by increasing their ability to suffer and cope. Consequently, each new wilderness experience must be more difficult and extreme than the previous, or personal development is stifled. The process is self-focused and nonempathetic, and it even includes characteristics of an addiction. The modern adventurer is like the Calvinist in strongly associating wilderness and suffering.²² However, whereas the Calvinist may think he or she deserves to suffer (because of Original Sin), the adventurer seems to enjoy it or at least consider it worthwhile because it leads to personal fulfillment or social recognition. Despite these criticisms, this type of experience is not inconsistent with being an effective advocate for physical wilderness.²³

Perhaps the wilderness adventurer seems relatively uninteresting because he or she is uncommonly exhibited in the simplified extreme degree portrayed above. However, if the extreme wilderness adventurer is at gross fault for strongly associating wilderness with suffering/coping, then might it follow that the adventurer would bear fault to the extent that he or she associates wilderness with suffering/coping even if that association is weak? If so, it would be illuminating to have an empirical understanding of the extent to which individuals within different cultures tend to associate wilderness and suffering. We suspect the association is significant for many North Americans.

4.2.2. Wilderness nihilism. Suppose a wilderness experience is judged positive to the degree one achieves feelings of unity and oneness with nature. As one has more wilderness experiences, one may become increasingly aware of the pervasiveness of human influence over virtually every landscape and seascape on the planet. For some, this awareness results in sadness and irritation with things like any sign, no matter how innocuous, that another human is or was nearby; jet contrails in the sky; testimonial-based knowledge of extirpated native species and exotic species in an ecosystem; and disruption caused to birds nesting too close to a hiking trail. These irritations can become serious obstacles to a positive wilderness experience (i.e., feelings of unity and oneness with nonhuman elements).

Attempts to empathize can result in a sense of despair. Wilderness experiences seem senseless or useless and hence nihilistic. Such experience may be driven by any of several processes: one may desire sentiment more than genuine empathy, or one may be unable to deal with the challenges that mature empathy sometimes poses. A peaceful wilderness experience can be difficult if not impossible to realize when one takes seriously the suffering of the object with which one empathizes. Although Buddhist principles maintain that empathy relieves rather than amplifies suffering, nihilism is a risk for naive practitioners of Buddhism.²⁴ Finally, one may have a greater capacity to empathize with nonhuman elements than with humans. Here one may be confusing empathy with pity and confusing empathy for humans with tacit support for unjust actions by humans (i.e., treating nature poorly).

4.2.3. *Supersensitivity.* The ability to focus on nonhuman elements in one's environment requires motivation and skill, which are achieved through practice. With limited skill, focusing on nonhuman elements may require being surrounded almost entirely by nonhuman elements. However, with increased skill, one can focus on nonhuman elements in human-dominated environments.²⁵ Empathy is similarly skill dependent.²⁶ At first, perhaps only extreme conditions stimulate empathy, such as being in a remote physical wilderness and witnessing some spectacular life drama in another species. However, with practice a deep sense of empathy might be triggered by far more subtle stimuli, such as merely seeing a single ant cross the sidewalk. Differences in motivation *and* skill account for much of the variation in one's ability to have a mature wilderness experience.²⁷

Wilderness maturity might entail the ability to *experience* wilderness virtually anywhere. A person with mature wilderness experience skills would in fact find it difficult to avoid wilderness experiences. Under such circumstances there would be little connection between a wilderness experience and physical wilderness. Distinguishing these ideas is important. Although both are important, it is detrimental to confuse a wilderness experience (e.g., empathy for a squirrel in a suburban front yard) with a physical wilderness (e.g., the Brooks Range).

4.2.4. *Buddhist thought.* Although wilderness is not a formal concept in Buddhist thought, a formal conception might be developed from other aspects of Buddhist thought. For example, Buddhist thought includes the doctrine of karma, which indicates that suffering is deserved. However, in contrast to Calvinist and Puritan traditions, some Buddhist traditions teach that during this lifetime it is possible for one to be (at least partially) liberated from suffering, so suffering is not to be endured (as it is for Calvinists) but overcome. Moreover, an essential element for overcoming suffering is shifting one's focus away from one's self and onto others. Thus, an essential element in the Buddhist solution to suffering coincides with what has been portrayed here as a mature wilderness experience. According to Buddhist tradition, compassion and right relationships necessarily arise from genuine empathy. In this sense suffering, empathy, and wilderness are formally related.²⁸

This connection does present some obvious challenges; for example, why should we be concerned with wilderness or environmental ethics when we routinely fail to treat people in an ethical manner? One Buddhist's comment points to an answer. The Dalai Lama has said: "One way you can develop empathy [for people] is to start with small sentient beings like ants and insects. Really attend to them and recognize that they too wish to find happiness, experience pleasure, and be free of pain. Start there with insects and really empathize with them, and then go on to reptiles and so forth. Other human beings and yourself will all follow."²⁹ The essential point here is that empathy for other humans does not begin with humans (and is not preempted by empathy for non-humans) but rather that it begins by fostering the virtue of empathy.

Hence, what a Westerner would think of as a wilderness experience might really be a form of Buddhist practice. Though such practice might be prompted both in and by physical wilderness, it is certainly not necessarily dependent upon the existence of physical wilderness.

4.2.5. Judeo-Christian thought. The Judeo-Christian treatment of human-nature relationships has been discussed extensively.³⁰ Here we merely indicate how wilderness experience, as portrayed in this essay, represents a general framework from which such discussion may be considered.

Judeo-Christian thought, more than other worldviews, reinforces self-other dualism (individual salvation) and human-nature dualism (e.g., the Christian creation myth emphasizes the distinction between humans and other creations). Judeo-Christian thought also includes perceiving deprivation as virtuous because it is atonement for Original Sin and personal sin. Predispositions for dualism and deprivation seem to promote negative wilderness experiences.

Lynn White, Jr., famously suggested that Saint Francis represents a Christian solution to such problems. He described Francis's "view of nature and of man [as] rest[ing] on a unique sort of pan-psychism of all things animate and inanimate, designed for the glorification of their transcendent Creator."³¹ White portrays Francis as fostering empathy by highlighting the "pan-psychism of all things" and transforming deprivation experiences into experiences that focus on something beside

one's self (i.e., glorifying a transcendent Creator). This is consistent with the positive wilderness experiences portrayed here, especially if the transcendent Creator is in some significant way a self-expression of its nature. Viewing this solution from the perspective of wilderness experience described in this essay raises two significant questions: Does a God-humanity or God-creation dualism promote a negative wilderness experience? To what extent does a positive wilderness experience depend on any forms of pantheism?

4.3. WILDERNESS, IGNORANCE, AND KNOWLEDGE

Some wilderness advocates believe that ignorance is an essential component of a wilderness experience. According to these advocates, wilderness experiences are enhanced by lakes and mountains without names and a total lack of scientific or cultural interpretation.³² Said experiences are, likewise, diminished in areas where lakes and mountains are named, studied, and interpreted. Justification for this position seems to be that knowledge invariably leads to control.³³

This position seems absurd. While control might not be possible without knowledge, knowledge does not invariably lead to control. On the contrary, ignorance is not compatible with empathy, unity, compassion, or mature love. For example, although ignorance might arguably be the basis for romantic love, which is inherently ephemeral, mature love, like that found in healthy marriages, depends upon knowledge. Hence, promoting ignorance of nature might well run contrary to promoting empathy, unity, compassion, or a mature type of love for nature.

Some wilderness proponents actually advocate ignorance on the basis that knowledge spoils mystery, which is essential for wonderment and respect. Although Richard Feynman's aphorism is appropriate, it does not go far enough.³⁴ If knowledge were to spoil mystery, wonderment, and respect, then we would want to remain as ignorant as possible about the people we love. In fact, one might well claim that the kind of love found in marriage and rooted in knowledge is extremely mysterious.

We ought to be equally cautious about how we relate wilderness and wilderness preservation with knowledge. Although scientific research in a (physical) wilderness area may foster care and wonderment, it is not easy to judge when such research is too invasive or manipulative. Some

knowledge is simply not worth the cost. No one could justify dissecting their spouse simply to better know him or her.

From a different perspective, increased knowledge may reduce one's valuation of an object. For example, one may value an ecosystem less upon learning that it is less pristine than originally thought. Although knowledge may cause reduction in value that is instrumental or conditional, knowledge is only likely to increase value when an object is intrinsically valued.

4.4. THE SUBJECTIVITY OF PHYSICAL WILDERNESS

The distinction between physical wilderness and experiential wilderness does not perfectly coincide with a distinction between subjective and objective elements of wilderness. Experiential wilderness, though importantly subjective, entails an important objective element—the physical stimulus (section 3.1). Although physical wilderness is importantly objective (i.e., it is about an object that exists independently of you and me), it is also importantly subjective. One must prescribe the conditions that represent physical wilderness. Is an ecosystem large enough or sufficiently uninfluenced by humans to qualify as physical wilderness? Which aspects of the ecosystem (e.g., species composition and nutrient cycling) are most important when judging human impact?

The depth to which objective and subjective elements seem entwined within both physical and experiential wilderness may be symptomatic of a more general false dichotomy between facts (objectivity) and values (subjectivity).³⁵ This complexity should not impair constructive use of either wilderness concept. It merely necessitates awareness and appropriate treatment.

CONCLUSION

Although experiential wilderness and physical wilderness are distinct, it is wrong to treat them as completely independent. For example, one can ask, To what extent does a mature sense of wilderness experience in a human community lead to increased physical wilderness? How does the existence of physical wilderness promote experiential wilderness? Is physical wilderness the only (or best) way to promote experiential

wilderness? Having reasonable answers to these questions would be of great practical importance.

Experiential wilderness and physical wilderness do not always come together, and they might not always serve one another. If we can have wilderness experiences outside of physical wilderness areas, then do we really need physical wilderness? And if our rationale for the preservation of physical wilderness rests upon the provision of wilderness experiences, then we might have a weak foundation upon which to rest our need for physical wilderness.

The failure to recognize the distinction between experiential wilderness and physical wilderness can lead to practical problems in the management of landscapes designated as wilderness. Keeping these distinctions in mind might go some way toward helping us sort out a few of the conundrums that currently plague our thinking about the concept of wilderness. According to the Buddha,

Mind is the forerunner of all actions.
All deeds are led by mind, created by mind.
If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, suffering follows, . . .
If one speaks or acts with a serene mind, happiness follows.

The Dhammapada

NOTES

1. This solution bears at least superficial similarity to an idea proposed by J. B. Callicott in his essay "Should Wilderness Areas Become Biodiversity Reserves?" in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. B. Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1998); see also J. B. Callicott's "The Implication of the 'Shifting Paradigm' in Ecology for Paradigm Shifts in the Philosophy of Conservation" in this volume. Throughout this essay we use variously the terms *ecoreserve* and *physical wilderness* to refer to the same general concept. In some cases one label seems more appropriate than the other.

2. More generally, physical wilderness may also be considered a quantitative characteristic of an ecosystem with different dimensions and degrees. A physical wilderness may be particularly large but not very pristine, or it may be very pristine but not very large. The dimensions of physical wilderness may conflict with each other. For example, restoring a native species that had been extirpated by humans would increase the physical wilderness quality of an ecosystem by making its *state* less influenced by humans (compared to its original

state). However, restoration itself represents a significant human influence on an ecosystem's *process*. Also, compare two ecosystems, one where timber extraction has ceased (increasing the wilderness nature of ecosystem processes) but the forest's state is significantly altered and will be for many generations (the ecosystem state is not very wilderness-like) and another where forest management is intensified but for the purpose of returning the ecosystem to its former state. Which place is more wilderness-like? Although judging a place to be a physical wilderness or not entails a very important normative dimension, that which is being judged is an importantly objective circumstance.

3. This analogy to "racism" is appropriate if "wilderness" is a neutral label for the concept it represents—perhaps what we have referred to as physical wilderness. However, if "wilderness" is inherently and unalterably loaded with subjective or biased perspective, then simply banishing "wilderness" from discourse would be like banishing the words "babe" and "nigger" in the hope of resolving issues of sexism and racism. Banishing such terms may be a necessary condition for some sort of remediation, but it is not clear that it is a sufficient condition for remediation.

4. In fact, an important opportunity for this sort of conceptual therapy might be missed if the concept or word is simply banished. For example, realizing that the concept of wilderness in the Euro-American mind (e.g., as uninhabited) has some disastrous results when it is imported to other parts of the world might force us to reconceptualize our idea of wilderness and allow for human habitation in some form. This, then, can prompt important discussions about what forms of human habitation would or should be compatible with wilderness preservation or with the preservation of wilderness experiences. See also William Cronon's "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands: How Do You Manage a Wilderness Full of Human Stories?" in this volume.

5. J. B. Callicott and M. P. Nelson, *American Indian Environmental Ethics: An Ojibwa Case Study* (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004).

6. Arguably, this is roughly what Jesus's wilderness experience was about. Jesus's wilderness experience was not about traveling over a landscape "untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain" (Cronon, "The Riddle of the Apostle Islands"). To think so would miss the point of that parable and the point of this conception of wilderness.

7. Holy men who take retreat at remote locations in caves and under trees typify South Asian examples. Eastern Orthodox Christian Poustiniks who live as mystical hermits typify Eastern European examples.

8. Søren Kierkegaard, *Frygt og Bæven: Dialectisk Lyrik* (1843), translated in E. H. Hong and H. V. Hong, *Fear and Trembling/Repetition: Kierkegaard's Writings*, vol. 6 (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983).

9. See also Marilynne Robinson, "Wilderness," in this volume.

10. Goethe, *Faust, Part I*, trans. David Luke (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), ll. 3278, 3291.

11. On other conceptions of what an experience (and a wilderness experience) is see Karen M. Fox, "Navigating Confluences: Revisiting the Meaning of 'Wilderness Experience,'" in *Wilderness Science in a Time of Change Conference*, vol. 2: *Wilderness within the Context of Larger Systems*, ed. S. F. McCool, D. N. Cole, W. T. Borrie, and J. O'Loughlin, May 23–27, 1999, Missoula, Mont., Proceedings RMRS-P-15 (Ogden, Utah: U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, 2000).

12. See, for example, Chief Luther Standing Bear, "Indian Wisdom," in Callicott and Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 201–6.

13. Is it sensible to consider a wilderness experience as entailing deprivation of human culture or deprivation of familiar culture? Can a country boy have a wilderness experience in the city? It may be useful to consider a set of distinct experiences, all sharing some element of deprivation. Deprivation of human culture is a wilderness experience. Deprivation of familiar culture is a foreign experience. We are not sure what kind of experience to call Valentine Smith's in Robert Heinlein's *Stranger in a Strange Land* (he was deprived of human culture but immersed in Martian culture). Regardless, the point is that wilderness experience may usefully be considered a deprivation of human culture and as such is not equivalent to other types of deprivation. Moreover, Valentine Smith's experience begs us to consider the question, If we could "experience" Martian culture, could we sensibly "experience" the culture of other nonhuman entities? Wolves, bees, beavers, ants, elephants all have relatively sophisticated cultures compared to, say, yeast cells. The existence of a wilderness experience may require at least some sense of such an experience (see section 3.3).

14. For a third (ancillary) illustration, consider a person exposed for his entire life to nothing but an urban environment. Such a person is *deprived of wilderness* (i.e., he is deprived of the deprivation of culture).

15. We intend "wilderness" to be defined by the nature of the physical stimulus, not by the perception or reaction to it. So while it would be sensible to say that what qualifies as a wilderness experience for you does not qualify as one for me, it would not be sensible to say that what is wilderness for you is not wilderness for me. For a very different conceptualization of the notion of wilderness experience see Fox, "Navigating Confluences."

16. The ways in which physical stimuli cause perceptions in wilderness experiences, as in other experiences, are complex. Explicitly recognizing the relevance of the relationship between stimulus and perception in wilderness experiences exposes the concept of wilderness to analysis by the tools of psychology, neurobiology, metaphysics, and epistemology.

17. We refer to the noblest sense of "recreation" (i.e., the re-creation of one's

spirit, not the brief escape from reality that might be provided by playing a video game or watching Monday night football). However, even the noblest sense of *recreation* (sensu John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Kierkegaard; see section 2.0) entails a selfish (ego- or anthropocentric) interest. Regardless, this does not imply that only physical wilderness may have a nonanthropocentric value. Experiential wilderness that generates empathy for nonhuman elements has nonanthropocentric value.

18. Dualism may be problematic, primarily because it may imply a directionally causal relationship. This position was taken by W. D. Hart, *The Engines of the Soul* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988).

19. The sensibility of this idea depends on the extent to which one's self (identity) is defined by one's culture.

20. See www.empathy.com and www.m-w.com, respectively.

21. Wilderness adventurers are also thrill seekers. The thrill is in testing these adventurers' ability to suffer and cope.

22. The connections (somewhat profound) between wilderness and evangelical protestant religious traditions are well documented. See, for example, M. Stoll, *Protestantism, Capitalism, and Nature in America* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997) and J. B. Callicott and P. S. Ybarra, "The Puritan Origins of the American Wilderness Movement," *Teacherserve: An Interactive Curriculum Enrichment Service for Teachers, National Humanities Center*, <http://www.nhc.rtp.nc.us:8080/tserve/nattrans/ntwilderness/essays/puritan.html> (2001).

23. In fact, wilderness adventurers are most often (but not always) just such advocates. This might also go some way in explaining why they are not as effective as others might be and why wilderness preservation often smacks of "my values or interests as opposed to yours" ("I like wilderness, but you like roads and lodges"), but both are seen as merely subjective preferences aimed at self-satisfaction.

24. Empathy could also cause increased suffering, but it would be an immature expression of empathy.

25. See William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Callicott and Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, 471–99.

26. See Daniel Goleman and the Dalai Lama, *Destructive Emotions* (New York: Bantam, 2003) and Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam, 1997).

27. Recall from section 3.1.4 the comparison between the wilderness gull and the urban gull.

28. D. E. Cooper and S. P. James, *Buddhism, Virtue, and the Environment* (Hampshire, U.K.: Ashgate, 2005).

29. Goleman and the Dalai Lama, *Destructive Emotions*, 291. This idea also has precedence in contemporary Western ethics. See P. Singer, *Animal Liberation: A New Ethics for Our Treatment of Animals* (New York: Avon/New York Review, 1975, 1990).

30. A few examples include S. McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993); B. R. Hill, *Christian Faith and the Environment: Making Vital Connections* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998); M. D. Yaffe, *Judaism and Environmental Ethics: A Reader* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2001); L. H. Sideris, *Environmental Ethics, Ecological Theology, and Natural Selection* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); J. B. Callicott, "Genesis and John Muir," in *Covenant for a New Creation*, ed. C. Robb and C. Casebolt (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991); J. B. Callicott, *Earth's Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 14–30.

31. Lynn White, Jr., "The Historical Roots of Our Ecological Crisis," *Science* 155 (1967): 1203–7.

32. See Z. Papanikolas, "The Unpaintable West," in *The World and the Wild: Expanding Wilderness Conservation beyond Its American Roots*, ed. D. Rothenberg and M. Ulvaeus (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001), 24–25, 28 for a good example of this view.

33. The other rationale for this concern is that names have the effect of peopling the landscape, which, it is assumed, runs contrary to the idea of a wilderness. See, for example, P. Burnham, *Indian Country, God's Country: Native Americans and the National Parks* (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2000) and M. D. Spence, *Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

34. "It does not do harm to the mystery to know a little about it." Quoted in Robert S. and Michele M. Root-Bernstein, *Sparks of Genius: The Thirteen Thinking Tools of the World's Most Creative People* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2001), 132.

35. H. Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002).