

# Concepts of Preservation of Wilderness and Cooper's Deerslayer

## Abstract

Modern times have recognized the need for wilderness even as it is perceived to be under increasing threat from the forces of development. In this background the wilderness novels of James Fenimore Cooper assume greater relevance even if they were written in the nineteenth century and hark back to an even earlier time –the conquest of the American continent by the Europeans and the negative consequences of the colonization on the virgin forests and the land.

**Keyword:** Wilderness, Ascetics, Cities, Solitude, Species, Environment.

## Introduction

Modern ideas of wilderness all embrace its secular roots little realizing that it was actually a religious concept with many ramifications. Judith Adler has written an article called Cultivating Wilderness Environmentalism and legacies of early Christian asceticism, where she traces the roots of the current day term wilderness to biblical and other texts of the fourth century to eighth century such as The Life of Antony, Historia Monachorum, Lausiac History, Lives of the Eastern Saints, Spiritual Meadow, and Apophthegmata Patrum stating that it can all be traced back to catholic ascetic traditions which celebrated the wild man or desert fathers who abandoned a luxurious life in the cities for one in the wilderness far removed from the taints and taunts of their fellow men (Adler 20). She has shown how it all started in the fourth century with the establishment of the Roman Empire and the Christianizing of this empire. Emperor Constant established the city of Constantinople and here started the Roman metropolis in which men oiled themselves,

visited public baths and brothels and saw theatre and participated in the functioning of democracy. (Adler 4-37) But some fled these very centres of power to the outskirts of the city to the wilderness there and found much comfort away from the polis. She very rightly traces the modern secular foundations of wilderness to a tradition of ascetic monks who rejected life in the cities to one in the wilderness. The earlier Greco-roman culture in contrast was totally one of the city where life in the wilderness was looked upon as an exile. Even, Diogenes, the cynic claims that he is citizen of the world reinforcing pre-occupation with city life. But with the Christianising of the Roman Empire came the call of the wild. And now we see many men seeking to escape the pressures of city life to the wilderness or desert as it was called. In her study Judith has noted that desert meant wild and uncultivated rather than rocky or sandy places. (Adler 12) And for this they looked to the Old Testament which is full of the chosen people spending years in exile.

The prophets of the Jews too lived in the wilderness and in addition Yaweh or the god of the Jews revealed himself in the desert. So the monks of the early Christian period from the fourth to seventh century who left the cities to live in the deserts took their inspiration from Old Testament and other religious texts of influence. (Adler 14) And it may not be far-fetched to say these other religious texts may be influenced by the Indian tradition of asceticism, because these were not unknown in Roman Egypt. (Olivelle 125-61) Where the citizens of the city oiled, perfumed, bathed daily and shaved regularly, the monks in contrast had long, matted hair, wore little or no clothing. These monks or desert fathers as they came to be called left the use of haircuts, oil or daily toiletries. Because they were dirty they came to be regarded as pure in the eyes of the townsmen.

Here we find much the same ideas in the older traditions of the hermits of the Indian continent who underwent physical hardship to attain spirituality. They too slept on the ground and lived on alms alone, wearing little clothing and going bare foot. And undertook vows of silence and

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forsook the family to live in the Himalayan wilderness. Another important aspect of this asceticism is the kinship which the ascetics have with animals where the lions and other fierce creatures refuse to attack the hermits and live in communion with them. It is one of the hall mark of a prophet that the beasts do not attack them. This idea is present in the works of Khalil Gibran the Persian poet and in Nietzsche was influenced by the same tradition in Thus spoke Zarathustra. Cooper too in order to emphasize the divine grace of Hetty, although a mere slip of a girl, she is given rare powers of affiliation with predatory beasts like the bearcourter.

“To her surprise, though not to her alarm, the family of bears arose and followed her steps, keeping a short distance behind her; apparently watching her every movement as if they had a near interest in all she did in this manner, escorted by the dam and cubs, the girl proceeded a mile...She then reached a brook that had dug a channel for itself into the earth and went brawling into the lake, between steep and high banks covered with trees...drinking of the pure mountain water, she went her way refreshed and lighter of heart, still attended by her singular companions. This was part of the valley that ran obliquely, forming the commencement of a plain that spread between the hills, southward of the sheet of water. Hetty knew that she was getting near to the encampment, and had she not, the bears would have given her warning of the vicinity of human beings. Snuffing the air, the dam refused to follow any further, though the girl looked back and invited her to come by childish signs and even by direct appeals made in her own sweet voice.

This was part of the valley that ran obliquely, forming the commencement of a plain that spread between the hills, southward of the sheet of water”. (The Deerslayer 653). Hetty's superior spirituality can be attested because the bear mother and cubs trust her. She is like the desert fathers of yore who were known for their affinity to animals and non-violent ways. They were also known to eat grass to survive and chastity was another essential pre-requisite. We see Natty Bumppo is the chaste descendent of the desert fathers just as they fled the din of the city and also escaped their kith and kin and this flight is also an escape from women and the brothel and from the importuning and pleas of women looking for marriage. This strain is present in Cooper where the Deerslayer flees from two marriage proposals, after he slays the Red warrior.

Rivenoak holds him accountable, he says, “red men are few already; they have need of help. One of our best lodges have been emptied, by the death of its master; it will be long before his son can grow big enough to sit in his place. There is his widow; she will want venison to feed her and her children, for her sons are like the young of the robin, before they quit the nest. By your hand has this great calamity befallen her she has two duties one to Loup Cervier, and one to his children. Scalp for scalp, life for life, blood for blood, is one law but she has to feed her young, another. Take the gun, go forth and shoot a deer; bring the venison and lay it before the widow of le Loup Cervier, feed her children; call yourself her husband. After

which, your heart will no longer be Delaware but Huron; le Sumach's ears will not hear the cries of her children; my people will count the proper number of warriors. (The Deerslayer 953). For the Indians it was no matter of shame that the widow should marry her husband's slayer for she had to feed her young and only the able bodied slayer could do so. Rivenoak makes a marriage proposal which would restore peace between the Hurons and the whites. Natty rejects this proposal on account of race differences the fear of miscegenation saying “People and kindred must take care of their fatherless, leaving them that have no children to their loneliness.

As for me I have no off spring and I want no wife.” (The Deerslayer 976) Natty again rejects the proposal of Judith, a woman with a past who tries to redeem herself through marriage with the Deerslayer and proposes that she and Natty live in this exceedingly beautiful spot as king and queen of the woods, and she offers to remain in the woods and not seek the settlements which she personally prefers, “You love the woods and the life that we pass here, in the wilderness, away from the dwellings and towns of the whites” (The Deerslayer 1023), he responds As I loved my parents, Judith when they were living! This very spot, would be all creation to me, could this war be over and the settlers kept at a distance, (The Deerslayer 1023) and then he rejects her marriage proposal. Cooper says, “Her exceeding beauty and homage had failed to excite the admiration and homage it was wont to receive” and again “I do not feel towards any woman as if I wish'd to quit 'em in order to cleave unto her.” (The Deerslayer 1025). So in this way Natty rejects all women on some pretext or the other, some because they are of a different race or too old for him and other's because they have a dubious past as he later admits to Judith that what Hurry told him of her reputation in the officer's garrison influenced him and he remains the chaste bachelor of the woods as were the desert father's before him of the Christian and Hindu tradition and as the famous evangelical environmentalist, the bearded John Muir who came after the fictional Natty.

His education is minimal as is ascetic lifestyle “has been altogether in the woods, the only book I read, or care about reading, is the one which God has written.” Judith is more educated than him, he says “ I don't know whether a white man ought to be ashamed, or not, to own he can't read, but such is my case Judith. You are skilful, I find, in all such matters, while I have only studied with the hand of God, as it is seen in the hills and the valleys, the mountain tops, the stream, the forest and the saplings. Much learning may be got in this way, as well out of books” (The Deerslayer 728). Other Hermits don't pursue formal education but spend their life in pursuit of another worldly philosophy. pantheism which A philosophy which finds its spirituality in nature, it has elements of pantheism which considers all living beings as sacred.

These elements are decidedly pronounced in Cooper and in the Romantic tradition of Wordsworth. Christianity in the later centuries became decidedly anti pagan and looked upon as heresy anything vaguely resembling nature worship. Another aspect of religious

asceticism whether eastern or western is the emphasis on solitude. Solitude is an essential part of life in the wilderness. The very word hermit comes from 'ermis' which means solitude or empty place. It has been suggested that the solitary traditions of the Indian subcontinent were well known to Roman Egypt (Olivelle 125-61) who may have been influenced by them in the times preceding the Christianising of the Roman Empire. Solitude as opposed to being lonely is an essential element of the wilderness's life and a constant refrain of modern day environmentalists who bemoan its loss in an over-crowded planet. "But the most striking peculiarities of this scene, were its solemn solitude and sweet repose..., the mirror like surface of the lake, the placid void of heaven...presenting one unvaried hue of unbroken verdure.

As if vegetation were not satisfied with a triumph so complete, the trees overhung the lake itself...In a word the hand of man had never yet defaced, or deformed any part of this native scene, which lay bathed beneath the sunlight, a glorious picture of affluent forest grandeur, softened by the balminess of June, and relieved by the beautiful variety afforded by the presence of so broad an expanse of water." (The Deerslayer 513-4) Solitude is soothing, it gives rise to soothing thoughts and is a contrast to the noise and tumult in the cities is a theme in Juvenal's satires as in Johnson's London. "Smooth as glass, and limpid as pure air, throwing back the mountains, clothed in dark pines...

It was the air of deep repose, the solitude that spoke of scenes and forests untouched by the hand of man that gave so much pure delight...He was not insensible to the innate loveliness of such a landscape, either, but felt a portion of that soothing of the spirit which is a common attendant of a scene so thoroughly pervaded with the holy calm of nature." (The Deerslayer 524) Natty has an aversion for cities because of the lack of solitude therein. John Stuart Mill speaks for all solitude seekers when he claims that solitary spaces are an essential for the spiritual awakening of man and he must avoid crowds if possible. Being forced to live in an overcrowded planet has foreclosed many delightful opportunities for us, for example we can no longer access wild open spaces neither can we practice alternative ways of living (those removed from market forces) easily.

The earlier hunter-gatherer way of living gave ample leisure to its adherents and also freedom from forced labour although it was unkind on the old and ailing and also on the weak who could not travel in a nomadic manner. The semi-nomadic society of the Indians which Cooper depicts is primarily hunter-gatherer although they do cultivate corn for a few months. Hunter-gatherer societies and even slash and burn cultivation (Jhoom) as practised in the north eastern parts of India is sustainable because it allows the earth to replenish because these human societies abandon the land once the land stops being fruitful. The land then lies fallow for long periods allowing it to regain its nutrients and once again the wild reclaims the land. Modern day environmentalists have their reasons for disliking the urban sprawl of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

For bio-centric environmentalists the phenomenon of urban sprawl as the very phrase implies is a consequence of the prevalence of the automobile or mass transport which has resulted in cities getting larger and larger and spreading out more and more encroaching into forest land, agricultural land, and pasture land leaving no zone untouched. Other suggestions on preserving wilderness hover around the need to make non-destructive land use such as ecotourism, biodiversity prospecting or even complete preservation as financially beneficial as which accrue on destructive land use such as mining copper, coal, or harvesting timber or real estate benefits.

And now we come to a few modern notions about wilderness, in earlier times we saw the desert or wilderness was a site of purity and divine inspiration as also a site for the demonic forces, as in King Lear the witches brew in the heath, which had to be expunged in order to gain moral superiority. This rarefied site also became indispensable if one wanted to attain spiritual enlightenment, a monk could not be a venerated and sanctified being without the wilderness. As soon as he left the wilderness for the city, he lost his purity. Hence we see in Natty a marked aversion to life in the settlements time and again this theme is repeated. In *The Prairie*, Natty describes his aversion to the settlers in strong terms and his movement further inward to the west. "I passed the spring, summer, and autumn of life among the trees.

The winter of my days had come, and found me where I loved to be, in the quiet, ay, and in the honesty of the woods! Teton; then I slept happily, where my eyes could look up through the branches of the pines and the beeches, to the very dwelling of the Good Spirit of my people. If I had need to open my heart to him, while his fires were burning above my head, the door was open and before my eyes. But the axes of the choppers awoke me. For a long time my ears heard nothing but the uproar of clearings. I bore it like a warrior and a man; there was a reason that I should bear it; but when that reason was ended, I bethought me to get beyond the accursed sounds.

It was trying to the courage and to the habits, but I had heard of these vast and naked fields, and I came hither to escape the wasteful temper of my people." (The Prairie: A Tale 1119-20) So life in barren and empty fields of grass is also preferable to life in the towns or clearings. Cooper's critiquing of cities and towns is almost prophetic for modern day environmentalists. Eugene Odum an influential ecologist wrote, "Great cities are planned and grow without regard for the fact that they are parasites on the countryside which must somehow supply food, water, air, and degrade huge quantities of waste." (Odum 233) Environmentalism concentrates on sustainable use of resources, renewable and clean energy, curtailing consumerism and growth of all kinds because it depletes the resource base of earth, but if modern day environmentalism suffers from a shortcoming, it is that it ignores issues of farm animal welfare which should not be ignored at any level. As more and more people are becoming non-vegetarians, animals are being confined and being subjected to antibiotics in order to get

maximum meat out of them. This is a deplorable and cannot be allowed in societies which consider themselves progressive and ethical. Jane Goodal, I Diane Fossey, Birute Galdikas, three remarkable women have shown to uncomprehending world the powers of reasoning, community living, tool use all considered domains of the human are present in the primate community as well. Others have extended their finding to other members of the mammalian species such as dogs, cats, whales, dolphins and birds to name a few. As someone has said he is a vegetarian because cows scream louder than carrots.

And if humans cannot be vegetarians then the next best possible is to grow laboratory based meat as has already been done, and if hard core meat eaters still find their taste buds and appetites unsatisfied, farmers must provide compassionate care for their cows, goats, pigs, chicken and painless death. Animal welfare would have as its primary goal that animals should have what they desire. That would mean if animals desired space they should be given space to roam and if they wanted to roll and play in the mud they should be allowed to do that as well and mothers should rear their young. And this would make their life meaningful.

J Baird Callicot critiques the wilderness idea as conceived by John Muir which classifies wilderness is "an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain." Wilderness hence is an area such as sanctuaries and national parks which are out of reach for human activity Callicot believes that the primary achievement of this form of conservation is primarily ethical. "It formally acknowledges a human commitment to humility, forbearance and restraint." (Callicot 440) According to him the wilderness ideal suffers from an 'either or' dichotomy which allows for over-exploitation of land in the non- designated wilderness areas.

These areas are vulnerable to economic activity such as industrial agriculture, factory farming, increased penetration by roads and highways, chemical industries manufacturing pesticides, detergents and a host of unethical and non-environment friendly activity (Callicot 437-8). So he proposes that instead of removing all traces of man from wilderness areas and allowing unfettered economic activity in other areas man should dwell in harmony with nature just as the Indians did. Instead of wilderness areas for conservation which he finds too rocky or icy, he proposes bio-reserves which are species rich areas. These areas he proposes could harmonize with limited human activity.

He imagines a bio-reserve of ungulates (bisons, elks, deers) which harmonize with humans who rear them and imagines a world where wolves and mountain lions keep the ungulates from over reproducing as he also imagines coyotes keeping the prairie dog population down and the former cattle ranchers, ofcourse at the centre of all this, dependent on the ungulates for food and clothing. Here he imagines that people would rather see wild free nature from their landed property than see their neighbour's fences. He critiques the notion of private property which

sees all land in terms of fences and does not allow carnivores animals a right to existence outside designated wilderness areas.

Taking a relevant example of fishing he says these are not owned by anyone but the fishing boats and equipment is, fish go as they please unshackled by fences which can confine them to one person's ocean side property or the others (Callicot 440-3). But others such as Reed F Noss have rightly pointed out that mixed land use does not work for large carnivores and these do need the wilderness (Noss 445). For him what defined the wilderness is absence of roads, for it is these very roads which are sabotaging large mammal preservation and causing their extinction (Noss 446). Analysing the destructive impact man has on nature Rees notes that the term environmental crisis is a misnomer because it implies that the problem is out there and the crisis is something in the environment out there which needs to be fixed, deflecting from the fact the blame lies squarely on ourselves and our consumer behaviour which we need to alter to arrest the downhill spiral.(Rees 140) He identifies certain mammals notably elephants as patch disturbers, these creatures alter the environment they come in contact with tremendously by foraging and by their sheer size, but their impact is not altogether negative, their dung may actually be good for the environment. He identifies humans too as patch disturbers but with long term negative impact on the environment and also criticises the fact that human hunter gatherer are responsible for the mass extinction of many species with which they co-existed (Rees 143). These species include giant deer and mammoths in Eurasia, giant buffalo, antelopes and horses in Africa, and bears, wolves and beavers in Britain. (Diamond 356) To prevent further extinction, the majority of environmentalists and ecologists have come to the conclusion that further economic growth is unnecessary and harmful for the planet instead what is needed is a radical redistribution of the existing wealth which would lead to equitable wealth sharing.

And we may well ask ourselves the point of studying Cooper, a nineteenth century author setting his novels in the eighteenth century? It was to see its relevance in an age when nature all around is under threat from forces of development, when human beings have endangered the earth and put the remaining species under threat. All due to their population growth, rapid consumerism and excessive greed relating to food habits such as an increases appetite for meat which has put forests under threat as these are cleared in order to make way for pasture land. What are the ways and means to sensitize people about these issues? It must start at the primary level. At the core of all teaching of disciplines is the issue of teaching of frameworks or concepts and within these frameworks all disciplines exist. For example according to the discipline of economics man is an economic animal and his actions can be understood in the light of this.

And then again according to behaviourist psychology man is a pre-determined being whose actions are all a result of genes. What these behaviourist or economists do not understand that certain things cannot be explained in monetary terms

for example the value of a family home may be 'priceless' for some, neither can the value of a work of art be determined as they stand outside the market place as of a historical or archaeological site and are beyond the scope of economics. And the value of these cannot be determined and hence they may be labelled as priceless by art experts who determine paintings such as Mona Lisa as priceless. At a personal level a family may value a home as priceless and may refuse to sell it because of the memories or because a sense of place belonging is associated with it.

(Norton and Hannon 506) In acknowledging this sort of valuing as completely valid, we expose the limitations of pure economic/ monetary valuing and expose the discipline of economics too as one with serious limitations. Aldo Leopold too saw through the limitations of regarding land as a mere commodity to be bought and sold, for him land was a community (non-human and human) to which we all belonged. And the earlier Abrahamic and John Lockean thinking of land as human property was responsible for the extirpation of many animals and plant species because they had no economic value. So economics as a framework is just one out of many, which has many limitations. Just as seeing the world in terms of sub-atomic particles as physics does too has many limitations.

Andrew Brennan proposes that an ethical philosophical framework too is limited if it confines itself to human or other moral agents as traditional utilitarianism and Kant did because it does not take into account or explain the feelings of consideration or feelings of restraint people encounter in their behaviour towards other plants and animals. All this points to the fact that they are problems within the framework itself. It (Marxism, Capitalism, Utilitarianism, and Behaviourism) cannot account for many of these dilemmas which face us, implying that the framework has serious limitations (Brennan 519-520). A religious framework which reveres life and looks upon it as sacred such as Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism may be a better framework to solve these irresolvable dilemmas. In addition poets and writers such as Cooper may imbibe a lasting love of nature in doubting souls.

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