

Contemporary Controversy Paper

SYE 490

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Before and during my internship, one question in particular has always troubled me since we discussed it during my junior-year in Dr. Andrew Mill's Environmental Ethics class. While most people agree that preservation of nature is generally a good thing, some people argue that humans should avoid all interference with such preservation areas. This means that a wilderness can only remain a true wilderness if humans keep out. Every time a man or woman steps into the wild, he or she leaves marks in the ecosystem. Marks not only in form of obvious trash or soil-damage, but also a disturbance and change of the wild ecosystem. Considering that I was to ride into pristine wilderness during my internship, this ethical question came back to my mind frequently. This issue affected me when working as a wrangler in the wild, but it also affects all outfitters and backcountry park rangers at Yellowstone – and all other wilderness preservation areas worldwide. In the course of this paper, I will present positions against and for the presence of humans in such areas.

Ramachandra Guha states in his essay *Radical Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation* that “[a] characteristic of deep ecology is its focus on the preservation of unspoiled wilderness“ (Pojman 272). This seems easy to understand, but when looking at the situation of Yellowstone National Park, many problems come to face. Despite Yellowstone having over 2-million-acres of wilderness, the imprint of humans can be

found everywhere. Hotels, roads, walkways, and communication antennas on mountain ridges could be considered a necessary evil, but what about more far-reaching consequences? The current cap on the amount of snowmobiles in the winter indicates that the emission of carbon dioxide by hundred thousands of cars, vans, RV's, and snowmobiles must be taken serious. Guha explains that “[a] function of wilderness is to provide a temporary antidote to modern civilization,” (Pojman 275) but we have to wonder at what cost? He continues that the “enjoyment of nature is an integral part of the consumer society. The private automobile is in many respects the ultimate ecological villain, and an untouched wilderness the prototype of ecological harmony” (Pojman 275). This head-on collision of value and action is problematic for most visitors, but it also posed a problem for me. While horses emit no harmful gases, they still leave hoof-marks on the ground, and they might also bring in new diseases into the ecosystem. So how can I justify my actions while enjoying nature's glory at her best?

Finding an answer for supporting humans in a wilderness is not easy, but I feel that humans need to experience the peace and tranquility of the wild before they can motivate themselves to preserve it. In his essay *What's Wrong with Plastic Trees?* Martin Krieger describes the change of our perception of wilderness. When the first settlers arrived, their idea of wilderness was something dangerous – something that needed to be conquered. As cities developed, the idea of wilderness changed. “The Romantic appreciation of nature, with its associated enthusiasm for the ‘strange, remote, solitary and mysterious,’ converted territory that was a threatening wildland into a desirable area capable of producing an invigorating spirit of wilderness” (Pojman 221). This new-found appreciation for nature enables us to raise awareness for the importance of nature, but by

banning humans out of the wilderness this appreciation would soon vanish. Not many people would like for their tax-dollars to be spent on something they can never enjoy. Education, road improvements, and health-care – yes, but some unapproachable piece of land out west – probably not. Removing the spectators out of the Ohio State horseshoe would make for a lousy game experience – and revenue.

A second foundation of support can be found in Richard Watson *A Critique of Anti-Anthropocentric Ethics*. “Man is part of nature”, he writes, “and humans actions are as natural as are the ways in which any other species of animals behave” (Pojman 165). This means that our journeys into the wild are as natural as bison grazing on the range. Instead of grazing, we appreciate the solitude and peacefulness of our surroundings. He argues that “the human species should be allowed (...) to live out its evolutionary potential.” He adds immediately, “to its own destruction of that is the end result. It is nature’s way” (Pojman 165).

When looking at both positions in this controversial topic, I find the latter more convincing. Taking humans out of nature will diminish the value of wilderness – and us. However, I do propose a peaceful balance, similar to Aldo Leopold’s famous quote in *The Land Ethic*: “a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community” (Pojman 125). When we are enjoying nature, then natural conservation and preservation need to be an integral aspect of our behavior.

WORKS CITED

Pojman, Louis P. *Environmental Ethics: Readings in Theory and Application*. California: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning. 2001.