

The Demise of Wildness?

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Conservation is firmly rooted in the notion of wildness, of nature untrammelled by people. Organizations such as The Nature Conservancy or the Wildlife Conservation Society aim to protect “the last great places on earth” or “the last of the wild.” Such mottos emphasize the clear distinction between these places and those that bear the human footprint, and that few such places remain. Conservation has largely been about protecting those areas of essential wildness, where nature still rules and people are visitors who come and experience, to go away renewed and enriched.

Two recent publications have brought the issue of “wildness” and its place in the conservation agenda into sharp relief. In a paper in *Nature*, Josh Donlan and his colleagues (2005) have proposed “re-wilding” parts of North America. Proxies for the large animals – camels, elephants, cheetahs, and lions – that once roamed North America but became extinct 13,000 years ago would be introduced, restoring the ecological and evolutionary processes (and renewing a presumed balance of nature) that existed during the Pleistocene. Tim Flannery (1994) suggested a similar re-wilding of Australia, restoring ecological communities to the pre-Aboriginal state of 50,000 (or more) years ago. Such re-wilding is ecological restoration at its most ambitious.

The idea has generated considerable debate among conservationists, which need not be rehashed here (see Caro 2007). The relevant point is that such proposals aspire to restore

wildness to a previous state, not just by protecting threatened populations or mending ecosystems degraded and diminished by decades of abuse, but by aiming at an endpoint that few believe possible (or even desirable). Proponents of re-wilding imagine a much wilder world.

At the polar opposite, Peter Kareiva and his colleagues, writing in *Science* (2007), have suggested that there are no places on earth that remain untainted by people, that “ours is a world of nature domesticated” and further domestication of nature is inescapable. Domesticated nature means nature exploited and controlled for human benefits. Sure, there is a spectrum of degrees of domestication, but the game of preservation of the wild is essentially over, and wildness lost. Better, they say, for conservationists and ecologists to help humanity domesticate nature wisely, to preserve a balanced mix of ecosystem services. Rather than protecting nature from people, conservation stewardship should manage the trade-offs among ecosystem services so that both people and nature thrive.

It is this proposition of domesticated nature that I wish to challenge (mildly, because Peter is a colleague and a friend, and because their argument has much merit). Part of my concern is pragmatic. The shift of conservation focus from biodiversity to ecosystem services might be regarded as little more than an embrace of a new ecological buzzword, but it has a more pernicious side. Once one admits to the domestication of nature, one embarks on a utilitarian pathway. It’s fine to talk of people and nature thriving together, but if recent history is any guide that doesn’t often happen. If it’s a choice between people and nature, nature rarely wins. And the emphasis on ecosystem services opens the door to “designer ecosystems,” ecosystems engineered to perform vital ecological functions and provide essential goods and services to people in the most efficient (read cost-effective) manner. Think of the possibilities for

genetically modified organisms. Biodiversity is diminished in such a world, leaving little room for wildness.

My other concern is philosophical. Philosophers and environmental ethicists talk of “instrumental” versus “intrinsic” values. Instrumental values are those that directly or indirectly benefit humans – the ecosystem services of domesticated nature. The moral imperative is only to conserve those parts of nature that have utilitarian value. Intrinsic values are those of nature in its own right – wildness, for example. In this case, there are strong moral arguments for conserving all aspects of biodiversity. I think it is too early to give up on wildness. When Thoreau observed that “in wildness is the preservation of the world” or Aldo Leopold spoke of watching the “fierce green fire” die in the eyes of a dying wolf, they understood something of the intrinsic value of nature. That’s not something we should easily give up.

It’s true that there are probably no places on earth that are not tinged by human actions (global climate change is making sure of that). The Pleistocene megafaunas of North America and Australia are gone forever. No amount of re-wilding, even with proxies, can recreate the communities or ecosystems of those past millennia. Better to focus on the wildness we still have. And there is still much wildness in the world, whether it be in the Serengeti of Africa, the Great Basin shrubsteppe of North America, or the Bialowieza Forest of Poland. Wilderness Areas in the United States are crown jewels of wildness that should be cherished, and managed, in that context. But wildness also persists in many of the places where people live and work -- overgrown fields, hedgerows, urban parks, military training areas, and the like. Instead of creating a dualism of wild nature versus domesticated nature (or, for that matter, between instrumental and intrinsic values), we should recognize that these are simply points along a continuum of “naturalness” and values.

“Where the wild things are” should be more than a product of Maurice Sendak’s (1964) fertile imagination, yet we should also focus on “where the people are.” As we seek that elusive balance between people and nature that Kareiva and his colleagues advocate, we should be sure to leave some room for wildness.

References

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