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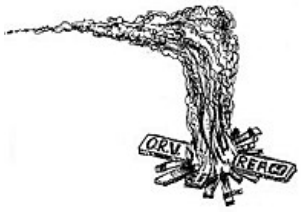
Around the Campfire
with Uncle Dave Foreman



Editor's note: We apologize for the long gap in Campfires. They will now be distributed on a more regular schedule.

The Anthropocene and Ozymandias

Much has been made lately of the so-called Anthropocene—the idea that *Homo sapiens* has so taken over and modified Earth that we need a new name for our geological age instead of the outmoded Holocene. One remorseless Anthropoceniac writes, "Nature is gone… You are living on a used planet. If this bothers you, get over it. We now live in the Anthropocene—a geological era in which Earth's atmosphere, lithosphere, and biosphere are shaped primarily by human forces."

One of the reasons given today for renaming the Anthropocene is that we have so impacted all ecosystems on Earth that there is no "wilderness" left. Insofar as I know, other than babbling about "pristine," "untouched," and so forth, none of the Anthropoceniacs ever define what they mean by wilderness, which is not surprising in that none of them give a hint for having been in a Wilderness Area or having studied the citizen wilderness preservation movement.

Moreover, they behave as though their claim about wilderness being snuffed is a new insight of their own. In truth, we wilderness conservationists have been speaking out how *Homo sapiens* has been wrecking wilderness worldwide for one hundred years. Bob Marshall, a founder of The Wilderness Society, warned eighty years ago that the last wilderness of the Rocky Mountains was "disappearing like a snowbank on a south-facing slope on a warm June day." Congress said in the 1964 Wilderness Act that the country had to act then due to "increasing population, accompanied by expanding settlement and growing mechanization" or we would leave no lands in a natural condition for future generations. My book, *Rewilding North America,* documents in gut-wrenching detail how Man has been wreaking a mass extinction for the last 50,000 years or so.

Anthropoceniacs do not seem to understand that when we wilderness conservationists talk about Wilderness Areas we are not playing a mind-game of believing that these are *pristine* landscapes where the hand of Man has never set foot. Although wilderness holds one end of the human-impact spectrum, it is not a single point but rather a sweep of mostly wild landscapes. Over seventy years ago, Aldo Leopold, the father of the Wilderness Area Idea, wisely wrote that "in any practical program, the unit areas to be preserved must vary greatly in size and in *degree of wildness"* (emphasis added). Senator Frank Church of Idaho was the bill's floor manager in 1964 when the Wilderness Act became law. He understood as well as anyone what Congress meant with the wording of the Act. Ten years later, in the heated fight for Wilderness Areas on the Eastern National Forests, when the Forest Service "would have us believe that no lands ever subject to past human impact can qualify as wilderness, now or ever," Church said, "Nothing could be more contrary to the meaning and intent of the Wilderness Act." The words *pristine* and *purity* are not found in the Wilderness Act, which is the best short explanation of wilderness. It seems that intellectual wilderness naysayers, whether wilderness deconstructionists or Anthropoceniacs, if they look at the

Wilderness Act at all, see only the ideal definition of wilderness:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammeled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.

In truth, the Wilderness Act has four definitions of wilderness. The first, which I have already quoted, says why we need to protect wilderness. The second, also quoted above, is the ideal, while the third immediately following the ideal is the practical:

An area of wilderness is further defined to mean in this Act an area of undeveloped Federal land retaining its primeval character and influence, without ***permanent*** *improvements or human habitation, which is protected and managed so as to preserve its natural conditions and which (1)* ***generally appears*** *to have been* ***affected primarily*** *by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work* ***substantially unnoticeable****.* (Qualifying words in bold.)

The wish of The Wilderness Society's Howard Zahniser, the main author of the Wilderness Act, and its congressional champions was to keep the idea of wilderness a bit fuzzy. The fourth definition, however, is not fuzzy. It has the lawfully binding language on how federal agencies are to protect and steward the Wilderness Areas under their hand:

Except as specifically provided for in this Act, and subject to existing private rights, there shall be no commercial enterprise and no permanent road within any wilderness area designated by this Act and except as necessary to meet minimum requirements for the administration of the area for the purposes of this Act (including measures required in emergencies involving the health and safety of persons within the area), there shall be no temporary road, no use of motor vehicles, motorized equipment or motorboats, no landing of aircraft, no other form of mechanical transport, and no structure or installation within any such area.

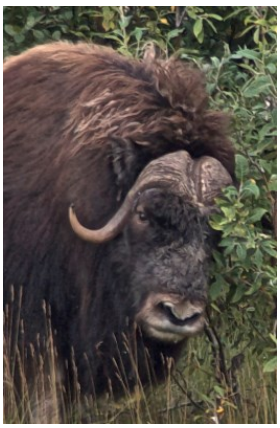
Too often, there is confusion between the loose, fuzzy entry criteria for Wilderness Areas and the tougher rules for management after designation. Before being designated as Wilderness, a landscape might have a few roads or acres that were once logged. After designation, however, the roads must be closed, vehicles banned, and future logging prohibited.

So. In the sense of the U. S. Wilderness Act (with over 700 areas totaling over 109 million acres) and like wilderness systems in other lands worldwide, there is, indeed, wilderness. Moreover, some 25 percent of Earth's land is lightly or seldom touched by Man.

But the Anthropoceniacs are really saying that there is no wilderness in its ideal pristine meaning. To answer this assertion, I think we need to put *Homo sapiens* in better perspective.

Life first wriggled on Earth some 3.5 billion years ago. That is a long time. So, let's take an easier timeline and only go back to the unfolding of complex animal life—the Cambrian Explosion of 545 million years ago. Make that a book of 545 pages with each page being one million years. With 250 words per page, a word would be four thousand years.

Where are we? Well, if the last sentence on the last page of the book is a long one of some thirteen to fifteen words, we behaviorally modern *Homo sapiens* left Africa at the beginning of that sentence. We began to ransack biodiversity then as well. As we spread, we killed the biggest wildlife as we came into new lands. In the middle of the third-to-last word, some of our kind began farming—remaking ecosystems to suit us. In the middle of the second-to-last word, civilizations began.



The very last word in this book of 545 pages takes in the time from 2000 BCE to today. Nearly the whole world met the strictest definition of wilderness until well into the last sentence. Through almost all of that last sentence the share of Earth's biomass held in our bodies grew very slowly. Much of Earth was untrodden by us for thousands of years. Other than the *Overkill* of the "Big Hairies," the wounds we inflicted on the Tree of Life only slowly grew. Not until the last 100 years with our exploding population and systemic pollution of Earth with radioactive fallout, antibiotics, artificial biocides, and greenhouse gases, have we finally gotten to the day where we are having an impact everywhere. That is an *impact,* not total control, not even leaving no lands or seas where Man does not dominate the landscape. When I was nearly run down and stomped by a woolly bully of a musk ox bull in a sixteen-million-acre Wilderness Area in Alaska a few years ago, I swear to you that Man did not dominate that landscape.

Call the last 100 years the period at the end of the last sentence on the last page of the book of the history of complex animal life. Do

Musk Ox Bull just before charging

Foreman

you now have a feeling for how long the Tree of Life and Wilderness have been without any harm from a ground ape self-named *sapiens*?

I've taken this twisty path to get to my main damnation of the Anthropoceniacs. Though one can hammer them for major mistakes in history and science as many of my friends have done, my beef is with their view of Man's place in evolution and on Earth. It is the *ethics* of the Anthropoceniacs that gives me shudders.

My anger with the Anthropoceniacs is not that they see how Man has taken over Earth (though they overstate greatly). The first third of my *Rewilding North America* tallies and weighs the ecological wounds we've wrought over the last 50,000 years. I know our impact is great—but not

thoroughgoing. By and large, the Anthropoceniacs grossly overstate the degree to which we "control" Earth.

No, my wrath is for the outlook many Anthropoceniacs have toward the ghastly, grisly slaughter of so many wild things. Where is the grief? Where is the shame? Where is the passion to save what's left? Where is the outrage? Where is the sadness for the loss of so many of our neighbors?

Instead, I see many making merry over the coming of the Anthropocene. "We've done it!" they seem to say while high-fiving one another. "Man has finally taken over!" In the writings I've read, they seem blissful, even gleeful. "Now we are gods!"

The mass extinction of other Earthlings seems not to bring them a tear. Witness the words of Peter Kareiva, the chief scientist for The Nature Conservancy, "In many circumstances, the demise of formerly abundant species can be inconsequential to ecosystem function.…The passenger pigeon, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, went extinct, along with countless other species from the Steller's sea cow to the dodo, with no catastrophic or even measurable effects." Field biologists and others have shown that this claim is so much biological balderdash—there have been big upsets. However, the true harm, the wound, the loss, the *sin* was the extinction of the passenger pigeon and the ongoing extinctions of countless other Earthlings who have just as much right to their evolutionary adventure as we have to ours. Maybe more, because they are not screwing up things for others. To say the "passenger pigeon… went extinct" is akin to a mass murderer saying his victims "became dead." The passenger pigeon did not go extinct; we slaughtered them in a spree of giddy gore in little more than a score of years!

How can anyone who works for something called The Nature Conservancy not feel woe and emptiness at the extinction of the passenger pigeon and all those others we've wrought and are causing today and tomorrow to make way for our Brave New World—or is it our Brave New Conservation?

Such uncaring, careless, carefree brushing away of all other Earthlings but for the ecosystem services they give the last surviving ground ape is—how can I say this—WICKED. It is washed in sin, it is treason to life, to Earth, and to all other Earthlings.

Such Anthropoceniacs behave like our takeover of the Tree of Life was foreordained, that evolution *meant* us and meant us to take over. This is teleology if not theology, my friends, one of the deep misunderstandings Darwin cast out 150 years ago. My children's tale of the 545-page Book of Life shows how we are but one of countless species that come and go. The late Stephen Jay Gould was unsparing on this conceit:

[T]he worst and most harmful of all our conventional mistakes about the history of our planet [is] the arrogant notion that evolution has a predictable direction leading toward human life.

Man is not the unerring outcome or endpoint of hundreds of millions of years of life's descent with modification, but is, rather, a happy or unhappy (hinging on what kind of Earthling you are) happenstance. We were not "meant to be." Nor is anything Man has done in its flicker of time been meant to be. We happened to become, just as did the curve-billed thrasher getting a drink right now from the birdbath outside my window.

We only happened to be.

This is maybe the hardest lesson from evolution to swallow—one that is stuck in many an Anthropoceniac throat.

It is *Homo sapiens'* arrogance that blinds us to our fate. We think that we, unlike every other species, will live forever. It's not a Thousand-year Reich we celebrate but an eternal Kingdom of Man Triumphant, of Man over all (*über alles*) other Earthlings. It is we and we alone who decide who lives and who dies, who offers ecosystem services and therefore gets to stay, and who is mere waste biomass. Some may soothe their conscience by making believe this blood-bath, like us, was meant to be. But it is not so. It is our choice to strip off one-third of the limbs of the Tree of Life. We do it willingly, even gleefully, all by our own free will.

The first sentence in Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* spells out much of the moral conflict between wilderness and wildlife conservationists and the Anthropoceniacs and their so-called New Conservation (which is truly only the latest version of Gifford Pinchot's resource conservation). Leopold wrote:

There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot.

We who fight for wilderness and all wild Earthlings cannot live without wild things. We believe wild things are good-in-themselves and need offer no services to Man to be of great worth. Those who blithely welcome the Anthropocene and can live without wild things see worth in Nature only in what it offers us as ecosystem services.

The Anthropoceniacs seem to believe that not only is Man running evolution now but that all the lessons scientists have learned about how evolution has worked for billions of years have been thrown out for Man in the Brave New Anthropocene geological era.

One who understood this mindset well, this will to power over Earth, was **Percy Bysshe Shelley.** Some two hundred years ago he wrote:

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: "Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear—
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away."

Yes, we can read our tale as the steadily growing sway over Earth by Lord Man. But the Anthropocene technocrats who prattle about grabbing the rudder of evolution and making Earth better are the wanton heirs of a Pharaoh's hubris. Their lovely human garden will stand unclothed as either a barnyard or Dr. Frankenstein's lab for other Earthlings. Three-and-a-half billion years of life becomes a short overture before Man in all his Wagnerian glory strides singing onto the set. Does our madness have no end? Have we no humility?

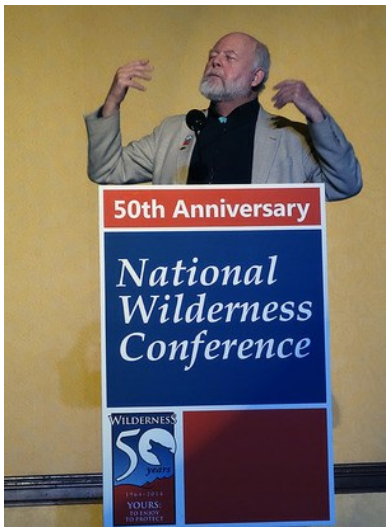
For six thousand years, each coming age has puffed out its chest. As each Ozymandias falls to the lone and level sands, a greater and more prideful Ozymandias takes his stead. Goodness is overridden more and more by might and the will to power.

Wilderness Areas are our meek acknowledgment that we are not gods.

Bibliographic Note

My extinction discussion is in Dave Foreman, *Rewilding North America* (Island Press, Washington, DC, 2004). Leopold's comment on the "degree of wildness" is at Aldo Leopold, A Sand County Almanac (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949, 189. Senator Church's statement is in Frank Church, "The Wilderness Act Applies To The East," *Congressional Record—Senate,* January 16, 1973, 737. I've taken the four definitions of wilderness directly from the 1964 Wilderness Act. I've stolen the "hand of Man" quote from the late Dave Brower. "Overkill" come from the late paleontologist Paul Martin and "Big Hairies) from the paleontologist Peter Ward. The quotation from Peter Kareiva and co-authors about the passenger pigeon's extinction is found in Michelle Marvier, Robert Lalasz, and Peter Kareiva, "Conservation in the Anthropocene," *Breakthrough Journal,* Fall 2011, 29-37. The quote from Gould is in Stephen Jay Gould, "Reconstructing (and Deconstructing) the Past," in Stephen Jay Gould, editor, *The Book of Life* (W. W. Norton, NY, 2001), 10. Leopold's "wild things" comment is at Aldo Leopold, *A Sand County Almanac* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1949), vii. *Ozymandias* is from *The Complete Poems of Percy Bysshe Shelley* (The Modern Library, New York, 1994), 589.

Happy Trails,
Dave Foreman



Wilderness 50 Conference, Albuquerque, NM
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This Campfire is from my chapter in *After Preservation*, an anthology featuring both giddy Anthropoceniacs and good old-fashioned wild-loving conservationists. Reading the book will give you an idea of what the whole Anthropocene craze is about.

After Preservation

"Although environmentalists have traditionally held onto a preservationist philosophy in fending off ecological harms, the omnipresence of human influence makes many now wonder if that approach is still feasible. In this collection of twenty-three spirited and thought-provoking essays, scientists, historians, and activists alike represent a broad spectrum of viewpoints, from conservation at all costs to balancing the natural world's needs with those of civilization. . . . Everyone concerned with the ongoing debate over wildlife protection will want to study this vitally important contribution to the discussion."
Booklist

"This is a great swirl of debate at this critical crossroads in the relationship between humans and the rest of nature. No holds here are barred. In prose sometimes pragmatic and sometimes anguished, some of the best minds in the business—some of the *wisest* people around today—argue about our place in nature, what it could be, what it should be, what it is, what it will be, and what we must not let it become. I regret that my own book deadline prevented me from contributing to this work. Feeling left out is my highest praise."
Carl Safina, author of The View from Lazy Point

From John Muir to the Endangered Species Act, environmentalism in America has always had close to its core a preservationist ideal. Generations have been inspired by its ethos—to keep nature apart, to protect it. But we have to face the facts. Accelerating climate change, rapid urbanization, agricultural and industrial intensification, and other anthropogenic forces all attest to the same truth: the earth is now spinning through the age of humans. *After Preservation* takes stock of the ways we have tried to both preserve and exploit nature to ask a direct but profound question: what is the role of preservationism in an era of seemingly unstoppable human development?

Contributors include: Chelsea K. Batavia, F. Stuart (Terry) Chapin III, Norman L. Christensen, Jamie Rappaport Clark, William Wallace Covington, Erle C. Ellis, Mark Fiege, Dave Foreman, Harry W. Greene, Emma Marris, Michelle Marvier, Bill McKibben, J. R. McNeill, Curt Meine, Ben A. Minteer, Michael Paul Nelson, Bryan Norton, Stephen J. Pyne, Andrew C. Revkin, Holmes Rolston III, Amy Seidl, Jack Ward Thomas, Diane J. Vosick, John A. Vucetich, Hazel Wong, and Donald Worster.

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Pleistocene wildlife header graphic by Sergio de la Rosa Martinez

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