

An Ocean Ethic

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A Schism in American Environmentalism

In his seminal 1948 essay “The Land Ethic”, Aldo Leopold called upon Americans to extend their circle of concern to include the land that supported their communities. “All ethics so far evolved,” he argued, “rest upon a single premise: that the individual is a member of a community of interdependent parts... The land ethic simply enlarges the boundaries of the community to include soils, waters, plants, and animals, or collectively, the land” (Leopold, 219). Leopold’s proposition reintroduced ideas about nature and wilderness popularized by Henry David Thoreau and John Muir in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Preservationists, as they were called, challenged the prevailing Conservationist notion that “evidence [for conservation] had to be economic in order to be valid” (Leopold, 226). Conservationist Gifford Pinchot famously declared, “there are just two things on this material earth: natural resources and people” (Callicott 1992). Whereas Conservationists valued the goods and services provided by nature for human consumption, Preservationists believed that nature had intrinsic value, independent of human interests or desires. “From the dust of the earth,” wrote Muir, “from the common elementary fund, the Creator has made *Homo sapiens*. From the same material he has made every other creature... They are earth-born companions and our fellow mortals” (*Thousand Mile Walk*, Muir, 139). This schism between Preservationists and Conservationists in American

environmentalism persists today and is perhaps most readily identifiable in modern marine policy debates. Both factions contend that marine ecosystem protection requires marine protected areas (MPAs), but their arguments differ distinctly in both scale and rhetoric. Whereas Preservationists center their discussion around existence value, spiritual connection, and recreation, Conservationists instead focus on ecosystem services, fisheries recovery, and long-term economic gain. Preservationists rely on communicating a sense of loss and the possibility for revival, while conservationists are concerned with generating compelling scientific and economic data in order to persuade the public. Though both have worked tirelessly to lobby politicians, corporations, and the public, Preservationists are winning the debate. Mimicking the rhetoric of Aldo Leopold, Preservationists have made great strides in the last decade, turning the tide in the debate surrounding marine protection that was once dominated by fisheries statistics and economic models. The shift toward very large marine protected areas (VLMPAs) in recent years, akin to large terrestrial National Parks like Yellowstone, is testament to the success of the Preservationist rhetoric. But before abandoning more careful reasoning to communicate our message, ocean advocates need to earnestly consider the historic ethical implications of such Preservationist measures.

Wilderness at what expense?

The exhaustion of mineral resources and the near-extinction of the American bison brought to light the human impact on the New England and Midwest environments in the mid-nineteenth century. Americans began to realize that the country's once-abundant natural resources were not without limits, and the wilderness ethic rose to political prominence in a desperate effort to preserve pristine natural environments of the West in their pre-contact conditions. Thus, central to the philosophy of wilderness was the exclusion of civilization, in order that the "tired, nerve-

shaken, over-civilized people” may escape into the wild for solace and “solitude” (Muir, 119) (Muir, 121). The U.S. Wilderness Act of 1964 would later go so far as to codify the absence of humanity, in defining wilderness as, “an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain” (Hendee et al. 1990; Nash 1990). In accordance with the wilderness mission, Yellowstone National Park became the first protected wilderness area in the United States in 1872, expanding across more than three thousand square miles. It was dedicated by President Ulysses S. Grant as “a public park or pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people,” and prohibited permanent settlement or occupancy (Act of Dedication 1872). Regrettably, Indigenous Americans that had been inhabiting the park for thousands of years. The Sheepeater people were forced off their land to make room for wilderness and were excluded from the park entirely, disallowed from using it either as a “pleasuring ground” or a hunting ground. This act of aggression and exclusion by the American government contributed to the tension that ultimately resulted in the bloody Nez Perce War (Merchant, 148). Nevertheless, National Parks proliferated. President Theodore Roosevelt alone, under the influence of Muir himself, conserved 230 million acres of American soil (Organ et al. 2010). The notion of intrinsic value motivated a nation to forgo natural resource extraction, in favor of preservation of remaining wilderness areas. “Emotive notions of nature’s grandeur and beauty and human spiritual connection to untamed wilderness,” rather than scientific or economic arguments, “drove the creation of the US national park system” (Auster et al. 2008).

But after a slew of National Park designations throughout the early twentieth century, listings came to a near halt in the 1940s following the unpopular dedication by President Franklin D. Roosevelt of Jackson Hole National Monument. Beginning in 1927, oil heir John D. Rockefeller, Jr. began buying up land in Jackson Hole under the guise of his private enterprise

Snake River Land Company, with the intention of turning it over to the government for protection under the National Park Service (Daugherty 2004). Rockefeller kept his intentions secret in order to avoid inflation of land values. Landowners were livid to discover they had been cheated, and in a letter to Rockefeller's attorney, Wyoming Senator Robert Carey wrote, "We are not willing to see this section of Wyoming exploited or its citizens driven out to gratify Mr. Albright's [Horace Albright, the superintendent of Yellowstone] ambition or to establish a monopoly for the benefit of Mr. Rockefeller's agents" (Richter 1989). When Congress refused to designate the area as a National Park, Roosevelt used the Antiquities Act to dedicate it instead as a National Monument, ignoring complaints by local ranchers that their livelihoods were being threatened and removing homesteaders from their legally-acquired lands. Critics viewed Jackson Hole's dedication not as "a pleasuring ground for the benefit and enjoyment of the people," but rather for the benefit of the wealthy, at the expense of those that relied on natural resources to survive.

Marred by the perceived injustices associated with National Parks, land preservation in the US had come to a stand-still by 1948. Leopold's "The Land Ethic" sought to restore the fervor of conservationists and of wilderness preservation for a new generation by drawing attention to the "unprecedented violence, rapidity, and scope" of environmental change occurring on the frontier (Leopold, 232). Leopold, like his wilderness predecessors, was disturbed by the staggering rate of environmental change, and he longed for the return of environs past.

Extending the Wilderness Ethic

As land preservation legislation slowed, marine and estuarine conservation issues rose to the forefront of American policy. Atrocities in the ocean became increasingly evident post-World War II. Nuclear testing was destroying distant Pacific atolls, the International Whaling

Commission had formed to avoid external regulation of the industry, and the Federal Water Pollution Act was struggling to pass Congress (Kovarik). In an effort to protect American marine ecosystems against such environmental assaults, the US established Everglades National Park as its first MPA in 1947, only a year prior to publication of “The Land Ethic” and more than seventy years after the creation of its first terrestrial National Park (nps.gov). Yet there is no mention of ocean or coastal preservation anywhere in Leopold’s writings. This disconnect is perhaps unsurprising. The underwater world is inherently foreign to humanity. By virtue of the fact that we inhabit terrestrial environments, our interactions with the ocean are necessarily superficial. As a result, “we consider the sea even further outside of us...even many of us who maintain a nature ethic don’t give the sea much thought” (Safina 2007). And the unfortunate truth is that, from the surface, a healthy ocean looks exactly the same as an unhealthy one. Muir himself viewed the ocean as “unspoilable,” believing that “much [of nature], we can say comfortingly, must always be in great part wild, particularly the sea” (Muir, 121). Ocean resources seemed infinitely bountiful until fisheries began reporting steep declines in catches in the 1950s, including the socially and economically catastrophic collapse of the west coast Pacific sardine fishery in 1952 (Radovich 1982). In the second half of the twentieth century, we began to experience the same nostalgia for pristine marine ecosystems that was expressed by Leopold regarding those on land. It was this “sense of loss, a desire to protect what remains, and a will to restore what is gone” that drove Americans to seek protection of the marine environment (Auster et al. 2008). The Greenpeace “Save the Whales” campaign popularized marine conservation efforts in 1971, and the surge of environmental legislation in the 1970s included, to a limited extent, protection of marine systems. In 1972, the landmark Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act established the National Marine Sanctuary Program (NMSP), tasked with

creating MPAs in American waters. However, NMSP was unable to secure dedication of a protected area until 1986, when fisheries collapses and more than sixty mass coral bleaching events drew further attention to the decline in ocean health (NOAA) (Huppert & Stone 1998).

From Conservation to Preservation of Marine Environments

Today, fisheries across the globe are overexploited. Scientists estimate that 90% of all large predatory fish have been captured from the ocean (Myers & Worm 2003). Still, protection of marine habitats continues to lag behind that of terrestrial environments. While 10-15% of the world's land receives protection, only 2.3% of our oceans are protected from "the clearing, trampling work of civilization" (IUCN 2010) (Muir, 120). The stated mission of the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), an international treaty signed by nearly every member state, is to protect 10% of the world's oceans by 2020; however, we are on track to protect only 6.1% (ICCB 2013). Marine scientists tell us we need between 20-50% protected in order to safeguard biodiversity, fisheries, and complex food webs (ICCB 2013). Our initial approach to marine conservation was to design small MPAs that restricted commercial fishing and other extractive activities. Scientists and economists reckoned that by concentrating our energy on highly-impacted ecosystems upon which people relied for food, recreation, and cultural practices, we could optimize the social benefit of conservation. These arguments for MPAs engaged stakeholders with seemingly divergent interests; for example, the "spillover effect," the fact that MPAs supply adjacent fishing grounds with more and larger fish, is appealing to fishermen, tourism operators, and ecologists (Roberts et al. 2001). Unfortunately, creation of these parks requires significant human and financial capital, and the ecological payoff is relatively minor. Debates surrounding their use and boundaries are often complicated and inaccessible to the general public.

Cue the preservationists. A recent shift toward a rhetoric of loss and longing has spurred intensified debate and rapid action surrounding marine protection. This was a decisive move on the part of marine scientists and advocates, who recognized that graphs and figures were getting them nowhere fast. In his 2008 essay “Toward a Sea Ethic,” marine conservationist Carl Safina invoked Aldo Leopold to argue that a change in ethics, not more data, was necessary to expand marine protection. “No system of ethics,” he contended, “no religious tradition, tells us that it is our right to consider only ourselves and destroy the future. We need to expand our idea of community” (Safina 2008). Safina received overwhelming support from the marine conservationist community, and since his writing, we’ve witnessed the rapid rise of VLMPAs. More than two-thirds of protected waters across the planet belong to only fifteen VLMPAs, none of which defends an area of high human population density or impact (MPAtlas.org). The goal of these VLMPAs is to preserve pristine ecosystems from expanding resource extraction efforts. Once *de facto* protected areas are increasingly within reach, and VLMPAs seek to maintain them in their pre-contact conditions. But these parks aren’t without scientific foundations; when it comes to MPAs, size does matter. Larger areas are generally thought to be more effective than smaller ones because they have a smaller edge per volume of protected waters, meaning that there is less opportunity for outside influences, such as illegal fishermen or pollution, to creep into the MPA (Jones 2011). VLMPAs are also cheaper to manage per unit area than small parks. But scientists and marine advocates worry that the recent uptick in VLMPAs are more grounded in political competitiveness than in sound science, and that some areas are designed with the express purpose of checking-off CBD boxes. Every VLMPA of the past ten years has been larger than the one before it, in a sort of MPA arms-race to see which country can come out on top in marine protection. In many regards, this trend is inspiring. The fact that politicians view marine

preservation as a valuable diplomatic tool is evidence of a growing global concern for the marine environment. But in the mad dash to protect vast areas of the ocean, many worry that the fine print of scientific observation, spatial planning, and ethical management have taken a back seat to the optimistic headlines that VLMPAs carry with them. In reference to Australia's newest proposal for the South-west Corner Marine Reserve, the would-be largest MPA in the world, Les Kaufman of Conservation International worries that, "only 3.5% of the protected area is shelf, where the oil and gas and fishing are... we have to beware of getting lots of stuff that no one cares about" (Jones 2011). Furthermore, VLMPAs are often dedicated in areas where indigenous peoples live, and these communities are rarely given a voice in decision-making processes regarding the parks, which sometimes limit or prohibit their resource use (Beltrán 2000). We are repeating mistakes of the past. We are preserving wilderness at the expense of people's livelihoods.

Bridging the Divide

American environmental success stories share a common thread: a preservationist rhetoric that pits human development against endangered natural wonders. Leopold's land ethic provides a valuable tool for reassessing our relationship with nature. Simply put, "a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise" (The Land Ethic, Leopold, 240). But the application of this directive has been problematic. We need to synthesize an ocean ethic with conservationist considerations for more anthropocentric concerns. If we are to achieve our mutual goal of marine protection, Preservationists need to acknowledge that scientific and ethical details cannot reasonably be ignored and Conservationists should recognize that storytelling and spirituality are more effective at persuading politicians and the public than are numbers alone. "When a problem is

perceived by participants as one of competing multiple values, or ethics,” as marine protection is viewed today, “negotiated settlement is foreclosed because consensus is philosophically intolerable” (Miller 1992). We need to bridge the historic divide between preservation and conservation that we may present a united front against the challenges facing the ocean and that we may protect the areas most in need of our protection. We all depend on the ocean, whether for recreation, sustenance, or spiritual value. The ocean can seem vast and foreign, but it is nonetheless connected to all of humanity.

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