Living Through the End of Nature

The Future of American Environmentalism

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Introduction

If you stand right fronting and face to face to a fact, you will see the sun glimmer on both its surfaces, as if it were a cimeter, and feel its sweet edge dividing you through the heart and marrow.
—Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

A number of years ago I was talking to a friend about a philosophical problem. I emphasized how the issue had perplexed thinkers throughout the ages, and how the accumulation of thought over the centuries had only rendered the problem that much thornier. I urged her to appreciate the depth of the dilemma and take up the challenge of resolving it. Not ignoring my sense of purpose, she nevertheless turned to me at one point and said, "Paul, this is where you and I part company. At this stage in the discussion you look at the unresolvable nature of the problem and say, 'Oh no!' I look at it and say, 'Oh well.'"

Many of us worry about things that others consider irrelevant—both philosophical and empirical. Some of us get wrapped up in abstract questions that others find abstruse, and many of us are disturbed by social dilemmas to which our friends and colleagues are indifferent. The combination describes many an environmentalist. Environmentalists worry about the well-being of the earth. We care about fresh air, clean water, healthy soils, and the planet's capacity to support human life and ecological abundance. While these are genuine concerns, there is something nonetheless abstract about them. Few of us live on

the front lines of severe environmental harm, and our concerns for the earth as a whole are fundamentally theoretical insofar as no one can see and experience the planet in its entirety. Yes, we have viewed those famous photographs from space, and have seen pictures of the Katrinas, Chernobyls, and clear-cuts of the world. But to capture these in thought and develop a sense of care about them requires us to rise above our immediate experience. When we do so, sadly not everyone joins us. Distressing about the earth is often a lonely exercise in abstract worry. Yet worry we do. We see lots of things happening that don't sit right with us.

The great environmental writer, Aldo Leopold, starts his classic *A Sand County Almanac* by saying, "There are some who can live without wild things, and some who cannot. These essays are the delights and dilemmas of one who cannot."[1] Leopold was keenly aware that not everyone shared his love and sense of concern for the natural world. He wrote that "one of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds."[2] Loneliness seems to be a characteristic of the environmentalist life. Environmentalists frequently see themselves as modern-day Cassandras—the ancient Greek mythical figure who was given the power to foretell the future, but later punished with the curse that no one would believe her. While societies throughout the world have certainly heard the calls of environmentalists, they have yet to embrace environmentalism's sense of urgency and the depths of its commitment. The machine—the economic, cultural, and political system that inspires people to do, get, and yearn for more, with often disastrous consequences for both humans and nonhumans alike—rolls on. "Oh well"?

This book shares much with Leopold's sensibility. It is a book of worries about wild things and quite a few abstractions. Like many other American environmentalists, I value wildness. I love those aspects of life that we meet at the edge of our ability to understand and control. The nineteenth-century

philosopher and naturalist Thoreau famously wrote, "In wildness is the preservation of the world."[3] Lots of people have tried to figure out exactly what he meant. To many environmentalists it is pretty clear. Humans thrive when in contact with the feral, spontaneous, or unbidden aspects of the world; we find much pleasure, greater sensitivity, and deeper levels of experience when we encounter things that elude our conceptual grasp and empirical control. For Thoreau and others this happens most palpably in the natural world. Mountains, waterfalls, elephants, and orchids seem to operate independent of human will. They appear to have their own way about them that makes them difficult to wholly size up. Preserving this wildness or otherness was important to Thoreau, and has been essential to the American environmentalist tradition. Because of nature's sheer otherness, Thoreau looked to it as a place to escape from the innervating pressures and entertainments of human society. It has long represented a realm uncontaminated by the pettiness that can often characterize human relations and a place where one could, as Thoreau puts it, "live deep and suck out all the marrow of life."[4] Wildness is the preservation of the world because nature's apparent difference—its nonhuman quality—opens us to a world different from and broader than ourselves. It thus prods us to marvel at existence itself and experience the sense of surprise and authenticity such wonderment frequently invites.

For many American environmentalists wildness also preserves the world in a more prosaic sense. As biological creatures, we humans need to eat, drink, and breathe to stay alive. Our ability to do so and with a decent quality of life depends on nature's regenerative, other-than-human capacity. Yes, to stay alive we often need to battle nature—to protect ourselves from the elements, wild animals, and vagaries of a world indifferent to our survival and well-being. But we must never forget that ultimately, at least at the biophysical level, we are subject to the earth. It provides natural resources, absorbs waste, and

maintains a host of ecosystem services that are prerequisites to human survival. In this sense, the wildness of the earth is not so much a turn-on as a foundational ground on which we rely every minute of our lives. The wildness of nature is essential to our welfare and sheer survival.

The End of Nature

The premise of this book is that the wildness of nature, so dear to American environmentalism, is coming undone. Over the past century or so the human world has encroached on and ultimately colonized nonhuman life to the point where we are increasingly being denied access to the untamed or unbidden. The dream of modernity, in which, as seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes notes, we "render ourselves, as it were, masters and possessors of nature," is quickly becoming all too true.[5] We are not only controlling nature but also wholly transforming it, and this makes identifying and securing its wildness that much more difficult, if not, for some, impossible. To use an all-too familiar environmentalist term, we are literally and figuratively *consuming* the wildness of nature. Our minds are taming it; our technologies are rendering it usable; our affluence is exploiting it; our power in general is transforming it. This book contemplates and worries about what that means.

Proclaiming that the natural world is disappearing and that humans will be worse off for it is nothing new. As far back as Plato people have complained about humans altering nature beyond repair or overlaying human thought too thickly on the nonhuman world so as to rid ourselves access to a realm independent from human society. To some, this has meant the disenchantment of the world; to others, it has meant a pressing threat to human physical well-being and survival. In either case, worries about disappearing wildness and the human-induced transformation of nature have been long-standing. They have been especially central to a prominent wing of the American environmental movement.

Today, however, those worries take on a new sense of urgency, and we need to develop a more philosophical appreciation for what is at stake. These days it appears that we are on the edge of not simply attenuating wildness from our experience but altering it beyond recognition. We are so thoroughly decimating the empirical reality of nature and so radically revamping our ideas of it that the whole ensemble of nature as that which is separate from humans is apparently vanishing before our eyes. If we are not mindful of this and vigilant in somehow protecting the wildness that is most easily accessible in nature, we will soon be writing an obituary—that is, if we are still around, able to hold a pen, and capable of imagining a world separate from ourselves.

Today's threats to the wildness of nature are taking place on two fronts: the empirical and conceptual. Empirically, a growing human population, unparalleled technological prowess, increasing economic might, and an insatiable consumptive desire are propelling us to reach further across, dig deeper into, and more intensely exploit the earth's resources, sinks, and ecosystem services. To be sure, humans have always altered nature. It is one of the paradoxes of life that we always change the very world on which we depend; simply being alive requires us to alter the natural environment. Recently, though, the cumulative force of our numbers, power, and technological mastery has swept humans across and deeply into all ecosystems to the point where one can no longer easily draw a clean distinction between the human and nonhuman realms. Whether one looks at urban sprawl, deforestation, loss of biological diversity, or ocean pollution, it is clear that humans have been progressively overtaking large swaths of nature and thereby imprinting themselves everywhere.

The empirical diminution of nature was given its most popular and forceful expression years ago when environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben originally published his book *The End of Nature*. McKibben announced that humans

have exerted so much influence on the planet in recent decades that nature is not only shrinking but being wholly colonized by human beings as well. We mine the earth's crust, fish its oceans, pollute its air, reroute its rivers, and rework the land with such intensity and extensiveness that there are essentially no pristine landscapes, untouched wilderness areas, unfished seas, or even unobstructed skies left anymore. (We need only look outside to confirm McKibben's thesis.)[6]

McKibben claims that the ultimate death knell of nature is anthropogenic climate change. The buildup of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases has altered the temperature, humidity, and weather across the globe so much that every region and living creature on earth has been altered, if only ever so slightly (for now), by human activity. According to McKibben, climate change has definitively erased the distinction between the wildness of nature and the "made-ness" of human enterprise. We can no longer wake up in the morning and comment on what a beautiful day the earth has given us, or how special certain plants and animals are. We must now acknowledge that we have partially manufactured the natural world. For McKibben and others, the scope and scale of human activity has created a world in which there is no longer any such thing as nature devoid of human influence. Wildness, as that dimension of nature that signifies genuine otherness, has been stamped out now that the human signature can be found everywhere.

As if the physical disappearance of nature is not enough, certain intellectual understandings are declaring the conceptual end of nature. Most of us, including McKibben, are accustomed to thinking of nature as an independent realm that operates according to certain principles and possesses a given character. The whole notion of wildness is in fact premised on this orientation insofar as it suggests that nature has a particular way about it that is separate from and indifferent to human beings. Nature, in this sense, is the world acting by itself; it is the way of things beyond the human realm. These days, many

prominent thinkers are pointing out that this view is anachronistic, if not fundamentally naive. Nature is not a self-subsisting entity with an essential character but rather a contextualized *idea* through which we approach the nonhuman world. That is, nature is not something laid out before us that we can apprehend in an unmediated manner; it is instead a projection of cultural understandings specific to certain times and places. In other words, nature is a social construction that assumes various meanings in different contexts. Thus, while Thoreau may have seen wilderness as a place of refuge, centuries before him others saw it as a foreboding area full of dangers in which one could literally and figuratively get lost. Likewise, today one person's endangered species is another's source of income, and what some take for a forest habitat others see as timber and board feet. Nature is not simply a material substratum whose essential character we glean from study and observation; rather it is a repository of meaning. This line of thinking rejects the idea that nature—as valued wildlife, beautiful landscapes, or simply a realm that holds specialness for humans—is disappearing, since nature *as such* never existed in the first place.[7]

Nature as social construct was given its most articulate and widespread expression a number of years ago in a set of essays, edited by historian William Cronon, titled *Uncommon Ground: Rethinking the Human Place in Nature*.[8] Cronon's volume presents an array of voices, coming mainly out of the humanities, that explain and illustrate the notion that "nature" is, fundamentally, an idea. The essays point out the many ways that nature as a locution is used to understand, describe, and appreciate the nonhuman world. This orientation doesn't mean, of course, that nature is a figment of our imagination or somehow does not exist. For example, the authors within Cronon's book recognize that Yosemite is a real place. They demonstrate, however, that Yosemite has come to mean particular things to those who visit, read about, or otherwise come to know it, and it is the contingency of such meanings that reveals nature's

socially constructed character. As Cronon puts it, "Yosemite is a real place in nature—but its venerated status as a sacred landscape and national symbol is very much a human invention."[9]

The "end of nature," in an empirical sense, and what can be called social-constructivist "ecocriticism" fundamentally challenge our notions of wildness, and as a consequence, the foundation of American environmentalism. Whatever else American environmentalism is—and it is a good many things—at its core it is about nature. Since the environmental movement's early days in the nineteenth century when people began worrying about rural areas being colonized by encroaching industrialization, to contemporary efforts at addressing climate change, water scarcity, and ozone depletion, a significant strand has seen human well-being and survival wrapped up with protecting the nonhuman world. Sometimes, especially recently, this has expressed itself as a matter of concern for the way people use nature as an instrument to exploit others, or for how racism, poverty, war, and human rights abuses are connected to the control over, access to, or simply diverse experiences of land, water, air, species, or resources in general. Nonetheless, threaded through all of these is a focus on the way the material earth is used, altered, owned, accessed, preserved, or degraded. While the movement has thus changed over the years and today exhibits tremendous diversity, nature—and especially the wildness or otherness of nature—still stands at its center. Nonhuman nature provides the raison d'être of much American environmentalism. Given this, the end of nature raises important questions about the identity and future of the movement.

Without nature, what *is* the American environmental movement? On what philosophical grounds can it base its insights and construct its political strategies? Need it close up shop and go home since it no longer enjoys a reference point, or is there a new horizon toward which it should tack? Likewise, should we walk smilingly into a postnature environmentalist future in which we accept the dewilding of the world and simply

make do, or should the movement continue to resist human encroachment on nature even though doing so these days is seemingly a quixotic task?

This book wrestles with these questions. It seeks to understand the significance of contemporary criticisms of nature, and reflect on what they mean for the future of American environmentalism. Its central argument is that the end of nature, while fundamentally challenging to the movement, represents not a death knell but rather an opportunity. It offers the chance for the movement to think afresh about conventional philosophical and political categories, and therewith refashion itself into a more effective movement. The end of nature, in other words, far from representing the demise of environmentalism, embodies the movement's future. As will become clear as the following chapters unfold, coming to terms with wildness in a world seemingly determined to snuff wildness out of our lives represents the promise of environmentalism.

Into the Postnature World

Simply to raise questions about the end of nature and fate of wildness at this point in time makes many environmentalists uncomfortable. Environmentalism in the United States is finally finding its political footing after nearly a decade at the margins of political life. The Bush administration started the new millennium with essentially a frontal attack that put environmentalists on the defensive as the White House aggressively sought to dismantle years of legislative environmental protections and international commitments.[10] The Obama administration has largely reversed this effort, as it has tried to usher in a new era of environmental responsibility. It has, for instance, increased the number of wilderness areas, tightened regulation over various pollutants, advanced a new energy policy aimed at reducing our dependence on fossil fuels, and tried to assume a leadership role in international environmental issues. To be

sure, many of its efforts have been stymied, and environmentalists who helped put Obama in office expect more from him. Nonetheless, on the whole, American environmentalism seems to have finally found a hearing in Washington. Indeed, not since the 1970s have the political stars been aligned to enable environmentalism's message to be heard and its recommendations adopted. Given this, the last thing the movement seems to need right now is to get lost contemplating what seem like philosophical problems. Having at long last come out of the political desert, it seems unwise to rethink the movement's identity and political orientation. Doesn't the movement have enough on its plate right now advancing initiatives with a sympathetic administration?

A related set of concerns emerges as one recognizes the split character of the American environmental movement. While largely supportive of each other, many activist groups and intellectuals within the movement have made a profession of criticizing their brethren, and despite the new political promise of environmentalism (or because of it), such criticism continues. For instance, grassroots activists criticize national and transnational organizations for being out of touch with the needs and political visions of people on the ground. They complain that the sheer size of such organizations—often called "Big International Nongovernmental Organizations"—and the overly narrow agenda that such groups pursue alienate many would-be supporters, thereby compromising the movement's ability to mobilize people for significant campaigns.

From a different corner, radical parts of the movement criticize their more moderate counterparts for pursuing only modest goals in the political arena and nuzzling up too closely to industry in the economic sphere. They reject the kind of market-driven approach adopted by many groups that work with the business community and are wary about environmentalism's too cozy relationship with the Obama administration.

By way of response, the moderate or light green groups look at their radical counterparts as out of touch with political re-

ality. By calling for global transformation and at times undertaking extreme tactics to make themselves heard, the radicals, according to their critics, render themselves politically irrelevant at best and invite backlash at worst. This is especially troubling when there is a sympathetic administration in the White House.

It is in this context that many environmentalists fear recent criticisms of nature or musings about the end of wildness. There may in fact be times to reflect on environmentalism's fundamentals and even rethink its raison d'être. That time, however, is not now. Rather, this is the moment to reengage and deepen long-standing efforts to protect wildlife, fight against pollution, safeguard natural resources, and support sustainable development. For many in the movement, to get wrapped up in an abstract debate about the status of nature represents a detour that the movement doesn't need right now and from which it may never return.

I see things differently. Environmentalism certainly has a unique opportunity to intensify its conventional efforts and move beyond the holding pattern it was experiencing until recently. Moreover, its internal squabbles go way back and thus do not pose significant, timely challenges. But this doesn't mean that all is rosy. Despite recent legislative and executive victories, and the mainstreaming of an environmental sensibility across the United States, environmentalism's prospects are still rather dim. Environmental issues continue to be overshadowed by concerns about terrorism, the economy, conflict in the Middle East, and other so-called high politics issues. Additionally, Obama's policy agenda is so ambitious that his environmental commitments are always being balanced and often compromised by other concerns. Combine this with the monumental scale of environmental problems and it is clear that we are not unambiguously on a steady road to a green world. The movement may be having its moment, but behind this the machine is still very much rolling on.

To me, this situation calls out not for circling the wagons and simply reasserting past strategies but instead for thinking afresh about the movement's core principles and therewith exploring new terrain. It is in this context that the end of nature, far from undermining American environmentalism, represents a profound opportunity. For far too long American environmentalism has placed nature on a pedestal and relied on it to advance environmental protection. Nature has been the standard against which to measure environmental degradation, the good toward which environmental policies should aim, and the realm most deserving of protection. While such a focus has achieved much, it has also restricted the movement's political reach and effectiveness by helping to polarize political debate—pitting the well-being of nature against that of humanity—and leaving the movement with a unidimensional philosophy that unnecessarily offends movement critics. More generally, it has imprisoned the movement in a certain historical era and conceptual framework such that environmentalism's voice, while certainly part of contemporary political discussions, is sounding increasingly anachronistic and actually less responsive to the growing enormity and complexities of our environmental challenges.

The end of nature offers—indeed demands—a new orientation. It presents the chance for the movement to liberate itself philosophically and politically from a nature-centric perspective, and thus cultivate frames of reference as well as devise strategies for creating ecological and social health in a world where it is impossible to separate humans and nature. To the degree that environmentalists recognize the hybrid character of human-nature relations and appreciate the end of nature arguments, they can self-consciously work to protect the well-being of *both* people and the nonhuman world, and capitalize on environmental protection opportunities that arise at the complicated interface between the two. As I will show, parts of the movement are already embarking on such a postnature environ-

mentalist trajectory. One sees this in environmentalist efforts to address urban sustainability, social justice, poverty alleviation, and the rights of indigenous people. An understanding of the end of nature can further such engagements and reinvigorate the movement. It can encourage American environmentalism to get to know itself again in a changed political, biophysical, and conceptual landscape, thereby resetting its political compass. This can lead to a renegotiation of the fault lines that have long animated environmental politics and enable the movement to reposition itself so it can be more relevant to contemporary struggles. In short, rather than become nervous, environmentalists should embrace the end of nature, and take advantage of the opportunity it offers to become philosophically clearer and politically more effective.

What Do We Make of the End of Nature?

Such an embrace, while promising, will not be easy. Aside from pragmatic considerations, many thinkers and activists have responded coolly to the end of nature arguments on more abstract grounds. This is because the critiques cast into doubt not simply environmental thinking but also our ideas more generally about the place of humans in the world. People thus have been responding to the challenges posed by the end of nature in importantly different ways. For example, when it comes to concerns about pushing nature to the edges of the planet and, in the extreme, fundamentally stamping it out of our lives, some choose to put blinders on. Yes, humanity is trampling on wildness as people spread themselves across all parts of the planet and, yes, this entrails a blending of human artifice and natural places. Nature is still very much around, however, and different enough from humans to relieve us of getting overly concerned about the end-of-nature arguments. There are still plenty of beautiful places and nonhuman species about. These may be flecked with a human influence, but the impact is

usually so slight that dwelling on it is beside the point. Yes, climate change, for instance, has resulted in greater glacial melt, but this hasn't fundamentally changed the direction or flow of the planet's waterways, and thus it should not alter the way we understand glaciers, rivers, watersheds, and the like. The world has not become an artificial entity; the otherness of nature is still very present. Those subscribing to this view see humans and nature as fundamentally different things and understand that, while the two will occasionally mix, this doesn't render all parts of the earth human. In most instances, the mixing can't be detected and often can eventually be undone. This view doesn't completely dismiss the empirical end of nature but simply sees such concern as wrongly oriented. Rather than give up on nature, we should work to protect those elements that have yet to be significantly altered by humanity.[11]

Other people take a different tack. For example, many shrug off lamentations about disappearing nature out of the belief that humans are themselves natural, and hence cannot be faulted for extending the range of their presence or otherwise intervening in nature. In fact, the idea of intervening itself is meaningless. Humans are biological creatures just like all other organisms, and as such it is silly to say that they are encroaching on a world of which they are a part. Those advancing this view understand nature as everything that exists. "Nature means the sum of all phenomena, together with the causes which produce them; including not only all that happens, but all that is capable of happening," writes nineteenth-century philosopher and political economist John Stuart Mill.[12] Using this understanding, it is clear that humans cannot possibly alter the natural world since we are part and parcel of it. There is therefore no reason to worry about the end of nature because whatever is overtaking nature is indeed nature itself. Human colonization of "nature"—in the form of overfishing, suburban sprawl, air pollution, and so forth—is merely another evolutionary wrinkle in an ongoing story of ecosystem change. It's no big deal.[13]

Still others think that the end of nature *is* a big deal, but welcome it as an advancement in human well-being. Most people like the human-made world. They enjoy the security and comfort of living in an apartment or home with a reliable source of food and protection against the elements, and pine for these things when denied them. Most of us appreciate that the privileged among us are no longer subject to, say, the darkness of night (we can turn on lights), the culinary constraints of the seasons (we can import food from around the world), or the mercy of the weather (we have furnaces and air conditioners). These enjoyments have come through our battles with nature, and rest on such victories. Nature is, in so many ways, a constraint on our lives. Taking it over has thus been one of the most liberating human achievements. When McKibben and others complain about the end of wildness, they should take a hike to places where humanity has yet to master the natural world. Then they would realize that the end of nature is an event to celebrate, not lament.[14]

A final response sees the disappearance of nature as an important achievement, but is less sanguine about the gifts it will bestow on humans. Rather, many view the end of nature as an inevitable result of age-old human intervention into nature, and contend that whether we like it or not, we must now rise to the level of responsibility that taking over nature entails. They remain mixed, however, about whether we'll be able to assume this responsibility. For millennia, people have changed the earth. As mentioned, it is part of life to alter the world in which we live. Native peoples used fire to clear and fertilize the land, colonizers transported diseases and invasive species that reshaped ecosystems, and agriculturalists altered the evolutionary track of the plant and animal worlds through selective breeding. That we have altered the entire earth is thus no surprise, yet neither is it something simply to celebrate. As environmental scientist Daniel Botkin writes, "Nature in the twenty-first century will be a nature that we make; the

question is the degree to which this molding will be intentional or unintentional, desirable or undesirable."[15] Or as botanist Peter Raven says, "We human beings are in fact managing the entire planet Earth, every square centimeter, right now, and the illusion that we are not, that any one of us can be exempt from this work, is extremely dangerous."[16] In other words, the end of nature changes our historical role on earth to the degree that it calls on us to consciously take hold of the steering wheel of life, and become intelligent, compassionate, and otherwise mindful managers of the planet—quite a daunting challenge.

These different views suggest that coming to terms with the end of nature—either believing that it has actually happened (or even could happen) or pragmatically responding to it—is no easy matter. While some reject the whole idea that nature can be completely colonized, others embrace it as reality (and for some, a desirable reality). Such disagreement is not surprising given the stakes involved. The end of nature argument is not simply an environmentalist worry. It is also about the fundamental meaning of human life on earth.

The same uneasiness or diversity of opinion exists with regard to social constructivist ecocriticism. Constructivists claim not that nature is empirically disappearing but rather that it never really exists separate from the interpretative meanings we give it. This has elicited two main responses. On the one hand, many dismiss the social constructivist attack on nature out of hand, and merely reassert a modernist narrative about nature and its imperatives. Many see ecocriticism as a type of environmental relativism that is at odds with common sense and contemporary science. Certainly, they acknowledge, there is a social dimension to how we think about nature, but nature is fundamentally a physical entity, and our understanding of it can be based on scientific description. The whole notion that nature is constructed is intellectual sophistry practiced by ivory tower geeks who never venture outdoors or work at such high

levels of abstraction that they never genuinely engage the phenomenal world.[17]

Others see attacks on the idea of nature as simply the latest manifestation of a long anti-nature tradition associated with what biologist David Ehrenfeld calls the "arrogance of humanism."[18] Ecocriticism places human beings at the center of all phenomena and hence is overly impressed with the self-referential character of human experience. Consequently, it is blind to what philosopher Albert Borgmann calls nature's nonhuman, "commanding presence."[19] Those who feel this way argue that ecocritics are wrong in their so-called insights. Ecocritics practice "fashionable nonsense" as they overemphasize the social dimensions of the scientific enterprise and, out of a desire to appear intellectually cool, join the academic chic in getting rid of the nature of nature.[20] As such, many claim, we must reject (and therefore not worry about) their proclamations.

On the other hand, many go in the opposite direction and fully embrace the constructivist critique of nature. They maintain that since everything we call nature is relative to our ideas, we should accept and even celebrate our role as its creators. Like those who support the empirical end of nature and urge humanity to assume a managerial position, those excited about ecocriticism recognize that humans have always altered the material conditions on earth, but have done so within particular discursive contexts. We can never escape these sociohistorical cognitive landscapes and therefore should not try to do so. Instead, we should accept the constructed character of nature, appreciate the ways we invest the nonhuman world with particular meanings, and get on with it. Getting on with it entails doing whatever we want—which usually means utilizing technology, contenting ourselves with human-made landscapes, and happily using artificial substitutes for natural resources. For nature is not some other-than-human world that we find but rather part of the world we make. We should, to be sure, make our world into a place that maintains ecological

services, yet our vision and control over the environment need not be hindered by any preconceived vision of what is natural. Political scientist and futurist Walter Anderson represents this view when he recommends that we see ourselves for what we really are: ecoartists—designers and builders of the nonhuman world.[21] Those espousing this perspective call for dispensing with the category of nature altogether, and fashioning an environmentalism that uses other guidelines for vision and mobilization.

There are no easy answers to the problem of nature's status as something wild and fundamentally different from humans. This should not surprise us in that thinkers have been wrestling with the concept of nature for centuries. As social critic and novelist Raymond Williams writes, nature is "perhaps the most complex word in the English language."[22] One reason for this is that nature has so many meanings. Yes, it defines the world of plants, animals, mountain ranges, and so forth, but it also describes the "way of things," the patterns by which things "naturally" evolve or express themselves (including human beings). In *My First Summer in the Sierra*, naturalist John Muir observes, "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe."[23] This describes the difficulty with coming to terms with critiques of nature. The end of nature argument and social constructivist ecocriticism do not stand in isolation from the long history of reflection on the nature of things or the commitments various people have made to the practice of nature protection. It would thus be astonishing if there was agreement about what to make of recent empirical and conceptual assaults on nature.

The difficulties involving nature go even deeper. It is not simply that various camps line up in opposition to each other but rather that the issues are so perplexing that individuals find themselves split. Thinking about nature and its end is so riven by paradoxes that it almost necessarily sends the mind spinning. If we are to avoid dogmatism, which as philosopher

and dramatist Gotthold Lessing claims, identifies "the goal of our thinking with the point at which we have become tired of thinking," we must shy away from finding too easy a resting place in such issues.[24] As mentioned and as I will explain, recent criticisms of nature offer tremendous opportunities for both environmentalism and the struggle to find our place in the cosmos in our overly critical age precisely if we maintain a sense of ambiguity about nature.

Traversing the Human/Nature Divide

Like others, I too am torn by the critiques of nature. I resonate, on the one hand, with the above-mentioned criticisms. In my head anyway, I understand the arguments of those declaring an end to nature and revealing nature's socially constructed quality. Both perspectives are "right," in the sense that they are based on sound thinking, and informed by either careful observation or long traditions of philosophical thought. The wildness of nature *has* indeed largely disappeared as humans have placed their signature on all the earth's ecosystems. And we *never* come to nature unencumbered by cultural, personal, or subjective categories. To me, the ideas that nature is gone and that our conceptions of it are largely solipsistic are compelling. I also am sure that many environmentalists would concur with the logic behind these views.

At the same time, there is something inside me—and inside many American environmentalists—that finds both sets of insights unacceptable. A postnature world may make sense intellectually, but emotionally, morally, and I dare say spiritually it makes no sense at all. Emotionally, it offers a lonelier world in which we cut ourselves off from other creatures; morally, it appears overly anthropocentric and thus ethically arrogant; and spiritually, it makes us not simply an exceptional being in the universe but the be all and end all of existence. Many environmentalists have similar misgivings. In fact, a postnature image

of the world is at odds with the central tradition of American environmentalism. A postnature world cannot possibly sit well with those who associate their lives with Thoreau, Muir, Leopold, Rachel Carson, and others who prize the other-than-human world as something biologically, morally, and spiritually essential to human life.

Because of the complexities involved with thinking about nature, my sense of being torn extends to the wider uncertainty regarding humans and nature. Like many American environmentalists, I enjoy both the experience of being in nature—camping, walking, or just being surrounded by the natural world—as well as the comforts of the human-made world. After a long backpacking or cross-country skiing trip, I love coming home to the warmth of a furnace, the ease of retrieving food from a refrigerator, the entertainment of a stereo, and the shelter of walls decorated with various pieces of art. Thoreau celebrates this dual aspect of experience in his essay "Walking." On returning from a multihour walk through the woods, Thoreau remarks how much he enjoys his abode, where he can settle in front of the fire, escape the wind and rain, and take pleasure in reading or writing free from the elements.[25] Indeed, most of us, no matter how long we leave society for the wilderness, enjoy coming back. Few of us are willing to live in the wild all the time.

For many of us it is not simply a matter of returning to human-made comforts. These days, we take such comforts along with us. I go to the woods in stitched leather boots, a GORE-TEX jacket, and polypropylene underwear. I sleep on a synthetic pad, carry a metal canister of butane gas, and use a plastic water filter filled with chemicals to treat the "natural" condition of streams. If you look in my backpack, you'd find a whole host of items—from toilet paper, plastic bags, and rain gear, to flashlight, freeze-dried food, and plastic scouring pad—that are human-made, but that make being in the woods that much more enjoyable. Am I being hypocritical in my wilderness expe-

rience? Frankly, I'm unsure how one could be otherwise. Being torn about the criticisms of nature, in other words, reveals tensions about our relationship to nature more generally.

I was taught that when faced with contradictory feelings about something, or when mindful of paradoxes and tensions in the world, it is best not to resolve them too quickly less we forego the opportunity to learn something about the incongruities themselves. This is especially the case with regard to the question of nature and a possible postnature world. The struggle between the head and heart in this context offers a chance to think and feel afresh about environmentalism as well as the human condition more broadly. It prods us to resist analytic rigidity in which we must draw a sacrosanct line between humans and nature, or else let such a line completely disappear. What happens if we do neither? As I hope to show, such mindful resistance opens new vistas for environmentalism—vistas that offer greater conceptual clarity for a movement and world poised at the edge of a postnature age.

The Dual Dreams of Naturalism and Mastery

Resisting the impulse to resolve dilemmas is not easy. Few of us are comfortable with ambiguity, and nuance seems only to weaken political intent. It should be no surprise, then, that despite the tensions just described, in debates about nature people usually come down on one side or the other. We see this in the fault lines that have come to define American environmental politics. Environmental politics in the United States are exceedingly polarized. Environmentalists are labeled "tree huggers," and accused of caring more for plants and animals than people; skeptics, on the other hand, are seen as greedy technophiles blinded by self-interest. Such polarization is not simply caricature but instead reflects genuine disagreement. Environmentalists and their critics argue about a lot of things. They disagree about land-use issues, climate change dangers, the value

of biological diversity, the use of toxics, and the costs of mountain-top-removal mining. At bottom, however, such disputes are merely the circumstantial reflection of a deeper ideological clash having to do with two fundamentally different worldviews. These two views stand as oppositional narratives about the place of humans on earth. They offer ideological comfort for negotiating one's way through the perennial challenge of making sense of nature and humanity's relationship to it. The great promise of the end of nature argument and social constructivist ecocriticism is that they can help relax the rigidity with which these views are held. This would help the environmental movement by encouraging it to shed some of the baggage it has accumulated over the years, and therewith assist in resetting the fault lines that distinguish environmentalists from their critics and polarize political debate.

If you scratch American environmentalists deep enough, you'll find a basic sensibility that informs many of their understandings and practices. For reasons to be explained, I call this sensibility the "dream of naturalism." The dream of naturalism believes that the best thing human beings can do is to align themselves with the imperatives and patterns of nature. It assumes that there is a world outside of human beings, and that this world sets the parameters and provides special promise for human life. It recognizes that the more-than-human world has perfected, over billions of years, ways of creating and sustaining life, and that we should respect, appreciate, learn from, and emulate its workings rather than try to outsmart them. The reasoning is pretty basic. Nature provides the biophysical requirements for human life, and we ignore its imperatives at our peril. We need fresh water, healthy food, clean air, and the like to live and thrive. If we undermine these, we suffer and, in the extreme, endanger our very survival. The reasoning gets deeper, though, as we realize that nature means more to many of us than simply a biophysical backdrop for our lives. Many of

us in the American environmentalist tradition look to nature as a model for living, ground for morality, and source of aesthetic pleasure. Nature, in other words, is not simply a material substratum that we live within and depend on but also a source of principles, cultural edification, and delight. It represents much that is true, good, right, and beautiful in the world. As a consequence, we should harmonize ourselves with, rather than impose ourselves on, the natural world.

Environmentalism's embrace of naturalism leads it politically to support policies that protect nature's otherness. Environmentalists prefer the earth's air, water, soil, and species as "given"—uncontaminated or at least not too altered by humans. We rail against pollution, anthropogenic climate change, and the loss of biological diversity at the hands of humanity. Indeed, most environmentalist campaigns, particularly in the United States, have an element of protecting nature unto itself. Nature not artifice should be our guide in environmental matters.

Critics of environmentalism subscribe to a radically different orientation. Far from being a sacrosanct realm that deserves pragmatic deference and principled consideration, critics see nature as merely the biophysical backdrop for human life. There is nothing particularly special about it in a philosophical sense; if anything, the natural world is merely raw material ripe to be used and designed as humans see fit—that is, it is there for the taking. To the degree that nature has any character at all, it is as constraint to be overcome. Wind, rain, wild animals, excessive cold, and so forth curtail human freedom, and even threaten our survival. Human well-being consists of freeing ourselves from nature's exigencies—opting out, as much as possible, from nature's imperatives. Critics of environmentalism resonate with Francis Bacon's dictum that nature should be "bound into service" and "made a slave."[26] As such, they subscribe to what could be called the "dream of mastery."

The dream of mastery turns on the notion that human beings are uniquely endowed with ingenuity, resourcefulness, and the spirit of enterprise, and that we can and should use these to unlock and override nature's secrets. When we do so, we improve human life. Medical technologies, agricultural sciences, electronics, and the like are all examples of humans bursting through previously established biophysical limits, and each has brought humanity much safety, comfort, and delight. The dream of mastery seeks to deepen our commitment to humanity's quest to decipher and control nature. It expresses itself politically through policies that unleash science and technology, and cultivate a spirit of human confidence and enterprise. It sees humanity, as business economist Julian Simon puts it, as the "ultimate resource," and thus able to address any challenges, including environmental ones, simply through the application of greater human effort and control.[27]

The twin dreams of naturalism and mastery are, of course, ideal types.[28] They represent broad interpretative strokes trying to depict philosophical proclivities. Nonetheless, they capture the dual sensibilities that inform and animate American environmental politics. Environmental disputes are in many ways arguments about fundamentals. They involve clashing worldviews of humanity's place on earth. As such, they are almost theological in character. They pit the godly character of nature against the godlike attributes of human beings. Environmental politics in the United States has been mired for too long in an endless debate about which god is, or should be, primary. The end of nature and social constructivist ecocriticism can help advance such debate by stripping each camp of its theological assumptions. As I show in the following pages, such a contribution would enable American environmentalism to better understand and position itself in the postnature world, even if in doing so it must embrace a type of ambivalence when it comes to ultimate questions about our place in the more-than-human world.

Living through the End of Nature

Most of us hate ambiguity. We like feeling certain about ourselves and the world, and flourish to the degree we feel confident in our life paths. Living day-to-day involves negotiating our way through complexity, and often struggling against forces that threaten to alter our lives in basic and not always attractive ways. Ambiguity seems to undermine our abilities.

Environmentalism as a social movement is no different in its desire for certainty. Environmentalists engage complicated issues and battle an array of powerful forces. Many people are tone-deaf to environmental issues, or simply too wrapped up in their personal interests to care about the well-being of the earth's life-support systems, environmental injustice, or the prospects of future generations. Additionally, the trends of population growth, increasing affluence, and technological wizardry are intensifying almost all environmental challenges, forcing environmentalists to concentrate on a moving target. There are also structures of power—associated with capitalism, the nation-state system, patriarchy, and modernist, scientistic logic—that generate environmental degradation and demand a response, but defy easy analysis. In the face of such complexity and forces, there is the urge and seeming necessity to develop a keen-eyed sense of "what is to be done," and advance such thinking in a fierce and frequently uncompromising manner. As environmental activist David Brower once remarked, "Polite conservationists leave no mark save the scars upon the Earth that could have been prevented had they stood their ground."[28] Standing one's ground is not something we do well when we are ambivalent. Ambivalence seems to make us vulnerable to being swayed off our path. It involves uncertainty and doubt, and engenders hesitation and indecision. The last thing environmentalism seems to need these days is ambivalence.

Yet ambiguity may be the movement's saving grace. The world is a complex place. There are no easy answers to many

of the issues environmentalists wrestle with—at multiple levels of concern. Is globalization good or bad for the environment? Should environmentalists depend on scientific logic to advance environmentalist concerns, or is scientific logic itself part of the problem? How should environmentalism engage capitalism? Should it work in tandem or seek to overthrow it? Can the international state system address global environmental issues, or should we seek a new world order with different types of political units? Is technology good or bad for environmental well-being? Negotiating our way through such questions cannot be a matter of ideological bulldozing but instead must involve nuance, contextualized thinking, openness, and at bottom, a type of faithful unknowing. Environmentalism is often scared to advertise its own uncertainty about issues as it has been fearful, more generally, of exposing rifts within the movement. An appreciation for the end of nature arguments suggests that this is a mistake.

The empirical end of nature and social constructivist ecocriticism offer us new ways to think about ambiguity, and especially ambiguity in a political context. There is no straightforward answer to the perplexities of nature. As we shall see, we cannot come down definitively on the question of whether we are part of or distinct from nature, or whether we should lord over or subject ourselves to nature as evidenced in the debate between naturalism and mastery. Likewise, there are no absolutes when it comes to thinking about the social construction of nature. Yes, we humans tell ourselves stories about the more-than-human world, but there also seems to be something genuinely revealing about those stories. They are made-up and seemingly true at the same time.

In the following pages, I highlight uncertainties of environmentalism. I argue that these uncertainties are, paradoxically, entryways into a deeper kind of knowledge—one that better understands our inner lives and outer experiences as environmentalists. Ambivalence is not some horrid sensibility that makes

us weak-kneed and ineffective. Rather, it is a source of wisdom and, as I will assert, political strength. Life is full of mysteries. We may know that we evolved along with other creatures, and that our bodies operate according to physical and chemical laws, but we have no clue about what it all means, what is absolutely best for our lives, and how to pursue meaningful agendas in a world that is quickly changing, and in which we ourselves are shifting our affiliations as well as finding new passions and interests.

Many traditions have long maintained that the one thing we know about life is that things change. This is the one constant. Whether it's Heraclitus, the Buddha, or contemporary physicists, we know that circumstances are always shifting. Living in such a world is an exercise in openness and requires a confidence in unknowing in an absolute sense. Philosopher Alan Watts talks about the "wisdom in insecurity" to capture this.[29] The environmental movement has long appreciated ecological insecurity. These days, it is awakening also to movement insecurity. Environmentalism is increasingly uncertain about its core identity, which for centuries, at least in the American context, has revolved around the idea of nature. In working through this identity crisis, it cannot simply abandon the term and the reference toward which the word points, nor can it easily continue uncritically to embrace the idea of nature. We need to find a middle path. As I hope to show, this middle path is not mere "polite environmentalism" or a mishmash of muddled thinking. Rather, it is involves operating across the fault lines of philosophical contestation, and fashioning the tension itself into insight and practice.

The middle path involves living through the tensions of the end of nature. Those who wish to sweep the end of nature argument and social constructivist ecocriticism under the rug want to pretend that we still live in the twentieth century or even the late nineteenth one—a time when we could entertain a naive notion of nature and work productively to keep humanity out

of areas long devoid of human presence. Alternatively, those who wish to embrace such arguments and go full steam ahead toward a postnature world are too willing to abandon values and understandings that have long inspired and informed humanity. The middle path is about holding on to both sets of sensibilities. It involves appreciating the contradictions that inflect the contemporary world—for example, protecting wildness by intensively managing wilderness areas—and those that mark our inner lives—for instance, loving both the experience of hiking through mountains and vegging out in front of the tube. Living the tensions of the end of nature calls on us not to choose sides—within ourselves or the external world—but to enlarge ourselves to include both sensibilities. A meaningful, effective environmentalism for the twenty-first century requires us, in other words, to maintain the intensity that contradiction provides, and milk it for insight and effective policy.

This book explicates the tensions of being an environmentalist in a postnature age. Its aim is to hold a mirror to ourselves, as environmentalists, so we can better understand ourselves within the complicated world we live in. The hope is that such an exercise will enable us to live more meaningful lives and invest ourselves in environmental protection in more effective ways. We are often told that the most useful kinds of books are those that simplify the world, those that reduce complexity so we can perceive the broad outline of things and thus understand life with greater clarity. This book takes a different tack. As I see it, many contemporary difficulties stem from pretending that life is fairly simple, that we can confidently understand its fundamental themes, and that we can therefore exert control over ourselves and much of our world in a self-assured manner. A necessary antidote to this is to complicate the world. This doesn't mean inundating the reader with more detail but rather offering ways to appreciate how intricate and ultimately mysterious life is, and how such an appreciation can enhance environmentalism.

Despite a deep attraction to the dream of naturalism, many of us, as environmentalists, live in two worlds: an ideal one, in which we respect, honor, and treasure nature; and a more pragmatic one, in which we constantly compromise our love of nature to get through our days. We care about other creatures and the earth as a whole, but we also like to get around on fossil-fueled cars and planes, eat exotic and nonlocal foods, and type books or simply surf the Net on computers rich in cadmium, lead, and barium. As I hope to show, these dual loves are not pathologies but rather genuine reflections of living in a postnature world. We love the woods and our iPods. This doesn't mean that something is wrong with us; it instead expresses our environmental reality at this sociohistorical moment.

Likewise, environmentalism as a movement is split these days across two worlds. On the one hand, it wants to preserve, conserve, and sustain the more-than-human realm, which involves minimizing our presence, reducing our footprint, and otherwise restraining our interventions. On the other hand, we are realizing that this cannot be done without extreme intrusion using some of the most sophisticated technologies and managerial types of control. In the following pages, I show that these dual orientations are not antagonistic, even if they are on some level contradictory, but rather necessary practices in a postnature age. We live in a completely humanized world in which every corner of the globe has been inflected by human presence and in which our ideas have become so solipsistic that we can no longer see beyond our own social constructivism. In such a world, environmentalism can only operate stretched across constant tension. Anything else would be disingenuous. This book aims to articulate what it means, both individually and collectively, to live through the tensions of the present postnature age. It does so to help us deepen our experience of being environmentalists, and contribute to a more robust, historically relevant, and vibrant movement.

Sequence of the Argument

The book unfolds in the following way. In the next chapter, I provide a brief historical sketch of the environmental movement in the West, with special reference to the American context. I do so to highlight how the American environmental movement has drawn the distinction between humans and nature, and how this has served it in its political efforts. Since its early days, in the late nineteenth century through its contemporary expressions in the twenty-first century, American environmentalism has invoked a human-nature boundary to warn people against delving too deeply into the natural world. The boundary has been essential to cultivating a preservationist, conservationist, and sustainability ethic. The chapter aims to make this connection, and then explain the ways it has benefited the movement.

Chapter 3 explores what is behind the impulse toward such a boundary. Here is where I spell out the dream of naturalism. I explain that the boundary represents environmentalists' great love for nature—a love that borders on theological subscription. I describe various elements of this love: environmentalism's sense that nature is the true, good, right, and beautiful of the world. Appreciating the depth of environmentalism's adoration for nature is key to analyzing the challenges that the movement faces as we move toward a postnature world, and the distinct ways it can negotiate through the tensions that are increasingly becoming evident in a humanized world.

Obviously not everyone is a committed environmentalist, and thus to understand the political dynamics involved with moving toward a postnature world, one must appreciate other perspectives. The most important is that which environmental skeptics and critics of the movement espouse. This is where the dream of mastery comes in. In chapter 4, I point out that the dream of mastery, like its counterpart, relies on the boundary between humans and nature—only in this case instead of

championing a policing of the boundary, it prescribes overriding it. As mentioned, in contrast to naturalism, mastery sees humanity rather than nature as the true, good, right, and beautiful in the world, and appreciating such privileging is essential for coming to terms with how the debate between the twin dreams of naturalism and mastery—a debate that fundamentally informs and animates environmental politics—has been playing out, and how the end of nature and social constructivist ecocriticism can shift the ground of such debate.

Chapter 5 begins to catalog such a shift. It explains how neither the dream of naturalism nor mastery can sustain itself in the face of contemporary events and ideas. It describes the ways in which humans are seemingly erasing the divide between humans and nature, and rethinking the fundamental category of nature itself. Here I detail what I have been calling the end of nature and ecocriticism. As mentioned, these critiques of nature threaten conventional environmentalism. They also offer the movement possibilities for refashioning itself to become philosophically more coherent and practically more relevant for contemporary times—ironically by embracing an ethic of ambiguity.

Chapter 6 continues to catalog the shift that the end of nature and social constructivist ecocriticism can help to instantiate. It does so by examining wilderness protection in a postnature moment. It describes conventional environmentalist orientations to wilderness and demonstrates how they no longer make sense. Informed by the dream of naturalism, much environmentalism has worked to cordon off remote or ecologically rich areas in the interest of preserving remnants of wild nature for human enjoyment and ecological health as well as out of a sense of moral obligation. These areas are guarded from human intrusion and theoretically preserved in their roughly natural state. In chapter 6, I look at the increasingly anachronistic quality of this approach. I explain how wilderness protection today involves a tremendous amount of human

intervention. I make clear that wilderness as we know it is not left on its own but rather is highly managed using some of the most sophisticated forms of technology, capitalist models of resource use, and modernist sensibilities. Ironically, to preserve the wildness of wilderness these days, people have to engage in an awful lot of taming. The chapter does not stop there, however. It also points out that the management of wilderness, for all its technical skill and promise, can go only so far. Wilderness might be able to be managed, but it cannot be mastered in the sense of subjugating the nonhuman world to pure human design. Neither the dream of naturalism nor mastery is any longer appropriate for addressing questions of wilderness. The chapter ends with suggestions for crafting a postnature approach to preserving wilderness.

Chapter 7 provides a similar story with regard to climate change. Climate change is the most daunting environmental challenge. Much of life's future rests on how we approach it. Informed by the dream of naturalism, most environmentalists advocate getting out of the greenhouse gas business. Humanity should curtail and eventually halt our impact on the atmosphere. We should restrict ourselves from emitting too many greenhouse gases and let the atmosphere reconstitute itself. In contrast, subscribing to the dream of mastery, many suggest that we can continue using fossil fuels and even emitting greenhouse gases with the faith that we will simply technologically invent our way out of our troubles. Whether through geoengineering or some other technical feat, humanity will not have to alter its current trajectory. In chapter 7, I show that neither alternative holds much promise. The idea of leaving the atmosphere alone is no longer an option. Our interventions have brought us climate change, and no scenario even remotely being considered suggests that we can pull back enough to enable the atmosphere to "right itself." Moreover, there are significant questions to ask about what righting itself means: Are we aiming toward a preindustrial, prehistoric, or other state

of affairs, and is *this* natural? Similarly, the dream of mastery is unpromising to the degree that it was the aspiration to mastery that brought us climate change in the first place. Applying simply more conquest as a way to rid ourselves of the adverse effects of conquest seems particularly troubling. The chapter ends with ideas about how to fashion a postnature orientation to climate change.

Chapter 8 concludes the volume. It articulates what I have been calling the middle path. This path is not an answer to our ecological woes or even a set of principles to inform environmentalist policies. Rather, it is a sensibility that one cultivates to live through the paradoxes of a postnature age. A postnature age is one in which neither nature nor humanity has a singular essence or fundamental nature. It is an epoch in which we are adrift from the theological categories that have long provided intellectual, emotional, and even spiritual insight and comfort. The middle path is an environmentalist trail through such post-theological terrain. Like all paths that lead to uncertain futures, it has no single map nor even a clear trajectory. One walks it, then, like all genuine paths, with mindfulness and heartfulness fully alive to the twists and turns along the way as well as the grit under one's feet. Such awareness does not bleach out past theological categories but instead removes such categories of their theistic authority, and thus opens our eyes more widely to the tensions that mark our world.

Physicist and energy guru Amory Lovins was once asked in a seminar, "What is the single most important thing an environmentalist can do today?" He responded with two words: "Pay Attention."[30] The middle path I describe in the last chapter is about paying attention in a postnature world. It involves maintaining a love for wild things and recognizing the impossibility of sustaining that love in a straightforward manner. Such is the challenge of any act of love. Such is the future of American environmentalism.