

Ramachandra Guha



Environmentalism

A GLOBAL HISTORY

LONGMAN WORLD HISTORY SERIES
SERIES EDITOR, MICHAEL ADAS

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The Growth of the Wilderness Idea

I shift now to a third variety of environmentalism, the conservation of wild species and wild habitats. The formal history of wilderness conservation is little more than a century old, but viewed more broadly this movement has an ancient lineage. On the one side are popular traditions of 'sacred groves,' patches of forest worshipped as the home of deities and protected from human interference, that are to be found in all non-Christian cultures: Hindu Nepal, Buddhist Thailand, those parts of Africa that retain their ancestral religions. On the other side were elite feudal traditions of 'hunting preserves'—prevalent in Norman England, Qing China and Mughal India—where animal species such as the tiger and the deer were reserved for the exclusive pleasure of lords and kings, with peasants and commoners banned from the hunt and sometimes from the preserve itself. However, my focus here is on the distinctively modern traditions of nature conservation, the growth of the wilderness idea in the decades since the establishment of the first national park in the western United States during the latter half of the nineteenth century.

CONSERVATION IN THE COLONIES

We live in a time of international environmental conferences: seminars of atmospheric scientists, struggling to make sense of the dynamics of climate change; meetings of heads of state, putting their signatures

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to this or that treaty to protect biodiversity; communions of social activists, exchanging notes on how best to mobilize public opinion to resist environmental degradation.

These meetings have become more frequent in recent years, with the revolution in communications and the growing ease with which people now talk or move back and forth across the continents. But which was the first-ever 'international' environmental conference? It took place in the distant year 1900, in the city of London, and its topic was the protection of the wildlife of Africa. Characteristically for the times, there were no Africans present, the delegates to the meeting being the foreign ministers of the European colonial powers who then controlled the continent: France, Germany, Belgium, Italy, Spain, Portugal, and pre-eminently, Great Britain.

Convened by the British Foreign Office, the London conference was spurred by the massive destruction of African wildlife by European hunters in the preceding decades. For young men serving in the outposts of empire, hunting was the preferred form of recreation, offering trophies scarcely to be found at home. As one colonial official candidly remarked in 1857, 'the main attraction of India lay in the splendid field it offered for the highest and noblest order of sport, in the pursuit of the wild and savage denizens of its forests and jungles, its mountains and groves:' hunting here was, indeed, a 'welcome change from the boredom of shooting seals in the Shetland Isles.' India boasted the tiger and the Asian elephant, but Africa offered greater opportunities still. Through the nineteenth century, European soldiers, officials, missionaries and travellers relentlessly hunted anything that moved: elephant, lion, leopard, cheetah, zebra, antelope, or wildebeest. By the turn of the century, as *The Times* of London recorded, it was

necessary to go far into the interior to find the nobler forms of antelope and still further if the hunter wants to pursue the elephant, the rhinoceros, or the giraffe. It is perfectly clear that very soon those animals, unless something is done to prevent their extermination, will be stamped out as completely as the dodo.

The parties to the London conference of 1900 signed a 'Convention for the Preservation of Animals, Birds and Fish in Africa.' Although the title indicates a grand sweep, in point of fact the conservation measures introduced were rather modest. Only a few endangered species were accorded complete protection: these included the gorilla, the giraffe, and the chimpanzee. For some other threatened species, such as the elephant and the gazelle, hunters were given licenses

which limited the numbers that could be shot and prohibited the shooting of infants and pregnant females. Ironically, some species were classified as 'vermin,' deemed dangerous to men and cattle, and their killing was expressly encouraged. Bounties were thus offered for the shooting of the lion and the leopard—among the most cherished of wild animals from today's vantage point.

The London meeting was soon followed by the establishment of the first multinational conservation society. This was the 'Society for the Preservation of the Fauna of the Empire,' started in 1903 to halt the destruction of wild animals in the British colonies. The Society had local chapters across a wide swathe of Asia and Africa: dominated everywhere by hunters turned conservationists, it was known 'on account of its nucleus of elderly big game hunters as the Repentant Butchers Club.'

Through the colonies, wildlife conservation followed a set pattern. The first step was to moderate demand by specifying closed seasons when animals could not be shot, and issuing licenses, the possession of which alone allowed hunting. The second step was to designate particular species as 'protected.' The third step was to designate specified territories as 'game reserves' meant exclusively for animals, where logging, mining and agriculture were prohibited or restricted. The final and most decisive step was the establishment of national parks, which gave sanctity to entire habitats, not merely to animal species dwelling within them (see *box*).

In Southern Africa, the progress of conservation was linked to the development of a distinct settler identity. As English and Dutch colonists settled in for the long haul, identifying with Africa and turning their backs on their country of origin, the preservation of landscapes became synonymous with the preservation of the national spirit. Prominent Afrikaaner politicians, such as Paul Kruger and Jan Smuts, called for the creation of parks and sanctuaries so that the children and grandchildren of the pioneers could see the veld 'just as the Voortrekkers saw it.' The creation of reserves was thus dictated by sentiment as well as science, to simultaneously allow space for wild species and to affirm a shared human past. In neighboring Southern Rhodesia, where the English dominated, the grave in the Matopos hills of the great imperialist Cecil Rhodes became the nucleus of a national park extending over 45,000 acres.

Where did the African fit into all this? To be precise, nowhere. The white settler identified with the land but not with the men and women who had dwelt there long before their arrival. As the historians Jane Carruthers and Terence Ranger have pointed out, wildlife

conservation cemented a union between the Dutch and the English in southern Africa, but it also consolidated, on the whole, white domination over the majority black population. In game reserves Africans were barred from hunting, while in national parks they were excluded altogether, forcibly dispossessed of their land if it fell within the boundaries of a designated sanctuary. Conservation was even viewed as 'part of the white man's necessary burden to save the nation's natural heritage from African despoilation.' But this was a conveniently ahistorical belief which glossed over the butchery of European hunting in the early decades of colonialism. If there was indeed a 'crisis of African wildlife,' this crisis had been created by the white man's gun and rifle, not the native spear and sling shot.

AND WHY A NATIONAL PARK?

In 1916 a Games Reserves Commission outlined the reasons for the creation of National Parks in South Africa. Note however that terms such as 'the general public' and 'the town dweller' refer exclusively to one race only, that is, white, and for the most part also to one sex, that is, male.

We think that . . . greater facilities should be offered to scientists, naturalists, and the general public to make themselves acquainted with a portion of their country which should be of the greatest natural interest for the following reasons:

- (i) Here one may view and study conditions once generally obtaining throughout large areas of the Union, but which, owing to the advance of civilisation, are now rapidly disappearing and must eventually disappear altogether.
- (ii) As a training ground for the scientific student, whether in botany, zoology, or other directions, the area is unequalled.
- (iii) It is becoming more and more difficult for the town dweller to gain knowledge of the natural conditions of the country, and with the gradual extinction of game and other animals that is steadily going on, even to see the fauna of the country other than in the sophisticated surroundings of a zoological collection.
- (iv) Here and nowhere better can the natural surroundings and habits of South African fauna be really studied, unaffected as the animals are by the instinctive dread of the huntsman, which in other parts of the country tend completely to alter their habits.

Source: Jane Carruthers, *The Kruger National Park: A Social and Political History* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Natal Press, 1995), p. 56.



Poster encouraging visitors to a national park in South Africa.

SOURCE Jane Carruthers, The Kruger National Park (University of Natal Press.)

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WILDERNESS THINKING IN
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The first national park created anywhere was Yellowstone, in 1872. By now there are a thousand such parks spread across the globe. The United States has itself created what is generally regarded to be the best-managed system of national parks in the world. It is also in the U.S. that intellectuals and thinkers have pondered most deeply on what the wilderness has meant for the nourishment of the human spirit.

The background to wilderness conservation was the despoliation of the American continent by the westward movement of European settlers. In an essay published in the July 1897 number of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the California writer John Muir captured the environmental destruction caused by the pioneer's axe and fire, his corn fields and his cattle and sheep herds. Muir wrote stirringly of the past, present and possible future of the

American forests! the glory of the world! Surveyed thus from the east to the west, from the north to the south, they are rich beyond thought, immortal, immeasurable, enough and to spare for every feeding, sheltering beast and bird, insect and son of Adam; and nobody need have cared had there been no pines in Norway, no cedars and deodars on Lebanon and the Himalayas, no vine-clad selvas in the basin of the Amazon. With such variety, harmony, and triumphant exuberance, even nature, it would seem, might have rested content with the forests of North America, and planted no more.

So they appeared a few centuries ago when they were rejoicing in wildness. The Indians with stone axes could do them no more harm than could gnawing beavers or browsing moose. Even the fires of the Indian and the fierce shattering lightning seemed to work together only for good in clearing spots here and there for smooth garden prairies, and openings for sunflowers seeking the light. But when the steel axe of the white man rang out in the startled air, the doom [of the forest] was sealed. Every tree heard the bodeful sound, and pillars of smoke gave the sign in the sky.

I suppose we need not go mourning the buffaloes. In the nature of things they had to give place to better cattle, though the change might have been made without barbarous wickedness. Likewise, many of nature's five hundred kinds of wild trees had to make way for orchards and cornfields. In the settlement and civilization of the country, bread more than timber or beauty was wanted; and in the blindness of hunger, the early settlers, claiming Heaven as their guide, regarded God's trees as only a larger kind of pernicious weed, extremely hard to get rid of.

Accordingly, with no eye to the future, these pious destroyers waged interminable forest wars; chips flew thick and fast; trees in their beauty fell crashing by millions, smashed to confusion, and the smoke of their burning has been rising to heaven [for] more than two hundred years. After the Atlantic coast from Maine to Georgia had been mostly cleared and scorched into melancholy ruins, the overflowing multitudes of bread and money seekers poured over the Alleghanies into the fertile middle West, spreading ruthless devastation ever wider and further over the rich valley of the Mississippi and the vast shadowy pine region about the Great Lakes. Thence still westward the invading horde of destroyers called settlers made its fiery way over the broad Rocky Mountains, felling and burning more fiercely than ever, until at last it has reached the wild side of the continent, and entered the last of the great aboriginal forests on the shores of the Pacific.

This is a crisp if starkly chilling summation of the ecological history of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. Fortunately, by the time Muir penned these words public opinion had been sufficiently stirred to try and protect the 'aboriginal forest' that remained. As he noted with relief and pleasure, lovers of the landscape, 'bemoaning its baldness, are now crying aloud, "Save what is left of the forest!" Clearing has surely now gone far enough; soon timber will be scarce, and not a grove will be left to rest in or pray in.'

John Muir himself was one who shouted loudest, longest, and most effectively. Born in the Scottish town of Dunbar in 1838, he moved with his family to Wisconsin when a young boy. Here he grew up on a pioneer's farm, with an interest in botany and geology and an aptitude for things mechanical. After a desultory year or two at the University of Wisconsin, he left his home for the road, travelling through Canada before walking a thousand miles down to the Gulf of Mexico. Reaching San Francisco in March 1868, he settled in California, making repeated and extended forays into the Sierra mountains. Within a decade he had become known as a writer and lecturer, speaking out on the need to save what remained of the Western wilderness. In 1892 he founded the Sierra Club, which has since been the most influential conservation society in the career of American environmentalism.

Like Mahatma Gandhi, John Muir was not a systematic thinker: his ideas are scattered through his articles and speeches; they are not to be found in one, single, authoritative text. Yet there is no question that—like Gandhi—he was a thinker far ahead of his time. He knew well the economic rationale for forest protection—to supply a steady supply of timber, to prevent soil erosion, and to regulate the flow of

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John Muir, at his desk, c. 1897.

SOURCE Muir Papers, University of the Pacific, Stockton, California, here taken from Stephen Fox, The American Conservation Movement (University of Wisconsin Press.)

water in the rivers—yet he also believed passionately in an independent, non-utilitarian rationale for preserving the wild. In an early meeting of the Sierra Club, he pointed out that

any kind of forest on the flank of the Sierra would be of inestimable value as a cover for the irrigating streams. But in our forests we have not only a perfect cover, but also the most attractive and interesting trees in every way, and of the highest value, spiritual and material, so that even the angels of heaven might well be eager to come down and camp in their leafy temples!

Brought up a devout Christian, the son of an evangelical preacher, Muir came to embrace a mystical pantheism somewhat at odds with his received religious tradition. Christian doctrine puts man in a position of dominance over the rest of creation, but for Muir, as one admirer noted, 'cliff, air, cloud, flower, tree, bird and beast—all these were manifestations of a unifying God.' For him every species had its own honored place in the scheme of Nature. Man thought himself the master of the Universe, but Muir insisted that

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 should man value himself as more than a small part of the one great unit of creation? And what creature of all that the Lord has taken the pains to make is not essential to the completeness of that unit—the cosmos? The universe would be incomplete without man; but it would also be incomplete without the smallest trans-microscopic creature that dwells beyond our conceitful eyes and knowledge.

Muir wrote evocatively of landscapes, and lovingly of individual species too. The Sierra bear was for him 'the sequoia of the animals,' a fellow rambler in the forest who was 'everywhere at home, harmonizing with the trees and rocks and shaggy chapparal.' The water ouzel was a 'brave little singer on the wild mountain streams;' to see this bird and love him was 'to look through a window into Nature's warm heart.' To the city-dweller nature was distant at best, terrifying at worst, but to Muir the forest and its diverse inhabitants were always welcoming. When the philosopher Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Yosemite, Muir tried in vain to take him to the wild. He wanted to show Emerson the 'Sierra manifestations of God,' but the great man's hangers-on, full of the 'indoor philosophy of Boston,' held him to the hotels and approved trails. However, towards the end of his life Muir was heartened to see growing numbers of city folk come out to

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savor the glories of the Sierra. He saw that 'thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home.' To Muir this was proof that 'wildness is a necessity; and that mountain peaks and [forest] reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.'

In contrast to John Muir, for whom the Sierra was a second and occasionally a first home, these 'over-civilized' folk lived the year round in the cities and only seasoned their lives, a week at a time, with the wild. By the early twentieth century, growing urbanization had spawned a leisure industry which created a powerful social force for the preservation of wild areas. Muir might have wanted to protect Nature for its own sake, but the more humdrum pleasures of weekend camping and trekking played as influential a part in the creation of a national park system. As the historian Alfred Runte points out, the first reserve established on purely ecological grounds was the Everglades national park, created in 1934. Runte suggests that in fact several of the early national parks were created specifically to meet a rising surge of cultural nationalism. The apparent agelessness and sheer size of their mountains and forests provided, for the American intelligentsia, a substitute for the rich traditions of art and architecture that their country so conspicuously lacked. Unlike Europe, where the farmer and the shepherd carried in themselves the continuity of an ancient culture, there was no authentic heritage here of peasant life and traditions. Meanwhile, this land's indigenous inhabitants, the Native Americans, had been decimated in numbers and become degenerate in spirit. Into this void stepped the wilderness, which became, so to speak, *America's past*—a past to be mighty proud of. For if the Sierra redwoods had begun to grow before the birth of Christ, if the Rockies were twice as high as the Alps, and if compared to the Mississippi the Danube was a mere ditch, then this new nation could boast of a series of natural wonders vastly superior to the man-made artefacts, the churches, forts and paintings of Europe. In this sense, the monumental and unsurpassed scenery of the West provided American patriots with a way to answer Europe, the ancient civilization with respect to which they had a marked inferiority complex.

John Muir was himself a kind of ecological patriot, who believed that American forests were second to none: in their 'variety, harmony and triumphant exuberance' superior to the cedars of Lebanon, the deodars of the Himalaya, the selvas of the Amazon. But it is the ecological sensitivity rather than the patriotism which makes his a distinctive voice. Muir is rightly honored for his consideration for species

other than the human, for his dogged insistence (see *box*) that nature had a right to be cared for regardless of any man's bank balance or any country's gross national product. He has become something of a cult figure for latter-day environmentalists, who worship him as a bearded prophet, alone in the wild, embattled and beleaguered, crying out against the forces of commerce and industry that would devastate nature. Just adjacent to John Muir in the pantheon of the wilderness movement is the man we now come to, Aldo Leopold.

HOW AND HOW NOT TO
REVERENCE NATURE

John Muir on the threats to nature, and how to forestall or work around them.

1. Travellers in the Sierra forests usually complain of the want of life. 'The trees,' they say, 'are fine, but the empty stillness is deadly; there are no animals to be seen, no birds. We have not heard a song in all the woods.' And no wonder! They go in large parties with miles and horses; they make a great noise; they are dressed in outlandish, unnatural colors; every animal shuns them. Even the frightened pines would run away if they could. But Nature lovers, devout, silent, open-eyed, looking and listening with love, find no lack of inhabitants in these mountain mansions, and they come to them gladly.
2. The battle we have fought, and are still fighting, for the forests [of the Sierra] is a part of the eternal conflict between right and wrong, and we cannot expect to see the end of it. . . . The smallest forest reserve, and the first I ever heard of, was in the Garden of Eden; and though its boundaries were drawn by the Lord, and embraced only one tree, yet even so moderate a reserve as this was attacked. And I doubt not, if only one of our grand trees on the Sierra were reserved as an example and type of all that is most noble and glorious in mountain trees, it would not be long before you would find a lumberman and a lawyer at the foot of it, eagerly proving by every law terrestrial and celestial that the tree must come down. So we must count on watching and striving for these trees, and should always be glad to find anything so surely good and noble to strive for.

Sources: 1. 'Among the Yosemite,' *The Atlantic Monthly*, December 1898, p. 751. 2. 'Address on the Sierra Forest Reservation,' *The Sierra Club Bulletin*, volume 1, number 7, 1896, p. 276.

Leopold was born in January 1887 into a family of cultured and highly educated German immigrants. He grew up amidst books and

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music, but also acquired an interest in the outdoors, inspired by his father, a keen hunter himself. Aldo went on to obtain a degree at the Yale School of Forestry, before joining the United States Forest Service in 1909. He worked in the Forest Service for a quarter of a century, mostly in the south-west. In 1933 he moved to a Professorship at the University of Wisconsin, dividing his time between the college campus and a small farm he had bought in the country.

In his career Leopold was to shift allegiance from one variety of environmentalism to another. Long years in the Forest Service, that showcase of scientific conservation, prepared him for a late emergence as a philosopher of nature, as what one colleague termed 'the Commanding General of the Wilderness Battle.' Posted in forest areas with plentiful populations of wild animals, Leopold developed a philosophy of 'game management' modelled closely on the principles of scientific forestry, with game replacing timber as the product which needed to be harvested on a 'sustained-yield' basis. But in time he came to appreciate the cultural and ecological significance of the wild, and from promoting 'game refuges' began urging that a portion of the National Forests be set aside as fully protected wilderness.

Leopold's move from the Forest Service to the University of Wisconsin was also a move from the tradition of Gifford Pinchot to the tradition of John Muir, and beyond (see quotes in *box*). In January 1935 he helped found the Wilderness Society, an autonomous pressure group that embraced both a philosophical credo—'an intelligent humility towards man's place in nature'—and a practical program, the setting aside for posterity of wild areas as yet untouched by mining, industry, logging, roads and other such threats. Later the same year, Leopold went on a study tour of Germany, where he was dismayed by the artificialized systems of forest and game management, which had reduced the diversity found in nature in favour of a few select species. He remarked, of the mania for spruce, that 'never before or since have the forests of a whole nation been converted into a new species within a single generation.' The Germans, wrote Leopold in disgust, had 'taught the world to plant trees like cabbages.'

In *A Sand County Almanac*, his chronicle of life on a Wisconsin farm, Leopold offered moving descriptions of the coming and passing of the seasons, the changes through the year in plant and animal life. The land he tilled formed part of the prairie where the buffalo had once roamed in large numbers. Characteristically, Leopold mourned not so much the great buffalo as the lowly Sulphium, a native weed being exterminated by the plow and the lawn mower. The disappearance of Sulphium, he remarked, was 'one little episode in the funeral

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of the native flora, which in turn is one episode in the funeral of the floras of the world.'

ALDO LEOPOLD CHANGES ALLEGIANCES

Aldo Leopold moved from being a hard-nosed utilitarian conservationist to a philosopher of ecological harmony and interdependence. These quotes help mark the shift:

1. A harmonious relation to land is more intricate, and of more consequence to civilization, than the historians of its progress seem to realize. Civilization is not, as they often assume, the enslavement of a stable and consistent earth. It is a state of mutual and interdependent cooperation between human animals, other animals, plants and soils, which may be disrupted at any moment by the failure of any of them.
2. The emergence of ecology has placed the economic biologist in a peculiar dilemma: with one hand, he points out the accumulated findings of his search for utility, or lack of utility, in this or that species; with the other he lifts the veil from a biota so complex, so conditioned by interwoven cooperations and competitions, that no man can say where utility begins or ends.

Source: 1. 'The Conservation Ethic,' *Journal of Forestry*, volume 31, number 6, 1933, p. 635. 2. 'A Biotic View of Land,' *Journal of Forestry*, volume 37, number 9, 1939, p. 727.

Leopold has been the most influential wilderness thinker since Muir, and the Californian is indeed the authority most often cited in *A Sand County Almanac*. But where Muir had been a pioneer plowman himself, Leopold came from a more pedigreed background. Moreover, by the time he grew up, America had become a technologically advanced and urbanized society. These differences in biography and context might explain why Leopold's was an urbane, reflective approach, lacking the sheer *rawness* of Muir's engagement with nature. John Muir, one might say, was a moralist and self-taught scientist, Leopold a trained ecologist turned ethicist.

While Leopold and Muir both celebrated the wild, they are divided in their attitude to what happened outside it. For Muir displayed in abundance the siege-like mentality of the wilderness lover; he was hostile to any force or form that might disturb the integrity of nature. Thus his deep aversion to the 'marauding shepherds' who grazed their flocks of 'hoofed locusts' in the national parks: these, along with miners and timber contractors, were to him 'the Goths and vandals

of the wilderness, who are spreading black death in the fairest woods God ever made.' Muir thought the parks must be guarded by the military, for him the 'only effective and reliable arm of the government.' Soldiers with guns might make sure that 'not a single herd or cow be allowed to trample in the Yosemite garden,' a garden 'given to the State for a higher use than pasturage.'

In the view of Aldo Leopold, however, responsible human behavior *outside* the national parks was perhaps even more important than the protection of wild species within them. He urged private landowners to promote a mix of species on their holdings, thereby enhancing soil fertility and maintaining a diverse flora and fauna. Strict control of wild areas by the state mattered little unless individuals and communities moderated their consumption and respected nature. 'We need plants and birds and trees restored to ten thousand farms,' he wrote, 'not merely to a few paltry reservations.' As the Harvard historian Donald Fleming has remarked, for Leopold

The virtue of small farms and rural living was the homely private transactions with nature to which they lent themselves, the untremendous and unpremeditated encounters knit into the fabric of daily life. National parks and national forests were seen as the goal of a pilgrimage, holy places set apart under the care of a jealous priesthood of conservationists, against the day when a lay believer, once in a lifetime, would conform to the faith in some cathedral-of-pines. This was the core of Leopold's objections to the Transcendentalists posture towards nature. It was irrevocably coupled to the idea of retreats from practical life, and worse still, to a corresponding devaluation of the workaday world as an appropriate arena for cherishing the natural environment. Leopold's own purpose was exactly the opposite. He wanted to strip the conservation ideal of its remote and sacred aspects and make the cultivation of a loving and wondering attitude toward other organisms and toward the land itself a matter of voluntary daily practice in modest contexts, particularly when men were unobserved and unintoxicated by the gigantic and patently sublime.

Aldo Leopold differed not only from John Muir but from dozens of wilderness thinkers before or since, who have had time only for spectacular habitats like the seas and the mountains, and for charismatic animals such as the tiger and the whale. These thinkers have focused narrowly, too narrowly perhaps, on the creation of parks and sanctuaries policed from within and protected by walls and fences from without. Leopold's was a more inclusive approach, and this in more than one respect. Ecologically, he moved from the protection of species to the protection of habitats and on toward the protection of all

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forms of biological diversity. Socially, he recognized that wild areas could hardly be saved without a wider reorganization of the economy on ecological principles, so that the fruits of nature's use could be more equitably distributed among humans. Ethically, he hoped that an attitude of care and wonder towards nature would not be expressed only on occasional excursions into the wild, but come to be part of the fabric of our daily lives, so that on weekdays, as much as on weekends, we would come to tread gently on this earth.

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