Beyond Wilderness

For years, I sought true wilderness in remote mountains — but couldn't find it anywhere. All along, it wasn't a place I was seeking but a way of being with the world.

An essay on the lines we draw — through landscapes, on maps, and in the mind — and on the moments that defy them.

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The letters WILDERNESS were written in an elegant arc over a vast expanse of green that revealed — enticingly — nothing. A stream of contour lines swept over the sage background, at times converging and at times diverging, as if obeying an invisible force that had raised ridges to the east and west and carved a long, deep depression between them. The contour lines eventually slowed down and spread out, giving way to an open valley. On its edges I imagined dense groves of redwoods and pine guarding meadows and deer. Waist-high grasses swayed gently, moving to the same breath. Overhead, a lone eagle rode the updrafts, keeping silent watch. Next, a layer of shading had been carefully drawn over the area to simulate the ridges' shadows, as if sunlight were casting from a northwesterly direction across this two-dimensional world of paper and ink.[1] Running between the spurs on the ridges were thin, blue arteries that fed lakes and ponds, each settling naturally into the folds of the land. Finally, a thick black line intruded on this paper world. Noticeably more erratic than the other lines, it marked the trail that had been cut through the landscape. The line struggled against the contours and bisected the natural geometry of the land in an attempt to bring every corner of the wilderness into human reach. Superimposed lines of latitude and longitude uncompromisingly segmented the land into rectangles, reducing every lake, meadow, and tree to a set of points defined by degrees, minutes, and seconds.

[1] The sun never actually shines from that direction in the Northern Hemisphere, but mapmakers use this fictional convention because the human brain expects light to come from the top-left: when a shaded object is pretense-lit from this direction, the brain interprets crests and troughs correctly.

Before I started spending much time in wilderness, I imagined it to be pristine and wild. I desperately wanted it to be some kind of antidote to everything that overwhelmed me — my PhD, the news cycle, the noise of leaf blowers and the *beep beep beep* of construction vehicles reversing outside my apartment. Perhaps I wanted it to be an antidote to humans themselves. But the wilderness in my imagination and the wilderness outside didn't align. Over the years, I found myself on trail highways along with droves of other thru-hikers trying to hit twenty, thirty miles a day, listening to podcasts on their power-bank-charged smartphones, inReaches dangling from their shoulder straps. No matter where I went, airliners criss-crossed the sky above, filling the air with the roar of jets. Every route seemed neatly mapped and every turn predictable, discovery replaced by an AllTrails Plus subscription. Over time, wilderness started to feel like a tamed, curated version of what I was seeking. Something one could pick off the shelves at REI. The very signs of human presence and control I was trying to get away from suddenly stood out to me everywhere in the form of trails, signs, regulations, infrastructure, and consumer goods. I began to see wilderness not as a place apart from humans, but as a human creation. An obsession slowly spread its roots in my mind: an obsession for something, *I don't know* — untamed, non-human, truly wild. I started avoiding the traffic jams in Yosemite Valley and increasingly headed out in the winter months, where the snow kept people away and covered up my tracks behind me. I was searching for true wilderness, yet no matter how far I went, it always seemed just out of reach, as if retreating in step with me, repelled by my very presence.

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Wilderness, as a historical system of places, boundaries, and regulations, wasn't what I was seeking. The more I searched, the more I saw that what I craved wasn't wilderness at all — it was something harder to pin down, something not tied to particular places, but rather a particular way of being with the world. This something I began to call *wildness*, and it had been with me all along.

Part I
Wilderness

Wilderness is as much an idea as a place. Of course, the locations that are now considered wilderness have always been "out there." But the way many of us think about them today — as pristine, untouched sanctuaries apart from "civilization," valued precisely for their untainted nature, supposedly existing beyond history and human existence — is a recent historical development. It's an idea absent from most other cultures and points in time — one that first had to be created. A twentieth-century movement of philosophers, religious thinkers, and nationalist writers in the U.S. laid the groundwork for this idea. Then the land had to be made to conform to it by an army of park rangers. While the locations we call wilderness have always existed, the way we experience them today has not. We have altered these places in fundamental ways: by fencing them in, by erasing signs of prior human presence, by controlling the flow of species, by cutting trails. The way we use wilderness is also distinctively modern. Wilderness recreation is, at heart, a city phenomenon: it arose among educated urbanites reacting to industrialization, the strains of city life, and the perceived emasculating comforts of modern society. Yet it depends on the gear, infrastructure, and technologies of the very civilization from which one is hoping to escape. In this sense, our modern notion of wilderness is an invention of the twentieth century. And it's riddled with tensions.

For a long time, there was no wilderness at all. Of course, the nomadic foragers that account for ninety-five percent of human history gazed up at mountains in the distance, walked through vast forests, and lived off the prairie. But the concept of wilderness, as we understand it today, didn't exist and wasn't needed. As Roderick Nash recounts in *Wilderness and the American Mind*, humans thought of themselves as being part of nature and everything natural was simply habitat: "Nothing was 'wild' because nothing was tamed."

Once permanent settlements emerged with agriculture ten thousand years ago, humans began fencing themselves in and nature out. As the land was fenced, so was thought. The notion of "the wild" acquired meaning: it came to mark whatever lay outside the sphere of human settlement and control. Now that there were fields, there was a boundary where the field ended and the forest began. Lines were drawn — on the land, in language, and in minds. But unlike today's notion of wilderness, the wild was not imagined as a pristine realm set apart from people; it was the uncultivated margin, but still bound up with human life. Most cultures haven't divided the world into "wilderness" and "civilization" as European Americans later did, but have seen the wild as a continuous extension of human life. For many Indigenous peoples, what settlers called wilderness was and is homeland — a lived-in landscape shaped by fire, hunting, and seasonal cultivation. For pastoral and desert peoples, open land has long been subsistence commons, not something sealed off from human life. In Daoist and Shinto thought, mountains and groves are considered sacred presences, not places defined by human absence. In Mayan cosmology, untamed spaces are crowded with gods, ancestors, and animals. In short, what Americans later called "wilderness" has in other traditions long been habitat, commons, or sacred ground — rarely a realm defined by human absence. Even today, most languages lack a word for "wilderness." While they have various words for "wild" whose connotations cluster around uncultivated land, untamed animals, barrenness, and sacredness, none capture

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the stark human–nature binary that "wilderness" has come to embody in the English imagination.

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In popular thought, wilderness is understood to comprise undeveloped areas outside of human civilization, valued and protected for their "pure nature" and restorative potential — a thought so ingrained that it feels true almost by definition. Yet this concept of wilderness is, in fact, far from timeless or universal. It is the product of generations of religious and nationalist thinkers who cultivated the idea of wilderness and embedded it in modern consciousness.

Throughout history, wilderness has often mirrored human desires and fears, and consequently it has taken on different meanings as those desires and fears have changed over time. In ancient Greece and Rome, wilderness stood opposed to cultivation and order. When nature is celebrated in Greek and Roman classical literature, it is of the pastoral kind that supports human flourishing, not the wild kind. Wilderness was largely shunned — an attitude that lives on in our language: the word "panic" comes from Pan, the Greek god of the wild, who instilled fear in those who ventured too far into the woods.

Later, on the American frontier, wild nature posed a threat to survival and profit, and so wilderness became an "enemy" to be "conquered" and "subdued" by a "pioneer army," as many diaries from the frontier period put it. In Nash's words, the pioneer lived a little too close to wild nature to appreciate it. Wild country was valued merely for its potential to provide security, comfort, and profit.

It was those most removed from the wild, and least threatened by it, who began to ascribe aesthetic and ethical meaning to it. Appreciation of wilderness began in the cities. As people increasingly saw themselves as a threat to nature and to their own well-being, they started looking back at wilderness, yearning for a mythical, uncorrupted state. As William Cronon argues in "The Trouble with Wilderness," only people whose relationship with the land had already been alienated and whose food and resources came from elsewhere could have idealized wilderness as a model for human life in nature. Farmers, herders, and Indigenous peoples who used the land to live couldn't treat it as a sacred preserve because their everyday life required altering it. It was urban intellectuals, living in crowded and smoky cities, and inspired by Romanticism, Deism, and Transcendentalism, who imbued wilderness with moral and aesthetic qualities.

The Romantics reacted against the Enlightenment's attempt to measure and control nature, and celebrated untrod landscapes as a realm beyond human order, where the imagination could encounter the infinite. Deists rejected traditional, revealed religion and sought God's will not in books but in the natural world. Because wilderness was seen as nature in its purest form, as the least altered expression of creation, it thus became revered as the clearest medium through which the divine could be apprehended. The Transcendentalists built on this idea: they believed in a correspondence between a higher realm of spiritual truth and a lower realm of material, natural objects. Thus, every natural thing became a symbol that — if looked at rightly through intuition, imagination, and personal experience rather than rational understanding — could reveal truths about the divine order of the universe. The individual alone in nature became the locus of knowledge, rather than organized religion or science. Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that "in the wilderness, I find something more dear and connate than in the streets or villages … in the woods we return to reason and faith." John Muir remarked that God's glory is written over all his works, but in the wilderness the letters are capitalized. A clear line was now being drawn: "Let me live where I will," David Henry Thoreau declared, "on this side is the city, on that the wilderness, and ever I am leaving the city more and more, and withdrawing into the wilderness."[2]

Nationalists adapted the Romantic and Transcendentalist valuation of wilderness, recasting it as a symbol of American distinctiveness. Writers like James Fenimore Cooper celebrated frontier forests and plains, linking wilderness to character formation, while thinkers such as Frederick Jackson Turner argued that democracy itself was shaped by the frontier experience: thousands of miles away from rigid European institutions, the frontier was thought to have provided continual challenges that led to a more egalitarian, pragmatic, and self-reliant society. Outdoor movements, from the Boy Scouts to Theodore Roosevelt's advocacy of the "strenuous life," promoted excursions into the wild as a means of cultivating moral, civic, and physical vigor. Wilderness came to be valued not merely for its resources, but as a cultural and ethical mirror reflecting human aspirations and ideals.

[2] Thoreau lived in solitude at Walden, on private land owned by his friend Ralph Waldo Emerson, only for about two years. The majority of his life he preferred to spend on Main Street in Concord.

Once wilderness had been reimagined as a cultural and moral asset, it became institutionalized. The boundaries that Romantics and nationalists wove into literature soon found expression in law and policy. The establishment of Yellowstone in 1872 — the world's first national park — marked a decisive turn: wilderness was no longer just a literary or philosophical symbol but a legal and political category. The National Park Service was created with the National Parks Organic Act of 1916, which, Joseph Sax points out in *Mountains without Handrails*, created a seemingly contradictory mandate to simultaneously preserve park resources while also facilitating their consumption by the public. The idea of wilderness as untouched land had been incoherent from the start, but was now actively being implemented. In many cases, the National Park Service had to create the appearance of untouched wilderness. As Mark David Spence recounts in *Dispossessing the Wilderness*, Indigenous populations had lived, hunted, gathered, and conducted ceremonies in Yellowstone, Yosemite, Glacier National Park, and other places for centuries, but their presence was at odds with the by now dominant image of wilderness as uninhabited. A visible Indigenous population remained in Yosemite Valley well into the twentieth century. In the 1950s, the National Park Service implemented a policy of only allowing permanent government employees to remain in the village. As people retired or passed away, their families were given eviction notices and their cabins were destroyed to prevent others from moving in. By the end of the 1960s, only a few buildings were left. Then the National Park Service burned the remaining structures during a "firefighting practice session." In Spence's words: "Uninhabited wilderness had to be created before it could be preserved." The U.S. model of wilderness was later exported to the rest of the world, inspiring national parks such as South Africa's Kruger and Canada's Banff.

Hiking exploded in popularity as trails opened up and outdoor equipment became widely accessible. Several long-distance trails, including the John Muir, Appalachian, and Pacific Crest Trails, were built over decades in an attempt to connect up a patchwork of disconnected wilderness areas, in some cases by acquiring private property or reaching agreements with landowners. Wilderness — once feared, avoided, and inaccessible — was suddenly in. Trails were artificially constructed. A clever design philosophy emerged which favored carefully built, functional trails that could withstand the impact of erosion and thousands of visitors while simultaneously appearing to be wild. Their purpose is to channel people along predefined paths that route them to scenic sites — so-called "positive control points" — while keeping them away from sensitive sites — so-called "negative control points" — enabling large numbers of visitors to experience this curated version of nature without disturbing the land further. The Wilderness Act of 1964 stipulated that wilderness should retain its alleged "primeval character and influence" and be managed in such a way that it "appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature." Trails became a somewhat paradoxical creation — both a product of, and a response to, the growing appetite for wilderness, even as they deepened that very demand by increasing access. We built trails to reach the wild — and in doing so, tamed it. As Nash puts it, the National Wilderness Preservation System became "a kind of zoo for land" in which "wilderness is exhibited in legislative cages, clearly mapped and neatly labeled." Wilderness management became necessary to protect landscapes, yet is marked by tension. It aims to create spaces that are simultaneously controlled and uncontrolled. The means of managing wilderness — trail construction, signage, and regulation — undermine the desired end of experiencing wilderness as wild. And, of course, it is not wilderness that needs managing but people.

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A new form of engagement with the wild emerged: wilderness became a destination for recreation and tourism. This is where I enter the history of wilderness, as one more visitor holding a trail map and a permit, stepping into a physical and mental landscape already prepared for me. I stood at the Horseshoe Meadows trailhead, my portal to a 200-mile hike through the Sierra Nevada. It

didn't transport me to another world, though, so much as extend the old one a little further into the mountains. I followed even, sunken lanes carved through the meadows by trail dozers, which left the tread a few inches below the ground, making me walk through the landscape but never on the land itself. This corridor made it easier to access the landscape, but also sealed it off. The wild was preserved, like a butterfly pinned by its wings and displayed behind glass. It felt like I had arrived too late; the wilderness I longed for existed no longer in space but in time, a vision of the past I couldn't reach by walking deeper into the woods. It was a wilderness that belonged to the imagination of Thoreau and Muir, and it had never been real to begin with. I was looking for something beyond wilderness.

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Part II
Wildness

Wildness found me on a windy day in June when I wasn't looking for it. Bobbing the waves on my surfboard a few hundred feet off the Bolinas shoreline, I was catching my breath. My friends were sleeping on the beach, taking a break from the cold, choppy sea. Southwesterly gusts skirted along the surface, were forced upwards by the rising waves and, when blowing past the crests, took with them a fine spray that blew directly into my face. The afternoon sun shimmered in the water suspended in the air, instantly refracted by each droplet's unique geometry and dispersed in a thousand directions according to principles that are, on their own, intelligible to the human mind but intractable as they apply to millions of irregular droplets oscillating, colliding, and breaking apart on millisecond scales. All I perceived of these interference patterns were glints and sparkles that averaged out to white.

Then the surface exploded. *Fwump. Fwump.* Bodies fell from the sky and impacted the water, followed by loud splashes and a fizzing, splattering patter as the droplets rained back down. Overhead, the slow, deliberate flapping of large wings — a loud *hwooom* on the downward stroke, followed by a fainter *ffff* on the recovery, interweaving into a continuous, uneven rhythm that never quite repeated itself. *Pelecanus occidentalis.* A giant pod of brown pelicans was dissecting a school of anchovies that had concentrated into a frenzied, amorphous bait ball just beneath the surface — an instinctive attempt at collective defense that might protect the school, though for each anchovy, the shimmering shield of bodies provided only the illusion of safety. I witnessed ancient creatures engaged in a twenty-five-million-year-old spectacle, utterly indifferent to me.

I didn't quite know how to label the experience. It wasn't beautiful, though there was something elegant about it. It wasn't fear-inducing, though there was something brutal about it. It wasn't meaningless, though it unfolded with perfect ambivalence towards me. That moment I experienced it: the raw, elusive thing I came to call *wildness*.

Wildness is an experience characterized by a heightened sense of living things that appear *self-willed* — that assert themselves without regard for, or in spite of, attempts to control them. Wild things have an unbidden, unruly life of their own. These experiences can be had in response to lots of things, but they're perhaps most common with large-scale, autonomous processes that seem limitless, overwhelming, and that straddle the boundaries of human understanding, such as migratory patterns of birds, complex weather phenomena, the starry night sky. In some ways, these things can't be controlled, only encountered. They can be small things, too — a weed on a cracked sidewalk or a coyote sneaking through an urban park at dusk.

Of course, a thunderstorm or pod of pelicans isn't willed in the human sense. And there is no true independence, no non-arbitrary way of drawing the line between humans and the natural world — everything acts on everything else, and everything is equally natural in that it exists in space and time. Even though experiences of wildness are triggered by processes outside of us, wildness is still a perceptual quality. We project a will onto natural processes and recognize that, in some way, they defy our control and comprehension. Wildness thus isn't a property that resides in things or that exists independently of our beliefs and perceptions. The fact that it's fundamentally relational in this way doesn't make it unreal or less meaningful: these are still real episodes in our cognition. Because wildness is partly psychological, this also means we have some control

over the likelihood that we encounter it: wildness requires a certain disposition, an openness or attentiveness to it. That's why one can hike for days in "wilderness" without ever encountering it, or find it in a moment when sitting on a surfboard a few hundred feet from shore.

Experiencing wildness is thus not tied to particular places such as wilderness areas, but to a way of being with nature. In principle, wildness can be found almost anywhere, even if we're most likely to find it in places where nature is allowed to run its course and signs of civilization are sparse. Similarly, wildness is not the absence of people, but the presence of life doing its unbidden, surprising, unruly work. Wildness is the feeling that there are things that are separate from you, indifferent to you, and beyond you. That some things aren't made for you, can't be possessed by you, can only be witnessed or surrendered to. But, if you're sufficiently attentive, you can have a glimpse of them. And, sometimes, you can be part of them.

Wildness evokes feelings of awe in the original sense of the word: something "full of awe" was understood to be overpowering, whether it was beautiful or terrible. It's an emotion that modern English has no single word for. A mix of reverence and mild fear, one that inspires respect without tipping into panic, perhaps comes closest to describing it. The Romantics called it the *sublime*, a kind of danger that is perceived from a distance. It's a defeat of sorts — a recognition of your limits — but a defeat that doesn't demoralize; it makes you feel alive.

Experiencing wildness, I've come to believe, isn't just special — although it would certainly be enough to be stopped in our tracks sometimes, awe-struck, and just experience it. Encountering wildness also has certain virtues. For one, awe is *disruptive*. It's a piercing experience of reality that, for a moment, challenges my thought and routines. It unsettles me, but without destabilizing me entirely. It's not a consumer emotion to be maximized, but a liminal moment that upends, if only briefly, how I see the world and my place in it. In small quantities, it makes me feel alive. In large quantities — if it could ever be experienced at scale without diminishing the quality of experience — I suppose it could be dangerous. Another virtue of wildness is that it is *humbling*, a reminder that there are limits to what I can control. Lastly, wildness promises fleeting *relief*: encountering the wild is freeing because here is something that I don't need to control, can't control; something that doesn't judge me and is indifferent to whether I judge it. It's a reminder that I don't matter on these scales — not a depressing thought, but a liberating one. As Schopenhauer once put it, "the sublime dissolves the self in the presence of vastness."

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Wildness and wilderness are distinct and shouldn't be conflated, but they're not entirely at odds. While wildness may not reside neatly within wilderness boundaries, and wilderness management is in perpetual tension with wildness, protecting certain landscapes is still a necessity — only about two percent of the entire U.S. is legally designated wilderness. These lands can offer some refuge from the pressures of human development, as long as they're not over-managed by the park service and over-toured by us. Protected wilderness spaces enable the flourishing of species that can provide some of the experience of wildness both in and outside park boundaries. My criticism thus isn't with efforts to set aside large tracts of land. Lines can be arbitrary and still be useful, even necessary. Rather, the problem lies in drawing lines and expecting nature and our experiences to abide by them.

Over time, I thus came to see that WILDERNESS written across maps and legislation was a kind of promise and a limitation at once. Maps and laws are part of a necessary human attempt to order, name, protect, and guide. For better or for worse, we do need to draw some of these lines, but we shouldn't overlook what flows between and beyond them. The wildness I sought was never contained by lines, fences, or park signage — it is the experience of encountering life on its own terms, unpredictable, autonomous, and alive. Maps can guide us, laws can protect the land, but wildness asks only for our attention, our presence, and our willingness to let it find us anywhere we happen to be. ■