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# PROTECTING THE WILD

PARKS AND WILDERNESS,  
THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

## INTRODUCTION

### *Protected Areas and the Long Arc Toward Justice*

TOM BUTLER

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**PROTECTING THE WILD: PARKS AND WILDERNESS,  
THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION**

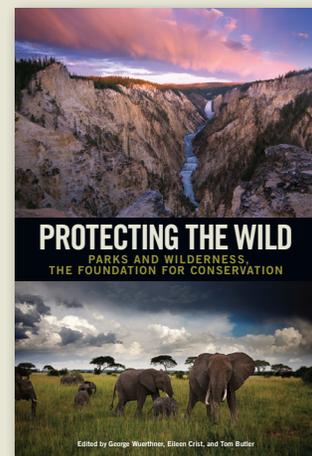
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**C**RAYFISH ARE CRUNCHY. And, it appears, tasty. Sound travels easily over water, and we can hear each distinct bite as an otter devours a crustacean across the pond from where our canoes float. Curious about the passing travelers, the pair of otters has retreated to a mudflat; they gambol about for a while, then sit, partially submerged and attentive. They watch us, unperturbed, while one finishes his snack. We enjoy their company for a time, and paddle on.

Where are we? First and foremost, we are uninvited but seemingly welcome guests in the home of otters. Three canoeing buddies and I are exploring an expansive wetlands complex in New York's Adirondack Park, the largest park in the contiguous United States, a 125-year-old patchwork of private and public land, the latter of which comprises the Adirondack Forest Preserve. The Forest Preserve is protected as "forever wild"; in perpetuity there can be no logging or development on these public lands. In the lexicon of conservation, we are in a "protected area."

On this brilliant late summer day, we have witnessed the aforementioned otters crunching, kingfishers cavorting, a northern goshawk plying the skies, and a gray jay, so typical of this boreal forest country, perched upon a larch at water's edge. Black bears, fishers, coyotes, deer, and moose are here, too, unseen today, but undoubtedly preparing for the long winter in this northern realm, not far from the Canadian border. And indeed, the landscape looks like much of eastern Canada, with spruce and fir interspersed with some species more typical of the northern hardwood forest to the south, sugar maple and yellow birch in particular.

Everywhere one looks the sights are pleasing to the eye—water and tree-clad hills stretching to the distance. The smells are earthy, piney and sprucey with a dollop of Christmastime (balsam) that will mix with our campfire smoke this evening. The sounds are also noteworthy—the occasional chattering of chickadees and wail of a loon wafting over the water, and between these natural noises a background sound track of . . . nothing. No traffic. No chain saws. No motors of any kind. Silence, the rarest of privileges in a world of 7-plus billion humans transforming the world in our image.

These are the gifts of the wilderness for those of us lucky enough to have time and the inclination to seek them out. The effort to reach what I'll call "Otter Pond" was modest—some hours of paddling and portaging, with one quick dunk in cold water when I lost my footing while dragging the canoe upstream over rocky shallows. The re-

turn on this muscular investment was extraordinary—the opportunity to experience beauty, spiritual refreshment, and the companionship of old friends, to reminisce with them about previous wilderness adventures and to contemplate future ones. Another gift was solitude. In a park that is within a day's drive of 60 million people, during the height of tourist season, we spent four days in the woods and saw no one else.

Our trip was not epic. No grizzlies charged us. No mist-shrouded summits were conquered. The scenery, while lovely, was commonplace to the region.

What is remarkable is the resurgence of wildness across the landscape. For more than a century, the area we canoed had been subject to intensive exploitation and manipulation at the hands of men (gender exclusivity intended). A moldering wooden dam at the pond outlet and an old railroad bed through the wetlands were some of the infrastructure that supported past logging operations. Not far from our campsite we found the remains of a former settlement along that long-defunct railroad; in the 1910s it had included a depot, sawmill, post office, etc. Now it is barely visible, just some crumbling foundations covered with moss, trees growing skyward where a roof once shed rain. In 1923 a forest fire swept through the area and *rewilding* commenced. Today the land is more wild than it was a century ago, and because of its conservation, in another century it is likely to be wilder still, and therefore more resilient to climate change effects.

Otter Pond is representative of the Adirondacks and so many other places where nineteenth-century timber barons scalped the land and moved on. Reacting to that rapacious logging, conservationists who were concerned about deforestation, associated watershed degradation, and collapse of wildlife populations succeeded in having New York establish a "Forest Preserve" including lands in the Adirondacks and the Catskills in 1885. At a constitutional convention the following decade, the clause ensuring that the public lands comprising the Adirondack and Catskill Forest Preserves would remain "forever wild" was incorporated into New York's state constitution.<sup>1</sup> (That conservation landmark celebrates its 120th anniversary this year.)

The pioneering conservationists who were responsible—among them the civil rights lawyer Louis Marshall, who was father of Wilderness Society cofounder Robert Marshall—blazed a path that still leads toward expanding beauty and health. Indeed, the Adirondack Park may be the greatest example of rewilding on Earth, the fullest

expression of the incremental reforestation of the north-eastern United States following the first wave of logging associated with European colonization of North America. Those otters at home in the Adirondack Forest Preserve, we visitors enjoying a sojourn in the forest, and future generations of wild residents and human recreationists owe earlier conservationists an immense debt of gratitude. Because of conservation action, the Adirondacks are more ecologically vibrant, provide more secure wildlife habitat, and are a more intact canvas for natural processes to create, shape, and sustain biodiversity than other parts of the Northeast<sup>2</sup> outside protected areas. That the Adirondack Park also provides tremendous social and economic values including watershed protection, the initial reason for its creation, is equally clear.

The landscape here is not pristine. It is not virginal, a place where, in the marvelous mixed metaphor attributed to the late David Brower, “the hand of man never set foot.” The designated “wilderness” and “wild forest” units that make up the Adirondack Forest Preserve are *free*, consistent with the etymological roots of the word “wilderness,” to follow their own course. They are self-willed lands, home to self-willed creatures.

The Adirondack Park is part of an amazing legacy of protected areas that now cover approximately 13 percent of Earth’s land surface. (That percentage includes all categories of conserved land, from strictly protected natural areas to places managed for “sustainable” resource production.) Across the planet, every national and state park, wilderness area, wildlife refuge, nature sanctuary, or other permanently conserved habitat exists today for one reason only: because an individual or group of individuals worked to have them protected. There is a grand history here; it is global in scope, and that historical narrative helps inform current discussions and debates about the future role of protected areas.

During the few months bracketing my Adirondack canoe trip, conservationists in the United States noted several landmarks:

The first is that 2014 marked the 150th anniversary of the Yosemite land grant when President Abraham Lincoln signed legislation giving Yosemite Valley to the state of California for its permanent protection with the condition that the land “be held for public use, resort, and recreation.” That action put the federal government in the conservation business, setting the stage for the creation of Yellowstone, the world’s first national park, the following decade.<sup>3</sup> (Yosemite Valley would come back into the fed-

eral domain several decades later after Yosemite National Park was established.)

A second landmark was the hundred-year anniversary of the death of the last passenger pigeon,<sup>4</sup> a captive bird named Martha. Formerly the most abundant bird species in North America (and perhaps anywhere on Earth), passenger pigeons entered the dark night of extinction in 1914. Martha died alone in the Cincinnati Zoo, a testament to the shattered myth that nature was inexhaustible and endlessly resilient.

Landmark three was the 50th anniversary of the Wilderness Act of 1964, which created America’s national wilderness preservation system. The result of years of grassroots organizing and advocacy, the law is surely one of the most eloquent statutes ever passed, its language largely the work of Howard Zahniser, then executive secretary of the Wilderness Society.<sup>5</sup> Zahniser’s pen was well used, inscribing more than 60 drafts before the final version became law. Not incidentally, Zahniser was a part-time resident of the Adirondacks, his family having a vacation cabin there, where he sometimes worked on those many drafts of the wilderness bill.<sup>6</sup> “Zahnie,” as his friends called him, had been introduced to the region by conservationist Paul Schaefer, a tireless defender of the park’s wild rivers during the mid-century era when dam building was all the rage. Schaefer’s activism had been influenced, in part, by the Adirondacks’ preeminent family of wilderness advocates, the Marshalls. Schaefer first met Robert Marshall atop Mt. Marcy, New York’s highest peak, in 1932, and was a longtime conservation colleague of his brother, George Marshall, following Bob’s untimely death.<sup>7</sup>

These three anniversaries reveal something about the evolution of arguments for protected areas. It’s interesting to me that as the arguments for conserving protected areas morphed from aesthetic and recreational to scientific and ecological values—“from scenery to nature” in Dave Foreman’s concise summation<sup>8</sup>—previous rationales were not abandoned, but built upon. To apply a geological metaphor, there has been deposition and accretion, but not erosion.

The suite of reasons undergirding advocacy for parks and wilderness areas deepened with the insights emerging from the fields of landscape ecology and conservation biology in the latter decades of the twentieth century. This did not, however, make moot the earlier, experiential arguments for conservation. Millions of us who visit national parks each year still are motivated by the scenic beauty of wild nature. We who seek to enjoy the freedom

of the wilderness with family and friends still treasure the experience of muscle-powered recreation in a primitive setting and the challenge of developing appropriate skills for travel in wild country. Some 168 years after Henry David Thoreau was buffeted by howling winds atop Mount Katahdin—later describing the “Titanic” scenery he encountered there and averring that the “mossy and *moosey*” Maine woods were “no man’s garden”—we feel exactly the same awe at natural forces in a wilderness setting. But there are now far fewer places on Earth one could describe as intact, primeval, wild, or ungardened, far fewer places where wildlife is secure from the pressures, direct and indirect, of a burgeoning humanity.

Which is why, of course, flocks of passenger pigeons no longer darken the skies and vast herds of bison no longer rumble across the Great Plains of North America. And why modern conservationists have viewed protected areas and wildlife protection laws as the key tools for combating the human-caused extinctions of our fellow members in the community of life. The conservation movement in the United States arose as a counterpoint to the loss of wilderness and wildlife as Euro-American culture swept across the continent. Conservation ideas, and particularly the national park concept, spread quickly across the globe and were widely embraced in diverse cultures.

When American conservationists succeeded in passing the Wilderness Act in 1964, the law didn’t just codify the notion that some places should remain off-limits to resource exploitation; it also reflected a century’s worth of intellectual development in conservation philosophy and practice. Implicitly, the law acknowledged that wild places have intrinsic value, regardless of their utility to people. In a notable bit of historical congruence, Congress also enacted a major piece of civil rights legislation in 1964.<sup>9</sup> It extended rights to a marginalized category of people whose skin had more melanin than that of the country’s ethnic majority. That law did not magically abrogate racial prejudice but helped expand justice.

The Wilderness Act did the same, moving society toward a more equitable relationship between people and nonhuman nature. In effect, the law suggested that humanity’s sphere of ethical concern should expand to embrace all members of the biotic community, including traditionally marginalized members such as large carnivores. This is a remarkable idea to emerge in an extraction- and use-focused culture, which has viewed the landscape almost exclusively through the lens of economic possibility: “How can I profit from this place? Can I log it, or mine it,

or graze it? How can I make it my garden?”

A century and a half of conservation experience tells us that protected areas are popular, effective,<sup>10</sup> and broadly supported—but almost always controversial before establishment and sometimes long after. Land conservation stimulates strong feelings, particularly on the wilderness end of the spectrum but even sometimes when sustainable resource production is the objective. Land use is deeply personal. It is no surprise when communities with economic and cultural ties to particular extractive industries—industrial forestry and paper production in Maine, for example, or ranching and wool production in Patagonia—are skeptical about proposed protected areas. While there are exceptions to this norm, parks and wilderness areas very often have been the targets of such hostility from “traditional” resource users.

What is perhaps more surprising is when protected areas are attacked from the left for being the colonialist residue of Western imperialism. In truth, the modern conservation movement arose as a counterrevolutionary force in response to the land degradation and wildlife holocaust associated with the expansion of industrial civilization, a wave that extirpated indigenous cultures as well as native species. The movement’s foremost tool—protected areas—rejects a colonialist, imperialist attitude toward the living Earth. The designation of protected areas is an expression of humility about the limits of human knowledge and a gesture of respect toward our fellow creatures, allowing them to flourish in their homes without fear of persecution.

**PERHAPS NOT SURPRISING** but discouraging is when it becomes trendy to attack parks and wilderness using strawman arguments. This seems to occur periodically and, unfortunately, the latest rhetorical dustup is under way. Indeed, it is the reason for this book, and for its companion volume, *Keeping the Wild: Against the Domestication of Earth*,<sup>11</sup> which constructively critiques a nexus of ideas being advanced by so-called new environmentalists or social conservationists. These ideas include:

- ▶ The Anthropocene has arrived, and humans are now de facto planetary managers;
- ▶ If “pristine wilderness” ever existed, it is all gone now; moreover, focusing on wilderness preservation has poorly served the environmental movement;
- ▶ Nature is highly resilient, not fragile;
- ▶ To succeed, conservation must serve human aspirations, primarily regarding economic growth and development;

- ▶ Maintaining “ecosystem services,” not preventing human-caused extinction, should be conservation’s primary goal;
- ▶ Conservationists should not critique capitalism but rather should partner with corporations to achieve better results;
- ▶ Conservation should focus on better management of the domesticated, “working landscape” rather than efforts to establish new, strictly protected natural areas.

This last point regarding the future role of protected areas is of such crucial importance that we have developed *Protecting the Wild* to consider it. Should the primary goal of conservation be to establish systems of interconnected conservation reserves across the globe—anchored by strictly protected areas such as national parks and wilderness areas—intended to halt the extinction crisis and sustain the evolutionary flourishing of all Earth’s biota?

Or is such a goal of planetary rewilding a naive dream in a time of ballooning human numbers, with the demographic trajectory headed toward 10 billion or more people, the majority of whom will live in poverty? Given this context, should conservation give up on its core commitment of stopping anthropogenic extinctions and instead focus on humanized, managed landscapes intended to produce “ecological services” for people?

These questions are addressed in *Protecting the Wild* by a prominent cast of scientists, academics, and conservation practitioners from multiple continents. After a foreword by tropical ecologist John Terborgh, the book is organized into three sections—“Bold Thinking About Protecting the Wild”; “Rewilding Earth, Rewilding Ourselves”; and “Protected Areas, the Foundation for Conservation.” The volume concludes with an afterword by Douglas Tompkins, the businessman-turned-conservation philanthropist. With his wife Kristine McDivitt Tompkins—former CEO of Patagonia Inc.—and colleagues, Tompkins has helped conserve well over 2 million acres, creating or expanding five national parks in Chile and Argentina.

The latest of these, the 130,000-hectare El Impenetrable National Park in the Chaco Province of northern Argentina, was formally established as Argentina’s 32nd national park with a unanimous vote in Congress just before this volume went to press. As with most contemporary, large-scale conservation initiatives, it was a public-

private collaboration. Argentine conservationists worked tenaciously to develop political support and raise funds to support the project.<sup>12</sup> The positive outcome for wildlife and local communities was made possible by broad-based fundraising and a major gift from a family foundation established by Tompkins.

This is not an isolated victory. Using science, passion, and ethical persuasion, conservationists are striving and succeeding to expand protected areas around the globe. In November of 2014, thousands of advocates from some 160 countries gathered at the World Parks Congress to chart the future direction of the parks movement. There was tremendous excitement and energy for a global commitment to protected areas that is commensurate with the ecological and social challenges we face.

The days of protecting wild nature are not, and should not, be in the past. A bolder, resurgent conservation movement need not settle for an agenda based on trying to ameliorate the effects of humanity’s numbers and overconsumption. Rather, it might sound a clarion call for a peace treaty between humans and nature, a cease-fire in industrial humanity’s war on wild nature. The most tangible sign of that rapprochement would be the encircling ribbons of green and blue, strongholds of terrestrial and marine<sup>13</sup> wildness, around the globe. It would be a profoundly pro-life movement, articulating the value of protecting nature for biodiversity, for humanity, for climate stability, for peace, and for future generations—of otters and people.

While he did not originate the aphorism, Martin Luther King Jr., the American civil rights leader, famously said, “The arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” That long arc bends fitfully in our diverse human tribe and, if we open our eyes to the natural world, we see that it also bends toward justice—and diversity, and beauty, and wildness—in the whole community of life.

The fundamental choice for our species is whether we will continue striving to be the planetary manager, the gardener-in-chief, or become a respectful member in the community of life. With every action to reassert the dominion of beauty, diversity, and wildness over the Earth—each hectare protected, each habitat secured—we tug the universe a bit more toward justice. That is the overarching story of conservation—past, present, and future.

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## NOTES

1. Frank Graham Jr. describes the park's birth, the passage of the "forever wild" clause at the 1894 New York state constitutional convention, and the subsequent defense of the Adirondack Forest Preserve's constitutional protections in his classic book, *The Adirondack Park: A Political History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978).
2. The land use changes, geology, wildlife status, and many other facets of Adirondack Park ecology and history are wonderfully illuminated in J. Jenkins, *The Adirondack Atlas: A Geographic Portrait of the Adirondack Park* (New York: Wildlife Conservation Society, 2004). The recovery of otter, black bear, beaver, white-tailed deer, and other native species from their greatly reduced nineteenth-century populations is another example that habitat conservation and wildlife protection laws can be extremely effective.
3. See D. Duncan, *Seed of the Future: Yosemite and the Evolution of the National Park Idea* (San Francisco: Yosemite Conservancy, 2013).
4. See [passengerpigeon.org](http://passengerpigeon.org) for information about events marking the 100th anniversary of passenger pigeon's extinction.
5. James Morton Turner describes the development of that wilderness bill campaign, its eventual success, and the way it influenced subsequent history in his brilliant book *The Promise of Wilderness: American Environmental Politics Since 1964* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012).
6. See E. Zahniser, *Where Wilderness Preservation Began: Adirondack Writings of Howard Zahniser* (Utica, NY: North Country Books, 1992).
7. D. Gibson, pers. comm., 2014. Conservation activist and historian David Gibson, a long-time friend of the Schaefer and Zahniser families, cofounded Adirondack Wild: Friends of the Forest Preserve ([adirondackwild.org](http://adirondackwild.org)).
8. D. Foreman, "Wilderness: From Scenery to Nature" in *Wild Earth: Wild Ideas for a World Out of Balance*, ed. T. Butler (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2002).
9. L. Savoy, "Wilderness and Civil Rights 50 Years Later: Recognizing the Ties of Race and Place," *Huffington Post* (9-3-14), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauret-savoy/wilderness-and-civil-righ\\_b\\_5760902.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/lauret-savoy/wilderness-and-civil-righ_b_5760902.html).
10. B. Coetzee, K. Gaston, and S. Chown, "Local Scale Comparisons of Biodiversity as a Test for Global Protected Area Ecological Performance: A Meta-Analysis," *PLoS ONE* 9, no. 8 (2014): e105824, doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0105824.
11. G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler, eds. (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2014).
12. Birthing new national parks is a collaborative activity, but Argentine biologist and conservationist Sofia Heinonen deserves especial commendation for the successful creation of Impenetrable National Park. She worked tirelessly to align the politics and private funding needed, the majority of which came in the form of a major grant from Conservation Land Trust–Argentina, a foundation established by Douglas and Kristine Tompkins.
13. *Protecting the Wild* focuses on terrestrial protected areas due to space and thematic constraints. The editors fully recognize, however, that Earth is mostly a blue planet, and no conservation agenda that seeks to fully protect the wild can ignore the pressing need for a global system of marine protected areas, anchored by strictly protected marine wilderness areas.