

Anthropocene boosters and the attack on wilderness conservation

In the past few decades, a group of wilderness critics inside and outside of academia have argued that humans have so completely modified the Earth that we should give up on the notion that there is any place wild. Instead, the argument of these 'Anthropocene boosters' goes, we should recognize that we have already domesticated, in one fashion or another, the entire planet for human benefit. This article details and refutes the assertions made by the Anthropocene boosters against wilderness and protected areas. In it, the author also explores what individuals can do to defend the ideas of wilderness and protected areas against this attack. The ultimate rationale for 'keeping the wild', observes the author, is the realization that there is intangible and intrinsic value in more-than-human nature.

There is a growing debate that has serious consequences for our collective relationship to nature. Beginning perhaps 20 years ago, a number of academics in disciplines such as history, anthropology and geography began to question whether there was any genuine wilderness or wildlands left on Earth. These academics, and others, have argued that humans have so completely modified the Earth that we should give up on the notion that there is any place wild and instead recognize that we have already domesticated, in one fashion or another, the entire planet for human benefit.

These individuals and groups are identified under a range of different labels, including 'green postmodernists', 'neo-environmentalists', 'neo-greens', 'new conservationists' and 'pragmatic environmentalists', but the most inclusive label to date is 'Anthropocene boosters' and so that is the term I will use in this article.

The Anthropocene boosters' approach does not account for the intrinsic value of non-humans, and following such anthropocentric ideology risks further escalating loss of biodiversity. The basic premises of their argument are that humans have lived everywhere except Antarctica and that it is absurd to suggest that nature exists independent of human influences.

Wilderness was, just like everything else on Earth, a human cultural construct that does not exist independently of the human mind (Cronon, 1995). With typical human hubris, Anthropocene boosters suggest that, instead of the outmoded term 'Holocene', we need a new name for our geological epoch that recognizes human achievement.

These critics argue not only that humans now influence the Earth to the point there is no such things as an independent 'nature', but that we have a right and an obligation to manage the Earth as if it were a giant garden waiting for human exploitation (Marris, 2011). Of course, there are many others, from politicians to religious leaders to industry leaders, who hold the same perspective, but what is different about most Anthropocene boosters is that they suggest they are promoting ideas that ultimately will serve both humans and nature better.

Others, however, argue that we need to consider more than just human interests, and that all species have an intrinsic value that must be honoured. If a species, or even an ecological process, has value then we have a moral obligation to protect and preserve it (Rolston, 2015; Batavia and Nelson, 2017).

From this beginning, numerous other critiques of wilderness and wildness have added to the chorus. Eventually these ideas

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found a responsive home in some of the largest corporate conservation organizations such as the Nature Conservancy, as well as think tanks like the Breakthrough Institute, the Long Now Foundation, the Reason Foundation and others.¹

Rebutting the Anthropocene boosters' assertions

The Anthropocene boosters make a number of assertions (Kareiva *et al.*, 2012):

- 1 Pristine wilderness never existed; or if it did, it is now gone. Making wilderness protection the primary goal of conservation is a failed strategy.
- 2 The idea that nature is fragile is an exaggeration. Nature is resilient.
- 3 Conservation must serve human needs and aspirations, and it must do so by promoting growth and development.
- 4 Managing for 'ecosystem services', not biodiversity protection, should be the primary goal of conservation.
- 5 Conservation efforts should be focused on human-modified – or 'working' – landscapes, not creating new strictly protected areas such as national parks and wilderness reserves. Wildlands protection is passé.
- 6 Corporations are the key to conservation efforts, so conservationists should partner with corporate interests rather than criticize capitalism or industry.

Furthermore, in order to garner support for these positions, conservation strategies like creation of national parks and other reserves are attacked as 'elitism', 'cultural imperialism' or 'colonialism'.

Many holding these viewpoints seem to relish the idea that humans are finally 'masters of the Earth'. They celebrate technology and the 'path of progress' and believe it will lead to a new promised land where nature is increasingly bent to human desires, while human poverty is alleviated. For instance, Stewart Brand, of Whole Earth Catalog fame, embraces the idea of altering evolution with genetic modifications of species by 'tweaking' gene pools (Brand, 2015). Geographer Ernie Ellis is optimistic, writing that "[m]ost

of all, we must not see the Anthropocene as a crisis, but as the beginning of a new geological epoch ripe with human-directed opportunity" (Ellis, 2011).

These trends and philosophical ideas are alarming to some of us who work in conservation. The implications of these goals and observations imply no limits upon the consumption that is destroying the planet's ecosystems and contributing to a massive extinction of species. Whether intentional or not, these ideas justify our current rapacious approach that celebrates economic and development growth. These ideas represent the techno-optimism of a glorious future, where biotech, geoeengineering and nuclear power, among other 'solutions' to current environmental problems, save us from ourselves.

Many Anthropocene boosters believe that expansion of economic opportunities is the only way to bring much of the world's population out of poverty. This is a happy coincidence for global industry and developers because they now have otherwise liberal progressive voices leading the charge for greater domestication of the Earth. But whether the ultimate goals are humane or not, these proposals appear to dismiss any need for limits on human population growth, consumption and manipulation of the planet.

Many of those who are advocating the Anthropocene Booster worldview, either implicitly or explicitly, see the Earth as a giant garden that we must 'steward'. In other words, we must domesticate the planet to serve human ends. But the idea of commodifying nature for economic and population growth is morally bankrupt. It seeks only to legitimize human manipulation and exploitation and ultimately is a threat even to human survival.

Keeping the Wild, a book that I co-edited (Wuerthner *et al.*, 2014), explains why this is so. It advocates a smaller human footprint where wild nature thrives and humans manage ourselves rather than attempt to manage the planet.

Next, let us examine the assertions in more detail.

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'Pristine wilderness'

First is the Anthropocene boosters' assertion that 'pristine' wilderness never existed, and, even if it did, wilderness is now gone. Boosters never define what exactly they mean by wilderness, but their use of 'pristine' suggests that they define a wilderness as a place that no human has ever touched or trod on (Marris, 2012).

That sense of total human absence is not how wilderness advocates define a wild place. Rather, the concept of a wilderness is related to the *degree* of human influence. Because humans have lived in all landscapes except Antarctica does not mean that human influence is uniformly distributed. Wilderness should be viewed as those places largely influenced by natural forces, rather than dominated by human manipulation and presence. Downtown Los Angeles is without a doubt a human-influenced landscape, but a place like Alaska's Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is certainly not significantly manipulated or controlled by humans. Though, certainly, low numbers of humans have hunted, camped and otherwise occupied small portions of the refuge for centuries, the degree of human presence and modification is small. The Arctic Refuge lands are, most wilderness advocates would argue, self-willed. By such a definition, there are many parts of the world that are to one degree or another largely self-willed.

Proponents of the Anthropocene often have a ready rejoinder that wild nature is a myth: "We create parks that are no less human constructions than Disneyland" (Kareiva *et al.*, 2012). But such a response seeks to ignore that there is a real nature out there, which exists irrespective of whether we wish to acknowledge it as independent of humans (as hurricanes, earthquakes and wildfires prove).

'Nature is resilient'

Peter Kareiva, the Nature Conservancy's former Chief Scientist, is one of the more outspoken proponents of the idea that nature is not fragile, but resilient. Kareiva says: "[i]n many circumstances, the demise of formerly abundant species can be inconsequential to ecosystem function" (Kareiva *et al.*, 2012). He

cites as an example the loss of the passenger pigeon, once so abundant that its flocks darkened the sky, whose demise, according to Kareiva, had "no catastrophic or even measurable effects" (Kareiva *et al.*, 2012).

Stewart Brand also sees no problem with extinction. Brand recently wrote "[t]he frightening extinction statistics that we hear are largely an island story, and largely a story of the past, because most island species that were especially vulnerable to extinction are already gone" (Brand, 2015). Indeed, Brand almost celebrates the threats to global species because he suggests that it will drive evolution and increase biodiversity in the long run. Such a cavalier attitude towards the demise of species, and the normalizing of species declines, undermines the efforts of many conservation organizations to preclude these human-caused extinctions.

Many biologists disagree with Brand and the authors he references. They believe we have entered, or are on the verge of, a sixth mass extinction. There have been other mass extinctions, but this is a preventable one. We know it is occurring and that its cause is human domination of the Earth and its resources.

There is something callous in asserting that it is acceptable for humans knowingly to drive species to extinction. There seems to be no expression of loss or grief that we are now pushing many species towards extinction. Humans have survived the Black Plague, the Holocaust and many other losses over the centuries, but one does not celebrate these.

'Conservation must serve human needs'

Another pillar of the Anthropocene boosters' platform is that conservation's main purpose must be to enhance and provide for human needs and desires. Of course, one consequence of conservation is that protected landscapes nearly always provide for human needs – contributing clean water, biodiversity conservation (if you think that is important) and moderation of climate change, to name a few examples. However, the main rationale for conservation should

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surely be much broader and more inclusive. Despite the fact that most conservation efforts do have human utilitarian value, the ultimate measurement of value ought to be how well conservation serves the needs of the other species we share the planet with.

The problem with Anthropocene boosters' promotion of growth and development is that most species losses are due to habitat losses. Without reigning in human population and development, plants and animals face a grim future with less and less habitat, not to mention the changes in any remaining habitat that makes survival difficult if not impossible. Even when species do not go extinct, the diminishing of their ecological effects can also lead to biological impoverishment – for instance, when top predators are eliminated from ecosystems.

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‘Conservation should focus on “working landscapes” not creation of more parks and wilderness’

The term ‘working landscapes’ was invented by the timber industry to put a positive spin on their rapacious operations. Americans, in particular, look favourably upon the ‘work ethic’, and industry coined the phrase to capitalize on that cultural perspective. Working landscapes are typically lands exploited for economic development including logging, livestock grazing and farming.

While almost no conservationists would deny that there is vast room for improvement in these exploited landscapes, the general scientific consensus is that parks, wilderness reserves and other lands where human exploitation is restricted provide greater protection of ecosystems and biodiversity (Wuerthner *et al.*, 2015). For this reason, many scientists, including such eminent biologists as Harvard biologist EO Wilson, are calling for protecting at least half of the Earth’s terrestrial landscapes as parks and other reserves (see www.natureneedshalf.org).

‘Conservationists should stop criticizing corporations’

Some Anthropocene boosters believe that conservationists should stop criticizing corporations and work with them to

implement more environmentally friendly programmes and operations.

Almost all conservationists would argue that corporate entities should adopt less destructive practices. However, it is overdevelopment that is the ultimate threat to all life, including our own. Implementing so called ‘sustainable’ practices may slow the degradation of the Earth’s ecosystems and species decline, but most such proposals only create ‘less unsustainable’ operations. At a fundamental level, the promise of endless growth on a finite planet is a dead-end street, and it is important for conservationists to harp on continuously about that message. To halt criticisms of corporations invites greenwashing and precludes any effective analysis of the ultimate problems of development and growth.

‘National parks and reserves are a form of cultural imperialism’

Many Anthropocene boosters, in order to validate their particular view of the world, go beyond merely criticizing environmental and conservation strategies. They seek to delegitimize parks and other wildland protection efforts by branding them with pejorative terms like ‘cultural imperialism’ and ‘colonialism’.

The creation of parks and protected areas began with Yellowstone National Park in 1872 (or arguably Yosemite, which was a state park earlier). The general theme of the Anthropocene boosters is that this model has been ‘exported’ and emulated around the world, and that Western nations are forcing parks upon the poor at the expense of their economic future. Notwithstanding that nearly all cultures have some concept of sacred lands or places that are off limits to normal exploitation, to denigrate the idea of parks and wildlands reserves as ‘imperialism’ because it originated in the US is crass. It is no different than scorning democracy as ‘Greek imperialism’ because many countries now aspire to adopt democratic institutions. Western countries also ‘export’ other ideas like human rights and racial equality, and few question whether these ideas represent ‘imperialism’.

Of course, one of the reasons protected areas are so widely adopted is because they ultimately are better at protecting ecosystems and wildlife than other less protective methods. But it is also true that strictly protected areas have not prevented the loss of species and habitat, although in many cases they have slowed these losses. When parks and other reserves fail to safeguard the lands that they are set aside to protect, it is typically due to a host of recognized issues that conservation biologists frequently cite, including small size, lack of connecting corridors, lack of enforcement and underfunding. To criticize parks for this is analogous to arguing we should eliminate public schools because underfunding, lack of adequate staffing and other well-publicized problems often result in less than desirable educational outcomes. Just as the problem is not with the basic premise of public education, the oft-cited difficulties for parks are not a reason to jettison them as a foundation for conservation strategies.

Another criticism is that strictly protected parks and other reserves harm local economic activities and sometimes subsistence activities too. In reality, that is what parks and other reserves are designed to do. We create strictly protected areas precisely because ongoing resource exploitation does harm wildlife and ecosystems – if it did not we would not need parks or other reserves in the first place. While park creation may occasionally disrupt local use of resources, we regularly condone or at least accept the disruption and losses associated with much more damaging developments. The Three Gorges Dam in China, for example, displaced millions of people. Similar development around the world has displaced and impinged upon indigenous peoples everywhere. Indeed, in the absence of protected areas, many landscapes are ravaged by logging, ranching, oil and gas extraction, mining and other resource development practices, often to the ultimate detriment of local peoples and, of course, the ecosystems they depend upon.

In the interest of fairness, I would agree that people severely impacted by park creation should be compensated in some way. However, it should also be recognized that the benefits of parks and other wildlands reserves are nearly always perpetual, while logging the forest, killing off wildlife and other alternatives are usually less permanent sources of economic viability.

What you can do

The threat to wildlands from Anthropocene boosters is real. The best antidote to their critiques is education and context. Wherever you read critiques of parks and wildlands, write a response addressing their misinformation, using the information in this article and the books I have helped to publish, including *Keeping the Wild* (Wuerthner *et al.*, 2015) and *Protecting the Wild* (Wuerthner *et al.*, 2015). Both books have essays that challenge and refute all the fundamental assumptions commonly asserted by Anthropocene boosters.

However, the real answer, perhaps, is more personal involvement with nature. So encourage Anthropocene boosters to spend a little time in a wild place. I find it difficult to believe that anyone who has spent serious time in a wild place could maintain that wilderness and wildness are not real and just a human cultural construction. A few weeks in the Arctic Refuge, or even the backcountry of Yellowstone, might cure such naysayers of their myopic perspective.

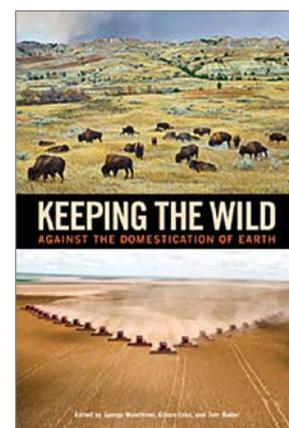
Conclusion

The wild does have economic and other benefits for human well-being. However, the ultimate rationale for 'keeping the wild' is the realization that there is intangible and intrinsic value in protecting nature. Keeping the wild is about human self-restraint and self-discipline. By setting aside parks and other reserves, we, as a society and a species, are making a statement that we recognize our moral obligation to protect other life forms (Piccolo, 2017). And while we may have the capability to influence the planet and its biosphere, we lack the wisdom to do so in a manner that does not harm. ■

Recommended books

The books mentioned by the author in the "What you can do" section, and detailed below, are both on the Ecocentric Alliance's list of recommended ecocentric reading, which can be accessed via the following link:

<https://is.gd/ecobooks>

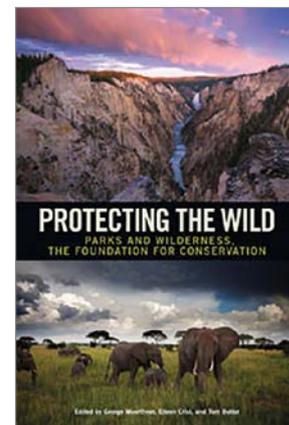


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Notes

1 For more information, see <https://www.nature.org>, <https://thebreakthrough.org>, <http://longnow.org> and <http://reason.org>, respectively.

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Call for Papers

Patrick Curry, Editor-in-Chief

We are inviting authors to submit contributions to *The Ecological Citizen*. The pieces that we are seeking include: Long Articles (in general, 2500–3000 words plus up to 30 references, but please see the note below about the possibility for lengthier pieces*); Opinions (400–500 words plus up to five references); Reflections (1000–1250 words plus up to ten references); Book and Culture Reviews (500–1000 words); and Meeting Reports (500–750 words). And we are interested in receiving contributions from a wide spectrum of authors, including philosophers, scientists, naturalists, indigenous thinkers, theologians, activists and poets. We are particularly interested in pieces with practical messages offering a ‘way forward’.

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