

Ode to the Remaining Wilderness

by

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This was originally intended as a eulogy for the remaining wilderness of North America, especially for the Alaska National Wildlife Refuge. However, the wilderness had not yet been entirely erased from this continent, nor should we allow it to be. So I have retitled this essay in hopes that a eulogy will prove unnecessary.

Congress is speeding towards opening ANWR to oil drilling. Conservative pro-drilling groups have established propaganda sites on the web (ANWR.com, ANWR.org, etc.) touting drilling as humane and responsible, and claiming that the resources of ANWR will feed our energy demands—state by state—for many years to come. Their figures are unrealistic; they must be considering every bit of oil which has even the remotest possibility of existing within ANWR. And they must also be considering every last drop of it to be extractable.

According to the most reliable figures published by the US Geological Survey, found in their 1998 assessment(1), ANWR contains somewhere between 5.7 and 16 billion barrels of oil (Gb), with the most likely figure being somewhere in the neighborhood of 10.4 Gb. Recoverable reserves are estimated to lie between 4.3 and 11.8 Gb, with a mean value of 7.7 Gb. The United States consumed 7.3 Gb of oil in 2003. So, under the best circumstances ANWR could only supply us with a little over one year and a half worth of oil. Compared to other notable oil fields ANWR is 7/100ths the size of Ghawar, and holds about the same comparison to the West Siberian Basin. It is about 1/4th the size of the North Sea Graben deposits. The USGS reports that the entire region of northern Alaska ranks 25 on a listing of world hydrocarbon deposits.(2) For this we are willing to destroy one of the last pristine habitats on the planet?

The pro-drilling websites claim that drilling will not damage the environment. Some of their material even goes so far as to say that the wildlife will benefit from the careful management of the oil industry. Yet two separate scientific studies point to the opposite conclusion. In an exhaustive study published by the National Academy of Science, a team of researchers studied the cumulative effect of oil and gas activities on the North Slope of Alaska.(3) The researchers found environmental degradation across the board, with loss of habitat and diminished quality of life for most of the wildlife. A study by the USGS found similar results, particularly with regard to Caribou herds.(4) The USGS study looked specifically at caribou within ANWR and found that oil and natural gas activities would have a negative impact upon the caribou. ANWR holds one of the largest remaining caribou herds in the Arctic. And that herd is now endangered.

But what does a herd of caribou matter when compared to a few years of domestic oil production and a nice profit for a few people in key places? When the lights go out in the lower 48, and gas stations begin rationing, will we allow a bunch of ungulates to stand in the way of a slight increase in domestic energy production?

As goes ANWR...

ANWR is only the most noticeable tip of the iceberg here, as the White House and Congress are working together to open our entire remaining wilderness to resource production. Other prominent targets include opening protected lands in the Rocky Mountain fore-thrust and elsewhere to energy production, and opening all of our national forests to logging (in doublespeak language, in order to protect them from forest fires). Nor is this madness confined to the US. Canada is preparing to rip up much of Alberta in order to reach the precious tar sands. In the process they will create a new mountain range composed of tailings, and the world's largest waste water reservoir.

What we are witnessing is the opening salvos of resource gobbling—truly the gobbling of crumbs—as peak oil announces a new age of depleting resources. Since the dawn of the industrial age, and mostly within the last century, we have gobbled up resources at a prodigious rate. Within the next few decades we will see shortages of everything from phosphorus to iron, aluminum and other various metals. We will soon face shortages of

wood, fertile soil and drinking water. Even if we continue to fend off this initial scramble to open the remaining wilderness, the question is for how long? From here, the situation will only worsen. And how long can we keep the vultures out of the remaining wilderness once resource depletion once resource depletion begins to impact our daily lives?

Is that, then, the only true value of our remaining wilderness, as a repository of resources against the fast approaching day when they will be needed? Is that why we set these lands aside and protected them from commercial enterprise? Are we so far removed from the wilderness that we can no longer remember its true value?

The True Value of the Wilderness

The argument could be made that the true value of the wilderness lies in the biological diversity it contains. The continuation of life on this planet, long after the species *Homo Sapiens sapiens* has exhausted its gene pool, is ensured within the wilderness. And there is likely some truth to this argument.

It can also be argued that the remaining wilderness holds the tattered web of life on this planet together. Species extinctions are continuing at an alarming rate as a result of the activities of industrial man. The web of life is already off balance; if we pillage the remaining wilderness, we risk severing the remaining key threads in that web. And no one can foresee where this chain of effects will lead.

One could state that the greatest value of the wilderness lies in its aesthetics. That to destroy the remaining land where the wolves trot and the eagles soar would be tantamount to defacing the Mona Lisa or bulldozing the Sistine Chapel. And while this argument is true enough, it has never stopped us before—either with regard to works of art or works of nature.

No, it is my contention here that the wilderness is the true sanctuary of freedom, and that this is its greatest value. In this respect, the wilderness could truly be called the soul of America, the soul which gave the native peoples their ways, the soul which called to the frontiersmen, the mountainmen and the explorers, the soul which ultimately gave birth to the declaration of independence, the New England transcendentalists, the spirit of Benjamin Franklin and Walt Whitman, and the concepts of freedom and democracy which are so dear to us.

The Sanctuary of Freedom

An interesting example of Orwellian doublespeak as it has developed in the US is the word freedom. In the American lexicon, freedom has come to mean the freedom of corporations to generate profit and the freedom of the public to consume. Freedom is measured by to number of dollars you generate, and the number of dollars you spend. Freedom is supposed to be the inherent right of every US citizen, but how free are we really? Most of the public has only a limited ability to generate profit, but we all have the freedom to consume. Freedom is the ability to buy whatever you want in whatever brand, model, or style that you desire. But is the freedom to consume truly freedom at all?

Freedom is supposed to be measured by the ability to do whatever you want, whenever you want and wherever you want. But try to do this without worrying about generating an income, servicing your debt or storing your possessions. By this standard, the freest person you are likely to see is that homeless guy riding his bicycle and rifling through garbage bins.

In reality, the amount of freedom you have is inverse to the number of possessions you own. Each item that you own is a ball and chain hampering your freedom. If you own a car, or a house, or any other possessions, then you are tied down by your car insurance, your mortgage, your bills, your consumer debt, and the material things themselves.

The people who truly founded this country did taste freedom, and they tasted it in the wilderness. We are talking about people like Daniel Boone, back when he lived in a cave in the Kentucky frontier. We are talking about the trappers and the mountainmen, and the Indians whom they found already living in the wilderness. The pioneers and settlers who followed those first explorers were already tamed of their freedom to some degree,

to a homestead and to providing a living for themselves and their family. But even they were freer than your average US citizen of today.

Those who have lived in the wilderness are the freest people on the planet. Not that their life is easy. We first began to cede our freedom for security—the security of a regular meal, the security of having a roof over our heads and some sort of safety net to insure our security and welfare against any mishap. But the price of this security is not the price of freedom, it is the inverse: the forfeiture of freedom is the price of this security.

Yet, so long as there remains some wilderness where people could potentially go (and some few do) to escape the ties that bind, then the whisper of freedom is still alive. This, then, is the true value of the remaining wilderness.

The Enemies of Freedom

Our economy is based upon debt and consumption. Without mounting debt to create more profit, and without more consumption to drive the whole machine, our economy would grind to a halt. Because of this, the freedom of the wilderness is antithetical to our modern way of life.

To ensure that a significant portion of the population does not opt out for the freedom of the wilderness, people are tied into the economy at a young age. And really, who would want to live at the mercy of nature, with the insects and the weather, when he or she can live in comfort and opulence? In our childhood, we are instilled with a desire to consume, throughout our school years we are trained to become productive servants of the economy, and perhaps the main rite of adulthood is now the ownership of a car, with all of the bills which that accrues. Nowadays, before most young folks even graduate high school, they already have a credit card and a consumer debt.

The wilderness, itself, which once covered this entire continent, has been pushed back to the remote corners, in ecosystems where it is the most difficult to survive. And there are forces at work in our government that want to ban all public use of public lands, leaving them reserved for government and industry.

The knowledge of how to live in the wilderness—that is, the knowledge of how to be free—has been all but forgotten. It is a wonder that this knowledge survives at all. But it can be found in survival manuals and anthropological treatises. Tom Brown Jr. has done a very good job of assembling this knowledge and making it widely available. And if you wish to read a very basic overview of the subject, you can read my article, A Matter of Survival, at http://www.survivingpeakoil.com/article.php?id=matter_of_survival. While this article does leave out a great deal, it contains the basics, and if you read put it into practice, then you will never have to worry about starving or going homeless, plus you will have a taste of what freedom really is.

Let me state that all of this is not in the nature of a conspiracy—or, rather, that it is an unstated conspiracy in which we have all taken part. In our very efforts to try to get back to nature and escape from the rat race, we act to limit the wilderness and our own freedom. We buy a piece of land, cut down the trees, plough it up and build a home. We chase out the wildlife, eradicate the native vegetation and plant ourselves a lawn. The few who truly do retreat into nature are viewed as outcasts, mentally incompetent, homeless and poor. Most disappear from our civilization and are rarely heard from again.

Giants in Their Steps

In all remaining wilderness areas there are a few people who are still living the free life. they are generally recluses and it can be very hard to make contact with them. But they are to be found, particularly in the Canadian Rockies, British Columbia, the Yukon Territories and Alaska. In this region of the North American Cordillera, there is still a big open land where people can live freely. But this land is coveted for its timber and its mineral wealth. And this age of depleted resources may very well bring these remaining practitioners of freedom into conflict with modern civilization.

I spent many years writing a novel about this very subject, an epic entitled Giants in Their Steps. This novel explores in full all of the themes mentioned in this essay. In this book, I attempted to give the reader a taste

of true freedom, and a subjective knowledge of what is at risk if we do not change our relationship with nature. I have been told that this book succeeds very well. Readers have said that it is an impelling book, which throws out all of the conventions of novel writing and yet succeeds wonderfully.

Though I shopped it around for years, *Giants in Their Steps* would not be picked up by the publishing industry. Time and again, I was told that it was a very good book which deserved to be published, but everyone was reluctant to do so mainly on account of its size, but also because of its content. Finally, I resorted to self-publishing with a print on demand publisher, www.lulu.com. The book can now be purchased directly from the publisher, through amazon.com, or by special order wherever books are sold. But now this novel languishes for lack of attention, just as the remaining wilderness languishes.

Giants, in the end, is a cautionary tale. It warns of what we will lose if we pillage the remaining wilderness. And now that we enter the age of resource depletion, the stage is set for that pillage to take place. Let us hope that there is enough awareness of what is at stake to turn back this madness. It is my hope that *Giants in Their Steps* may yet bring this conflict onto a personal level, and in so doing help to galvanize the public against opening the remaining wilderness areas to industrial exploitation.

The years to come will be difficult, but we must learn to curb our rampant consumption. We must seek a more sustainable way of living. We must realize the true value of the wilderness. Such is the price of freedom.

Notes

1 Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, 1002 Area, Petroleum Assessment, 1998, including Economic Analysis, Bird, Kenneth J. & Houseknecht, David W. USGS, 1998. <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/fs-0028-01/fs-0028-01.htm> or <http://pubs.usgs.gov/fs/fs-0028-01/fs-0028-01.pdf>

2 Ranking of the World's Oil and Gas Provinces by Known Petroleum Volume, Klett, T.R., et al. USGS open file report 97-463, last modified August 2004. <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/1997/ofr-97-463/97463.html>

3 Cumulative Environmental Effects of Oil and Gas Activities on Alaska's North Slope, authors. Nat'l Academies Press, 2003. <http://books.nap.edu/openbook/0309087376/html/index.html>

4 Arctic Refuge Coastal Plain Terrestrial Wildlife Research Summaries, authors. USGS, date. <http://www.absc.usgs.gov/1002/index.htm>