

# Mapping the Geography of Hope

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**Abstract**—What is the nature of humankind’s relationship with the natural world? To what extent can social science shed light on this relationship? What are the most pressing research questions? What limitations present themselves? Drawing from the experiences of a 16th century cartographer, Fra Mauro, the author addresses the prospects for successfully mapping the meaning of wilderness in contemporary life.

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I have been waiting my whole life to give this talk. You see, like John Steinbeck confessed in *Travels with Charley* (1962), I, too, am in love with Montana. When I was a youngster growing up in Michigan, my parents used to bring me to the edge of the Bob Marshall Wilderness every other summer on vacation and turn me loose.

I fished mostly. I waded the streams in blue jeans and tennis shoes, floating grasshoppers over the riffles into the deeper holes, trying to entice a brook or rainbow trout to splash at my offering. When I got thirsty, I dipped my baseball cap into the water at my feet and drank to my heart’s content.

Later on, when I was a teenager, my dad taught me to fly fish on the South Fork of the Sun River, and I replaced grasshoppers with an imitator called the Crazy Goof that I purchased at Dan Bailey’s Fly Shop in Great Falls. I rode trail horses, too, with names like Skeeter and Buster. They were plodders mostly, setting their own pace, delivering me in their own good time to places I wanted to fish—places like Pretty Prairie—and to other places from which I could gaze deeper and deeper into “The Bob”—places like the fire lookout atop Patrol Mountain.

As a geography major at The University of Michigan, I returned to the Bob Marshall Wilderness with a friend to backpack into the Chinese Wall. Lo and behold, spring floods and a Forest Service airstrip had changed forever the Benchmark area where I fished as a boy, and for the first time, I entertained thoughts of dedicating my life to the protection of wilderness.

Now, 30 years later, I still count those Montana summers as the happiest days of my life. Viewed retrospectively, they provided not only a wonderful context for my boyhood adventures, they provided fertile ground for stimulating my imagination, for exploration and make-believe, and for dreaming my future. They also provided, as it turns out, the inspiration for my life’s work. Obviously, the Bob Marshall Wilderness had a significant effect on me, and the fact that

I am standing here before you today is clear trace evidence of the depth and durability of the meaning of wilderness in my life.

But, of course, the case for wilderness cannot stand on one story alone. As Bev Driver once wrote, “Who cares what wilderness means to any one individual? The important question is what does it mean or not mean to representative samples of users and nonusers” (Driver 1988, p. 55). Bev was right, I suppose, at least from a scientific perspective. So you might ask Perry Brown about his boyhood excursions into the Sierra Nevada, or Roderick Nash about hiking as a ten year old in the Grand Canyon, or Gary Snyder about his youthful forays into the wilds of the Pacific Northwest. Or take a more formal survey of others at this conference, in this town of Missoula, in this State of Montana, in these United States of America, or, for that matter, in most any other place on this planet, about the origins of their love of nature. Like Snyder, many people, I think, would speak of an immediate, intuitive, deep sympathy with the natural world that was not taught them by anyone (Oelschlaeger 1991).

It is this deep sympathy, this deep sense of affiliation with nature, that I most encourage wilderness social scientists to explore. Where does this sympathy come from, if it comes at all? How does it express itself? What other forces influence it? Can it be taught? And how does this deep sympathy affect our behavior, our sense of place in the world and, ultimately, our growth and development as human beings?

Theologian Sally McFague reasons that “all things living and all things not living are the products of the same primal explosion and evolutionary history and hence are interrelated in an internal way from the very beginning. We are distant cousins to the stars,” McFague says, “and near relations to the oceans, plants, and all other living creatures on our planet” (Rockefeller and Elder 1992). If she is correct, a deep sense of attachment to the land should come as no surprise. We are, after all, made up of the same ingredients.

Environmental psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan explain these same deep stirrings in terms of our species’ age-old penchant for information about the natural world to enhance our prospects for survival in it (Kaplan, R. and Kaplan, S. 1989). If the Kaplans are right, a deep sense of connectedness to nature should also come as no surprise. We are, after all, intimately dependent on the natural world for our sustenance.

Then there are the poets and philosophers among us, many of whom see wild nature as the divine manifestation of God (Nash 1989). If they are right, a feeling of sacredness toward the land should not surprise us either. We are, after all, the self-conscious part of His creation, the part that, by design, reflects on the meaning and purpose of things (Oelschlaeger).

I don’t know to what extent any of these speculations about our relationship with nature reflect a ray of truth, but I do know that I am intrigued by the possibilities. Indeed, throughout the first half of the 1990s, I worked on

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a book called *Nature and the Human Spirit: Toward an Expanded Land Management Ethic* with 50 other contributors from many walks of life, all of whom felt that a spiritual bond with nature is a palpable, researchable topic (Driver and others 1996). While I remain optimistic about our ability to shed light on these hard-to-define and hard-to-measure spiritual values through the practice of social science, I am going to confess a doubt or two about the prospects of ever reaching the full depth of their meaning. And while I'm at it, I might as well also confess that even though I have spent much of my adult life pondering the meaning of wilderness to humankind, I often wish I were that little boy again in Montana who simply loved to fish and drink the water at his feet without having to think.

## The Mapmaker's Dream

I speak to you not so much as a social scientist as a wilderness enthusiast, as one who feels the call of the wild even as I have trouble articulating it. But that, of course, is the challenge—to tease out the meaning of wilderness to people like me, however inadequate our self-reports, however inef-fable our feelings. The challenge is magnified by the fact that what we are seeking to understand is invisible (Schumacher 1977). Mapping what Wallace Stegner once called “the geog-raphy of hope” is really mapping the geography of the human mind, a geography that more often than not seems unfathom-able (Benson 1996).

We are not unlike Fra Mauro, the 16th century cartogra-pher to the Court of Venice, whose lifelong dream was to make a perfect map, one that represented the full breadth of Creation. “I speculate,” he confessed. “Mapmakers are en-titled to do so, since they readily acknowledge that they are rarely in possession of all the facts. They are always dealing with secondary accounts, the tag ends of impressions. Theirs is an uncertain science. What they do is imagine coastlines, bluffs, and estuaries in order to make up for what they do not know. How many times do they sketch in a cape or bay without knowing the continent to which it might be attached? They do not know these things because they are constantly dealing with other men's observations, no more than a glance shore-ward from the rigging of a passing ship” (Cowan 1996, p.11).

I'll let you draw your own analogies. Suffice it for me to say that since we cannot really see what is going on inside other people's heads, since we must rely on secondary accounts and the tag ends of impressions, ours, too, is an uncertain science. I say this not to discourage us from our quest for understand-ing, but to emphasize that when it comes to mapping the invisible worlds of others, there is always a danger of seeing something that is not there and not seeing something that is there. Any notation of landmarks, and their subsequent assignment to continents, should thus be understood as the most tentative of undertakings.

## Emergent Meanings

What I am hinting at here, and what I am celebrating in my own way, is the incredibly rich, diverse and often unique makeup of that part of each and every one of us that is not body (Bloom 1987). While we social scientists may make sketch maps of the human mind that are useful in very

general ways for wilderness planning and management, as we probe deeper and deeper into the invisible worlds of others, the landmarks we uncover inevitably become more specific, more personal and unique. The resulting maps, while richly textured and finely detailed, are not likely to be very useful for predictive purposes. This was Driver's point about personal accounts of wilderness meaning. They may be fascinating to read, but they are seldom generalizable.

There is an indeterminism in all this that I find wonder-fully maddening. It feels wonderful to the poet in me. It feels maddening to the social scientist in me. What to do? How to handle it? If, as Roderick Nash reasons, wilderness is not so much a place as it is our response to a place, we humans have considerable latitude in terms of what we make of wilder-ness (Nash 1982). It is this openness of meaning, I think, that is our hope for the future. Wilderness symbolizes unbridled potential. It represents the wellspring from which all blessings flow. It is a source to be interpreted creatively. The question, it seems to me, is not so much what wilderness means to us, but what do we want it to mean?

## Conclusion

Wilderness experience, as Mike Patterson, Alan Watson, Dan Williams and Joe Roggenbuck recently conceived it in a paper in the *Journal of Leisure Research*, may be thought of as human experience characterized by situated freedom, in which the wilderness sets boundaries that constrain the nature of the experience, but within those boundaries people are free to experience wilderness in unique and variable ways (Patterson and others 1998). The authors go on to characterize wilderness experience as an emergent phenom-enon motivated by the not very well-defined goal of acquir-ing stories that enrich our lives.

I began with a personal story that has taken 45 years to unfold, a story, I might add, that remains unfinished. Multi-ply my story by countless others waiting to be told by wilderness enthusiasts across the Earth, each of whom, through encounters with wild nature, comes to better under-stand her or his place in the world. Pay attention to each and every detail of their stories and rejoice in the thickness of your data. Pencil in your landmarks, and assign them to continents as best you can. Then, like the 16th century cartographer, Fra Mauro, prepare yourself for the world's infinite capacity to surprise.

Thank you, Montana.

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