



BLAZES

Opinion: Everything is Wilderness

The “true wilderness” that adventurers so often seek no longer exists in our modern world. But it’s all worth protecting.

BY SAM NORTON

In 2012, the well-known conservation scientists Peter Kareiva and Michelle Marvier released a paper titled *What Is Conservation Science?* In it, they described how the discipline—and the planet—have changed since conservation first became a hot topic in the mid-1980s.

The paper presented several new ideas to guide conservation in the modern world, the first being this: “‘Pristine nature,’ untouched by human influences, does not exist.”

Hearing this for the first time at Miami University, I was shocked. Angry, even. Haven’t I trekked through pristine wilderness before? Atop rugged peaks in the central Rockies or deep within Glacier National Park?

It was, frankly, a gut-wrenching, offensive thought. I live for adventure, captivated by the moments when I can explore some new, awe-inspiring landscape. Is that force not the power that untouched wilderness bestows?

The answer, I reluctantly began to accept as the semester drew on, was no. Wilderness, it seems, is actually rather difficult to define. (What is the threshold of human influence that transforms a place from backcountry to frontcountry? Where—between footpaths and roads, outhouses and visitors centers—does wilderness end or begin?) But of

the remote and wild places I’ve traveled to, it’s clear that humans have left their mark on all of them.

No matter how far-off or rugged our adventure is, at the very root, the places we explore are not the pre-human wildernesses we dream of. According to many scientists, this idyllic state has not existed for thousands of years; even aboriginal humans were drastically altering their ecosystems.

Since the dawn of the Industrial Revolution, mankind’s influence has spread across the entire planet and become increasingly impactful. The Arctic Circle suffers from greater temperature increases than the tropics thanks to climate change, and the Amazon rainforest now breathes unnatural carbon dioxide levels just as our cities do.

Thousands of years ago, the country *was* entirely wilderness, and there was no need to delineate it. But now, human influence extends to the boundaries that define our modern idea of wilderness. In the United States, what we now consider wild lands remain more or less that way because someone drew lines on a government map. Our “wild” lands are wild because of an invisible marker that prevents them from being completely sold off to development (and even that is becoming increasingly fragile).

In essence, we live in a world of manufactured wilderness.

But this is not a pessimistic revelation meant to invoke naturalist doom and gloom. Because if we

didn’t have manufactured wilderness, we’d likely have no wilderness at all.

If we hadn’t drawn the park boundaries, they long ago would have succumbed to logging. If we hadn’t forged narrow trails over mountain peaks, tunnels may have been blasted through them. If humans hadn’t “touched” some of the wilderness we found, those living today wouldn’t know their splendor.

As outdoor enthusiasts, we can take this notion and actually use it to grow closer to nature. Rather than constantly searching for the newest remote escape or finding enjoyment only in the most rugged and “untouched” corners of the earth, we should recognize that no landscape is truly untouched. We should embrace all our natural places—regardless of the extent of human influence—as wilderness.

Undoubtedly, there is still so much to be gained by exploring places removed from visible human influence. They refresh our souls and challenge us to forgo modern comforts. But even if “pristine nature” doesn’t exist anymore, nature still does. And all nature is worth fighting for—whether Central Park or Denali. To ensure that our children and grandchildren can spend a few days getting lost in the woods, we mustn’t place certain landscapes on a pedestal. Let’s avoid sorting “real wilderness” from the rest. Let’s protect all our natural places, and love them equally.

◀ *In Denali National Park, a 93-mile gravel road cuts through a significant portion of the park’s wild landscape.*