

WILDLAND ETHICS

Introduction

Wilderness is no longer a threat to our survival as it was to early American settlers. Rather, it is a vanishing resource that many of us are beginning to view as vital to our survival, necessary for our mental and spiritual health, and intrinsically valuable regardless of its economic or ecological importance to us. As wilderness travelers, we need to explore and understand the ethical underpinnings that motivate various minimum-impact backcountry practices.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a basic resource, an introduction to wildland ethics. It is not meant to provide exhaustive coverage of such an expansive and controversial subject, nor does it represent an official NOLS view of ethics and management. Rather, the intent is to spark interest and to provide background and knowledge to foster a strong relationship to the land and to

facilitate that relationship in others. Minimizing one's impact in the backcountry is largely a matter of technique, but specific practices must be motivated by an ethic, since they often require a bit more care and effort than other camping practices. Thus it is necessary for educators to be able to articulate and discuss those underlying ethics and begin to instill them in others. We have included a substantial number of original quotes to give character to the essay and have presented them in a text which seeks to give background and context. But of course, ideas and quotes are themselves secondary to the process of developing a personal ethic; the land and its inhabitants are the essence, and no text can substitute for time spent in the backcountry. The content is excerpted from *An Introduction to Wildland Ethics & Management*, published by NOLS in the Summer of 1992.

Historical Perspective: Human Perceptions of Wilderness

Thousands of tired, nerve shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that the mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of lumber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.

-John Muir, *Our National Parks* (1901)

Wilderness has undoubtedly affected art, literature, governments, philosophy and religion for as long as those institutions have existed. Examples of its influence abound in many different cultures. Western civilizations, however, have not traditionally shared the same reverence for wilderness that many cultures have.

A broad movement embracing aesthetic and spiritual appreciation of the wilder places and aspects of the natural world, such as deserts, dense forests, and storms, apparently began in Western culture with the era of Romanticism in the eighteenth century. American Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, continued to challenge centuries of adulation of civilization and fear of wildness in the nineteenth century. "Walking," an excerpt of which follows, is one of Thoreau's most famous essays, in which he articulates his revolutionary defense of wilderness:

I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil—to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society...

In Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibers forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plow and sail for it. From the forest and wilderness come the tonics and barks which brace mankind. Our ancestors were savages...

Life consists with wildness. The most alive is the wildest. Not yet subdued by man, its presence refreshes him. One who pressed forward incessantly and never rested from his labors, who grew fast and made infinite demands on life, would always find himself in a new country or wilderness, and surrounded by the raw material of life.

The development of new attitudes and the consequent actions of people toward wilderness and conservation in the century since Thoreau are well documented. While exploitation and destruction of the land still occur at an alarming rate, this slowly developing consciousness is cause for optimism. Appreciation for and conservation of wilderness is motivated for some by a form of enlightened self-interest; as people learn that we are ecologically interdependent with our natural environment they seek to protect their habitat. The oft-used image of fouling the bed in which we lie is both compelling and frightening. But there is also a fringe on the circle of environmental activists and thinkers that is motivated by a less utilitarian impetus. This fringe is advocating an expansion of traditional human ethics to include the community of the land and its living things.

The evolution of a land ethic and appreciation of wildlands are luxuries we in the United States and people throughout much of developed Western countries can now afford. Ironically, successful exploitation of natural resources in the United States has placed us in the enviable position of being able to afford the luxury of conservation. Affluent and educated, we have the time to ponder

our relationship with the land from a variety of perspectives: economic, recreational, religious, scientific and aesthetic. Indeed, the rise to prominence of the science of ecology has been instrumental in promoting the evolution of a land ethic.

While we can certainly be proud of past accomplishments in the United States and continue to work to improve institutions that protect our wildlands, we must also look beyond our borders.

To sustain the evolution of a global environmental ethic we must continue to face human social issues both at home and abroad. People's immediate needs for food and shelter must be met before we can hope to talk to them about conserving and respecting the land. Perhaps what is also needed is a dramatic and clear example by the most developed nations, not just of preservation, but of revering the portion of the land which we inhabit.

Defining a Wildland Ethic

ethic n. 1. the body of moral principles or values governing or distinctive of a particular culture or group: the Christian ethic, the tribal ethic of the Zuni. 2. a complex of moral precepts held or rules of conduct followed by an individual: a personal ethic.

wilderness n. 1. a wild and uncultivated region, as of forest or desert, uninhabited or inhabited only by wild animals; a tract of wasteland. 2. a tract of land officially designated as such and protected by the U.S. government.

-Random House Dictionary, Second Ed. Unabridged (1987)

Ethical boundaries have gradually expanded in Western thought from relationships between individuals and within the family to include nations and the entire human race. A relatively new concept in Western philosophy and ethical thought is the notion that our ethical code of conduct ought to include relationships between humans and nature. This idea takes American liberalism, a belief system based on the rights, sovereignty and freedom of individuals, to or perhaps beyond its conceptual limits by suggesting a set of "inalienable rights" of nature, much as the Declaration of Independence did in 1776 for some American men. Roderick Nash, an intellectual historian at the University of California-Santa Barbara, introduces and elaborates on this progression in *The Rights of Nature*. The book presents an expanding umbrella of ethical awareness and behavior from the pre-ethical past to a hypothetical future. This umbrella initially encompasses only pure self-interest and gradually expands to include family, tribe, community, nation and ultimately (and perhaps hypothetically) nonhuman life and nonliving matter.

Aldo Leopold, a forester and wildlife biologist, and perhaps more importantly, a conservationist and armchair philosopher, discusses this ethical progression much earlier in *A Sand County Almanac*. The book, published in 1949, is a simple collection of sketches and essays, yet it continues to be one of the most influential pieces of literature in the conservation movement. The following excerpt is from "The Land Ethic," the final essay in the *Almanac*, in which Leopold

eloquently defines an ethic and discusses this expansion of ethical boundaries.

This extension of ethics, so far studied only by philosophers, is actually a process in ecological evolution. Its sequences may be described in ecological as well as in philosophical terms. An ethic, ecologically, is a limitation on freedom of action in the struggle for existence. An ethic philosophically, is a differentiation of social from anti-social conduct. These are two definitions of one thing. The thing has its origin in the tendency of interdependent individuals or groups to evolve modes of co-operation...

There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. Land is still property. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations. The extension of ethics to this third element in the human environment is, if I read the evidence correctly, an evolutionary possibility and an ecological necessity... Ethics are possibly a kind of community instinct in-the-making.

While Leopold's land ethic is arguably still embraced by only a few, there are growing numbers who view the evolution of which he speaks as a necessary and logical progression. Proponents of such an ethic are found in a broad spectrum of

philosophical niches and do not always agree with one another.

Land, Wilderness, Wildlands

Now that we have begun exploring the meaning of an ethic, let's take a look at wildlands. Wilderness is difficult to satisfactorily define because of its historically ephemeral symbolism. Gary Snyder compares the word "wild" to "a gray fox trotting off through the forest, ducking behind bushes, going in and out of sight." He also notes that common definitions frequently define wilderness strictly in negative terms, by telling us what it is not. The Random House definition, "a wild and uncultivated region... uninhabited or inhabited only by wild animals; a tract of wasteland," is a good example. In contrast, Snyder offers a definition of what wildlands are: "a place where the original and potential vegetation and fauna are intact and in full interaction, and the landforms are entirely the result of nonhuman forces." Bill Devall and George Sessions suggest that wilderness might be defined as "a landscape or ecosystem that has been minimally disrupted by the intervention of humans, especially the

destructive technology of modern societies."

When we talk about wilderness in modern American society, it is necessary to indicate whether the land in question is "Wilderness" or "wilderness". Wilderness with a capital "W" refers to Congressionally designated land under the 1964 Wilderness Act, in which Congress established a National Wilderness Preservation System "to secure for the American people of present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness." In this essay, we use "wilderness" and "wildlands" and "backcountry" interchangeably, but will always be referring to wilderness of the lower-case "w" variety. That is, land that might fit the Congressional description of wilderness, but is not necessarily officially designated as such. Our relationship with wildlands is necessarily different than to either urban or rural lands. Most of us will only visit wildlands and continue to spend the majority of our lives in the "other world." But a wildland ethic can only exist in the context of a broader land or environmental ethic, as outlined by Aldo Leopold over forty years ago; the two are inseparable and completely interdependent. A wildland ethic cannot begin and end at the trailhead.

Wildlands and People: What's the Connection?

Man always kills the thing he loves, and so we the pioneers have killed our wilderness. Some say we had to. Be that as it may, I am glad I shall never be young without wild country to be young in. Of what avail are forty freedoms without a blank spot on the map?

-Aldo Leopold, *Sand County Almanac* (1949)

What is our relationship with wilderness? Congress decreed in 1964 that in designated wilderness man and his accouterments should only be allowed as a visitor. The status of "visitor" seems to indicate a separateness from wild places, and, indeed, most of the trappings of modern civilization are incongruous within a wild setting. But on a deeper level many influential Americans, such as Aldo Leopold and David Brower, have espoused the idea in this century that we are in fact members of a world community that includes wild creatures and places. How are people today connected to or isolated from wildlands? This section explores that question, both in a practical ecological sense and from a more spiritual, philosophical perspective.

Healthy Ecology at Work

Defenders of wilderness have oft noted that humans need wildlands as examples of unhindered, healthy ecological processes. Humans have altered the landscape so drastically, and in some cases violently, that wilderness provides a necessary yardstick with which to measure the damage. The rate at which we are losing biological diversity through species extinction is difficult to measure, but most scientists agree that it is increasing at an accelerating rate. All questions of ethics aside, the fast rate at which extinction is occurring is alarming in the sense that it indicates an accelerating pattern of destructiveness related to increasing human population and changing land use patterns. Aldo Leopold once said that one of the rules of successful tinkering is to save all the parts. In the last century, man has been tinkering madly and wantonly

discarding the parts.

At the same time wilderness helps us gauge our destructiveness, it also works to mitigate the damage. Diverse undeveloped areas work to filter air and water, break down waste, recycle nutrients, and generate soil. Forests all over the world act as carbon dioxide sinks, helping to balance man's increasing release of that and other gases into the atmosphere and thereby moderating extreme weather and climatic fluctuations. Natural areas are also often able to successfully reclaim themselves after destructive human influence is removed. Thus wilderness keeps us honest by providing a standard against which other ecosystems can be measured, and it assists in the recovery when ecosystems fall below that standard.

Wilderness as Symbol

Wilderness played an important role in Leopold's land ethic, not only as an example of healthy ecological processes, but also as a reminder to modern man of his relationship to the natural world, a relationship from which we are over-insulated by the comforts and gadgets of society. "Your true modern," writes Leopold, "is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He has no vital relation to it; to him it is the space between cities on which crops grow. Turn him loose for a day on the land, and if the spot does not happen to be a golf links or a scenic area, he is bored stiff." Wilderness is more fundamental to the human condition even than a connection between us and nature. It is the raw material of human culture, said Leopold, and "gives definition

and meaning to the human enterprise." It provides the "single starting-point, to which man returns again and again to organize yet another search for a durable scale of values." Mountaineer, philosopher and writer John Muir also spoke often of wilderness as the ultimate source of human life and culture. He expresses our cultural debt to the mountains this way:

The mountains are fountains of men as well as of rivers, of glaciers, of fertile soil. The great poets, philosophers, prophets, able men whose thoughts and deeds have moved the world, have come down from the mountains—mountain-dwellers who have grown strong there with the forest trees in Nature's work-shops.

Roderick Nash says that in the United States, original culture did not begin until artists and writers began deriving their inspiration from wilderness rather than from their European predecessors. Wilderness, he says, is a source of democracy and cultural independence and distinction in this country. Wallace Stegner, novelist and historian, articulated the American cultural debt to wilderness as early as 1960 when he wrote that "... an American, insofar as he is new and different at all, is a civilized man who has renewed himself in the wild." There exists a clear relationship for Americans between wilderness and freedom. The wild frontier symbolized freedom

from the restraints and confines of civilization.

The symbolic value of wilderness has changed with social issues. It may still be a source of American cultural independence and a "fountain of life," but it has also taken on added significance in recent decades. Nash explores this newer symbolism in *Wilderness and the American Mind*. "Preserving wilderness means establishing limits," he writes. "In the 1960s environmentalists joined forces with the counterculture in arguing that bigger was not always better." Suddenly a very vocal segment of our society was challenging us to re-examine some fundamental societal assumptions. Preserving wilderness indicates a conscious decision to do without some of the resources it might contain and helps to see that "going without" can indeed be an enriching experience. In the last thirty years, preservation based on a simpler lifestyle and self-restraint has become increasingly prevalent among wilderness proponents.

Wildness Within

Wilderness also provides a medium through which people can reacquaint themselves with the wildness that is within the human soul. Our species lived much more closely to the land for most of its existence than we do now. Sigmund Freud said that humans consequently find civilization oppressive and the resulting stress manifests itself as neuroses. Wallace Stegner wrote in support of the Wilderness Act of 1964 that, "(w)e simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope."

In his customary irreverent style, Edward Abbey, the caustic and sharp-tongued spokesman for the deserts and canyons of the American Southwest, expresses a similar sentiment and reminds us that wilderness is necessary to



come to terms with our Bedouin blood and nomad spirit. "We need wilderness because we are wild animals," he writes in *The Journey Home*.

...Every man needs a place where he can go to go crazy in peace. Every Boy Scout troop deserves a forest to get lost, miserable, and starving in. Even the maddest murderer of the sweetest wife should get the chance for a run to the sanctuary of the hills. If only for the sport of it. For the terror, freedom, and delirium. Because we need brutality and raw adventure, because men and women first learned to love in, under, and all around trees, because we need for every pair of feet and legs about ten leagues of naked nature, crags to leap from, mountains to measure by, deserts to finally die in when the heart fails.

Stegner and Abbey assert that we must define our relationship with wilderness on a spiritual as well as a geographical, cultural or political level. Wilderness is necessary to fully define the human condition, and by repressing the aboriginal side of our soul, we deny legitimate expression to a vital, creative component of our being.

The Land: Are We Stewards or Citizens?

Even among conservationists, however, there is a fundamental, philosophical schism with regard to the human relationship with wilderness. Are we meant to be stewards of the natural environment, as described in the book of Genesis, with "dominion over the fish of the sea, the birds of the air, and the cattle, and over all the wild animals and all the creatures that crawl on the ground (Genesis 1:28)?" Or are we mere citizens of a world biotic community? This debate, often referred to as "preservation vs. use," has been ongoing since the beginning of this century and has resurfaced in numerous manifestations.

The first publicized American dispute between these two schools of thought was the

controversy early this century about whether to dam California's Tuolumne River in Hetch Hetchy valley to provide San Francisco with more and better fresh water. Hetch Hetchy is said to have rivaled Yosemite for its natural splendor. Gifford Pinchot, patriarch of the environmental stewards and first Chief of the U.S. Forest Service, summarized the utilitarian perspective in the context of the same issue during Congressional Committee hearings when he said "the fundamental principle of the whole conservation policy is that of use, to take every part of the land and its resources and put it to that use in which it will serve the most people."

When John Muir and Pinchot first met in 1896, they initially became close friends. They had in common a strong desire to protect wildlands from wanton destruction. Soon, however, it became clear that their fundamental loyalties were quite different. Pinchot was deeply committed to scientific management for human benefit and Muir to preservation of wilderness for its own intrinsic and spiritual value. In the Hetch Hetchy debate, Muir spoke for those who would preserve the valley in its pristine state and referred to Pinchot and his followers as "temple destroyers, devotees of ravaging commercialism (who) seem to have a perfect contempt for Nature, and instead of lifting their eyes to the God of the Mountains, lift them to the Almighty Dollar." Congress voted in 1913 to build the dam in Hetch Hetchy, and today most of the valley lies under a large reservoir. The preservation vs. use argument is still prevalent in the conservation movement, though it has become more complex and multi-faceted as understanding and issues have evolved.

Leopold wrote in the 1940s that "no important change in ethics was ever accomplished without an internal change in our intellectual emphasis, loyalties, affections, and convictions. The proof that conservation has not yet touched these foundations of conduct lies in the fact that philosophy and religion have not yet heard of it." There are, however, increasing numbers of philosophers, scientists, land managers and religious leaders contributing their voices and thoughts to the dialogue about the human

relationship with the earth. Muir, though himself heavily influenced by the likes of Thoreau and Emerson, was one of the first Americans to popularize the debate. The following quote succinctly expresses his idea of man's appropriate place in the natural order of things:

The world we are told was made for man. A presumption that is totally unsupported by facts. There is a very numerous class of men who are cast into painful fits of astonishment whenever they find anything, living or dead, in all God's universe, which they cannot eat or render in some way what they call useful to themselves... Nature's object in making animals and plants might possibly be first of all the happiness of each one of them, not the creation of all for the happiness of one. Why ought man to value himself as more than an infinitely small composing unit of the one great unit of creation?... The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also

be incomplete without the smallest transmicroscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

The voice for nature has been growing louder throughout the twentieth century. Leopold added an ecological insight to Muir's spirituality of the nineteenth century in the 1930s and 40s. In 1954, natural history writer Joseph Wood Krutch wrote that "the thing missing is love, some feeling for, as well as some understanding of, the inclusive community of rocks and soils, plants and animals, of which we are a part." Environmentalism and wilderness preservation were picked up by the counterculture in the 1960s and put on the national agenda. In the 1990s, though we may still be far from possessing a national or international land ethic, Leopold would be pleased to know that at least philosophy and religion have very definitely heard of it. So the steward versus preservationist debate continues; both camps would preserve wild places, but for fundamentally different reasons.

Personal Responsibility: Implications of a Land Ethic

An instructive activity that occurs on most NOLS courses is the “campsite check,” wherein a group of students and one or two instructors walk around to each campsite after folks have packed up. The purpose of the check is to survey the effects the course has had on the area. The activity has no formal agenda; we look for overturned rocks, matted grass or wildflowers, bits of garbage or food, or any other sign that someone has camped there. And we talk about whether these impacts are ecological or merely aesthetic.

It is not often that people get such immediate feedback about their impacts or, conversely, their ability to walk softly. The campsite check provides a convenient starting point for broader discussions about “minimum-impact living.” What are the practical implications of a wildland ethic to the individual? First, it seems, is this recognition of one’s impacts on the land, both direct while in the backcountry and indirect as a result of daily habits. The second step is to decide if the impacts are acceptable. If they are not, the third step is to reduce those impacts.

Direct impacts on wildlands and other visitors are usually easy to recognize, although they may be quite subtle. Minimizing one’s impact in the backcountry is largely a matter of technique and awareness, but specific practices must be motivated by an ethic, since they generally require a bit more care and effort than other camping practices.

On a larger scale, a wildland ethic must be part of a more encompassing land or environmental ethic which is expressed every day. We can continue to minimize our impact on the land after we leave the backcountry and return to civilization. Aldo Leopold provides a basic guideline for examining our consumption habits and daily lives: “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.” We have considerable freedom in this country to make lifestyle choices that reflect an ethic.

How do we begin to walk more softly? Author

and farmer Wendell Berry repeatedly reminds us of the practical implications of a land ethic. “To use or not to use nature is not a choice that is available to us;” he writes, “we can live only at the expense of other lives. Our choice has rather to do with how and how much to use. And this is not a choice that can be satisfactorily decided in principle or in theory. It is a choice intransigently practical. It must be worked out in local practice.”

The lifestyle choices and changes suggested here by Berry and Leopold are not new or radical. Others before them from different times and cultures, such as Jesus Christ, Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas K. Gandhi, have espoused simple living and self restraint. What is new is the underlying ecological conscience. When told that we must exploit wilderness for resources to maintain our standard of living, David Brower tends to respond that a viable, if often overlooked alternative is to lower that standard.

Individual Responses vs. Collective Action

What are the practical implications of a wildland ethic to our society? There are both personal and societal components of any ethic. In the case of a wildland ethic, its individual manifestations will vary considerably. For many, such an ethic also implies responsibility on a wider scale, through public policy or collective action. In a democracy, legislation and the existence of political activist organizations are to some extent reflections of social attitudes and priorities. Deep ecologists (defined by Devall and Sessions) criticize current environmental and land use legislation and regulations on the basis that they are anthropocentric and utilitarian, both in their philosophical underpinnings and practical applications. Most relevant legislation justifies taking care of the earth in the interest of providing for present and future generations of humans. But despite what some would deem the shallowness

of such motivation, many have found collective action that utilizes current laws and regulations an effective means to an end.

While the wheels of democracy and justice turn slowly and inefficiently, they may provide lightning-quick results relative to the evolutionary process that must occur before a wildland ethic

catches on globally. Things we now take for granted, such as recycling, Earth Day, unleaded gasoline and the Environmental Protection Agency, did not exist thirty years ago. Change happens. We can travel along soft paths in the wilderness and make choices every day that allow those paths to continue to exist.

Educating for Ethics

I know you are tired. I am tired too. Will you walk along the edge of the desert with me?.. This is how to do it. Wait for everything to get undressed and go to sleep. Forget to explain to yourself why you are here. Listen attentively. Just before dawn you will finally hear faint music. This is the sound of the loudest dreaming, the dreams of boulders. Continue to listen until the music isn't there. What you thought about boulders will evaporate and what you know will become clear. Each night it will be harder. Listen until you can hear the dreams of the dust that settles on your head.

-Barry Lopez, *Desert Notes* (1981)

Ethics can be defined as the study of competing (and subjective) moral values. We learn ethics (choosing between “right” and “wrong”) by understanding different facets of a situation and by learning to value the ever-changing pros and cons of our actions. Aldo Leopold states that ethics are the “social approbation for right actions, social disapproval for wrong actions”. Leopold’s statement implies knowledge and consensus about the thorny issue of what constitutes a “right action” (e.g. it is “wrong” to hurt an infant, but it is “right” to give it a needle full of medicine¹). As humans, learning always includes knowledge *and* feelings. For many people, feelings and emotion are the most important guide to what is right and wrong.

Education develops people’s knowledge, and can also affect people’s feelings about a topic. What role does education play in the evolution of a wildland ethic? Regarding the evolution of ethics in general, Charles Darwin writes, “(a)s soon as (a) virtue is honored and practiced by some few men, it spreads through instruction and example to the young, and eventually becomes incorporated in public opinion².” Ethics evolve, therefore, much as other physical human attributes do. In our society, this requires the participation of all our cultural systems and institutions: economic, political, religious and educational.

Public lands managers have a mandate to maintain the ecological health and visual aesthetic of America’s wildlands. They have many tools from which to choose to encourage backcountry visitors to protect the land. Included in that management toolbox are rules, regulations and educational efforts. Unfortunately, education often seems like a slow, inefficient means to an end³.

One look around would seem to indicate that educating people about their connection and consequent responsibilities to the earth is a monumental task. On the other hand, education is probably the **only viable means** through which we can **affect long-term changes in our society’s values and ethics**.

Wilderness as a Classroom

Wilderness education is in a unique position to contribute to the evolution of a wildland ethic. First, wilderness educators can teach people important skills and techniques that help preserve our wildlands. Learning and using skills such as minimum-impact camping and travel techniques are essential to wilderness preservation. These practices allow later backcountry visitors a sense of discovery and solitude, and in some cases, preserve the long-term health of ecological communities⁴

Second, a wilderness experience gives people the opportunity to live simply in and with the wilderness, cultivating a new kind of personal awareness. The immediate feedback of the wilderness environment helps people establish habits of self-scrutiny and careful decision making. We hope people can learn to apply these habits to their daily lives and begin to think in terms of walking softly everywhere they go.

Thirdly, the strongest link between minimum-impact education and backcountry recreationists is the emotion and deep enjoyment that all users in some way share. The principles of Leave No Trace seek to bridge new techniques and users’ personal experience and commitment. No matter what their current habits, backcountry travelers and campers

really want to do the right thing; they are already believers.

Teaching to Instill Ethics

How do we teach this awareness effectively, so that it becomes a part of those we meet, so that it becomes an ethic for them? George N. Wallace, in his article "Law Enforcement and the Authority of the Resource", states that people learn ethics most effectively when they are exposed to ethics as part of an enjoyable discovery of how the world works⁵. For a person in authority to help the public learn ethics, a comfortable relationship needs to be established first. Important components of this educational relationship include appropriate voice and body language, and establishing a common ground of interests or activities. That commonality is the base upon which we can build a new ethic. The different methods people use and the impacts we leave behind are the variables that extend from all recreationists' ethical foundations.

The public needs to be convinced that you are there to help them, not to dictate their actions.

Dr. Wallace writes that you can help people develop ethics by using the "authority of the resource", meaning that you should emphasize **why** adhering to a specific regulation protects their resources from being "loved to death". Wallace uses as an example a forest ranger confronting a hiker with a loose, rambunctious dog in an area where leashes are

required. He suggests that the hiker will be more likely to accept the reasoning for the regulation if the ranger takes a moment to make conversation and then explains how loose dogs can cause problems for wildlife and water sources. Focusing on the resource, rather than valuing blind obedience to a regulation, rule, or authority figure, will help the public develop ethics they will endear and pass

on to others. When we learn interesting things about how the world works in a non-confrontational setting, we can then relate that material to other things we know, and we can use that information to guide future value judgments (ethics.)

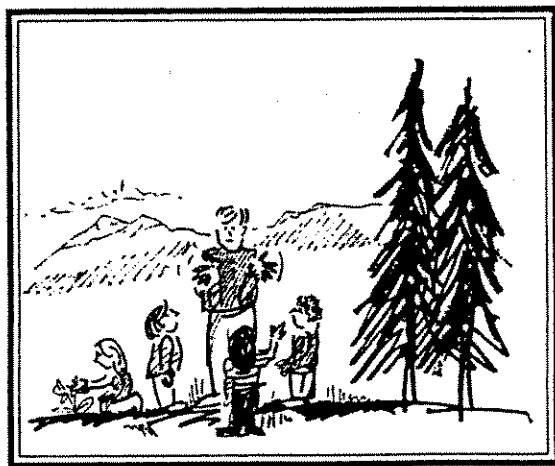
Once an individual develops an ethic, they tend to **pass it on** to others; through their actions, passion and commitment to wild areas. This is where the efficiency of "Education, not Regulation" helps the agencies and the resource. More experienced campers are usually held in high regard by novices. Role modeling, by users and the agencies, has significant impact on the masses, especially in high use areas. Experienced campers or travelers will sometimes confront others regarding their high-impact practices. These experienced campers or travelers care about the resource, and they realize that greater responsibility by users directly equates to less regulation by the agencies, and less degradation of the resource.

This system of learning ethics is as dependent on a comfortable learning atmosphere as it is on **rationalism**. Thoughtlessly extreme preservationism (like saying that dropping grains

of rice is evil because it irreversibly changes the ecology of the region) will impede the development of an ethic that can be passed on to others. Indeed, when most of us realize that we are being told exaggerated points just so we'll behave a certain way, we feel deceived and alienated, often leading to an understandable skepticism about related topics as well. Put minimum impact statements and techniques in

their real context. Be able to cite appropriate research or experience, but don't be afraid to also cite the higher philosophical goal of literally and philosophically **Leaving No Trace**. (Pick up those grains of rice because you brought them and they are not part of the local ecology.)

And finally, we, as Wilderness educators, should be able to give those we meet a glimpse of



our own commitment and passion for wild places. There is a place for passion. Cool analysis is an important component of the defense and protection of wildlands, but that analysis must be fueled by passionate conviction or it becomes flat and ineffective. When it is clear to the public that we really care about these places, and that we ourselves follow the "rules", it becomes easier for them to do the same. Darwin told us that virtue is spread through **instruction** and **example** before it

becomes incorporated into public opinion. Thus it is the responsibility of educators to teach using both methods. Passion for wilderness, constructively channeled and effectively communicated in a cause-and-effect, non-judgmental way, will constitute a powerful example for the public when they are learning a new set of minimum-impact ideas. Consciously orchestrating **emotion** and **rationale** will ultimately encourage all backcountry users to **Leave No Trace**.

Footnotes

¹ Hunt, Jasper, *Ethical Issues in Experiential Education*, 2nd Ed., AEE, Boulder, CO, 1990.

² Darwin, *Descent of Man*. p. 137-8, as quoted in Nash, *The Rights of Nature, A History of Environmental Ethics*, Univ. of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1990, p. 44.

³ Joseph Doucette and David Cole. "Wilderness Visitor Education: Information About Alternative Techniques", USDA Forest Service, Intermountain Research Station, Ogden, 1993, p. 7.

⁴ Cole, David and J. Benedict, "Wilderness Campsite Selection—What Should Users Be Told?", *Park Science*, Vol. 3, No. 4, p. 5-7.

⁵ *Legacy*, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 4-8.

Suggested Readings and References: Wildland Ethics

The following is a list of articles, books and essays related to wildland ethics. Many of them were quoted in this essay, and most of them in some way influenced it. These sources can be referred to for more depth in any one aspect of the subject or for a more detailed historical context.

The books, essays and stories marked with ** are tried and true readings to read aloud to groups. NOLS instructors have read them to courses,

comprised primarily of high school and college students, but many of them also to Instructor Courses or Outdoor Educator Courses comprised of older students. There is a lot of worthwhile reading in this genre; these were chosen because they are good stories with good messages. They can often be used as part of a discussion or on their own. Be sure to know your audience and screen any readings ahead of time to confirm their appropriateness.

** Abbey, Edward. 1977. *The Journey Home*. New York: E. P. Dutton.

The caustic, sharp-tongued spokesman for the American Southwest. See especially the following chapters: "The Crooked Wood;" "Shadows from the Big Woods;" "Freedom and Wilderness, Wilderness and Freedom." These chapters are short and quite readable.

** Abbey, Edward. 1968. *Desert Solitaire, A Season in the Wilderness*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

This book by Abbey is best read slowly and thoughtfully to oneself, but one chapter is controversial enough to make good reading for a somewhat older group. In "Polemic: Industrial Tourism and the National Parks," Abbey outlines some rather radical ideas about restructuring the way our parks are managed, which bring up lots of ethical issues.

Berry, Thomas. 1988. *The Dream of the Earth*. San Francisco: Sierra Club Books.

Berry represents a new breed of theologians searching for a "new" spiritual orientation that returns us, in his words, "to our native place after a long absence, meeting once again with our kin in the earth community." Valuable background material that sheds new light on the steward vs. citizen debate and on the role

of organized religion in the evolution of an environmental ethic.

Berry, Wendell. 1987. Preserving wildness. *Wilderness* Spring 1987: 39-54.

It seems to be impossible for Berry to leave behind his agrarian roots, but those roots lend a note of pragmatism to an area that can become excessively esoteric. This is a thoughtful and thought-provoking essay.

Bookchin, Murray. 1982. *The Ecology of Freedom*. Palo Alto: Cheshire.

A philosophical discussion of the sociological roots of our ecological crisis.

** Carter, Forrest. 1976. *The Education of Little Tree*. Albuquerque: The University of New Mexico Press.

An autobiographical account of Carter's Cherokee boyhood with his grandparents. The lessons he learns are poignantly expressed, loaded with good humor and important for all of us to relearn. Most of the chapters make good stories on their own. The following chapters are particularly good stories with a strong message about our relationship with the natural world: "The Way," "The Secret Place," and "A Dangerous Adventure."

Devall, Bill and George Sessions. 1985. *Deep Ecology, Living as if Nature Mattered*. Salt Lake City: Gibbs M. Smith, Inc.

Devall and Sessions are largely responsible for popularizing deep ecology in this country. The book is an overview of the basic tenets of this influential philosophy.

Dustin, Daniel L. 1985. To feed or not feed the bears. The moral choices we make. *Parks and Recreation*. October, 1985. 54-57,72.

In this article, Dustin applies Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development to outdoor recreation management. The result is a series of thought-provoking ideas and suggestions about ways managers might alter users behavior.

Earth Works Group, The. 1989. *50 Simple Things You Can Do to Save the Earth*. Berkeley, CA: Earthworks Press.

Specific recommendations about practices to minimize one's impact, plus pertinent facts and figures and constructive suggestions about small lifestyle changes that individuals can make to reduce their impact on the land. This book can lend some specificity to a discussion on the personal responsibility associated with a land ethic.

** Eiseley, Loren. 1978. *The Star Thrower*. San Diego, New York, London: Harcourt, Brace, Janovich.

A book of discerning meditations on the natural world and our place in it. The following chapters may be especially thought-provoking for older audiences: "The Fire Apes," "The Dance of the Frogs," and "The Star Thrower."

Fox, Stephen. 1981. *John Muir and his Legacy*. Boston: Little, Brown.

A comprehensive and thorough biography of one of the most influential conservationists of the century.

** Geisel, Theodor Seuss. 1971. *The Lorax*. New York: Random House.

A classic by a master story-teller, and one that almost all ages seem to enjoy hearing.

** Giono, Jean. 1985. *The Man Who Planted Trees*. Chelsea, VT: Chelsea Green Publishing Co.

First published in 1954, this is a wonderfully warm and hopeful short story about a man who devotes his life to planting trees.

** Leopold, Aldo. 1949. *A Sand County Almanac, And Sketches Here and There*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book continues to be a mainstay in the conservation movement. Though Leopold wrote a great deal for academic audiences, this is his only piece of popular literature. "Thinking Like a Mountain" is a very readable and powerful essay.

Nash, Roderick. 1982. *Wilderness and the American Mind*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Nash's classic provides thorough historical coverage of American perceptions of wilderness.

Nash, Roderick. 1989. *The Rights of Nature, A History of Environmental Ethics*. Madison, Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press.

In this book, Nash outlines the progression and expansion of ethical awareness from the pre-ethical past to a hypothetical future, which includes a set of moral precepts about our relationship with nonhuman life and nonliving matter.

Rolston, Holmes. 1989. *Environmental Ethics, Duties to and Values in the Natural World*. Temple University Press.

Rolston is a philosopher at Colorado State University. This book represents years of pioneering work in this subject.

Sax, Joseph L. 1980. *Mountains Without Handrails, Reflections on the National Parks*. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.