

REPRINTED FROM

# PROTECTING THE WILD

## PARKS AND WILDERNESS, THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

Disclaimer: This essay contains references to a faith that I no longer have and perhaps never did. That said, I still maintain that teaching humility in the face of wild nature itself and with respect to one's own limitations is a principal benefit of wilderness, and my thoughts on what that means for wilderness management still stand. I would now say, however, that such humility is sufficient benefit on its own, and it is not improved by a spiritual expression or outcome. I'll have to re-write this one day, sans religious overtones. For now, please do your best to ignore them.

-Spencer Phillips, 2022

## *The Humbling Power of Wilderness*

SPENCER R. PHILLIPS

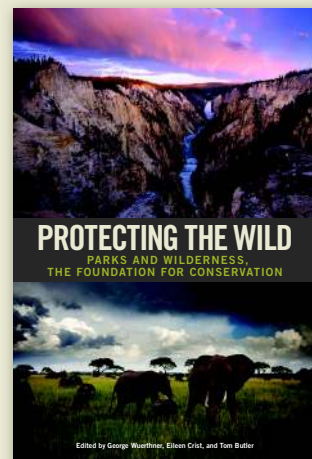
### PROTECTING THE WILD: PARKS AND WILDERNESS, THE FOUNDATION FOR CONSERVATION

Edited by George Wuerthner, Eileen Crist, and Tom Butler

Published by the Foundation for Deep Ecology and Island Press  
Distributed by Island Press | [www.islandpress.org](http://www.islandpress.org)

**Requested citation:** S. R. Phillips, "The Humbling Power of Wilderness," in *Protecting the Wild: Parks and Wilderness, the Foundation for Conservation*, ed. G. Wuerthner, E. Crist, and T. Butler (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2015), 154–161.

**SPENCER R. PHILLIPS** is a natural resource economist and founder of Key-Log Economics, LLC, which brings economic information to land use, ecosystem management, and community development decisions and crafts policy and market solutions to foster sustainable connections between community, economic, and ecosystem health. He is also adjunct faculty at the University of Virginia and Goucher College, lecturing in ecological economics, natural resource policy, and spatial analysis for public policy. He holds an M.S. and Ph.D. in agricultural and applied economics.



*The central epiphany of every religious tradition always occurs in the wilderness.*

—ROBERT F. KENNEDY JR., *HUMANKIND*<sup>1</sup>

**L**ET'S STIPULATE that religious epiphany requires an understanding of one's relationship to the divine . . . to the creator . . . to God. I would further submit that this understanding is fundamentally a matter of humility. Humility is the recognition that we are not masters of the universe—not even of our own little corners of it—and that we need something more than ourselves if we are to make sense of our lives. What Kennedy's observation suggests is that this understanding—this *humility*—is best attained in wilderness.

I am not going to argue that other human experiences cannot have this effect. Try giving birth, for example. Or, if you are not properly equipped, watch your wife do it. Listen to a symphony. Or head to a museum or gallery and see what Georgia O'Keeffe or Ansel Adams saw when they looked at the wild.

But I will suggest that experiencing wilderness is the most effective way to get the proper perspective on life. As John Muir wrote, "the clearest way into the universe is through a forest wilderness."<sup>2</sup> That must mean that all those other ways we try to find our way into the universe—via even the highest art that humans have wrought or our dearest relationships with other people—are not so clear.

Even so, spiritual renewal or religious significance often gets short shrift in our consideration of the value of wilderness to people. For example, one conservation organization's website lists "nine surprising reasons for kids to get outside this summer."<sup>3</sup> A litany of intermediate goals and instrumental values that parents might wish for their children so they can be more productive and less bothersome little human beings, it includes items like: less stress, increased attentiveness, better sleep, building crucial life skills, enhanced learning and creativity, reduced violence and crime, more defenders of wild lands.

Not that there's anything wrong with lower stress, not being a criminal, and defending wild lands. But speaking as a parent, I find something conspicuously missing from this list: learning humility, appreciating one's place in the universe, and the spiritual transformation these produce. I am also speaking as one who has had to learn this lesson myself—the hard way—and, of course, in wilderness.

*The Sacandaga ice-water enema*

The Siamese Ponds Wilderness is part of New York's Adirondack Park and could well be called the immediate inspiration for the Wilderness Act of 1964. It borders the land where the Zahniser family has its camp, which is where Howard Zahniser drafted much of the Act.<sup>4</sup>

I was there in May of 1996, squeezing in a short solo backpacking trip before leading a newly designed economics workshop later in the week. I had a plan for the trip, and my plan included fording the East Branch of the Sacandaga River to complete a brilliantly laid out loop.

My plan, however, was not the wilderness's plan. The wilderness didn't care about my brilliance. It was just doing its wilderness thing, which on that day happened to be regulating the water flow unleashed by a storm the night before and from still-melting snow farther upstream. The river itself seemed narrow enough, maybe 20 meters, but it was high, raging, and very cold.

I should have turned back and picked another route. But I had *my* plan, and it called for fording. I put my clothes and boots in my pack (so they'd be dry on the other side). There was a cable stretched over the river to ease fording in milder conditions, so I clipped my pack to the cable, tied a rope to the carabiner, and, not wanting to lose the connection to my pack, tied the other end of the line around my waist and waded in. "I got this," I thought.

By the time I was in up to my knees, I knew I'd have to move fast to avoid hypothermia. I moved a bit farther from the bank, into deeper water. Before I could give another thought to the cold, the current knocked me over. As luck would have it, I literally reached the end of my rope in a rapid downstream. With my middle tethered to the cable upstream, the river doubled me over, and the hydraulics slammed my bottom down to the river's bottom. Repeatedly.

All I could do at the end of my rope, with my brilliant plan having gone suddenly and horribly awry, was say or think "Jesus, help!" or maybe it was more like "Jesus! . . . [glub, glub, glub] . . . Help!" Either way, and after another bounce or two, my *feet* finally found the river's bottom, and my hands found the rope behind my back. I hauled myself upstream a bit and pendulumed back to the bank I'd had no business leaving in the first place.

My attitude went from "I got this" to "I get it."

I needed to learn humility—to set aside my will, my intention, my self—and be subject to the reality of the wilderness. The lesson included, of course: *Never practice*

*“live bait” swift-water rescue alone.* More broadly, I learned that my plans, however brilliant, are not all that important, and I might pursue them at my peril. In the words of Solomon: “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”<sup>5</sup>

The physical lesson about allowing nature to take its course and to rule over and curtail my hiking plans had a metaphorical connection to my life at the time. You see, even though it was taking a toll on my family, I was set on my way in a particular direction with my work. I thought that my progress in that direction should take precedence over all other concerns.

I had my plan laid out and I was going to follow it, no matter the hours, the travel, or the distraction from my closest relationships. I was going to follow my path, come hell or—so I thought until the Sacandaga had its say—high water.

As I lay in my sleeping bag that night following the river’s lesson, I watched the stars through the canopy of centuries-old hemlocks and reflected on how close I had come to becoming a really bad newspaper headline, something like: “Naked Environmentalist Wins Darwin Award.” And it sank in that maybe my way wasn’t quite the right one. I saw that I needed to set my plans and priorities—all of them—aside and (humbly) take a different path.

I’m certainly not the first to have learned humility in the wilderness. Consider Moses, the son of Hebrew slaves raised in the Egyptian palace. Moses knows who he is, and he thinks he knows how to help his enslaved brethren. After killing an Egyptian whom he’d witnessed hitting a slave, Moses flees Egypt and spends the next forty years lying low. He marries, has children, and becomes a humble shepherd. Then one day, leading the flock “to the far side of the wilderness,” he sees the burning bush and hears God’s call to return to Egypt to lead Israel out of bondage and, not incidentally, into the wilderness.

Moses has some doubts. He says he’s not much for public speaking, for example. And he wants to know what he’s supposed to say if the Israelites demand some proof that he is operating on good authority. God’s answer is tell them that “I am” sent you. In other words, Moses, you have no authority, only the command of the one who sent you. This is not about you.

It takes all of those forty years, the transition from prince to shepherd, and (I submit) the separation from civilization that wilderness provides, before Moses can get to a place, spiritually, from which he can actually lead. Moreover, he is able to lead only by humbly follow-

ing someone else. Moses eventually does lead Israel out of Egypt and into the wilderness, but perhaps ironically, it takes *another* forty years before the people are ready to enter the Promised Land.

Contrary to popular belief, the Israelites don’t wander about in the desert for forty years because Zipporah’s husband (Moses) refuses to stop and ask for directions. Rather, their wilderness trek is in part punishment for doubting their ability, under God’s care, to succeed right off. It’s also a means of preparing the people to eventually be successful. The people have to get over their grumbling and learn, in the wilderness, that God is all they need.

In the book of Deuteronomy—his swan song delivered just before the rest of the nation crosses into the Promised Land—Moses tells the people:

*God, your God, is leading the way; he’s fighting for you. You saw with your own eyes what he did for you in Egypt; you saw what he did in the wilderness, how God, your God, carried you as a father carries his child, carried you the whole way until you arrived here.*<sup>6</sup>

It is a reminder first of all that they had not come so far, nor would they be going any farther, either alone or under their own power. Later, when Moses says, “Remember how the Lord your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you,”<sup>7</sup> it is a reminder that the thing they would need most going forward would be humility.

### *A goat, a prophet, and a carpenter walk into a wilderness . . .*

During their time in the wilderness, the people of Israel also receive the law, including what to do on Yom Kippur, the annual Day of Atonement. On that day, the sins of the entire nation, a whole year’s worth, are to be laid on the head of the (scape) goat who then will carry the sin away into the wilderness.<sup>8</sup>

This ritual of confession and sacrifice comes after, and is in addition to, the prayers and sacrifices made to cover over various individual sins as people went about their lives throughout the preceding year. All that effort—the prayers said, the incense and grain burned, the oil and blood poured out—evidently, was not sufficient: The nation still needs the wilderness to take away its transgression. The people cannot do it for themselves: They have to humbly let the scapegoat and his walk into the wilderness do it for them.

(How fitting it is that the National Wilderness Preservation System includes the Scapegoat Wilderness.)

Jumping forward a couple thousand years and into the New Testament, we find John the Baptist “crying out in the wilderness, ‘prepare the way of the Lord.’”<sup>9</sup> He does in fact do his preaching “in the wilderness of Judea, saying, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.’”<sup>10</sup>

What strikes me as significant is that John does not call the people to the temple, nor to the palace, and certainly not to the marketplace, to get in touch with their spiritual need. Instead, his call to repentance comes from the wilderness, a place where social status does not count, the cares of daily life do not distract, and the comforts of home do not dull people to what God might have to say.

Jesus himself walks into the wilderness so that John can baptize him. This is itself an act of humility, as even John protests that he is unworthy to baptize his cousin (and his Lord).

Afterwards, Jesus walks farther into the wilderness to be tested in preparation for his earthly ministry. The *Message*, a modern, more idiomatic translation of the Bible, tells the story this way:

*Jesus prepared for the Test by fasting forty days and forty nights. That left him, of course, in a state of extreme hunger, which the Devil took advantage of in the first test: “Since you are God’s Son, speak the word that will turn these stones into loaves of bread.”*

*Jesus answered by quoting Deuteronomy: “It takes more than bread to stay alive. It takes a steady stream of words from God’s mouth.”*

*For the second test the Devil took him to the Holy City. He sat him on top of the Temple and said, “Since you are God’s Son, jump.” The Devil goaded him by quoting Psalm 91: “He has placed you in the care of angels. They will catch you so that you won’t so much as stub your toe on a stone.”*

*Jesus countered with another citation from Deuteronomy: “Don’t you dare test the Lord your God.”*

*For the third test, the Devil took him to the peak of a huge mountain. He gestured expansively, pointing out all the earth’s kingdoms, how glorious they all were. Then he said, “They’re yours—lock, stock, and barrel. Just go down on your knees and worship me, and they’re yours.”*

*Jesus’ refusal was curt: “Beat it, Satan!” He backed his rebuke with a third quotation from Deuteronomy: “Worship the Lord your God, and only him. Serve him with absolute single-heartedness.”*

*The Test was over. The Devil left.*<sup>11</sup>

Fittingly, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy, Moses’s post-wilderness-odyssey debrief, to counter the tempter’s appeal to what he assumes would be Jesus’s pride. Jesus and Moses draw the same lessons from their experience of wilderness. In Jesus’s case, it is that he, *even he*, has to relinquish control and be humble—that is, he is not to use his power in service of his own interests, whether in food, position, or power. As he later puts it in Gethsemane, “Not my will but yours.”<sup>12</sup>

The Bible is rife with this idea that humility is spiritually essential. To give one example, again in the *Message* translation, “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule.”<sup>13</sup> The same verse in *New Living Translation* reads “God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.”

This need for humility is not only fundamental to spiritual survival, it’s also a need that wilderness is uniquely able to fill. When it’s just you and the wilderness, it’s awfully hard to *honestly* say “I got this.” Because the minute you do say that, you find yourself at the end of a rope, maybe drowning in a frigid river, or tumbling off a rock. At a minimum you will simply be missing the most important thing you might have come to the wilderness for, even if you don’t know yet know why you are there.

### *Two paths diverge in the future of wilderness*

With the Wilderness Act now fifty years old, and human impacts on even the remotest wilderness becoming ever more obvious, some urge that we reconsider the efficacy and the wisdom of letting wilderness do its own thing. People of this view worry about the loss of iconic species and landforms (climate change driving the Joshua trees from Joshua Tree National Park and the glaciers from Glacier, for example), and contend that people should actively intervene to maintain natural, or at least historically familiar, conditions in wilderness areas.

I, on the other hand, worry much more that such intervention is the opposite of humility, and it would therefore hinder our spiritual transformation while diminishing the ability of the wilderness to teach humility to our future selves.

In the first version of the future, we think we know better than nature what nature needs, at least if we define what nature “needs” as that which produces what we want from it. In that future, we favor “naturalness” over “freedom” and set about manipulating ecological processes in order

to mimic the production of a certain familiar set of natural outcomes on the right side of some particular set of administrative boundaries. You know, this many glaciers here, that many elk there, some particular mix of vegetation, and the same palette of sunsets and wildflowers for the delight of recreationists adorned in their own glorious hues.

This is essentially the view Christopher Solomon takes in his much-discussed *New York Times* column: Echoing a group of scientists, resource managers, and—to be fair—wilderness lovers, he urges a transition of our role as the guardians of wilderness to one of being gardeners of wilderness.<sup>14</sup>

It is perhaps tellingly *un-humble* that the *Times*' headline pronounces that the fifty-year-old Wilderness Act "is facing a midlife crisis"—as if the completely human and artificial concept of a mid-(human) life crisis can or should be applied to what one hopes is a timeless legal institution or, worse, to the "bits of eternity"<sup>15</sup> that the institution protects. If the Act's turning fifty means it's time to "rethink the wild,"<sup>16</sup> should we be prepared next year to rethink the right to vote when the equally venerable Voting Rights Act hits the half-century mark?<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, the idea that we can do better than nature alone at delivering natural outcomes is a fundamentally proud one. Solomon's and the gardeners' faith in human intent or capability must confront the reality that the reason nature no longer gives us precisely what we want is that we have already so royally screwed up its ability to do so. Having failed to steward the original fruitfulness of the Earth, who could honestly believe that humans will outdo nature at the much harder task of restoring Earth's fruitfulness?

In a better future, we humbly let the wilderness be wild and favor its freedom over its naturalness. This is the view embodied in Bob Marshall's assertion:

*There is just one hope of repulsing the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth. That hope is the organization of spirited people who will fight for the freedom of the wilderness.*<sup>18</sup>

If we are humble, we can choose to refrain from intervention in wilderness—even in the face of climate change

and the myriad other effects of our use, benign and otherwise, of the rest of the planet. We can also let the ecological, aesthetic, social, and economic chips fall where they may. And if we do, we will still have the enduring resource of wilderness that the Act was established to secure. Even an "unnatural"—but still untrammelled—wilderness will teach a cautionary tale about the inescapable limits of our own brilliant plans.

Most importantly, we will have learned humility and put ourselves in a position from which our lives can then be lifted up, or "exalted," as in the verse above. Wilderness will continue to teach humility, and the humble will be blessed.

### *We've got to know our limitations*

In summary, if we insist on trusting in ourselves and following what seems right to us . . . if we believe that we can "help nature adapt"<sup>19</sup> and that "we got this," we are doomed.

Beyond what Moses, Isaiah, Jesus, and the others had to say, this wisdom is echoed by a more modern sage: Clint Eastwood. In the final scene of *Magnum Force*, Eastwood's Dirty Harry character sends his (proud) nemesis to a fiery doom and snarls, "Man's got to know his limitations."

Wilderness is most powerful as a place, an idea, and an institution that teaches us our limitations: our limitations as individuals, our limitations as a civilization, and our limitations as a species. To ignore this lesson is to insist that we know better. And the drive to become gardeners rather than guardians of wilderness is really just a new expression of "the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth."

Taking fuels reduction, invasives removal, fixed climbing anchors, and the like into the wilderness<sup>20</sup> might be a gentler or more enlightened means of conquest than converting wild areas to vacation resorts, timber plantations, gas fields and wind farms, but the freedom of the wilderness will be just as lost.

Lost with it will be the chance to learn humility and to find, as John Muir wrote, "our way into the Universe." My wilderness prayer is that by not insisting on our way, we will instead find it.

## NOTES

1. R. F. Kennedy Jr., *Humankind* (Podcast), Produced by David Freudberg, retrieved October 14, 2014, from [http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/program.php?products\\_id=31](http://www.humanmedia.org/catalog/program.php?products_id=31).
2. J. Muir, in *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. W. M. Hanna (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press), p. 138.
3. The Wilderness Society, *9 Surprising Reasons for Kids to Get Outside This Summer*, Retrieved July 12, 2014 from <http://wilderness.org/blog/9-surprising-reasons-kids-get-outside-summer>.
4. A. Coumo. Press Release: "Governor Cuomo Announces Conservation Easement of Adirondack Site Where Federal Wilderness Act Was Penned," Albany, NY, September 10, 2014, retrieved from <https://www.governor.ny.gov/press/09102014-easement-wilderness-act>.
5. Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25 (New American Standard Bible).
6. Deuteronomy 1:30–32, as translated in E. H. Peterson, *The Message*, retrieved from Bible Gateway website Oct. 12, 2014, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.
7. Deuteronomy 8:2, as translated in E. H. Peterson, *The Message*.
8. See Leviticus 16:21–22.
9. Luke 3:4 (New Revised Standard Version [NRSV]).
10. Matthew 3:1–2 (NRSV).
11. Matthew 4:2–11, as translated in E. H. Peterson, *The Message*, retrieved from Bible Gateway website Oct. 12, 2014, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>.
12. Luke 22:42 (NRSV).
13. Matthew 5:3, as translated in E. H. Peterson, *The Message*, retrieved from Bible Gateway website Oct. 12, 2014, <https://www.biblegateway.com/>, 12 Oct. 2014.
14. C. Solomon, "Rethinking the Wild: The Wilderness Act Is Facing a Midlife Crisis," *New York Times*, 5 July 2014, [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/opinion/sunday/the-wilderness-act-is-facing-a-midlife-crisis.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/06/opinion/sunday/the-wilderness-act-is-facing-a-midlife-crisis.html?_r=0).
15. Wilderness Society founder Harvey Broome said of the wilderness, "Here are bits of eternity, which have a preciousness beyond all accounting." See the Harvey Broome page on the website of The Wilderness Society [accessed October 12, 2014], <http://wilderness.org/bios/founders/harvey-broome>.
16. C. Solomon, "Rethinking the Wild," *New York Times*.
17. Never mind that this seems to be exactly the intention of redistricting, voter ID laws, and other measures taken in several states, but that's another conversation.
18. R. Marshall, "The Problem of the Wilderness," *Scientific Monthly* 30, no. 2 (February 1930): 141–48. [Author's emphasis on "freedom."] Note that Marshall singles out the *freedom* of the wilderness as that attribute in need of defense.
19. C. Solomon, "Rethinking the Wild," *New York Times*.
20. I should emphasize that such activities to protect property, restore or maintain natural conditions, or enhance recreational safety may be appropriate and effective outside of wilderness. It is okay to have gardens and climbing gyms, just not everywhere.