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### Talking Wild: A Report on the 4th North American Interdisciplinary Wilderness Conference (Nov. 1993)

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To conceive the wild, to 'create' wilderness areas, to hold academic conferences on wilderness: these are activities which border on the paradoxical. Celebrated at the very foot of the Wasatch Mountains, and with a view of the as-yet uncolonized Great Salt Lake, the Wilderness Conference at Weber State University.1. provided a focus for a many-pronged exploration of the conceptions of wilderness, of its value, and of appropriate human approaches to it..2.

Wilderness encompasses that which escapes human control..3. Many of the talks at the Conference attempted to provide us a grasp of wilderness and the wild. If, however, categorisation of some area as wilderness is a matter of sociocultural construction, and if such construction is already an endeavour aimed at control, then the pursuit of an understanding of wilderness through our conceptualisations of it may be a futile affair. The *apparent* success of such conceptualisations indicates their actual *failure* since apparently comprehensive definitions (for example, in terms of 'biomass' or 'systems' and 'entropy') leave out what is truly wild and uncontrollable in wilderness. One response to this paradoxical situation may be to *defer* reference to the wild in our discourse. This seemed to be David Rothenberg's strategy in his paper "The Idea of the North"; Rothenberg only obliquely spoke of the Northern wilderness by citing the Danish explorer/ethnologist Knud Rasmussen, who in turn quotes an ancient, native Northerner who in turn speaks in the language of myth. Perhaps in this way the need to *speak* of the wild was balanced against the need to *acknowledge* its simultaneous elusiveness and power.

John C. Elder's paper "'Directive': the Poem of New England Wilderness", in contrast, highlighted the resilience of wilderness through an analysis of Robert Frost's poem. Wilderness, apparently extirpated through the colonists' labours, returns to the New England orchards and fields - although -in the guise of domestic spaces and species 'gone wild'. We learn that wilderness may be found (again) where it seemed outlawed by human beings.

The social construction of wilderness was investigated in various papers focusing on women and landscape, such as Kody Patridge's "An [Other] Crack in a 'Civilized' Community." The social construction of wilderness and gender in the wilderness, along with its shaping power, was also illustrated in Michael Cohen's talk "Postmodern

Conditioning" in which he showed that our attempts at adequation, through physical and psychological conditioning, to the stresses of the wilderness results in the "re-creation" of ourselves. Cohen's paper reminded us that wilderness is an effective force even if, or perhaps because, it is beyond our control.

The value of wilderness was at issue in Thom Kuehls', "What is Being Sustained?" and in my "Sustainable Development and Technological Rationality." These papers agreed in the conclusion that the expression 'sustainable development' has been and is being deployed to disguise the wholesale, accelerating industrial development of the natural environment. Ari Santas took on the arduous task of clarifying the basis of the ascription of intrinsic value to nature in his paper, "A Contextualist Theory of Intrinsic Value." Santas pointed out that the natural environment constitutes an interdependent system, each part of which depends on others for its subsistence; consequent, insofar as each part *derives value* from other parts, each part functions *as an end* and may therefore be properly conceived of as having intrinsic value.

Finally, a number of papers addressed the question of what may serve as a sufficient motivation for offering respect to wilderness. As I have noted, Cohen remarked on the power of wilderness in stimulating human re-creation. Writer/photographer Stephen Trimble added to this line of thought in his talk, "The Geography of Childhood: Why Children Need Wild Places." Interestingly, and perhaps ironically, the *extrinsic* value to human beings of wilderness appears to be based on the recognition of its *intrinsic* value. This phenomenon calls for closer scrutiny than is possible here. Roughly, it seems that wilderness, as exemplar of (non-human) generative powers attains extrinsic value to us human beings not only because it serves our interests in survival but also because it can provide a *model* for other forms of creativity. Consequently, the more clearly we perceive the inherent value of wilderness in terms of its self-generative powers, the more pronounced is its value to us as witnesses.

Recognition of the value of wilderness constituted by its *independence* from human intervention leads to arguments for respectful forms of approach by human beings. This was the theme explored by Stephen Herrero's "Wilderness Use and Consumption" and J. Williams and C. Monz's "Fragile Rivers," for example. Ultimately, this Conference made clear that wilderness, insofar as valuable for human self-realization, calls for our *active* attention. In this spirit some of us closed our explorations of wilderness by walking along the Wasatch's rugged, undeveloped ridges and along the humanly unencumbered, marshy shores of the nearby Great Salt Lake. Lyall Crawford's, "Talking Wild", made clear that the *talk of the wild* calls for the *practice of the wild*. As Gary Snyder tells us,

The wild requires that we learn the terrain, nod to all the plants and animals and birds, ford the streams and cross the ridges, and tell a good story when we get back home..4.

## Notes

1. For participation in the Arts and Humanities section of the 1994 Conference, to be held Nov. 10-12, contact Dr. L. Mikel Vause, Dept. of English, Weber State University, Ogden, UT 84408- 3807, U.S.A.

2. In what follows I offer a subjective selection of vistas, the incompleteness of which does not reflect on the value of the papers that failed to receive a mention.

3. See, e.g., Gary Snyder, "The Etiquette of Freedom" in *The Practice of the Wild* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1990), especially pp. 8-18.

4. Snyder, p.24.

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