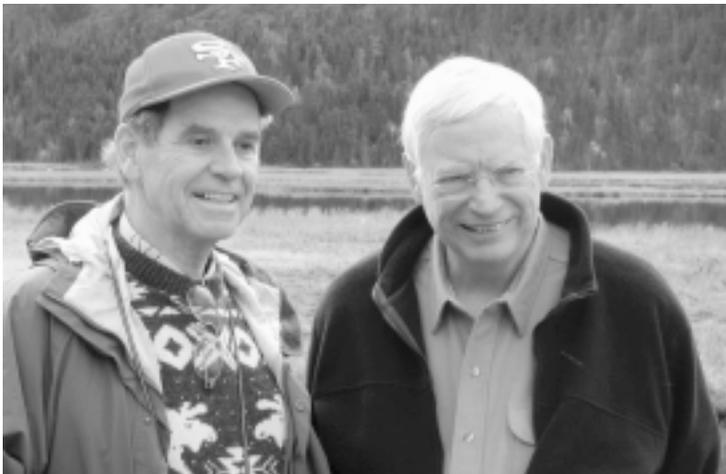


Writers and Wilderness

How to Recapture the Momentum in Saving Wilderness

BY ROBERT C. BARON

Many of us were introduced to nature at a young age. In most cases, our education was started by a parent or grandparent, a teacher or friend, someone our age or many years older. But we were led outside and taught how to see, what to look for, and our questions of what and why were answered.



John Hendee and Bob Baron sharing field observations while on a trip in Alaska following the 8th World Wilderness Congress in 2005. Photo by Chad Dawson.

Sometimes the first introductions to nature are very specific—the name of a bird or a flower, what the formation of the clouds signify, what that bright light in the night sky means and why its position in the sky changes with the seasons, why birds fly north in the spring. Some of us, as a result of this early start, have become naturalists, botanists, ecologists, teachers, and other professionals. Almost all of us prefer being outdoors to being in an office, and to spend our weekends continuing the explorations of our youth.

This personal introduction to nature is often a one-on-one experience. One parent teaches one child how to appreciate and love the world in which we live.

But there are a few people who are able to broaden their audience. These artists, photographers, filmmakers, lecturers, and writers reach out to many, in some cases to thousands or even millions. And by their work they influence the world. Think of John Muir and his writings that helped develop our national parks, or Rachel Carson who wrote about DDT and pesticides and helped bring the bald eagle back from the brink of extinction, or Ansel Adams whose photography caused many people to see nature in a new way.

The theme for the 8th World Wilderness Congress (8th WWC) in Alaska in 2005 was Wilderness, Wildlands and People: A Partnership for the Planet. The conference addressed the importance and benefits of wilderness to contemporary and traditional human societies, using the latest information to make the strongest case possible for balancing wilderness protection and human needs. Among the highest of human needs is the spiritual value of wilderness.

At the 8th WWC, special attention was paid to those photographers and writers who have guided our relationship with nature. The International League of Conservation Photographers was established by 40 of the world's finest conservation photographers. And during the congress we heard from and paid tribute to writers, both from the past and the present.

Writers have strongly influenced our views on nature and wilderness. For three days, established and new writers from around the world shared their experiences and future plans.

What I sought in books was imagination. It was depth, depth of thought and feeling; some sort of extreme of subject matter; some nearness to death; some call to courage. I myself was getting wild; I wanted wildness, originality, genius, rapture, hope. I wanted strength, not tea parties. What I sought in books was a world whose surfaces, whose people and events and days lived,

actually matched the exaltation of the interior life. There you could live. (Annie Dillard in Gilbar 1989, p. 118)

Some writers describe what they see in nature, and how wondrous it is. In this they are similar to a nature photographer who takes pretty pictures. But some writers have an underlying message; something important they are trying to convey to the reader. The best of the environmental writers, such as Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Sigurd Olson, and Aldo Leopold, communicated to inform and influence as well as to provide feelings about nature. Perhaps that is why their books still affect readers today.

Most nature writing is local, whether a small pond in Massachusetts, a remote cabin in Alaska, a small woodlot in Wisconsin, a beach in Maine, a mountain vista in the Catskills, a valley in Yosemite. A few writers are able to take a small wild place and make its story universal and personal. And, in the writing, change us forever.

Modern-day Wilderness Authors

In a preliminary session on writing and advocacy at the 8th WWC, established writers talked about their work and its meaning, where they were, what they were thinking and feeling, and what they were trying to communicate. These writers, Dave Foreman (*Rewiring North America: A Vision for Conservation in the 21st Century*), Jay Griffiths (*A Sideways Look at Time*), John Haines (*The Stars, the Snow and the Fire*), Patty Limerick (*The Legacy of Conquest*), David Quammen (*Song of the Dodo*), and Marianne Wallace (America's Ecosystems series), are among the leading authors today.

This session was followed by a tribute to five deceased people who

through their writing affected our vision of the natural world and helped to preserve wilderness. These people—Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Rachel Carson, Edward Abbey, and David Brower—had major influence on conservation and love of the land. A short biography of each person was given and then selections from their work were read.

Another session dealt with writers and Alaska. Alaska had been purchased from Russia in 1867. It became a territory in 1912, and a state on January 3, 1959. Today, almost a century after becoming a territory and a half-century after statehood, Alaska remains the last American frontier.

Alaska is a place where people come to live out their personal dreams. In a panel, Children of Dreamers, contributors to a new book called *The Alaska Reader: Voices from the North*, discussed what it meant to live in the shadow of others' dreams of Alaska. In another panel, Alaska as a Parable for the Future, contributors to the anthology discussed why Alaska is a canary in the mine for so many issues of national and global significance. These sessions were led by the editors of the anthology: Carolyn Kremers and Anne Hanley. Ten major Alaskan writers participated.

Another session dealt with Native Writings from North America. Marilou Awaikta and Daniel Wildcat talked about writing and its importance to their culture, their environment, and their world. They paid tribute to some of the major Native writers.

Finally, in a session called Passing the Torch, writers met and talked about their work, and received advice and encouragement from other writers, producers, editors, and publishers. These conversations continued well into the evening.

At the Congress, The WILD Wilderness Writing Award was announced for

the best newspaper article, magazine article, essay, book, or body of work published relating to meaningful and significant writing on wild nature, the environment, or the land. Submissions in English anywhere in the world are eligible. The first annual WILD Wilderness Writing Award was presented to John Haines of Alaska. Through his poetry and essays, John has contributed greatly to our appreciation of this world we share.

Most Influential Authors

At the congress, a questionnaire was distributed asking participants which writer(s) influenced them the most. There were 100 writers listed on the survey, and participants added several other names. Participants identified 91 writers, with most people mentioning several writers who have had great influence on them.

Five of these writers were honored at the congress. Sixteen others received numerous votes for their influence on attendees. These writers are Wendell Berry, Annie Dillard, Loren Eiseley, Aldo Leopold, Barry Lopez, Peter Matthiessen, John McPhee, Margaret Murie, Roderick Nash, Sigurd Olson, Roger Tory Peterson, David Quammen, Gary Snyder, Wallace Stegner, Terry Tempest Williams, and Laurens van der Post. Several of them will be honored at the 9th World Wilderness Congress.

Being a writer can be a very lonely occupation. Yet a writer and a book can reach out across the centuries and the miles, touching the hearts and minds of other human beings. Writers who received mention were born as early as 1739 and as late as 1963. Yet their words and ideas are known and treasured by people from around the world in 2005.

As people working for the preservation of wilderness, it is essential to read the best writings and understand the

intellectual grounding of the movement. In this way, we can build on the ideas of the past and move strongly toward the future. For the same reason that every citizen should know about the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution and Civil War, Washington, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, so everyone who works to preserve the planet and the creatures we share it with should know our history.

What should be read by everyone? The list of classic books is long but would certainly include: *Walden* by

open space as a paved parking lot for another Wal-Mart or strip mall.

But there have always been some who have fought to preserve the planet, its land, and the plants and animals who inhabit it. At the congress we honored the writers and photographers who have led the battle.

“There is just one hope for repulsing the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche of the whole earth. That hope is the organization of spirited people who will

enforcing the Clean Air and Water Acts, and much more.

Recapture the Momentum in Saving Wilderness

As a species, we believe in our technology, our power, our money, our egos. But Mother Nature can show us who is really in charge—in the recent hurricanes hitting the Gulf Coast, in global warming, arctic ice meltdown, earthquakes, tsunamis, and in countless other ways.

But nature can also be a teacher. We can learn in a quiet walk through wilderness. We are part of nature and nature is part of us. No matter what a few misguided people say about evolution, our ancestors have been on this planet for millions of years, and we should not cut off that portion of our heritage.

Wilderness is under attack in Africa, in Latin America, in Siberia, and around the globe. Species dependent on wilderness are in danger. We must fight for endangered species, the chimpanzee, gorilla, panda, tiger, blue whale, northern spotted owl, Asian elephant, white rhino. But more than that, we must fight for wilderness, for nature, for undeveloped space, and for the creatures and plants with whom we share the planet.

The writers' sessions at the 8th WWC were titled Writing and Advocacy. We need to convince the silent majority to become the vocal majority, to get people to fight for wilderness, wild places, species, clean air and water. Some did it in the 1960s when major legislation was passed with strong bipartisan support, and we have benefited. We need to continue and escalate the fight. We owe it to our grandchildren and to future generations.

We have let some politicians be wrong on Middle East oil, on tax policy for the rich, on balancing the budget, on domestic policies, and most

A few writers are able to take a small wild place and make its story universal and personal. And, in the writing, change us forever.

Henry David Thoreau, John Muir's *The Mountains of California*, Aldo Leopold's *Sand County Almanac*, Henry Beston's *Outermost House*, Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*, Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, Sally Carrighar's *One Day at Teton Marsh*, Sigurd Olson's *Reflections from the North Country*, and Rachel Carson's *A Sense of Wonder*. The list could be extended significantly, but this is a good start.

All of us who were at the congress know the value of wilderness, preservation, and the importance of people, animals, and places. We need to widen our constituency. Some of us must reach out to additional thousands of people and tell why it is essential to conserve parts of the world. Those of us who are writers, photographers, teachers, filmmakers, speakers, and publishers have to let our voices be heard.

There is no shortage of people who wish to drill, dig, and pave over the planet anywhere, anytime. To them, the only value of a tree is as lumber, an animal as a trophy or as food, an

fight for the freedom of the wilderness” (Bob Marshall, 1930).

The battle is hard and relentless. A writer may not know who he or she influenced or how long is his or her shadow. Henry David Thoreau championed the human spirit against materialism and conformity. During his lifetime, fewer than 2,000 copies of his books were sold. But his voice and words are with us now. John Muir fought hard and not always successfully. But what he built and stood for has changed the environmental movement. Rachel Carson, sick with cancer, gave us *Silent Spring*, and today the eagles and the osprey are back from the edge of extinction.

My favorite philosopher, Lucy from the Peanuts cartoon strip, said, “There is no problem so big or so complicated that it can't be run away from.” And our elected leaders in Washington and other places have for decades followed this advice—on formulation of a national energy policy, acting on global warming, funding our national parks,

importantly on the environment. It is time to fight strongly for the truth, to not let noise be confused with wisdom or sound bites for thought, to have our message be heard, and to leave the world a better place.

Preservation of our wilderness and expansion of our national parks has traditionally been a Republican issue. Yet we have in Washington today a group from the radical right that wishes to destroy what has been preserved for centuries. It is time for moderate Republicans, Democrats, and Independents to fight for the land, to speak out for wild nature, to acknowledge the intrinsic value of all life-forms.

A shift of 1% or 2% of the votes would have changed the last several elections. If a politician, any politician, does not care about the future that we leave to our grandchildren or about the environment, and will not address the issues, he or she should be defeated. It is time for us to speak out. It is time for us to take back our country.

Finally, there are excellent young writers, some of whom were at the 8th WWC, born in the 1970s and 1980s, who will someday be considered in the same class as those named previously. There are also great writers from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and elsewhere, unknown to those in North America and

Europe. It is our jobs as readers, as editors, and as publishers to find them, to encourage them, and to read their books.

The fight for wilderness and the natural world continues. We are grateful to those who write about our relationship to wilderness. **IJW**

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approaches for effective science delivery and application.

In addition to these priorities, the Program Charter outlines a renewed commitment to collaboration and partnerships. To fulfill its science leadership vision the Leopold Institute must work closely with the science and management staffs of the federal wilderness agencies to identify information needs and priorities and apply research find-

ings to management and policy issues. Scientific collaboration with the many other scientists that conduct research important to wilderness management or that use wilderness as study sites is particularly important. In an effort to further strengthen its collaborative activities, the Leopold Institute has recently formalized a Visiting Expert and Exchange Program in which scientists, managers, students, and other specialists with expertise in areas relevant to wilderness science or

management can be hosted at the institute for varying periods of time.

The Leopold Institute's 2005 Program Charter, as well as additional information on its wide variety of research and science delivery and application programs, can be found at <http://leopold.wilderness.net>.

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