

Moving Beyond the Romantic Biases in Natural Areas Recreation

R. Bruce Hull
College of Natural Resources
Virginia Tech

KEYWORDS: *Ethics, leisure, post-modern, restoration*

A distinctly American Romantic view of nature emerged during the 1800's. It was motivated by concerns that core American values were being degraded by the replacement of the wild frontier with industrialization and urbanization, and by concerns that a shallow and materialistic society was being created by the rationalism and utilitarianism of modernism (Oelschlaeger, 1991; Oravec, 1996). Romanticism celebrates wild, untrammelled nature as a holy temple where one finds God, learns moral lessons, and retreats from civilization. Nature has value because it is beyond human control, undisturbed and original, and because it has endured the test of time and presumably would continue doing so if humans just left it alone (i.e., nature knows best). Humans only soil this quality of nature. Humans cannot improve upon what nature produced.

Three examples should suffice to illustrate that Romanticism has become institutionalized in many natural areas recreation programs. First, consider the Recreation Opportunity Spectrum (ROS). ROS is a widely used, very effective management system that, among other things, describes and categorizes recreation settings, experiences, and activities. The categories range from primitive at one extreme to developed at the other extreme (Clark and Stankey, 1976). The primitive category reflects the romantic ideal, where one finds minimal sights or sounds of humans and minimal evidence of human modification. Each category along the spectrum is defined relative to this referent, containing more development, more facilities, more management, more control, more access, and generally more evidence of people. The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) provides a second example. It is a planning process for negotiating acceptable and appropriate conditions in wilderness settings (Stankey, et al., 1985). Although it was intentionally designed to recognize that some human-impacts are acceptable in recreation areas, in practice, de-humanized nature serves as the basis of comparison for most indicators of acceptable quality. Typical indicators include: fewer and smaller campfire areas, less trail width, less litter, less displacement of wildlife by humans, and more blending with nature of facilities (Merigliano, 1992). Indicators reflecting positive outcomes and human-centered ideals such as

These ideas and this essay were crafted while working on various projects kindly supported by the North Central Forest Experiment Station of the US Forest Service. David Robertson contributed significantly to crafting this argument. The author may be reached at the College of Natural Resources, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061 or by email at: hullrb@vt.edu.

family bonding, environmental awareness, or stewardship activities are few and far between. The "Leave No Trace" program (LNT) provides a third example of the romantic bias in nature-based recreation programs. It is a highly visible, very successful means of educating visitors to natural areas. The newly revised principles (www.lnt.org) encourage visitors to leave natural features undisturbed, minimize human impact, respect (i.e., minimize impact on) wildlife, minimize crowding, and let nature's sounds prevail. Both in name and in intent the "Leave No Trace" philosophy polarizes humans and nature. It encourages people to think of themselves as temporary visitors whose presence can only harm nature. It encourages people to define responsible action as that which leaves no trace of their humanity. Both LAC and LNT emphasize the negative consequences people have on natural areas and on recreation experiences rather than positive benefits or other ideals.

The Romantic ideal has come under increasing criticism as a guide for land use policies. Contemporary ecological science (e.g., Botkin, 1991; Worsler, 1994; Zimmerer, 1994) is unable to support the belief that nature knows best, or that nature is necessarily better if people would just leave it alone. Rather than a balanced, stable, pristine, nature that continually self-corrects to achieve an optimally healthy state we find, instead, that many alternative environmental conditions are equally possible, equally healthy, and equally "natural" for any given place, at any given point in time. We find a nature that is dynamic rather than static and anthropogenic rather than pristine. Thus, neither nature nor ecological science (as the study of nature) can show us what is best for nature. Romantically inspired land use policies are being questioned from a philosophical perspective as well. Critics argue that the romantic ideal causes society to focus on the wrong questions and to develop misplaced priorities. In our search for solutions to contemporary problems the Romantic ethic forces us to look backwards towards the past for guides rather than forward towards future possibilities. Rather than privileging untrammelled nature and demeaning human involvement, we should instead hold up as an ideal a lived-with nature that promotes human acts of stewardship, management, and care. We should embrace an ideal that allows us to consider our relationship as a dance and a celebration rather than as rape and degradation. We need to build an appreciation and respect not just for nature, but for our *relationship* with nature, and not just for wild nature but for all forms of the environment from parks to parking lots (for expanded discussions of these points see Callicott and Nelson, 1998; Cronon, 1885; Soper, 1995; Dubos, 1980; Jordon, 1994; McQuillan, 1993). By no means does this critique suggest that we abandon our search for an ideal or a land ethic and uncritically accept the nature that utilitarianism and economic efficiency produce. Rather, the critique urges us to debate and construct alternative ideals that might replace the weakened romantic ideal and better stand up to the powerful market-driven arguments of wise use and progressive conservation.

Regardless of these critiques, the popularity of the romantic conception of nature-based recreation is evidenced in study after study of public preferences reported in this and similar leisure journals and in the popular and

impassioned prose of American nature writing extending back to Muir, Thoreau, and Emerson. Clearly, many recreationists seek and value the recreation experiences associated with the romantic ideal. If we listen carefully, however, we can hear a growing chorus of voices advocating the recreation experiences associated with other views of nature. For instance, contemporary scholars of ecological restoration argue that active involvement with ecological restoration projects produce profound experiences in people (e.g., Higgs, 1991; Jordan, 1994; Schroeder, 2000). Being involved, responsible, and informed about changes made to the environment evokes deeper and richer feelings and memories than are possible than when leaving no trace. By taking responsibility one feels pride or grief in the outcome, and wants to return and witness how nature has responded to one's kind intentions. This alternative conception of what constitutes a valuable experience of nature is not without notable precedent. Recall that Thoreau experienced profound moments while hoeing his bean field and Leopold felt great passion actively restoring his Sand County farm.

The implications of this alternative perspective for natural areas recreation can be further illustrated by engaging in a thought-experiment. Imagine how recreation "problems" might be solved differently. Instead of issuing permits restricting the freedom of choice on where to camp, we could instead require several hours of campsite or trail maintenance for every 3 recreation days. Instead of paying fees to enter recreation areas, people could instead be given the choice to pledge their time to plant urban trees or monitor suburban water quality when they return to their places of residence. Instead of restricting the spectrum of possible recreation experiences to those the fall along the continuum from primitive to urban, we could add another dimension that extends from untrammeled to tended. Instead of "leaving no trace" we could encourage people to "adopt a spot" that they would care for and improve over time.

The number and diversity of visitors to natural areas are increasing. Conflict is an inevitable result of these pressures: not all desired experiences are possible, not every stakeholder will be satisfied, and some will certainly lose out. Issues of social equity, power, and politics will increasingly dominate recreation. Natural resource recreation seems to be following its natural resource cousins (i.e., water, timber, and grazing) into the courts. The professions concerned with natural areas recreation should actively debate the ideals used to guide choices and take positions on these important issues.

References

- Botkin, D. (1990). *Discordant Harmonies*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Callicott, J. B., & Nelson, M. P. (Eds.). (1998). *The Great New Wilderness Debate*. Athens: The University of Georgia Press.
- Clark, R. N., & Stankey, G. H. (1979). *The Recreation Opportunity Spectrum: A Framework for Planning, Management, and Research*. Forest Service General Technical Report PNW-98. Washington, DC: US Department of Agriculture.
- Cronon, W. (Ed). (1995). *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. NY: Norton.

- Dubos, R. (1980). *The Wooing of Earth: New Perspectives on Man's Use of Nature*. NY: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Higgs, E. S. (1991) A quality of engaging work to be done: ecological restoration and morality in a technological culture. *Restoration and Management Notes*, 9, 97-104.
- Jordan, W. R. (1994). Sunflower forest: ecological restoration as the basis for a new environmental paradigm. In A. D. Baldwin, J. Deluce, & C. Pletsch (Eds.), *Beyond Preservation: Restoring and Inventing Landscapes* (pp. 17-34). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- McQuillan, A. (1993). Cabbages and kings: the ethics and aesthetics of new forestry. *Environmental Values*, 2, 191-222.
- Merigliano, L. (1992). *Ideas for the Limits of Acceptable Change Planning Process: Book Two*. Washington, DC: USDA Forest Service.
- Oelschlaeger, M. (1991). *The Idea of Wilderness: From Prehistory to the Age of Ecology*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Oravec, C. L. (1996). To stand outside oneself: the sublime in the discourse of natural scenery. In J. G. Cantrill, & C. L. Oravec (Eds.), *The Symbolic Earth: Discourse and Our Creation of the Environment* (pp. 58-75). Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky.
- Schroeder, H. (2000). The restoration experience: volunteers' motives, values, and concepts of nature. In P. Gobster and B. Hull (Eds.) *Restoring Nature: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Science*. Washington DC: Island Press. (in press).
- Soper, K. 1995. *What is Nature?* Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell.
- Stankey, G. H., Cole, D. N., Lucas, R. C., Petersen, M. E., & Frissell, S. S. (1985). *The Limits of Acceptable Change (LAC) System for Wilderness Planning*. General Technical Report, INT-176. Ogden, UT: USDA Forest Service.
- Worster, D. (1994). *Nature's Economy: A History of Ecological Ideas*. New York: Cambridge Press.
- Zimmerer, K. S. (1994). Human Geography and the "New Ecology": The Prospect and Promise of Integration. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 84(1), 108-125.