

**Wilderness and Western Society: the Essential Role of Myth in a Cultural  
Constructivist Approach**

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For my family, especially Mum and Dad, without whom...

## **Abstract**

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The relationship between western culture and nature has historically been one of conflict and domination. Western culture, specifically that which has arisen from Europe and the United States of America, has tended towards a rapacious and destructive approach to the natural world. It has been increasingly exported around the world economically, socially, industrially, and in a western view of nature and wilderness which has been increasingly predominant in the global arena. This study asserts that this worldview is largely responsible for what is clearly by now a global ecological crisis.

Wilderness is the focus of this study as it is identified as being the fundamental basis of our understanding of nature in general. Wilderness is at the boundary of the interaction between humans and non-human nature. It is initially how we dissociated ourselves as social creatures from nature. It is therefore an appropriate framework to use in a discussion of our relationship with the natural world.

This study examines the role that culture has played in constructing our understandings of and behaviour towards wilderness. As culture is highly complex, the search for a singular, universal disposition towards wilderness is inappropriate. The study claims that contemporary theories such as deep ecology, ecofeminism or social ecology do not take into account the full range of cultural influences in their explanation of a global ecological crisis, and that they tend towards the simplistic and prescriptive in their approach to possible solutions. Furthermore, this study claims that they neglect the mythic element of culture, which plays a central role in forming our conceptions of wilderness, and that we must address this mythic element if a more complete understanding of our behaviour is to be reached.

To this end, the study uses the theory of cultural constructivism. A cultural element is essential in addressing the mythic; myth being interpreted as the social explanations of our experience of the natural world. A constructivist approach is equally essential in exploring the foundations of these social explanations.

The case studies in this thesis are the United States and Britain. An examination of wilderness myths in these two countries focuses on artistic representations, including landscape art, literature, and film. A range of responses towards wilderness is identified which has directly affected our modern perceptions of ecological problems. Individual cases are explored that demonstrate the cultural plurality and the complexity evident in the construction of myth. Such complexity means that there are plural cultural influences that affect our responses and guide our decision making processes.

This study claims that the acknowledgement of a cultural plurality and complexity suggested by a cultural constructivist approach has the potential to guide societies towards more measured and inclusive decision making processes. These processes, it is hoped, can more fully recognise the range of considerations we must make, a range that will include the ecological health of the world. The study concludes that only by acknowledging a wider range of influences that include a consideration of the mythic can a more inclusive standpoint be adopted. This is essential to ensure that decision making processes have social and cultural resonance and relevance within their host cultures, and, it is hoped, lead towards ecological sustainability for our collective futures.



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## **Introduction**

The western pattern of consumption and industrialisation is one that is being globally exported and that has resulted in dire impacts on environments and living conditions across the globe. The western worldview has arisen from Europe and more latterly the United States of America, and is both highly mechanised and increasingly pervasive. This western worldview is however not so easily defined by a discrete set of rules and norms; while it is true that the western model is generally perceived to be rapacious in its approach to the global environment, it is complex and various in its constituent parts, and understanding this complexity is fundamental to developing an understanding of the relationships we have created with the natural world.

The examination of 'nature' must entail not simply the objects we assign to that category, but also the category itself: the *concept* of nature, its origins and implications. (Evernden 1992, xi)

The focus of this thesis is therefore on western attitudes towards nature, and more specifically wilderness. Wilderness is at the boundary of the interaction between humans and non-human nature. It is how we initially dissociated ourselves as social creatures from nature, and it is therefore a paradigm framework for a discussion of attitudes towards nature in general (Cronon 1996, Eder 1996). Wilderness has as a western concept long been categorised as the 'other', as that which is uncontrollable and untamed, as that which exists beyond the boundaries of human habitation. As such the concepts of fear and reverence which exist throughout our conceptualising of wilderness have been profoundly influential in our treatment of nature in general (Short

1993). This combination of fear and reverence does not necessarily manifest itself in other societies, and the concept of wilderness as 'other' is not consistent across human cultures, particularly those with a more symbiotic relationship with their natural environments such as the aboriginal indigenes of Australia. From a western standpoint however the multiplicity of definitions of wilderness is not only a strong signifier of both ecological and cultural plurality, but is also a core indicator of our cultural orientation towards nature in general. This can in turn provide a perspective and an understanding of why ecological problems arise and of the human role in such problems (Nash 1982, Short 1993, Cronon 1996).

Many attempts have been made in the past to investigate ecological problems from the standpoint of investigating western ethical norms, and in particular western views on science and technology (Nasr 1968, Milton 1996). The basis of these arguments seems to be broadly similar whichever school of thought is considered; ecological problems, both within western countries themselves and also globally, are essentially a problem of the western ethical orientation towards nature (Brennan 1995a, 1995b, Oelschlaeger 1995, Callicott 1994, 1995b, 1998, 1999). This may be, or may in part be, a social problem which highlights how we fail to fully take into account the issues at stake both ecologically and socially. Ecological problems, then, are an indication of an ethical failure; the assumption is that once the ethical failure is resolved the ecological problems will end (Simmons 1993, Attfield 1995a).

On the basis of this there invariably are investigations into how these failures came about, in the form of discussions of Judaeo-Christianity, social hierarchy, economic relations and so on, and prescriptions for resolving those failures. Generally speaking

culture does not play a strong part in those theories of why ecological problems arose in the first place and how they may be resolved. Where culture is included it tends to rest upon two things in particular; the cultural effect that Judaeo-Christianity (or Greco-Christianity) has had in the formation of western values more generally, and the (often related) argument that mechanistic materialism (the scientific or material ways in which we view nature) channels our view of nature into a fundamentally dualistic and destructive dynamic between culture and nature (White 1968, Hargrove 1989a, Passmore 1980, Attfield 1994, 1995).

This thesis will not fully dispute these readings of the sources of ecological problems. It seems reasonable, on the basis of considering these arguments in the chapters that follow, that the ethical inheritance of western cultures has indeed been implicated in ecological problems, although it is not at all clear that we can sustain only one reading of that inheritance. Equally, there will be little dispute with the literature that argues that mechanistic materialism (and the science and technology it produced) is a pervasive cultural influence which, again, tends towards a fundamental form of the culture/nature duality that is not helpful in a full cultural appreciation of nature (Harding 1986, Bookchin 1990a, 1994, Gaard 1997).

The central argument of this thesis however is that these views in themselves are incomplete, in part because they tend strongly to suggest singular views of the problem of the ecological crisis itself, but also because they have by no means exhausted the possible factors which may meaningfully be ascribed to culture and its views of nature.

It is not a part of the remit of this thesis to establish such an exhaustive account of culture and its orientation towards nature in general. Rather, it hopes simply to demonstrate firstly that culture is indeed indispensable to understanding western views of nature (and hence ecological problems more generally), and secondly that one particular aspect of culture is invariably neglected when we try to explain why nature is viewed as it is within western paradigms, and that one particular aspect is myth. Within western cultures there are myths which inform our fundamental sense of what nature is and how we should relate to it (Nash 1982, Jenks 1993, Milton 1996, Cronon 1996, Peterson 1996).

Again, this does not mean that all cultural views of nature have been incorporated into a new (culturally sensitive) model of human/nature relations. There is, for example, little consideration of how electronic and news media may currently shape our perceptions of nature and embed themselves in the values, language and beliefs of cultures, and in so doing create new myths of our relationship with nature.

The purpose here is to trace the historical development of past myths of nature and wilderness and to suggest ways in which they may, in contemporary settings, have an effect on our perceptions of current ecological problems (Leopold 1962, Lovelock 1979, Nash 1982, Simmons 1993a, Merchant 1992, 2003). Of course, these myths compete with other prevalent factors (economic priorities being perhaps the most obvious) and it is not claimed that such factors are unimportant. The simple claim here is that some of our cultural understanding of nature, and in particular wilderness, and some of our treatment of nature can be attributed to historically detectable mythical

senses of what nature represents to human societies and how, as a consequence, we may behave toward it.

An implication of this, of course, is that part of any culture's relationship with nature will be unique to that culture and consequently the search for a singular, universal disposition towards nature is therefore impractical, inappropriate and is, in effect, ethically indefensible. More will be said on these arguments later.

This thesis is concerned with arriving at a more complete understanding of what drives our actions and decisions, of the origins of our conceptualisation of nature and wilderness, and the various and complex influences we have visited upon the social and cultural construction of our understanding of nature and wilderness. By acknowledging the plurality of our culture and society, we can more readily allow for a more inclusive approach, rather than relying upon singular prescriptive solutions which do not take into account the complexity of our perceptions of and attitudes towards nature. This pluralistic approach potentially looks towards more long-term and ultimately ecologically sustainable decision making, acknowledging as it does a variety of influences, and leaning towards a more measured and inclusive standpoint.

### *A cultural perspective*

We interact with nature in a social sense, we codify our responses to nature through language and social structure, and our behaviour in shaping the environment around us reflects cultural myths, norms, archetypes and ideologies:

... (the human species) occupies not only an ecological world but a psychological one too. As well as its biophysical surroundings, it has an environment which we understand culturally. Hence how we act towards the non-human is a consequence of our beliefs both about ourselves and what it is we are acting upon. (Simmons 1993a, 1)

This thesis examines the construction of our cultural responses towards wilderness in the western world, and so explores the assertion that culture is pluralistic and complex, that myth and symbols are multiple, and that cultural complexities can lead to different responses to wilderness and nature even within the same broadly delineated culture. The complexities and varieties of these cultural responses are examined using the theory of cultural constructivism, as it is only through a cultural approach that the arena of human experience expressed through myth can be explored, where myth is interpreted as a form of codifying and interpreting experience, of creating social explanations of our experience of the natural world.

A constructivist element means that a theory is more likely to be attentive to the ideological and theoretical foundations that inform these social explanations. Constructivism is a concept that has been most commonly associated with the field of psychology, but in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century it gained further currency in the field of education. Constructivism is a meta-theory, it encompasses a variety of approaches, and it is the particular strand defined as social constructivism which recognises the importance of the social existence of the individual to the learning environment. Social constructivism has its origins in the theories proposed by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who focused on the importance of cultural and social



contexts in influencing learning (Dougiamas 1998). It is this distinct strand of social constructivism that informs the theory of cultural constructivism, which is an approach that seeks to acknowledge cultural diversity and hence more fully address the plurality of approaches we display towards nature and wilderness.

Cultural constructivism is chosen as the theoretical framework of this thesis in preference to other contemporary theories, as the conclusion is that these are limiting in their prescriptive approach towards wilderness and nature. This is not to say that they are not entirely valid and that they do not have valuable approaches which are essential to consider in a full and complete examination of our relationship with wilderness and nature. We seek explanations and we simplify and codify our experience as a human response to perceived and real complexity, we also seek to escape from our own perceived human limitations, and in this sense the approaches examined in the field of contemporary theories have considerable impact on the social and psychological needs of our culture:

One of the attractions of deep ecology is the idea that there might be something about our individuality and experience of self that is not culturally constructed.

(Jagtenberg & McKie 1997, 146)

In using cultural constructivism I also acknowledge the validity and usefulness of other contemporary theories, however I do assert that a more complete understanding of the conceptualisation of wilderness and nature, and an understanding of our subsequent relationship with nature, is only approachable through a broadly anthropocentric stance, however valid a contribution to the debate that an ecocentric position for example may

offer. By this token such an approach is open to criticisms of nature-scepticism (Soper 1995, 33), where a culturalist perspective is interpreted as one which, through the use of cultural filters, denies the possibility of any intrinsic value in nature, and one which validates only that which is culturally mediated.

Although I do not intend in this thesis to embark upon a discussion of the existence or otherwise of an intrinsic value in nature, which is a central tenet of an ecocentric position, I do assert that we have no option but to view and interpret the world from an anthropocentric stance. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that the act of observation is in itself a form of participation which changes the event, and that there is therefore no such thing as objectivity. Similarly we as humans have no option but to view all aspects of our existence from an anthropocentric stance, and therefore we must be mindful of our interpretations of nature and of wilderness.

there is perhaps something inherently mistaken in the attempt to define what nature is, independently of how it is thought about, talked about and culturally represented. There can be no adequate attempt, that is, to explore 'what nature is' that is not centrally concerned with what it has been *said* to be ... (Soper 1995, 21)

Approaching the thesis through a cultural perspective and from an anthropocentric standpoint does not mean that I wish to deny any part of nature that is not culturally mediated an intrinsic value, only that I claim that this is as yet unknowable from a human standpoint. I further claim that a focus on the cultural construction of our relationship with nature and wilderness can lead to a more informed and ultimately

inclusive approach to our place within the natural world, an approach that has the possibility of the inclusion of other perspectives. To this extent the anthropocentric position from which I approach this relationship is a broad based one that does not inherently deny the existence of other perspectives, nor could it be characterised, as anthropocentrism often is, as an approach concerned exclusively with human interests .

There are competing ontologies regarding the natural world; language mediates our relationship with nature, and circumscribes that which we know, understand and ascribe value to; we have developed our perceptions based upon our scientific and technological relationship with and understanding of nature; and cultural mediation may result in a poor reflection of how the natural world outside the sphere of human existence is actually constituted. But we can overcome the complexities of competing ontologies through the principles of construction. There is much we do not yet understand about the physical world, whether it be due to lack of data or lack of other skills perhaps of intelligence or understanding, and we need to address the frameworks themselves by which we codify and classify our relationships, behaviours and rules. In this thesis these frameworks are concerned with nature, and more specifically with the paradigm case study of wilderness.

In order therefore to reduce the mass of information to something which we can tell ourselves that we understand ... and especially so that somebody can do something about it, we make constructions of various kinds. (Simmons 1993a, 3)

Different cultures develop different constructions, cultures differ radically from one another, and an understanding of cultural diversity is a key component when considering the influence of the western worldview and the growing tendency towards globalisation. Cultural diversity is essential for survival in much the same way as genetic diversity, in that cultures have arisen in geographically and historically defined spaces and times and have allowed for interaction with and survival within the natural environment:

Culture ... is something which man interposes between himself and his environment in order to ensure his security and survival. (Carneiro 1968, in Milton 1996, 39)

Culture is sustained and modified through social interaction, and it impacts upon the environment through a combination of technology, economics, political ideologies, ethical standards, practical knowledge, religious conventions, 'the assumptions on which all these things are based and the activities that are generated by them' (Milton 1996, 5-6). Although not everything that exists in the human mind is constructed, although some knowledge comes to us through experience, it is mediated by a cultural response, and so a cultural perspective is essential in any thorough examination of the relationship between human and nature. It is from this social interaction and the interplay of factors which affect our perception of nature that myths, stories and the symbolism of nature have been built, and which constitute, in part at least, the uniqueness of particular cultural perceptions.

The case studies are an examination of the diverse inputs into the construction of our cultures, and the role of myth is particularly fundamental. Myth about nature and wilderness is one of the key inputs to our cultural constructions; the construction of the myth of uninhabited wilderness allowed the first European settlers in the United States to disregard the needs and human rights of the indigenous populations they found living there, the myth of the frontier is still evident in the language used in the ongoing discovery of space, the English countryside is seen a repository not only of species and landscapes, but also of morality and a sense of a benign and mutually supportive relationship with nature, and the Australian outback combines a unique ecological inheritance with the European and American immigrant concepts of the frontier and of land management.

Although there is undoubtedly a global ecological crisis, it is not so much an issue of environmental problems as social problems with an environmental delivery route (Simmons 1993a, 17). We should therefore be wary of devaluing the human place in nature, and instead focus on the specific activities arising from our cultural construction of nature and of wilderness. The plural character of our relationship with nature and wilderness informs opposing viewpoints within the same broadly defined culture, and the case studies of the United State of America and of Britain in their cultural interpretation of and relationship with wilderness will highlight some aspects of the pluralism of the cultures, and the way in which this pluralism informs differing viewpoints and hence decision making processes. For example, the cultural milieu arising from the meeting point between the physical needs of those settling at the frontier, as opposed to the European need for myth in the drive to settle the United States, has resulted in a variety of responses, including a belief in Manifest Destiny and

the right to subjugate the land; the sublime movement reflected in literature and painting that influenced the creation of the national parks; and another morally driven response to wilderness and wildlife that has led to the drive to individualism. These differing outcomes are as a result of the complexity of cultural interpretations of wilderness in the emerging modern nation of the United States, and popular culture and opinion is instrumental in the legislative process, as can be evidenced by the drive to establish the national parks. To consider a more contemporary example, the outcome of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) with its powerful critique of chemical methods of pest and disease control (agriculturally, industrially and domestically), informed and thus empowered a population, and led to a greater and more complete understanding of this chemical inheritance. This in turn led to changes in legislation that have since limited the use of such chemicals, and so culture has informed political change. If we cannot radically change culture to be more benign and ecocentric, as deep ecologists would have us do, and if the purely mechanistic interpretation of ecological problems and the resulting implementation of policy does not take into account the power of culture, then we need to ensure that an approach that takes into account the diversity of cultural influences is applied, in order that decision making processes have resonance and longevity within their host cultures. A plural rationality reached through a cultural constructivist approach is therefore necessary to ensure that a more inclusive and measured decision making process is developed.

This thesis is addressed in the form of the subsequent chapters, which are outlined as follows:

## *Chapter One: Nature, Culture and Wilderness*

Chapter One creates the framework for the thesis in that it defines wilderness and culture, more specifically it examines the construction of western culture in relation to wilderness, and the crucial role that language plays in our conceptualisation of our environment. Culture is the boundary at which civilisation and wilderness meet, and is therefore the arena in which our conceptualising of and subsequent behaviour towards our environment is shaped. Although western civilisation is spoken of as a unique whole, it is a complex structure of different cultural inheritances, and this has led to a variety of approaches towards our environment that reflect this complexity.

Defining wilderness is key to understanding the importance of its role in our western cultural inheritance. Wilderness is defined in terms of an ecological reality or realities, it is conceptual, it is also a matter of scale; the concept of wilderness is not easily delineated, and it is a highly emotive term that encompasses ecological realities as much as cultural conceptions and constructions surrounding those ecological realities. The role of myth is examined as a key indicator of cultural interpretations of nature and more specifically of wilderness, and this is traced from early indicators in western culture through to contemporary myths of wilderness.

Finally I explore the importance of the concept of nature in western culture, drawing from the influence of pre-Christian European narratives, the influence of a Greek tradition, and the impact of a Judaeo-Christian tradition. The development of the western tradition of domination over nature is explored, with specific reference to our cultural inheritance both ecologically and theologically based. As a precursor to an

examination of the theories in use in the field of environmental politics, I establish that an anthropocentric outlook is unavoidable in any consideration of the relationship between humans and nature, and that this is as much a part of a modern conception of nature and wilderness as the historical route traced above.

## ***Chapter Two: Contemporary Western Wilderness Philosophies and Theories***

Chapter Two is an examination of contemporary theories in the field of environmental ethics and politics. The relationship between culture and wilderness is central to an understanding of our behaviour towards the environment, and the theories chosen for the purpose of this examination are theories that connect social problems with the ecological. As the cultural input of society will be identified as key to our conceptualising of the environment, it is appropriate that the social input is acknowledged and that these theories are the main focus of the study.

The chapter looks at the theories of resourcism and preservationism, theories which are also the basis of all non-radical approaches. The chapter also looks at the various forms of social ecology and ecological socialism, eco-feminism, and biocentrism and deep ecology. It will be argued that all of these theories display an element of naïveté and an ethical bias that ensures their evaluations of the environmental crisis are not sufficiently culturally informed, and that as a result of this they can tend toward the universalist, and hence approach the prescriptive. I establish that the current theories in common use either do not acknowledge the cultural input to the conceptualising of wilderness, or that if they do acknowledge the cultural input they do not accept its limiting effect; they



believe that radical change is possible and that cultural inheritance can be overcome. Current and recent theories of environmental concepts are limited in their approaches, as they each address only a limited selection, to greater or lesser degrees, of what constitutes the social and cultural foundations to our concepts of the environment, and cannot therefore integrate plural rationalities. Contemporary theories tend to focus on single issues such as hierarchy or gender inequalities. They furthermore all work from the premise that social change can be affected by overcoming elements of culture, rather than exploring the embedded aspect of such elements. Equally, in their treatment of science and technology and their views of the western ethical inheritance I suggest that, while these are clearly important cultural attributes, there still remain important aspects of culture which are not fully considered. Myth, in the sense that it is a fundamental process by which we codify and interpret experience, is thus a key aspect of culture that demands consideration.

I then conclude this chapter by proposing that the theory of cultural constructivism is a more complete and inclusive approach to examining our approach towards wilderness, and can therefore take us further as an interpretative tool when examining our response to the global ecological crisis.

### ***Chapter Three: Cultural Constructivism***

In Chapter Two I explored theories which contained a cultural or social dimension as the contemporaries of cultural constructivism. I accepted the validity of these theories but concluded that a more plural and less prescriptive approach was needed, and that cultural constructivism could take into account the diverse range of cultural influences

on our social behaviour. In this chapter I intend to suggest cultural constructivism as an interpretative tool; it can address the multiplicity of cultural influences, it does not focus on single issues but instead is concerned with a pluralistic approach, and furthermore it does not seek to overcome cultural elements but instead seeks to guide future knowledge with an awareness of the spectrum of cultural diversity. A constructivist element means theories are more attentive to the ideological foundations and theoretical frameworks that inform social explanations. Constructivism can also locate rationality within a historical and conceptual context, it does not presume that rationality is universal or utilitarian. Cultural constructivism therefore can more fully and comprehensively respond to the needs of the society in question and the issues surrounding the global ecological crisis.

I intend to approach myth as an ongoing and current perspective in the examination of cultural development, showing through the case studies that it is a present and powerful aspect to our cultural inheritance. Bearing this in mind, I examine cultural constructivism as an interpretative tool, as it can encompass the variety of human experience that has shaped, and continues to shape in an ongoing and dynamic process, our pluralistic and complex cultural inheritance.

Based on this understanding of the constructed nature of culture, I first look at wilderness as an example of how we have approached nature through cultural construction. I then, with an understanding that wilderness is a constructed concept, move to examine constructivism as a theory or approach. After looking at the historical development of constructivism I then specifically address the fields of radical, cognitive and social constructivism. I then approach nature as it has been encountered

by human activity, and as such I look at the essentially scientific sphere of human encounters with nature in the experience of western society.

Here I spend some time considering how science and technology have been used within the current literatures to provide the epistemological basis of (western) human understandings of nature. I suggest that while science can provide part of our cultural understanding of nature and wilderness as both a conduit and a component part of western culture, with reference to the industrial revolution and the development of a modern scientific consciousness, it does not represent a complete explanation. Any explanation for how we view nature must, I argue, include some reference to myth.

I conclude by reasserting my position regarding social constructivism, and propose that only by including the social perspective and perspectives regarding other global cultures, alongside the perspectives afforded by other theories such as feminism, can a culturally constructivist framework be reached. I then define my position concerning the central importance of the examination of western cultural construction, and outline the cultural signifiers I have chosen to examine in the case studies to follow, signifiers that will in themselves demonstrate the complex and contradictory nature of a western cultural response to nature and wilderness.

The case studies that follow are of wilderness in the United States of America and in Britain. The current western worldview is a mix of North American and European influences, and the choice of these countries is to ensure that as examples they are similar enough and also different enough to represent the range of cultural inheritance, without of course being fully comprehensive.

#### *Chapter 4: American Wilderness*

The previous chapters have dealt largely with building a sense of how culture may be included in accounts of the ecological crisis in both the contemporary and historical sense. Chapters Four and Five begin the process of illustrating how such a perspective may be included in particular cases and this is done in two ways, firstly by considering the cultural inheritance of particular countries (the United States of America and Britain) and also by looking at case studies (however briefly) within those countries. It is not possible to give comprehensive accounts of cultural inheritance in general or fulsome cases given the space available, but some sense of the role of culture and myth with regard to nature and wilderness should be possible.

The American response to wilderness is complex and also deeply grounded in the establishment of the nation and of national identity. In this chapter I look at the complex inheritance from predominantly European cultures that led to the early development of a seemingly fundamental dualistic response to wilderness, and a response that still retains elements of this form of dualism. On the one hand is the very real response of the first settlers who needed to overcome and subdue wilderness in order to live. This taming of the wilderness is no less fundamental to the creation of wilderness attitudes than the subsequent response of romanticism and the sublime movement in literature and art. Add to this the deep sense of national loss at the closing of the frontier at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the creation of a national myth of the frontier, and we can identify a complex and highly emotional response to a variety of ecological realities that may be defined as wilderness. Wilderness is however not just a collection of ecological realities, but is also a cultural construction, and this chapter illustrates the responses to wilderness throughout a

relatively short period in history that has been highly documented in art, literature, photography and film, and legislation relating to nature and wilderness. In this case study I intend to use these cultural signifiers as illustrations of the powerful effect of cultural construction, and the very real and lasting effect that this has on the national psyche and subsequent political decision making processes.

As a conclusion to this I identify the case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, and the very recent conflict that has existed over the extraction of oil and minerals in this protected area. The use of cultural signifiers and cultural resonance by both proponents and opponents to this project has graphically illustrated the power of the collective national psyche, the repository of myth. It is precisely this cultural inheritance and this constructed reality that demonstrates the strong link between culture and behaviour, policy being part of this behaviour. This cultural inheritance has resulted in certain traits of policy making, and has also created an effective opposition to the political will and market forces that might otherwise have encountered little opposition to development and subsequent ecological damage.

A cultural constructivist perspective leads to a greater understanding of the divergent forces upon the decision making process, and can lead to a more inclusive and pluralistic outlook that refutes a single set of rules or norms that dictate behaviour. Approaching an issue from divergent positions that do not use the same frame of reference in the justification of their decision making processes, behaviours, or beliefs, cannot lead to anything other than a contest with delineated winners and losers. By adopting a perspective that understands the cultural references used by each party and that allows validity to each standpoint, a more pluralistic and universally acceptable outcome may be

arrived at. This approach will potentially involve some measure of compromise, and to address the plural needs of society and ecological issues, this means that an acceptance of standpoints and cultural perspectives in conflict with one's own may be necessary in the search for a more inclusive and sustainable framework of behaviours. This perspective is further examined in the following chapter.

### ***Chapter 5: Wild Britain***

Chapter Five adds weight to the concept of a constructed culture by examining the very different ecological reality of wilderness that exists in Britain. The response to wilderness is no less complex or heartfelt, but the ecological reality of wilderness that seems at first glance to be more apparent in America is much less clearly delineated in a highly populated country such as Britain. The approach suggested by cultural constructivism demonstrates the complexity of issues at play in a country which has similar foundations to its cultural identity, but which has developed within a set of ecological realities very different to those of America. It shows that with the shared inheritance as examined in the previous chapter, and the differences emphasised in this chapter, the predominant worldview driven by the western nations (of which the case studies are representative) has been fundamental to the construction of a complex approach to nature and wilderness that has been globally exported. There are ecological realities which are interpreted as wilderness, but these interpretations are based on cultural assumptions, and the two case studies are very different in their understandings of wilderness within their own countries. I do not intend to decide upon a canon of ecological realities that can definitively be classified as wilderness, as definitions are socially and culturally constructed and reflect

the standpoint of the individual in terms of their relationship with nature and wilderness. I instead intend to highlight in this second case study the comparisons between the two nations in terms of the inclusion of ecological realities as definable wilderness. If definitions are socially constructed then it is not the ecological reality that is in question, but rather the acceptance of plural approaches that combine to create a complex understanding of wilderness.

By an examination of the understanding and cultural resonance of wilderness in Britain, I will expand the concept of cultural constructivism to relate to the importance of the diversity of wilderness experience in our relationship with nature. This includes issues concerning access to rural and wild lands, and the right to roam debate. The issue of compromise in the decision making process from a cultural constructivist perspective is revisited and explored in this case study with the examination of the need to integrate the economic and ecological needs of humans in environmentally degraded areas, and with this in mind looking more specifically at the area of the Lower Lea Valley in London. The argument is developed and concludes that it is only through the acceptance of a multiplicity of responses to nature and to wilderness that we can hope to include wilderness within our daily lives, and also simultaneously maintain our sense of wilderness as grandeur and as the unknowable. This pluralistic viewpoint is essential if a relationship with wilderness and with nature can encompass a future that exists beyond a global ecological crisis.

## *Conclusion*

I conclude the thesis with the reassertion that an anthropocentric stance has been prevalent throughout western culture, but that this does not preclude a more benign relationship with nature. A moderated and perspectival anthropocentric stance will more fully allow for a certain validity of other perspectives on the environment, essential for a more inclusive and pluralistic decision making process. To this end I reassert that a cultural constructivist approach to our understanding of and behaviour towards nature and wilderness is necessary, particularly if any ethical consideration of our environmental attitudes, any consideration of a modification or mitigation of our behaviour, is to be considered. This thesis is not concerned directly with the search for a new environmental ethic, but does acknowledge the ethical dimension inherent in any environmental discussion, and is concerned with the role that culture has played in the construction of western attitudes towards nature and wilderness.

I reassert the primacy of myth in the construction of human culture, and its continued validity in the modern era. To have a broad based approach to the ecological crisis from a western perspective it is necessary to include as wide a range as possible of inputs into the cultural construction of this perspective, and myth in its broadest and most inclusive sense includes a variety of narratives that we create to impose order, structure and understanding on our relationship with nature. Such an understanding is essential to the creation of our beliefs and moral strictures that limit and proscribe our behaviour and decision making processes. The importance of the multiple myths that we ascribe to nature and wilderness has led to a diversity of understanding of wilderness within culture, and by accepting a



diverse range of wilderness experiences, definitions and realities, we can more fully accept our ecological responsibilities in our behaviour towards nature.

I conclude with an understanding that in order to modify our behaviour, in order to more fully address our decision making processes as regards the environment which have led us in the west to develop a generally rapacious and destructive relationship with nature, we need to understand the complexity of the cultural inputs that have constructed our beliefs that underpin such behaviour. Only by accepting the plural inputs into our cultural construction can we hope to arrive at a more complete understanding of our behaviour, and so modify the more destructive aspects of our decision making processes in a way that will have social and cultural relevance.

## **Chapter One: Nature, Culture and Wilderness**

### **Introduction**

Nature in its relation to human existence is a socially constructed concept. We codify and construct our views of nature, imbuing nature with concepts of good and evil, and creating our deities in and of nature. While there is increasing differentiation and pluralisation of society, there is also increasing differentiation and pluralisation of what constitutes nature, and what kind or level of environmental change is acceptable. The environmental issue is itself flexible, it is subject to processes of cultural change and social redefinition; not only do existing and emerging technologies and institutions have to accommodate environmental interests and concerns, those interests and concerns themselves are in a constant state of change. If our concept of nature is socially and culturally constructed, so the perception of ecological risks and problems is based on contested values and norms. Ecological rationality can therefore merge into environmental ethics. Multiple conceptions of nature and different value hierarchies therefore give rise to multiple ecological imperatives (even though there are empirical facts concerning environmental issues that are indisputable).

Between the physical environment and human activity there is always a middle term, a collection of specific objectives and values, a body of knowledge and belief: in other words, a cultural pattern. (Forde 1949, in Milton 1996, 40)

Plural conceptions and definitions of nature will necessarily create a plurality in the cultural pattern of a society. Culture however is a concept that embraces a wide range of

understandings; it is the total of the inherited beliefs, values, ideas and knowledge which constitute the shared basis of social action, it is also the total range of activities and ideas of a people, or a particular civilisation at a particular period. Culture also refers to the artistic and social pursuits, expression, and tastes valued by a society or class, or the enlightenment or refinement resulting from these pursuits. As a culture develops a range of definitions of nature and wilderness, so the beliefs and values of that culture as regards nature and wilderness will vary. As artistic and social pursuits vary across the constituent parts of a society, so responses towards nature and wilderness will also vary, even within the same broadly delineated culture.

In this chapter I will argue we can place the concept of wilderness within two debates, firstly that which considers the relationship between nature and culture and the central role that wilderness plays within this relationship, and secondly that of how wilderness can be defined in the spectrum of human perceptions of nature. In a thesis that argues that our views on wilderness are culturally central to our perception of our responsibilities towards nature more generally, then establishing a plausible sense of what this relationship entails is unavoidable.

I will begin by considering the concept of nature and will argue that it cannot be seen as being independent from human, cultural perceptions. I will then go on to explore in more detail the idea of culture and its interface with nature. I will argue that we may see this interface as one which has a recursive aspect to it and in which the boundaries between nature and culture shift and continually inform each other.

I will then move on to place wilderness within such a framework. I will suggest that in its multiplicity of definitions wilderness is a strong signifier of both ecological and cultural plurality, but is also a core indicator of our cultural orientation towards nature in general and that this, in turn, provides valuable insights into why ecological problems arise.

### **Nature and Culture**

Views of nature and of wilderness are part of the cultural construction of societies, and as such an examination of what we understand to be the cultural dimension must be explored in order to place within it our specific understandings and interpretations of wilderness.

Ideas of nature can never exist outside a cultural context, and the meanings we assign to nature cannot help reflecting that context. ... If we wish to understand the values and motivations that shape our own actions toward the natural world, if we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural. (Cronon 1996, 35-6)

Humans inhabit not only an ecological world but also a psychological one (Simmons 1993a, 1). We understand the world culturally. Culture is that which separates us from the purely natural, the collective noun used to separate human ontology from the sphere of the natural. Other animals interact (we presume) with nature in a continuous way, they are indeed part of nature. Humankind however transforms its experience of nature

by coding its interactions by way of linguistic and other symbolic representations, through which it interprets and knows experience. These representations, be they linguistic, habit, artefact, custom, or myth, are mediators between human experience and the natural world. At one level therefore culture defines a sphere of unification for all humankind, regardless of when or where they live(d). The concept of culture provides at a fundamental level a profound break with the natural world in a western tradition, as can be evidenced by the discussion to follow later in this chapter of the dualism between nature and God that arose with Christianity.

The word culture in early English usage was associated with the cultivation of animals and crops and with religious worship (Smith 2001, 1). A metaphorical extension of this idea of cultivating land developed in Europe from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards to include the cultivation of the mind, and hence the associated idea of the cultivation of manners, of understanding and of codes of behaviour. Jenks (1993) identifies the common European linguistic tradition as equating 'culture' with 'civilisation'. It is this development of the term culture into one which implies a sense of hierarchy that supports Jenks' theory of the cultural development in Europe of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and into the 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Whereas previously culture had signified a gulf between humankind and the natural world, so culture increasingly came to represent the separation between both different kinds of humans, and between humankind and increasing mechanisation.

Civilisation can be interpreted as a human society that has a complex cultural, political and legal organisation, of the peoples or nations collectively who have achieved such organisation, and of the total culture and way of life of a particular people, nation, region or period. Civilisation also however refers to intellectual, moral or cultural

refinement, and this hierarchy is an issue that finds resonance within the complex cultural approaches to wilderness that predispose certain aspects of behaviour. To associate wilderness with the untamed in terms of a social and moral hierarchy meant that early European colonial settlers could disregard the cultures of indigenous populations, and regard the (often) more ecocentric approach of their cultures as uncivilised and therefore of lesser cultural worth. A sense of hierarchy within culture, as expressed by the concept of civilisation, is not concomitant with an approach which seeks to recognise the plurality of beliefs and the validity of the various aspects of that cultural plurality.

Cultural plurality is inherent in the complex whole that defines a society. The complexity of culture encompasses the moral and intellectual development of a society, it embodies human achievement and ideals of perfection, it commonly describes the intellectual and artistic achievements of a community, and it is also a social category that represents the way of life of a community, however broad a concept of that community may be.

Culture may be defined in several distinct ways, which are however by no means mutually exclusive. Firstly, culture as a state of mind. Culture in this sense can be interpreted as the ideal of perfection, it is romantic in tradition, it represents the moral and intellectual development of a society and as such is informed by evolutionary thinking. It refers to the intellectual, spiritual or aesthetic development of an individual or society. Secondly culture is also a descriptive and concrete category. It refers to the intellectual, social and artistic pursuits, expressions and tastes valued by a society or class. Used in this sense it carries with it concepts of exclusivity, specialisation, elitism,

knowledge and socialisation. Thirdly culture is a term that designates the way of life of a particular society or a people. It represents the total of the inherited beliefs, values, ideas and knowledge, which constitutes the shared basis of social action

The three aspects outlined above are interrelated in a complex whole which can be demonstrated by example: if we consider painting, more specifically the painting of the American Sublime movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (which is explored in depth in the relevant case study in Chapter Four), then we see all three of the above aspects clearly demonstrated. The painting of this period reflected the predominant mood of conquest and exploration, reflected in the portrayal of the natural grandeur of the new world. It demonstrates the first of these three aspects in its glorification of the developing American collective psyche, of the development of the American spirit of adventure and a break with the effete past represented by Europe. In doing so it celebrates the individual talent of the artist and the collective moral and intellectual ambitions of the nation. The paintings themselves fulfil the second of the two aspects, being material representations of the unique glories of the new nation, while anchoring themselves in an artistic tradition which has resonance in its cultural European inheritance. And lastly, the Sublime movement was a representation of that aspect of culture which reflected the beliefs and values of the prevalent society. This was a society that was defining itself by its difference from its European inheritance, that was anchoring its uniqueness in the natural world and the scale of its natural resources, and that was creating a value system that was founded in moral certitude based on the simplicity of natural responses, rather than in the historical and moral complexities of a varied European cultural inheritance.

Culture also has an historical dimension; it is those customs and beliefs which are legitimised and strengthened by being passed on through the generations within a particular society.

... there is no intrinsic, universal quality that is captured in the terms we use, but rather those terms are conventions of particular cultures and times, loaded with, and intelligible because of, the meanings and values of those cultures. (Peterson 1999, 342)

We have a multiplicity of societies and a multiplicity therefore of cultures. Societies are historically, socially and geographically constituted, and as such relate to nature in a variety of ways. Within cultures also there are different ways of knowing and perceiving and understanding, but if culture is a set of beliefs, knowledge and values, then it is a pattern that has been developed, in part at least, to exist between nature and human activity.

Culture, then, consists of assumptions about the world and these assumptions limit the range of possible decisions and alternative solutions to problems which are logically possible, and so define the limits of behaviour. The range of assumptions may be on the one hand very narrow, consistent and strongly interrelated, as in a small tribal grouping, or may encompass a wide range of contrasting views, which are not necessarily consistent or compatible with each other, as with a larger more complex society. However, whatever the size of the social grouping, whatever the geographical region it covers, not everyone within the group will share the same theory of their culture, not everyone will know all aspects of that culture, and not everyone will respond uniformly



to cultural and non-cultural stimuli. This is not to say that there will not be broad patterns of response and of like and dislike within cultures, but it does mean that we cannot predict or read from the prevailing culture what human responses will be. This is of course all the more true of readings of other unfamiliar cultures.

Culture, particularly within complex western societies, will not then provide a uniform set of values nor a single tradition upon which individuals perceive both nature and culture itself. This is the lesson of the debate concerning Judaeo-Christianity which follows. However, we would expect that distinctive patterns of response (for example, aesthetic or scientific) would be discernable within cultures. It is also possible, as I argued above, to interpret events on the basis of which cultural signifiers appear to be preponderant within the framework of the actions being considered. This being the case, the interpretation of action as culturally constrained is indispensable to any understanding of a situation, for it is through such an interpretation that we can establish an understanding of motivation.

To take an approach from the standpoint of plurality is not to say, however, that there is no experience of nature other than that proscribed by cultural influence, and therefore that if all forms of nature are relative it is not possible to evaluate one environment as better or worse than another, or to support one intervention and prevent another. This approach would ultimately not challenge the dualism and domination tendencies of western culture, and furthermore does not acknowledge a reality independent of human social discourse. However, a more inclusive approach that acknowledges some extent of responsibility for the natural world as a result of human activity, and that appreciates the variety of different approaches to the environment, would also consequently support

the search for an ethic that would provide guidelines for understanding actions and consequences and differentiating between them. This thesis is concerned with the need to acknowledge the multiplicity of cultural responses of our relationships with nature and with wilderness if we are to successfully identify and address the needs both of humanity and of the rest of the biosphere. Culture as a mediator of experience is unavoidable and this will have, as we shall see later, implications as regards whether it is possible to avoid anthropocentrism, whether we can meaningfully expect all cultures to ascribe the same values to the same aspect of nature, whether we can meaningfully suggest that one universal approach to ecological problems is defensible, and consequently whether one ethical perspective on nature is useful.

So, culture exists in people's minds and it is expressed through what they say and do. It consists of perceptions and interpretations through which people make sense of experience. And culture is a mechanism through which people interact with their environment. The case studies are concerned specifically with wilderness in western nations, and as such the definitions of wilderness and the cultural inheritance that these terms carry is fundamental to the way we as humans interact with our environment. The change in definitions of wilderness, the change in emphasis from the fearful to that which was to be revered was a crucial factor in the formation of national identity in America. The complexity of language and the relationship between these positions can be simply demonstrated by the fact that in English, 'fear' and 'revere' come from the same linguistic root.

Importantly for this thesis, the collective historical inheritance of culture can also be reflected in the myths that we develop and draw upon to understand our experience of

nature and wilderness. These myths, whether associated with the characteristics of the landscape, our means of experiencing it or our ways of understanding are, like culture more generally, unavoidable in their influence over us and are often mediated through the very words and images we use and respond to when speaking of wilderness.

Language provides order and objectification, and through language meaning can be given to the structure of life, to the tools we use, to the intentions behind our actions and to the concept of a future. All higher levels of thinking are dependant upon language. Language can enable an understanding of concepts and ideas which are not necessarily attainable to everyday experience, such as art, science, or philosophy. The structure of language influences the way in which we understand our environment.

Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society... the 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group... we see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of communication. (Edward Sapir 1939, quoted in Whorf 1956, 134).

The cultural resonance that language contains is essential in understanding the multiplicity of forces at work on our cultural interpretations of wilderness. As will be explored in the case studies to follow, the use of the word 'frontier' conjures up a variety of responses from ecological perceptions, landscapes, and moral messages

communicated through myths in literature and film. The complex construction that creates our culture is one that demands a pluralistic outlook in order to appreciate the cultural resonance of the myths and images that we employ. Although terms such as nature and wilderness are not historically or culturally universal, we can still 'know' them as concepts and realities, and accepting cultural and historical influence on our actions does not absolve us from learning about or caring for the environment. We can have no unmediated understanding of nature, but the world is comprised of more than human mediations.

This, of course, blurs the boundaries between nature and culture for the meaning of each is continually defined and redefined as the two meet each other. This suggests that an understanding of nature requires an interaction with it, for an appreciation of nature without experience is one mediated almost exclusively through culture alone. It also suggests, as was discussed in the introductory chapter to this thesis, that environmental problems are reflections of social problems; that the ecological crisis is a crisis of society, more specifically western society:

If there is disharmony between humans and the rest of the Earth, then it seems more likely that there is a set of social problems which have, in part at least, an environmental delivery route. (Simmons 1993, 16-7)

In the introduction to this chapter I said that the relationship between nature and culture was recursive, that is, that each helps to form the other when they interact; culture clearly shapes nature in a very literal sense of transforming it physically, and nature informs culture, it helps define our sensibilities, our values and our ethics. As wilderness has been

and continues to be many different ecological realities, so cultures evolving from societal needs have developed in as many different ways as there are environments in which humans exist with nature.

Milton identifies the fact that human activity is seen as an important agent of environmental change (Milton 1996, 24), whether culture is the medium through which we interact with the environment or the medium through which we adapt to our environment. Macnaghten furthermore states that there is no one single 'nature' but instead a variety of contested natures constructed through a diversity of socio-cultural processes (Macnaghten 1998, 1), and the multiplicity of responses which we have to nature and to wilderness would seem to support this pluralistic viewpoint. It is important to note however that while cultures have their own developed set of beliefs and behaviours, there are problems inherent in interpreting nature from a solely western viewpoint, in light of a complex set of beliefs, interpretations, behaviours and aesthetic responses that are not indigenous to other parts of the globe. Milton questions the belief in the so-called 'detached observation' approach of western science (Milton 1996, 192) and voices the concern that devaluing indigenous knowledge and disregarding the ways local communities interact with their environments is dangerous. It is not possible to replace local belief systems with a western cultural model, as cultures develop with the different components being interrelated, and radical variations between cultures reflect radically different natural environments across the globe.

Variations also exist within cultures, and just as a western viewpoint is plural in its interpretations and cultural constructions, so are other cultures varied in their responses to nature and wilderness. Just as there is a worldwide plurality of cultures that need to

be considered in any local or global response to nature, so within the western worldview and within each broadly delineated culture there also exists a plurality.

If cultural plurality is thus acknowledged, then viewing the global environmental crisis as a single, if fractured, condition is not realistically possible; instead a recognition of the plurality of differing worldviews of nature is essential if an approach to the ecological crisis is to be explored. Similarly, we should be wary of looking exclusively to nature for the answers to ecological problems, for these problems are more a difficulty in the cultural perception of nature as they are of any intrinsic qualities nature may have. The plurality of these different cultural perceptions is fundamental to the understanding of the complexity of our cultural construction, and our relationship with wilderness is a key factor in our relationship with nature in general.

There are two ways in which we can illustrate the themes developed in this chapter so far; that culture is indeed the mediator of our conception of nature, and that consequently social needs are expressed in our perceptions of and our ethical disposition towards nature; and that as a result of this we should expect not one view of nature but many. Firstly we can do this empirically by taking the example of wilderness itself and showing how perceptions, definitions and policies towards it exhibit very clearly the themes already mentioned. Secondly we can illustrate the same themes interpretatively, that is by considering the debates surrounding whether Judaeo-Christianity has had a deleterious effect on western views of nature. This debate shows very clearly that looking for uni-casual explanations (even cultural ones) for ecological problems is unhelpful, not only because of the complexities of the development of cultures themselves, but also because it leads to simplistic ethical claims on where

blame may be attributed and the values which might lead us to solutions to the global ecological crisis. With reference to an illustration of these themes, I will begin with a discussion of wilderness.

### **Wilderness**

If the argument in the previous section is correct, it should be possible to establish that notions of wilderness are deeply connected not so much to a physical or 'natural' reality, but rather to social needs, linguistic conventions, and historically dominant value systems. Furthermore, we might expect that views will not be entirely consistent, as needs, language and values change through time. The argument here is that this is indeed the case.

Although wilderness may today seem to be just one environmental concern among many, it in fact serves as the foundation for a long list of other such concerns that on their face seem quite remote from it. That is why its influence is so pervasive and, potentially, so insidious. (Cronon 1996, 72-3).

Historically we have understood nature *as* wilderness and while contemporary ecological politics may seem only partly concerned with wilderness conservation or preservation, much of the cultural significance we attach to nature more generally stems from historical views of our relationship with wilderness which are still influential. Importantly, this section will make clear that our relationship with wilderness has historically been mediated through reverence or fear, each of which limits the cultural

possibilities as far as our interface with nature is concerned. In the absence of such cultural (and hence psychological) limitations, we should not be surprised that nature in general, and wilderness in particular, appears to display the signs of cultural disregard.

The social construction of identity involves naming, and while ideas about nature are historically and culturally determined, so language gives meaning and value. Language can also occupy spheres which are unavailable to everyday experience; the spheres of symbolism, myth, art, religion, science and philosophy (Berger and Luckmann 1967, 55). Naming gives identity and worth in a particular context. The etymological roots and the subsequent cultural assumptions behind terms like 'wilderness' will be discussed shortly, but language is not the only way in which we invest nature with value, or the way we construct our environment. Just as we can discuss language and ethics, so the more tangible forms of construction of our understanding must be acknowledged. One point of view is that there is nowhere on this globe that is truly wilderness, as all areas have been touched by human influence to a greater or lesser degree, and even those inaccessible and isolated areas which do not support human life have been reached by air polluted by human activity. McKibben has been particularly vocal in this area of discussion, focusing criticism on western urban and industrialised European cultural society and the effects of colonisation (Cronon 1996, 82 and Peterson 1999, 343). While America may popularly be seen to have been comprised of vast tracts of wilderness at the time of modern European settlement, the North American Plains had in fact been populated for millennia by indigenous cultures who through their hunting practices had helped shape the landscape and define the creatures that roamed it. It is simplistic therefore sweepingly to condemn all human practices; people have always influenced the areas in which they live, but to varying degrees of



environmental cost. While we must acknowledge that our interpretations of the natural world are culturally determined, so we must understand that humans have shaped their environments physically, and so avoid the dualistic mode of thinking that sees nature as an unchanging universal world existing outside of the human sphere.

This of course has implications for the issues surrounding the appreciation and preservation of wilderness. If for example we seek to preserve what we value, then divergent views on that which we perceive to be truly wild can lead to conflict over approaches and behaviour. If anthropocentrism is the cultural filter through which we view nature and wilderness (a point which I will argue shortly), then the variety of approaches suggested by anthropocentrism mean we are perpetually in a state of conflict within societies over how wilderness is to be defined and valued. This issue is explored more fully in the case study on the United States of America, and more specifically on the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge, with one party valuing the wide and bleak open expanse of tundra in terms of landscape and species diversity, and the other party citing the barren nature of the land as reason enough to allow an expansion in the oil drilling programme<sup>1</sup>. If both of these parties use language resonant with the cultural inheritance of their society, then the difficulty in deciding how to value wilderness and what to preserve becomes more complex. In this instance, as will be shown in the case study, both those for and against expansion of the oil extraction industry in the Arctic Wildlife National Refuge use terminology resonant with the frontier and with the grandeur and uniqueness of American wilderness. Understanding the complexity of the construction of these terms therefore, and acknowledging the diversity of experiences that have constructed the pluralistic complex culture that exists

in the west today, is essential if any form of negotiation or moderation with regard to our behaviour towards wild spaces is to be reached.

### *The etymological implications of wilderness*

The etymological implications of wilderness inform belief and culture, shape moral structure, and provide a rich source of material for artistic interpretations of the environment throughout the western cultural tradition. Our interpretation of such value-laden words as wilderness is fundamental to our understanding of key texts in our cultural tradition, texts that have helped shape societies and inform decision-making processes, as will be demonstrated later in this chapter with the discussion regarding the translation of the term wilderness in the Hebrew bible.

Both fear and reverence have existed in human society's interpretations of and relationship to wilderness. Etymologically the words fear and reverence are intertwined in the English language, coming from the same Greek root meaning 'to be in awe', but these conflicting attitudes towards wilderness come from the same societies, and awe for nature has inspired seemingly conflicting emotions towards wilderness.

Wilderness as a word was initially one which indicated the social definition of land, with its origins in the agricultural revolution ten thousand years ago when human societies began to move from predominantly hunter-gatherer cultures to a greater concentration of early agricultural ones, and when distinctions between cultivated and uncultivated land were being refined (Short 1993). Prior to this humans existed in hunter/gatherer societies

that interacted with (and were indigenous to) varied ecosystems, and had no reason to make any definition between different uses of land. In terms of pre-history definition, individuals cannot be lost in the wilderness as wilderness does not exist independently of human experience (this holds true today for current pre-modern tribes). With agriculture and the speed of human potential to modify the environment however, came a need to distinguish between cultivated and non-cultivated land, and so began the physical, emotional and social separation of human societies from the ecosystems they inhabited. Boundaries developed between the natural and the cultural, and conceptual restructuring was therefore inevitable. Concepts are reflected in language, and so came the dualistic trait of separating human activity from non-human nature: weed and crop, wilderness and home. Linguistically there was a progressive shift in the definition of wilderness, a move towards fear of the unknown rather than a purely agricultural term; 'wilderness' in Latin translates as 'barren waste'. This not only represents a shift away from defining land in terms of its purely agricultural usage to one that encompasses fear of the unknown, but it also defines land in terms of its worth to human society. A approach to the environment emerged where land is not only tamed or terrifying, it also has value-laden qualities.

The Savannah hypothesis (Wilson 2002, 143-4) suggests that most of humankind's early history is in the African Savannah, and that we are therefore genetically imprinted to aesthetically respond to it and reproduce it. This hypothesis would make perfect sense in the interpretation of wilderness from the Teutonic languages. Whereas in Northern Europe the word wilderness developed from imagery reflecting uncultivated areas of forests and darkness, in cultures developing around the Mediterranean the same word tended to reflect the cultivation and land use patterns of those areas. So while Old English developing from indigenous Teutonic languages gives us 'wil(d)-deorness'

meaning 'place of the wild deer' (or wild animal) (Simmons 1993, 160), 'wildeoren' (wild beasts) and weald/waeld (forest), Latin translations give us 'barren waste' and 'nascere' (to be born) as the root of 'nature'. Wilderness in Ancient Greek translated roughly as 'uncultivated' and one translation of Hebrew is 'unsown land' (Short 1991).

The Teutonic and Norse roots of wild seems to have been 'will' as in 'wilful' or 'uncontrollable' (Nash 1982, 1). Wilderness as a term we understand and use today seems to have largely developed from Teutonic languages, from areas which were densely forested. We can use the Savannah hypothesis to examine how this was reflected in the early American settlers' response to the vegetation patterns they discovered, with those from northern and middle Europe particularly preferring the wide open plains of the American mid-west to the forests of the east coast; the Savannah hypothesis seeming to offer at least a partial explanation in this instance. The complexity of attitudes to wilderness in America will be examined in further detail in the specific case study, but it is evident that our cultural heritage profoundly influences our response to wilderness.

Translations of the Old and New Testaments have been instrumental in forging a link between religious texts and our conceptualisation of the environment. The first translation into English of the Latin Bible in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century equated wilderness to arid uninhabited land of the near east, a conceptualisation followed by William Tynedale's 1526 translation of Greek and Hebrew versions of scripture into English. But by 1755 Samuel Johnson's Dictionary of the English Language equates wilderness with 'a desert, a tract of solitude and savageness' (Nash 1982, 2).

If we look in more detail at biblical translations of wilderness terms, we find that in biblical Hebrew there is no one word that translates exactly as 'wilderness', Hebrew terms denoting habitat types or specific places have instead been translated as 'wilderness' or 'desert' in English:

When the prophets threaten that the Jews' fruitful landscape will turn into the Arava, the prophecy must be understood as meaning a specific portion of the Jordan Rift Valley which receives less than five inches of precipitation per year and has insufficient vegetation for year-round pasturage, not as a blanket dislike of wild places. (Kay 1988, 325)

Similarly there have been many different Hebrew words which have been translated into English as 'dominion':

In biblical Hebrew... each of these words has a meaning much more precise than merely the exercise of authority. Some words are used to characterise the rule of tyrants, while others refer to responsible stewardship, and yet other words denote the power of intellectual persuasion. What sort of 'dominion' is envisaged by Genesis 1:26? (Clark 1990, 185)

When examining western culture for evidence of our relationship with nature we have to accept that our reality is formed by the way we interpret and arrange it, i.e. by our use of language. The English language has been criticised for encouraging the tendency to perceive resources in isolation, rather than holistically (Chawla 1991). However, if the Christian tradition has indeed permitted a rapacious relationship with nature, then it must

be remembered that limitations of English aside, the language of the Bible developed in a geographically and ecologically unique place at a particular period of time in the history of human cultural development, and as such is bound by the attendant limitations. The societies from which these texts arose were ones which experienced not only a separation between God and nature, but also the ecological necessity of constructing norms and behaviours which would ensure the growth and protection of the society against natural consequences such as famine. So a religion that forbade the desecration of nature, on the grounds that stewardship was granted by God, would necessarily protect the basic agrarian society against otherwise sanctioned environmental degradation that might result in crop shortages or deaths of livestock. If however we regard the indigenous aboriginal culture of Australia, we see a culture that clearly exhibits a sense of co-existence with nature, of imbuing the surrounding environment with spiritual meaning and consequently inhabiting it as an indigenous part of the ecosystem, not existing without. This lack of a dualistic approach differs from the western model and does not display the more distinct trait of anthropocentrism inherent in Judaeo-Christian culture. From an anthropocentric approach, and considering our naming and classification of nature through the use of language, the western model has developed as one which experiences a fundamental dualism with nature. Our cultural filters and cultural inheritance have formed a complex social response to wilderness that is essentially anthropocentric. This does not however mean that we as individuals and as western culture cannot hope to relate to wilderness in anything other than a socially mediated way, but our decision making processes reflect this cultural inheritance and are therefore constrained by its complexities.

### *Contemporary definitions of wilderness and the wilderness myth*

Wilderness in a western tradition from the early days of European settlement is represented in the oral tradition, largely lost to us, but is present in the earliest examples of writing still existing. We find early representations of the theme of outcasts from human society, of the marginalized, insane, and the criminal, inhabiting wilderness areas. The 8<sup>th</sup> century poem *Beowulf* describes men's fear of unknown creatures, of death arriving from the wilderness, and of the inexplicable and terrifying nature of these occurrences.

Grendel was the name of this grim demon  
haunting the marshes, marauding round the heath  
and the desolate fens; he had dwelt for a time  
in misery among the banished monsters,  
Cain's clan, whom the Creator had outlawed  
and condemned as outcasts.

(*Beowulf* lines 102-107)

Just as European folklore is dominated by tales of evil spirits from the woods, so the fear of wilderness and its effects on people persisted throughout western culture to the present day, evident for example in the European settlement of America, wilderness signifying not only a dark, elemental, even atavistic force, but also being symbolic of spiritual despair and harbouring society's marginalized, criminal and insane elements. The European tradition of evil abiding in woods and a consequent fear of wilderness can be seen to be reflected in the fears of the first European contact with the North American continent, and in the subsequent period of settlement of the newly emergent nation. In the myths and

history arising from this well-documented and intense period of rapid geographical and economic expansion, we find some of the most culturally resonant images and concepts of nature that inform the present day western concept of wilderness.

In modern terms the definitions of wilderness are various and multiple, reflecting the complexities of western society and scientific knowledge. In America, the closing of the frontier in the 1890s created a demand for wilderness experience, and as early American history is defined in terms of the frontier and the conflict between the pastoral and the wild, so the loss of the frontier meant a national cultural identity crisis.

Roderick Nash believed that the American enthusiasm for wilderness was based on Romanticism, deism and a sense of the sublime, that the beginnings of American appreciation are found among artists, writers, scientists, and gentlemen from the urban east of the country, not amongst pioneers; that it was in fact those removed from the west who sensed the ethical and aesthetic values of wilderness (Nash 1982). This is a commonly expressed point of view in American wilderness analysis, resting as it does on the history of a utilitarian pioneer relationship with nature, not an aesthetic relationship. This utilitarian perspective led to the 'myth of superabundance' (Coates 1993, 7), which led early Americans to have a markedly different relationship with nature than those of contemporary Europeans. European society and the agricultural practices that had been developed over the centuries on land of limited boundaries contributed in part to the burgeoning conservation movement in America in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Coates 1993).

However, by the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the attitudes towards wilderness areas had undergone a sea change in both American and Western Europe. The works of H. D.



Thoreau and John Muir in America, and of Wordsworth and the Romantic poets in England, were instrumental over this period. The first national parks were created; Yosemite was deeded to the state of California as America's first wild land park, and the first full national park was Yellowstone in 1872. The Hetch Hetchy Dam project at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the damming of the Tuolumne River within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park to meet the water demands of San Francisco, divided opinions sharply and the loss of wilderness was now seen as a national loss of an Edenic habitat, where previously the loss of wilderness might have been seen as nothing more than the economic use of barren useless land.

The impact that aesthetic representations of wilderness have had on political decision-making can be graphically demonstrated in the presentation to Congress in 1871 of William Henry Jackson's photographs of Yellowstone, contributing to the decision to make Yellowstone the first national park. The images of wilderness created by American artists may well have contributed to a mythic narrative of American wilderness, and this narrative is one which has informed the American public response to nature and wilderness, a response which has therefore influenced subsequent political decision making.

This mythic narrative is of no less importance in Europe. American natural history, while influenced by a European cultural heritage that informed environmental behaviour, has itself in turn become so much part of the modern European cultural tradition as to be inseparable. The scientific and artistic communities have been informing each other since the times of Plato and Aristotle; in fact it is impossible to distinguish between the disciplines in the works of many, from Plato to the present day.

The mythic narrative that supported the concept of the sublime encouraged the move from fear of wilderness to reverence of wilderness, a move that is not such an enormous departure as may initially be assumed. The wilderness, however barren and devoid of moral worth, has nevertheless always had the possibility of the sacred. An element of this contradiction has always been at the heart of biblical texts, however predominant the interpretation of wilderness as a place of fear and loss has been throughout western history. Just as one may encounter the devil and lose one's soul in the wilderness, there is the possibility that one may also come face-to-face with God. This dichotomy has since presented itself throughout aspects of western culture; it is also present in the concept of the frontier, a place outside of civilisation and therefore outside moral boundaries, but also a place where courage and independence might forge a new kind of individual and national character. The ability that we accord the concept of wilderness to embrace this universal dichotomy is rooted in the core values of the society, and this dichotomy is at the heart of the importance and influence that wilderness exerts over modern western society.

Wilderness has developed in western culture as not only a place of redemption, however spiritual or religious that redemption may be, but also and inextricably a place of renewal. This sense of renewal is evident in the early modern history of America with the growing importance the concept of the frontier began to assume. Primitivism manifested itself in the national myth of the frontier in America in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, for although the frontier physically defined an area of conflict, both with indigenous populations and with nature, it also became a place where the corrupting influence of civilisation was absent, and where creativity, independence, courage and

vigour could assert themselves and recreate democratic institutions free from the corruption of the East<sup>2</sup>.

Contemporary attempts to define wilderness exhibit all the problems we might expect if a strict separation of nature and culture are attempted. Nash, for example, cites the Outdoor Recreation Resources Review Commission of 1962 which defined wilderness in America as an area over 100,000 acres “containing no roads usable by the public” with “no significant ecological disturbance from on-site human activity” (Nash 1982, 5).

Similarly, the American Wilderness Act of 1964 defines a wilderness area as one which ‘has at least five thousand acres of land or is of sufficient size as to make practicable its preservation and use in an unimpaired condition’; wilderness is an area which ‘generally appears to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man’s work substantially unnoticeable...’ and is ‘an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain’ (quoted in Gaard 1997, 6).

Wilderness in this sense seems to be defined by the criteria we might most readily recognise; those which define wilderness as the absence of human influence, where habitation is not present or is very limited. However, Cronon argues that ‘far from being the one place on earth that stands apart from humanity, (wilderness) is quite profoundly a human creation – indeed, the creation of very particular human cultures at very particular moments in human history’ (Cronon 1996, 69).

Although Cronon argues that wilderness was a product of civilisation, he also acknowledged its complexity with the recognition that wilderness was to be found in the 'irreducibly nonhuman' (Cronon 1996, 70). This complexity has meant that wilderness has had a powerful hold over our imaginations from the earliest days of civilisation. We have imbued wilderness with our fears and with our hopes, and we are operating in a sphere of cultural diversity that gives us many different and changing meanings to the term wilderness. Acknowledging the changes to our understanding of wilderness allows us to understand why swampland and marshes have been some of the last types of ecosystem protected by legislation, both in American and Europe, as initially such ecosystems did not fulfil the purely aesthetic criteria of grandeur or of the sublime. Importantly, the possibility that nature can exist outside of culture is supported by the argument that wilderness is the non-human, but there remains a sense that wilderness involves an 'untrammelled' land and so is defined in its relation to the human sphere of existence.

A second critique of attempts to maintain a strict distinction between wilderness and humanity (or broadly speaking; nature and culture) comes with the argument that in fact, as there are no areas which are untouched by humans, there is consequently no such thing as a natural wilderness. Of course, this does not mean, as McKibben (2003) suggests, that wilderness is impossible, that the entire world has been contaminated by human activity, it simply means that attempting to define it solely in terms of the absence of a (broadly defined) human presence is not helpful.

no area of the earth is unaffected by white Western industrialized culture: toxins are carried in to 'wilderness' areas through the air and the rain .... defining

wilderness as 'an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain (US Wilderness Act 1964)' seems both andocentric and ethnocentric.... the concept of wilderness is itself a product of the culture/nature bifurcation of Western culture. (Gaard 1997, 6).

Hays (1996) disagrees with Cronon and McKibben in that he warns against viewing wilderness as the areas of earth 'untrammelled by man'. He also points out that wilderness is not necessarily protected as a result of identifying pristine ecologies untouched by human interference, but is instead protected as a reaction against development. This is consistent with, for example, Aldo Leopold's definition of wilderness as 'virgin country where nameless men by nameless rivers wander and in strange valleys die strange deaths alone' (Leopold 1966, 268). Here, wilderness is a place that we go to; somewhere where we may *absorb* nature. 'Wilderness areas are first of all a series of sanctuaries for the primitive arts of wilderness travel, especially canoeing and packing' (Leopold 1966, 270). No doubt, for Leopold this would involve the *relative* absence of culture, but that absence would, according to the argument presented in this chapter, have to be relative.

Crucially, Cronon brings into the argument the knowledge that wilderness is culturally and socially diverse, that wilderness involves more than the protection of endangered species in large forested tracts of wilderness, it is also the protection of species that have rural habitats, that the interaction of nature and civilisation has also been about living within nature and bringing nature into the urban, and that wilderness recreation is not anathema to the very existence of wilderness. Indeed, perhaps perception of

wilderness is also a matter of scale, the life of bacteria and protozoa is vastly unexplored by human science, and is largely unknown and uncontrollable (Wilson 2002, 145), and therefore is also definable by wilderness.

We can see that culture is central to our understanding of wilderness by returning to the subject of the creation of the myth of wilderness in America, where the perception of wilderness as a place of fear and death gave way as the frontier closed to a more prevalent concept of wilderness that was largely constructed. The frontier as a physical reality and as a concept, and therefore contact with and a relationship with wilderness, became a source of national renewal, a site for the development of the American national character. As the frontier disappeared, as its progression across the continent meant that by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the frontier as a physical reality no longer existed, the drive to preserve areas of wilderness increased. Protecting wilderness assumed enormous importance, as wilderness had become the repository of the sacred myth of the origin of the nation. Wilderness came to embody the national frontier myth, the myth of virgin uninhabited land, and it is a myth. There were human inhabitants of the continent when European settlers arrived, and they were displaced and removed from the areas that were designated wilderness; the Amerindians who had lived in and hunted the lands that the frontier consumed were moved to reservations, and the recreational use of the wilderness flourished. No matter what romantic perception of the wilderness was developing, the frontier in reality was an area of violent conflict, an area where the original inhabitants and invaders fought for land and resources and control.

American wilderness, for example, may be a set of ecological realities, but it is also culturally invented; it is the Garden of Eden from which humanity had to be excluded, it exists at the frontier and in its savage and violent history lies the creation of a national myth of heroism. It is a place where the trappings of civilisation may be evaded and where man can reinvent himself. It is sublime, authentic, and is the manifestation of the sacred. Wilderness in America and in Western Europe is culturally embedded and constructed, however much of an ecological reality (or realities) it is. Ansel Adams' photography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century is the representation of wilderness in a country that had recently been declared as no longer having a frontier. His photography of the Californian Sierra Nevada, including his seminal work on Yosemite Valley, is predominately in black and white. The human form is barely acknowledged, the majesty and grandeur of the landscape is meant to be awe-inspiring rather than threatening, and the vast scale of the landscape dominates. Adams was not only reflecting a national celebration of wilderness (and concurrently a predominant concern for the loss of wilderness), he also became hugely influential for the American wilderness movement as a whole, as wilderness had been very much a defining characteristic for a new nation in search of a unique aspect to its developing cultural identity. So as rugged individualism was interpreted not only as a wilderness but also as a singularly American characteristic, so we find that landscapes and species to which we attach values may in fact be expressions of cultural values.

This particular myth of wilderness embodies a dualistic vision, where humans are separate from wilderness, they exist outside of the boundaries of wilderness. If human beings cannot exist within wilderness, they by definition must be excluded. However, Cronon (1996) asserts that the danger of using wilderness as a repository of myth is that

we also are in danger of absolving ourselves of responsibility of the areas of what he regards as being the non-wilderness that we inhabit, that is the rural or the urban. This aspect of wilderness existing within the rural and the urban is one that I will return to in the case studies, and specifically the case study on Britain, as an exploration of the different aspects of wilderness that we identify from different cultural approaches within the western viewpoint. It is necessary for us to acknowledge the responsibilities that we have towards our relationship with nature in the urban and the rural, just as much as in the singular repositories of wilderness, in order that we address the global ecological crisis. To this end, recognising the elements of wilderness that exist in these areas is essential if we are to accept responsibility for our behaviour towards wilderness in general.

Just as we must be aware of cultural diversity within our own society that allows us to view wilderness in a multiplicity of ways and in different aspects and scales of perception, so we must also be aware that the exporting of the wilderness myth to other areas of the globe is an insidious form of cultural imperialism. The American and European pattern of wilderness preservation and the historically popular displacement of indigenous populations, or the disapproval of indigenous peoples' land-use in areas deemed to be wilderness, can all too easily replicate the recent history of America in other areas of the globe. The human cost of cultural imperialism through the exporting of the wilderness myth is potentially catastrophic. To impose the western perspective of wilderness with reference to human habitation on a country such as India for example, is unworkable and humanely unviable when considering the historical precedence for human habitation in wild areas in a densely populated country.



So, wilderness as we understand it to be in its various manifestations is in part a product of culture, though it is of course composed of non-human life and ecosystems that are biological realities and are to a greater extent untouched by human influence. Wilderness however is a construct in as much as it has been variously defined across nations and throughout history, and these definitions, what wilderness means to us, what it represents spiritually and culturally, change over time and across cultures.

...it is tempting to let the term define itself: to accept as wilderness those places people call wilderness... (it) is not so much what wilderness is but what men *think* it is. (Nash 1982, 5)

If of course wilderness is no more than that which men think it is, if we take this as a literal statement, then we are in danger of denying the validity of wilderness existence outside the sphere of human knowledge or awareness. However, if we choose to interpret this statement from Nash as a plea to acknowledge the social and cultural element that filters our behaviour towards wilderness, our anthropocentrism, then we arrive at a more inclusive and broad-reaching conception of wilderness and our responses towards it. I agree with Nash's perspective that wilderness is what we think it is, and that the plural definitions of wilderness each have an element of validity, but I also feel that, regardless of whether there is an ecological reality (or realities) of wilderness, regardless of our changing attitudes to wilderness as cultural definitions change and our spiritual and aesthetic responses adapt, we still approach wilderness through culture. Our relationship with nature is mediated through culture, and as such our cultural construction of wilderness is crucial in our ongoing relationship with nature.

Wilderness then has historically been a part of nature, and it has defined our relationship towards nature more generally. It is a place, however it is defined, that forms the basis of linguistic expressions of the natural world, and in our description of wilderness we betray human fears and aspirations. As such, it is fundamental to the repository of myths upon which we, knowingly or unknowingly, draw to make sense of our relationship not only with wilderness itself, but with the natural world more generally. As we shall see later in this chapter (and in those to follow), this is an important observation because much of the argument concerning culture and ecological problems has revolved around the cultural influence of science, and the ethical influence of Judaeo-Christianity. A consideration of the cultural influence of myth and its relationship to wilderness is taken here as a necessary counter-balance to existing perceptions of culture and nature.

Just as with wilderness, the debate on what nature is relies on the cultural to some degree or another, and this following section will examine the historical, etymological and theological background to the development of our understanding of nature from a western perspective. In doing so, a western tradition of domination over nature is explored, and this will inform the subsequent exploration of the definitions of culture and the cultural aspect to any mediation with the natural world.

### **The Western Tradition of Domination over Nature**

I have previously stated that there were two ways in which to test the ideas presented in the first section of this chapter. The first of these was regarding the idea that culture is

indeed the mediator of nature, and that consequently social needs are expressed in our perceptions of and our ethical disposition towards nature. As a result of this, we should expect not one view of nature, but many. The second was to consider the debate on the relationship between Judaeo-Christianity and ecological problems.

This debate is, in part, one which concerns issues of anthropocentrism and ecocentrism; that is the relationship between Biblical anthropocentrism and ecological degradation. It also concerns the issue of plurality. It is clear that arguments over which interpretation of scripture is correct fail to acknowledge the possibility of the co-existence of differing views, and that these views owe as much to historical necessity as to scripture. Equally, the debate gives the opportunity to locate anthropocentrism in the context of social construction, and to prepare the ground for arguments presented in the following chapter. These arguments will suggest that recent theories of environmental problems tend to be far too prescriptive in their analysis of both the problems themselves and the solutions.

### *Philosophical attitudes and the natural sciences*

Discussions of western cultural attitudes to nature have typically included the argument that much of our inheritance can be traced to Biblical views of dominion, which have in turn justified, explicitly or implicitly, the exploitation of nature witnessed from the modern era.

I have already argued that some form of dualism is unavoidable in that culture and nature, while not entirely separable, are clearly not analogous either. In this sense, the discussion here is less about whether a duality exists, and more about its characteristics, that is, what is the basis of the cultural view of nature?

The view that Judaeo-Christian cultures saw the rise of the concept of dominion over nature is one that does not take into account the importance of the cultural and philosophical inheritance from classical antiquity. I here use Hargrove (1989a) as an example of a position that introduces the concept of a classical inheritance, as he gives an explanation for the relationship between human and nature which he sites in the development of a relationship with nature in classical Greek philosophy. I will first consider this approach, though will argue it is too simplistic an explanation for the foundations of the modern era's attitude towards nature, and in doing so will draw on the criticisms of this approach by Attfield and others with specific reference to Hargrove's theories.

Hargrove claims that while environmental issues *per se* have not been at the heart of philosophical discussion for the last three thousand years, western ideas which have sprung from such philosophy are in fact themselves largely responsible for the development of ideas and values that have inhibited environmental protection. Religion, which he views as having intellectually borrowed from philosophy, and the intertwining of the disciplines of philosophy and religion, are demonstrated in the modern philosophical tradition that arose in the Late Middle Ages. It was at this time that church philosophers reinterpreted the Bible in accordance with the theories of Aristotle, placing nature at the service of man, hence the modern western cultural interpretations of man's relationship

with nature have their roots in classical Greek philosophy, as well as early modern European philosophy (Hargrove 1989a, 16).

Greek philosophers approached natural phenomena in a way that (1) prevented the development of an ecological perspective, (2) discouraged the aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, and (3) promoted a conception of reality that made the idea of nature preservation conceptually difficult, if not impossible. (Hargrove 1989a, 21)

According to Hargrove the fundamental philosophies of the Greeks prevented them from thinking in any systematic logical way; the belief that the world has a rational structure and that information gathered by the senses is corruptible discouraged firsthand observation. Knowledge was believed to be permanent, and ecological relationships being mutable and perishable were therefore not included in any principles governing the truth of the nature of existence; because change was essentially impossible it was therefore illusory; and the rational structure of the world was believed to be simple. This last principle, while readily acknowledged by ecologists today as not relating to the complex and interdependent relationships within ecosystems, nevertheless led to the reductionist method that concentrates on parts in isolation from the complex entirety (this reductionist method is still in use today in scientific study). Hargrove states that of all the major Greek philosophers Aristotle was the only one 'who came close to approaching nature from an ecological perspective' (Hargrove 1989a, 24), and that he developed interests in botany, geology and biology. He fundamentally believed however in a system of hierarchy, with all nature existing for the benefit of man.<sup>3</sup>

Hargrove's second point, regarding the lack of aesthetic appreciation of the natural world, he supports with the theory that although it was at times fashionable to appreciate nature through art and literature in Greek society, this appreciation never passed over into the philosophical community as philosophers were 'obsessed ... with their efforts to uncover the ultimate reality that they believed was hidden by sensation' (Hargrove 1989a, 26). Ultimately, geometric perfection and mathematical proportion are measures of beauty. These ideals Hargrove traces through to the Romantic nature poetry of the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, where appreciation of nature is often in the sense that natural forms are reaching for higher aesthetic and spiritual standards of beauty.

The third perspective Hargrove regards as being fundamental, as the metaphysical dimension of Greek philosophy prevented the development of ecological and aesthetic perspectives. Indifference to environmental change is interpreted as the belief that the material world did not exist, and that any change therefore was illusory and essentially unimportant. Hargrove at this point puts forward the idea that indifference points to the conclusion that the Greeks were suffering from 'existential angst' (Hargrove 1989a, 30) regarding the issue of change.

Attfield disagrees with Hargrove not only on the basis of reasoning, but also on the basis of no such angst having been recorded by the Greek historians, dramatists or poets. He also disagrees with Hargrove on the second point and cites the Epicureans and the Stoics who were 'materialists and advocates of simple pleasures ... (and who manifested) an appreciation of natural beauty' (Attfield 1994, 80). He furthermore quotes the Cistercians as a medieval example of Christians who set about improving the landscape for human benefit as well enhancing its beauty for the glory of God. Attfield suggests that the

relationship of man with nature, as has been proscribed by classical philosophy and religion, is more complex and inclusive of differing viewpoints and approaches than has been generally suggested. Hence a pluralistic standpoint as regards the construction of culture is one which can encompass this complexity and allow for the simultaneous existence of differing viewpoints and approaches.

Hargrove's position can be further critiqued by the views of Nasr (1968), who develops the concept of a philosophical inheritance from ancient Greek philosophy and religion to be more complex than that which Hargrove suggests. Instead of following a more singularly linear approach to such philosophical inheritance, he holds that the development of a specifically Christian culture is responsible for the modern relationship between man and nature from a western standpoint, and in this respect concurs with White (1968).

The present day encounter of man and nature, and all the philosophical, theological and scientific problems connected with it, carry within themselves elements connected with Christian civilization as well as with the civilization of Antiquity which Christianity came to replace ... (Nasr 1968, 53)

Pre-Socratic ancient Greek saw nature as being inhabited by gods, and the spiritual and corporeal were not as yet discrete. Aristotle marked the phase in Ancient Greek history when Western philosophy began and Eastern philosophy ended in terms of the dominant world view. Eastern philosophy continued along mystical and religious lines and its metaphysics combined both natural and mathematical sciences. Its influence can most readily be seen in the basis of Islam. Western philosophy however chose the path of rationalism with little concern for the natural sciences or the metaphysical world. Its

influence is prevalent in Western civilization, and its driving force has been Christianity. Christianity emphasized the boundary between the natural and the supernatural; in the quest for the survival of the faith, Christianity rejected the religion of the Greeks and rejected therefore naturalism. In this process the alienation from nature has characterized the subsequent history of Christianity: 'This is one of the deep-lying roots of the present crisis of modern man in his encounter with nature.' (Nasr 1968, 56)

If the philosophy and religion of ancient Greek culture could thus form part of the philosophical inheritance of two major Abrahamic religions, which differ in their basic approach in their representation of a relationship between the human and the natural, then this inheritance is not in itself enough to explain the subsequent development of the western perspective as regards nature and the natural world. If the multiplicity of conceptions of nature that are inherited from an ancient Greek philosophy are so divergent, then, as Nasr suggests, we need to look at the development of the western model and the inference that Christianity was a driving force in the development of a dualistic approach. The development of the boundary between humans and nature, the alienation from nature, is one that will be explored through the development of the anthropocentrism of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the view that in a western culture we cannot be anything but anthropocentric is explored through the diversity of definitions as regards anthropocentrism, and the standpoints that this diversity can encompass.



### *Anthropocentrism and the Judaeo-Christian<sup>4</sup> tradition*

The emergence of Judaeo-Christian cultures confirmed ideas already developed in ancient Greece, but also introduced new elements into the relationship between humans and their natural environment. These included the belief that God transcends nature, that humans are made in the image of God and therefore are set aside from nature, and that there is a widely believed message of the right of human dominion over nature. With Judaeo-Christian cultures we also introduce a strong element of duality regarding human existence and nature. For example, Judaeo-Christian cultures arose in the middle east, in land where water was a scarcity, hence the connection between wilderness and desert, and the tradition of baptism in water being redemptive: 'Therefore with joy shall ye draw water out of the wells of salvation.' (Isaiah 12:3).

The emergence of a dualist approach is often seen as the development of the theme of anthropocentrism, which has perhaps not surprisingly been held accountable for much of the perceived environmental crisis of the planet. Lynn White's essay *The Historical Roots of our Ecologic Crisis* (White 1968) instigated discussion of the concepts regarding anthropocentrism, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, and the interrelated (as he saw it) development of science and the human tendency to dominate the natural environment.

Especially in its Western form, Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has ever seen... Christianity, in absolute contrast to ancient paganism and Asia's religions ... not only established a dualism of man and nature, but also

insisted that it is God's will that man exploit nature for his proper ends. (White 1968, 86)

Anthropocentrism is a term that is much used in the literature surrounding environmental ethics; though it has many variants it is often left undefined, usually implying a critical pejorative application of the term. Bookchin complains that his concerns for social justice are characterised in 'an almost routine response' as 'anthropocentric' by 'ecomystics and deep ecology acolytes' in an essay that defends his work against such critics who he characterises as ideologically misinformed and dangerously anti-human. (Bookchin 1994, 14). Attfield identifies the alternatives to anthropocentrism: sentientism 'which accords moral recognition to all creatures with feelings ... and only to such creatures', biocentrism 'which recognises the moral standing of all living creatures' and ecocentrism 'which regards ecosystems and the biosphere as having moral significance independent of that of their members', and states that abandoning anthropocentrism would involve a movement towards one of these standpoints (Attfield 1994, 27). These issues, more specifically the issues of biocentrism and ecocentrism, will be addressed in the next chapter as part of the study of the variety of contemporary ecological approaches and theories. Attfield however also recognises the variants of anthropocentrism, and quotes Frederick Ferre's definition of 'perspectival anthropocentrism' as one that means that we cannot help but make decisions and value judgements from a human perspective. This mild interpretation is far removed from the traditional meaning usually ascribed to the term, which Attfield states as being 'the traditional view that only human beings and their values and interests matter' (Attfield 1995, 27-28). It is this approach of perspectival anthropocentrism which is useful in an acceptance of other approaches, such as those of

biocentrism or ecocentrism. Perspectival anthropocentrism would not deny the usefulness of these approaches, as it does not claim a moral or biological superiority of humans over non-human nature, but instead requests a measure of acknowledgement of the cultural filters which human societies employ in their interpretations of and relationships with nature and with wilderness. As such it is a fundamental aspect of a cultural constructivist perspective that also seeks to acknowledge the input and validity of other approaches.

The anthropocentric perspective developing from a Judaeo-Christian inheritance is evident throughout the variety of cultures that we might identify as being western in character, and has a direct relationship with the two Judaeo-Christian concepts of dominion and stewardship. These two approaches to our relationship with nature are readily identifiable as being fundamental to our legislative and cultural relationship with the natural world, as will be clearly demonstrated in the case studies, particularly that of the United States and the issues surrounding the establishment of the national parks. These two approaches are crucial in an exploration of our conflicting responses to the environment, as the issues of dominion and stewardship assist in an examination of the complexities of an anthropocentric approach developing in a Judaeo-Christian tradition of western society and philosophy.

The Biblical passage most readily quoted as that which permits, even commands domination, is from Genesis:

And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea,

and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Genesis 1:28)

There are many problems surrounding the interpretation of this passage, not least the issue of the translation into English of the word 'dominion' introduces an element of uncertainty regarding the sometimes-supposed 'right' to dominate nature. In fact, while God also sees to the needs of the animal population ('and to every beast of the earth, and to every fowl of the air, and to every thing that creepeth upon the earth, wherein there is life, I have given every green herb for meat: and it was so'. Genesis 1:30), dominion is furthermore not an unqualified state. In fact, God retains control entirely, and uses nature as a means of punishment for transgressing His laws:

But if ye will not hearken unto me, and will not do all these commandments: And if ye shall despise my statutes, or if your soul abhor my judgments, so that ye will not do all my commandments, but that ye break my covenant ... your strength shall be spent in vain: for your land shall not yield her increase, neither shall the trees of the land yield their fruits. I will also send wild beasts among you, which shall rob you of your children, and destroy your cattle... And I will scatter you among the heathen, and will draw out a sword after you: and your land shall be desolate, and your cities waste. (Leviticus 26:14-33)

So while it is commonly interpreted that nature is given to man to rule over, man must also be ruled by the laws of God, and by association therefore by the rules of nature (as God's use of nature to punish man in the form of failing crops and wild animals is a reminder of the strength and magnitude of natural forces):

the biblical Hebrew term *shmayim* means both sky and heaven ... God as the ruler of heaven was thus not simply a spiritual abstraction for ancient Israelites, but a way of portraying their crucial dependence on precipitation. (Kay 1988, 323)

What must be considered also is that the Bible is a product of its time, the social structures ruling human relationships in the Middle East at the time(s) of writing were by all accounts primarily those with rigid hierarchical systems, where such ruling over nations, states, districts, households and individuals was the norm. We should therefore not be surprised at the structure of relationships described in the Bible, whether they are between God and man or man and nature. Furthermore, in a period of time when humankind's relationship to the land was of a more basic agrarian nature, most deeds would have had a direct, and, in cases of degradation or despoilment, most likely irreversible (at least in the human short term) impact on the land, hence moral or immoral deeds could be responded to Biblically by the land, hence God used the land as a tool of punishment.

The belief that all human offences potentially imperil nature is the Bible's strongest statement about human domination over the environment. (Kay 1988, 321)

The cultural needs of society therefore are reflected in the interpretations of nature and of wilderness; issues of environmental degradation are less concerned with any perceived or real intrinsic rights of nature and are more concerned with using nature as a control measure within the human culture. The anthropocentrism this reflects does not necessarily imperil nature, but it does conceptualise nature and wilderness in relation to human society.

Passmore continues this theme when he identifies two main themes of dominion in Genesis, in fact throughout the Hebrew Bible (Passmore 1980); these are the themes of man as despot or man as shepherd. The subsequent duality of the role of man in nature can in fact be identified in one passage of Genesis regarding Noah, where God commands Noah to people the earth at the same time as He apparently places the fate of all other living creatures in Noah's hands (though 'delivered' may once again be an issue of translation and may also be translated in a more favourable 'stewardship' light indicating a more benign caring role).

And God blessed Noah and his sons, and said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth. And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be upon every beast of the earth, and upon every fowl of the air, upon all that moveth upon the earth, and upon all the fishes of the sea; into your hand are they delivered. (Genesis 9:1-2)

Passmore believes that the role of the despot is the one that has predominated throughout much of human history, that it is only recently that the shepherd role is playing a stronger part. This role of shepherd, or steward, Passmore identifies as being a minority tradition (Passmore 1980, 9). In fact, he identifies minority traditions as encompassing both the role of steward, doing the bidding of God in the natural world by assuming care over it under God's direction ('The land shall not be sold for ever: for the land is mine, for ye are strangers and sojourners with me' Leviticus 25:23), and the role of one who is meant to actively improve the world, to enhance and perfect God's creation. This is possible because nature is not divine, however much nature has been created by God it is not in itself deified, it is not in itself sacred, and is therefore open to utilisation without fear of

sacrilege (Passmore 1980, 209), even if this is simply by the absence of a stricture not to despoil.

Attfield however strongly disagrees with the view of Biblical permission having been given to dominate in a despotic way, as well as with the less despotic role of stewardship being a merely minority player in the cultural development of an ecological conscience (Attfield 1994). Not only does Attfield quote numerous examples in both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament of God's care for animals and the exhortation of man to do the same, wilderness and wild creatures which are of no immediate use to man are quoted as also being cared for by God:

Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who loosed the bands of the wild ass?  
Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings. He  
scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth he the crying of the driver. The  
range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searcheth after every green thing.  
(Job 39:5-8)

He also cites Glacken's seminal text *Traces on the Rhodian Shore* (1967), claiming that the views held regarding nature throughout western writing are too diverse to encompass within one definable ethic.

However, while Attfield identifies clear traditions of God's care for the animal world running through both testaments, Passmore identifies a clear difference between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament as regards man's relationship with nature. He identifies Christianity as being fundamentally anthropocentric due to the belief in Jesus as

God made man. Hence the Hebrew tradition, which he identifies as nature existing for the glory of God, was supplanted by the Christian tradition that is crucially arrogant in its assumption of its relationship with nature, according to his interpretation of anthropocentric Christianity therefore he identified as coming from a Greek tradition, and he modified White's assumption of a Judaeo-Christian despotism towards nature into a Graeco-Christian arrogance that was fundamentally anthropocentric (Passmore 1980). This Graeco-Christian tradition could be interpreted in two ways as regards the environment. Firstly conservatively where, apart from the important distinction of wilderness areas, God's work was not to be changed (wilderness being thought to harbour evil spirits, a direct line through to animist traditions), and secondly a more radical agenda. It is this agenda that is the inheritor of the dominant interpretation of Genesis, and one that found its secular translation in the Enlightenment, which will be addressed shortly.

While White holds that Christianity is largely responsible for western science and technology, Attfield believes it is not essentially the Christian inheritance or western science and technology itself, but rather certain elements of the deployment of such knowledge that has led to environmental degradation, hence the development of an environmentally sound body of ethics is still possible within the context of a western scientific tradition.

White's statement that anthropocentrism leads man to exploit nature for 'his proper ends' (White 1968, 86) is therefore a question of definition, an anthropocentric viewpoint does not necessarily lead to a disregard for other life, hence the ultimate development of the viewpoint that could lead to 'perspectival anthropocentrism':



An anthropocentric attitude toward nature does not require that man be the source of all value, nor does it exclude a belief that things of nature have intrinsic value. (Murdy 1983, 15)

This position is supported by Attfield who argues that Christianity *per se* does not encourage a despotic attitude towards nature, 'rather it embodies an awareness of the goodness of creation, and an ethic of concern to use and to conserve the natural environment for the sake of fellow humans, of future generations and of fellow creatures' (Attfield 1994, 18).

Jeanne Kay identifies a number of issues that prevent the, as she sees them, competing schools of despotism theory and stewardship theory from reconciling (Kay 1988). She questions the basic assumption of Judaeo-Christianity being at fault for the ecological crisis (citing and agreeing with Passmore who proposed the tradition at fault was the Graeco-Christian), the assumption that religious beliefs have had as great an environmental impact as has been thought (arguing cultural and ecological factors have had a mitigating effect on environmental impacts), and the argument that the Bible's environmental attitudes should be viewed from a historically accurate perspective and not through the bias of modern environmental attitudes.

Furthermore, Kay crucially cites much of the research in this debate as being fundamentally flawed and therefore contributing to the misinformation and division regarding the despot/steward debate. These faults she identifies as the relative reluctance to use the original source, the Bible; the reliance on a few key verses rather than a

systematic examination of the source literature; and the enduring problem of translation, as for example with the following examination of the word 'wilderness:

The Hebrew Bible does not even have an equivalent term for the generalized English word *wilderness*, but rather has several terms for specific types of Near Eastern habitats, such as the seasonally arid pastureland *midbar*. (Kay 1988, 312)

Bratton further discusses the issue of a supposed authority having been given for man to dominate nature, and instead suggests that man was created as God's representative only, that he was created to serve. The passage in Genesis 'And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it' (Genesis 2:15) she questions as regards the translation of the original Hebrew, where *abad* may be translated as 'to dress' or 'to till' but has the connotation of service and work (Bratton 1984, 204).

Not only are there linguistic anomalies in interpretations of Biblical texts, the historical context in which these texts were produced are furthermore an indication of the cultural needs of the human societies of the time. We have therefore adopted principles based on these anomalies of translation and the interpretations demanded by differing human societies. The Judaeo-Christian tradition furthermore incorporates elements of previous traditions, essential in order to have resonance with the cultural inheritance of a society, and the relationship between wilderness and evil is resonant with earlier animist traditions that located fear in wilderness and in wild animals. Nevertheless, the division between God and nature is key to an interpretation of the Judaeo-Christian anthropocentric tradition. The issues surrounding stewardship and dominion are not mutually exclusive, as they both stem from an anthropocentric agenda. That a belief in

the right to claim dominion of the natural world does not exclude more benevolent traits of stewardship is reflected in the complexities of a modern western perspective, which is founded in a scientific rationality that broadly speaking sees a scientific or technological solution to environmental ills. Furthermore, this pluralism that combines elements of both stewardship and dominion can also be seen in our multiple definitions of wilderness and in our patterns of land use. The complexity of our cultural construction gives us the ability to consider wilderness areas as those devoid of any evidence of human existence, and also those which require our stewardship, for example national parks, while furthermore exercising dominion in a rapacious and ecological damaging way over our agricultural areas. An approach that accepts the plurality of our cultural interpretations is essential if the complexities arising from this pluralistic outlook are to be addressed. A modern western response to nature and to wilderness carries elements within it of stewardship and dominion, is dominated by a Judaeo-Christian inheritance, but also reflects elements of earlier animist traditions and the influence of traditions from Eastern philosophy. It is a complex cultural construction that is pluralistic in its approaches to wilderness, and which encompasses a variety of simultaneous responses to nature. The ability to simultaneously apply divergent concepts is a reflection of the cultural complexity that has resulted in a modern western concept of nature.

### ***The development of a modern response towards nature***

The Enlightenment marks a watershed in commonly held beliefs regarding nature. This came from a greater understanding of the natural world in general; the natural sciences

such as botany, geology and astronomy flourished, and there was an increase in scientific rationality. The Enlightenment also allowed a romantic view to develop, a view characterised by regret and nostalgia, that saw purity in untouched wilderness, and furthermore which emphasised the spiritual significance of wilderness, wilderness as a symbol of purity and of lost innocence. The rise of Romanticism during the Industrial Revolution meant that culture came to be a word that was associated with spiritual development, separate from the material. As culture became a mediator between humankind and mechanisation, so this developed further into a separation of the creative endeavours of humankind from the technological and industrial endeavours that characterised the era. Both Bacon and Descartes were instrumental in heralding a new secular age of dominion over nature through science.

let the human race recover that right over Nature which belongs to it by divine bequest. (Bacon, quoted in Passmore 1980, 19)

Although there were arguments against the view that the proper attitude of man towards nature is exploitative, by artists such as Blake for example, it is true to say that in scientific development Cartesian dualism, the separation of man from nature, has been largely predominant throughout the modern era:

a practical philosophy by means which, knowing the force and the action of fire, water, the stars, heavens, and all the other bodies that environ us, as distinctly as we know the different crafts of our artisans, we can in the same way employ them in the uses to which they are adapted, and thus render ourselves the masters and possessors of nature. (Descartes, quoted in Passmore, 1980, 20)

This technological optimism has informed many other, sometimes radically different, ideological systems. In terms of Marxist political economy, while ecologists traditionally see man's domination of nature as the cause of ecological problems, so Marxist political economy states that if there are such problems then 'domination' *per se* does not strictly exist. Ecological problems are the result of the absence of man's domination. Marx asserted that there could be no harmony between humankind and nature, that domination was necessary and desirable, and furthermore, that the appropriate forms of transforming nature must be set and defined by historically existing human cultures:

The great foundation stone of production and wealth ... (is man's) ... understanding of nature and his mastery over it. (Marx, quoted in Lee 1980, 5)

The development of a modern ecological conscience from the seemingly conflicting traditions of dominion and stewardship can be demonstrated through an example which has relevance to the central case study of this thesis, in the creation of national parks in America. As has been demonstrated above, there are clearly approaches which differ in their reliance on either a scientific or an aesthetic response to nature, and furthermore in their beliefs in the foundations of such approaches. While I accept that there is a complexity in our cultural inheritance which demands all such approaches be considered, there are also themes which develop from these different approaches which have a certain commonality of response.

Attitudes concerning the recent history of wildlife protection attitudes have developed from attitudes previously explored in relation to man's mastery over nature. The United States of America was the first nation to introduce national parks into its statutes, and the

artist George Catlin was in 1832 among the first American's to call for 'a Nation's Park, containing man and beast, all in the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty' (Hargrove 1989a, 113). Hargrove points out that the preservation of species and the protection of the wilderness of America were in fact scientific and aesthetic considerations, as he recounts the pleasure Catlin took in documenting as an artist the death throes of a buffalo (Hargrove 1989a, 114), and indicates that the individual suffering of animals was still not an issue in the call for wilderness preservation. The utilitarian nature of the origins of wilderness appreciation will be more fully explored later in the thesis in the case studies, demonstrating as they do the early modern perspective that fostered the 'myth of superabundance' and the need to redeem the wilderness (Coates 1993, 7).

Hargrove asserts that our present attitudes towards wildlife would have developed without the assistance of evolutionary and ecological science, asserting that while a history of ideas supports our current position towards wildlife, this has not come about as a result of animal rights, or even that the science of evolution and ecology has greatly influenced our wildlife attitudes. He instead claims that it is the history of an aesthetic interest in wildlife and nature that has led to the gradual emergence of our present day attitudes regarding wildlife and nature (Hargrove 1989a, 109-10). This perspective has a validity, as in a global society the influence of aesthetic responses to nature and wilderness cannot be overlooked. The foundations of our aesthetic responses are complex, but I would argue that the cultural filters that exist in our societies are part of the conditioning for our aesthetic responses.

An aesthetic response is not adequate as the sole basis of an explanation of the development of our modern attitudes as regards wilderness. The aesthetic response is part

of the cultural complexity of a society, and it is a reflection of the myths and suppositions of a culture that reflect the relationship of that culture with nature and with wilderness. Without an examination of the complexities of culture, without an acknowledgement of the pluralistic responses that our cultural inheritance affords us in response to wilderness, then an aesthetic response can only be a partial explanation of the development of a modern ecological consciousness.

The inheritance of the Judaeo-Christian or Graeco-Christian traditions have been demonstrated to be plural and diverse, encompassing the traditions of domination and of a more benevolent stewardship even within the same texts. In absolute contrast to animist traditions and to the traditions of other major religions, God is divine and neither man nor nature can ever be. This of course means that abuse of nature is not abuse of a divine spirit, as with many other cultures and religions, and hence one major impediment to ecological abuse has been avoided in the collective cultural psyche. Thus if we relate this to the position of the indigenous populations of the North American continent at the time of European settlement, we perceive a collection of cultures which related to nature as the divine, and so developed a more symbiotic relationship with wilderness and nature that broadly speaking did not permit ecological degradation for human gain. The anthropocentrism of western culture is pervasive throughout the various debates regarding approaches to nature in a Judaeo-Christian tradition.

The rise of a scientific rationality and the development of dualism has layered more complexity on the issue of the construction of western culture, but while issues surrounding translations, of historical perspective, and of interpretation are ever-present, it is nevertheless a plural and complex cultural construction that has led to the formation of

what we might identify broadly as a western approach to nature and wilderness. This approach is characterised by the internal pluralities that allow for seemingly divergent viewpoints to co-exist, and this issue of plurality is fundamental to an approach that considers the complexity of cultural construction.

## **Conclusion**

Wilderness is indeed a collection of ecological realities, but the parameters of these realities are determined by cultural filters. These filters can stem from more scientific quarters; for instance we consider hedgerows in England to be repositories of ecological wilderness due to their tremendous species diversity, just as we consider the Arctic to be wilderness primarily by virtue of the enormity of the area and the relative absence of human life. However there are multiple layers to our cultural filters. The Arctic is still relatively unexplored, it is still an area where people easily die if venturing in unprepared, and as such has resonance with our need for danger in our relatively safe lives. It is romantic in its enormity, in its unknown tracts of impenetrable ice, and allows us to believe in something huge and forbidding. It is a sanctuary for our adventurous nature. The English hedgerow also has deep cultural resonance in the modern era, and harks back to a time, which is still within living memory, when the landscape of this country is perceived from today as being societally safer, when we lived more in tune with the seasons, where the rural idyll dominated and life had changed little since Hardy's novels were written.



We layer cultural suppositions and assumptions on ecological realities and determine our responses to them, but these suppositions, assumptions, reactions and responses will inevitably mutate and change over time and between cultures. From a western perspective we do however seem to demonstrate a common awareness of wilderness, and the definition of wilderness has broadly speaking been, until the modern era, generally cohesive. It has involved to some extent or another, across cultures and across nations, some degree of rarity of human habitation, of physically challenging areas in which it is difficult to sustain human life, whether the threat to human life be from animals, climate or terrain. The myth, or rather plural myths of wilderness are in fact similarly concerned with survival. They developed as mechanisms by which we mediated our response to and relationship with nature, in particular in this case wilderness, and in the modern era they have become mechanisms by which we alternately dominate or preserve wilderness. The same cultural myths have given rise to a multiplicity of approaches towards nature and specifically wilderness, and it is essential to allow the validity of these myths and not to dismiss them in the modern era as impractical, superstitious, sentimental or reactionary.

Just as some of our inherited myth has created a fear of wilderness, and so lent itself in the western psyche to a mindset that favours domination of wilderness, so our repository of cultural influences, our inherited bank of myth and legend, has in it the seeds of reverence of wilderness; of protection of wilderness areas, of species protection, of enjoyment of wide open spaces, and the observation of flora and fauna. The study of wilderness and the acknowledgement of the cultural construction of our response to and therefore behaviour towards wilderness is essential if we are to mediate between the various myths we have inherited. I do not suggest these myths are

contradictory; fear and reverence are present throughout human interpretations of wilderness, but our interpretation of myth, our individual and collective responses to myth are diverse. They are by no means more or less valid than each other, but we do not have the luxury of several planet Earth's on which to try out the conclusion of the unfettered enactment of our various responses towards wilderness. An acknowledgement of the complexity of our cultural inheritance is essential if we are to mediate between the behaviours we exhibit, and if we are to arrive at a worldview that is more sustainable in its future relationship with nature and with wilderness.

To this end, I examine the contemporary theories in use in the field of study and while acknowledging their relative validity in approaching the environmental issue, argue that they do not draw upon the construction of myth, and the embedded myths we draw on consciously and unconsciously; that they instead variously focus on social structure, on economics, on ethics, or on a combination of these influences. I subsequently suggest that cultural constructivism is the theory that will more readily address the issue at hand, acknowledging as it does the importance of myth creation and therefore the cultural element of our society in the construction of our relationships with nature and with wilderness. I further argue that cultural constructivism acknowledges plural definitions of wilderness, and that unlike other theories that rely upon a defined definition or set of definitions, that this theory instead allows the flexibility to develop and change definitions over time and between societies, as cultural influence demands. Wilderness exists in many forms of ecological realities and cultural concepts, and however compromised in terms of human intervention, wilderness, both real and imagined, ecological reality and cultural myth, is still a fundamental concern in our relationship with nature.

However we choose to define wilderness, those definitions will continue to change as societies modify their attitudes towards not only wilderness but towards non-human nature in general. The study of wilderness therefore is the study of society and the study of culture, and if the study of wilderness is linked with the thesis of humanity's relationship to the environment as being crucial to survival, then our understanding and behaviour towards nature and towards wilderness areas is an essential element in our collective futures.

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<sup>1</sup> "It is not beautiful. There are no mountains like they show in the television commercials. It is a plain." The quote was attributed to Gale Norton, the Secretary of the Interior, by the Guardian newspaper in a March 7, 2002 article. The Secretary also provided Congress with a 40-second videotape of the coastal plain showing nothing but a lifeless, frozen expanse. *from: Gale Norton Is No James Watt; She's Even Worse, by Doug Kendal, Published on Tuesday, January 9, 2001 in the Los Angeles Times*

<sup>2</sup> This is clearly demonstrated in the repeated reference in American sublime painting to ancient Greece and Rome and the founding of democracy. In the 1830's Robert Cole painted a series of five paintings called *The Course of Empire* which charted the course of the rise and fall of an imaginary nation based on classical lines, showing a progression from a hunting nation, through rural idyll, to the pastoral and civilisation, and ending in decadence, corruption, and ultimately desolation. This work is referred to and illustrated in Chapter Four.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's student Theophrastus developed a system of thought which held that plants existed for their own nature and not to serve man, and that habitat was important in the growth and existence of many plants, though his ideas never became part of mainstream philosophical thought.

<sup>4</sup> In using the term Judaeo-Christian I do not mean to merge the two distinct traditions of Judaism and Christianity, as they obviously have very many profound differences. They do however originate in the same texts, and as such the roots of each of these religions are inextricable when examining these texts for evidence of a relationship with nature.

## **Chapter Two: Contemporary Western Wilderness Philosophies and Theories**

### **Introduction**

The central tenet of this thesis is that cultural interpretations of nature have, through the relationships between humans and nature, and the subsequent behaviour patterns that have arisen, contributed to the current global environmental crisis and, further, that accounts of this crisis do not typically include a strong cultural element in their explanations.

Such cultural interpretations have a social delivery route in that human behaviour is circumscribed by the structure of our social systems. Theories that examine environmental problems and connect social practices with ecological problems will be ones that to varying degrees support the development of social consciousness, and focus on the possible restructuring of political procedures and institutions. The theories that will be discussed in this chapter therefore will have a social element to them, as the recognition of the cultural dimension of our relationship with nature demands we address the social structures that have given rise to the current situation. As stated in the previous chapter, it is central to this thesis that ecological problems are seen in the first instance as social problems, as problems of culture and its relationship with nature. Only then can we fully address and understand these ecological problems. Bookchin has argued in relation to wilderness: 'Wilderness preservation is an eminently social issue, and its future depends profoundly upon the type of social system as well as the values we develop'(Bookchin 1994, 12). The theories and approaches to nature and to

wilderness that will be studied in this chapter therefore include a cultural element to their approach.

Culturally we are a result of our social history; we carry with us beliefs, habits, attitudes, sentiments, and behavioural norms. My main criticism of each of the theories in this field is that they are too prescriptive, that they are not broad enough in their recognition of the complexity of our cultural inheritance, that they rely upon the development of a single new ethic and ontology, and that they demonstrate an element of naïveté in their constrained approach and inability to incorporate different ontologies in the search for an inclusive ethic or collection of ethics. Although this thesis is not directly concerned with the search for a new environmental ethic, it is necessary to acknowledge at this point that theories are used to structure approaches to issues that will rely to some extent or another on the field of ethics, as it is by the ethical perspective that we codify and modify our behaviour. However, ‘prescribing’ the direction of ethical change across a plurality of cultures is not something that is either defensible in its own right or likely to produce the ecological outcomes that are hoped for. The following chapter is an examination of such theories to identify their collective weaknesses and propose an alternative approach by way of cultural constructivism.

As a background to the more radical approaches examined in this chapter, and as the basis of many traditional approaches to the environment, I initially examine the issues of resourcism, conservationism, and preservationism. I look at the weaknesses of these approaches with reference to the social and the cultural. The impact of these approaches will be demonstrated fully in the case study concerning the United States of America, where conservation and preservation are examined in terms of their cultural and

legislative impact on American wilderness. Conservationism and preservationism are fundamental and historically documented approaches to environmental issues that have had clearly demonstrable impacts on our relationship with and treatment of wilderness areas, and as such are the foundations of modern environmental approaches and need to be examined as a precursor to more contemporary approaches to our relationship with nature and wilderness.

I then move to an examination of the ecocentric, including approaches such as sentientism and biocentrism, and their impact on the contemporary viewpoints on the environment. I furthermore look at these approaches specifically in terms of wilderness, and in terms of the essential inclusion of a cultural element to the study of wilderness.

I progress to an examination of the theory of deep ecology and then to the theory of ecofeminism, using this as a term to initially identify the various feminist approaches to the environmental discourse. I include criticisms of the limitations of these approaches, which have a very strong element of the cultural in their proposals for ecological and societal change, but which I believe focus too strongly on the 'intuitive' aspect of our relationship with nature, a response which, while important in itself, tends to make those responses 'mysterious' and impenetrable rather than ones which can be accounted for both rationally and culturally.

I then focus on the complex field of socialism in relation to environmental approaches. This is an area of complexity as regards definitional work. Merchant (1992) characterises a broad range of theories and movements as being defined under the term of radical ecology, which she identifies as being a branch of social ecology. In this

context she means social ecology as a philosophical development in environmental consciousness. This development has ecology as a starting point, that is, ecology as the development of a science in Europe and North America in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century examining the biotic and abiotic components of the environment. From this standpoint there developed human ecology, that is the addition of the human element in environmental interaction, then environmental history, which added a temporal element to environmental consciousness. Social ecology is identified as the acknowledgement of the role of political and social institutions, with radical ecology as the cutting edge of social ecology, challenging the political and social order, using theories to explain the social causes of environmental problems, and supporting social movements concerned with raising the quality of human life and reducing environmental deterioration. Merchant then however includes social ecology as a theory in its own right, alongside deep ecology and spiritual ecology as one of these radical ecologies (Merchant 1992, 8-11).

I use the subheading of social ecology to examine the approaches suggested by social ecology, eco-socialism, and ecological socialism. Social ecology will be treated as an independent theory and not as a blanket term for a group of theories, and will be examined alongside the similarly socialist-influenced eco-socialism and socialist ecology, as well as eco-feminism, and deep ecology. Merchant separates some of these into theories and movements; movements being those that draw on the ideas and ethics of theories, but which instead advocate direct intervention to resolve ecological conflicts. While there are certainly movements or direct action groups which can be clearly identified as drawing directly on one specific theory, broadly speaking there will not be any such discussion of semantics. Dryzek and Schlosberg also define all the

above mentioned theories as radical ecologies, or 'eco-philosophies that inform the more radical part of the spectrum of ecological politics' (Dryzek & Schlosberg 1998, 349). I resist such characterisation, although it is true that the chosen selection of theories is at the more radical end of the political spectrum. It is however entirely appropriate given the central tenet of this thesis that these more radical approaches are the selected contemporaries of cultural constructivism.

I conclude this chapter with an overview of the criticisms of the approaches and theories described in this chapter, and a justification and explanation for my choice of cultural constructivism as a theory, as a precursor to the subsequent chapter which will examine this chosen theory in detail.

### **Resourcism, Conservation, and Preservation**

Oelschlaeger identifies the need for a coherent wilderness philosophy that will have some relevance to the current political and economic process (Oelschlaeger 1991, 282). He identifies the two broad traditional schools of environmental management that require this coherent wilderness philosophy as resource management or conservationist, and preservationist. He furthermore acknowledges that both of these approaches to wilderness are inherently flawed as they do not fully realise the full extent of the range of cultural, ecological, economic and political needs of society.

Nature management and an approach to wilderness has been dominated by these two schools of thought, and it is the contemporary spectrum of radical wilderness and



ecological philosophies that is a reaction to their limitations. In the case study on the United States to follow, I discuss in detail the conservationist and preservationist movements which developed throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in America, and which drove forward the National Parks policy and played a crucial part in the development of a national approach to wilderness. Essentially the conservationist movement was a resource driven, top-down approach that had at its core the desire to effectively manage wilderness in terms of material resources. Preservationism however was a more grassroots movement that was concerned with the preservation of wilderness as a repository of the American national spirit in its myth of heroism. They each played a crucial role in the legislation required to found the national parks as repositories of resources, and the development of a national identity through the preservation of wilderness.

### ***The resource conservation approach***

From a resource conservation approach the environment is a collection of resources accessible through technology and science. Mechanistic assumptions lie behind ecological research, the end result being that to some extent the outcomes are predetermined, and it therefore seems reasonable to assume that manipulation of the eco-machine is possible and the results predictable. Resourcism has no sense of wilderness as a valid human habitation or ancient home, it has no Romantic sense of human purpose being linked to nature, and it has no sense of any intrinsic worth or value of wilderness. In the theory of resourcism, wilderness and civilisation have a clearly demarcated boundary, and wilderness is valued in economic terms. The concept

of renewable resources exemplifies the deeply anthropocentric core of resourcism, as if forests can be termed renewable resources because the trees alone can be replanted.

Such a belief in the renewable nature of resources is a simplistic approach to ecological realities and one that does not begin to acknowledge the ecological complexities of nature or of wilderness. The loss of biodiversity may be as a result of a resource-based approach to the environment, but resourcism is still fundamental to our understanding of our relationship with nature. As such, and as an approach towards our relationship with nature, resourcism and the resulting movement of conservationism is largely responsible for our existing environmental problems.

Similarly, resourcism does not begin to address the complexities of culture and the varied and complex relationships between human activity and the natural world. Resourcism in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has grown beyond the efficient use of non-renewable resources to include environmental quality and the wilderness experience as a resource, particularly in the United States. The focus on the resource of wilderness to fulfil the recreational and spiritual needs of our western societies is inherently problematic; the focus on one aspect of the myth of wilderness does not acknowledge the complexity in the construction of such myth. The resourcist approach to wilderness experience is narrow in its approach and its focus on the more marketable aspects of wilderness and nature. Consequently, it has a reliance on market mechanisms, but those mechanisms cannot be seen as universally appropriate in the management of the relationship between culture and nature. The meaning and significance of nature in its many diverse forms, across cultures which are similarly extremely diverse both within and between political boundaries, can only be understood

on a case by case basis in which markets and science may, or may not, be an appropriate method of collectively deciding how culture and nature interact with each other.

Resourcism has afforded wilderness at least some protection through the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Without conservation efforts the existence of wilderness in the west today would be markedly different. The restrictions placed upon development by a resource-led conservationist approach have to a great extent protected wilderness areas against exploitation and degradation, particularly throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This does not however mean that this is an appropriate method to continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, when global issues of our relationships with nature cannot be resolved within a single model that in itself cannot accommodate the complexities of nature and culture.

### ***The preservation approach***

The fundamental difference between resourcism and preservationism is holism. Preservationism approaches nature as an ecosystem where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and those parts are not easily divisible or interchangeable. Consequently ecological phenomena cannot be explained in simple mechanistic terms, and they can be irreversibly damaged by human activity. If nature is therefore viewed as an organic system of interrelated parts then the preservationist view of wilderness is fundamentally different from that of resourcism.

So, while preservationism overcomes the limitations of resourceism to the extent that it acknowledges a greater complexity within nature, and hence is more humble in its epistemological orientation towards nature, it is not without its own problems.

Preservationism tends to see nature in general and wilderness in particular as something separate from culture, as something to be preserved independently of other cultural, aesthetic, scientific and economic activities within social systems. As I argued in the previous chapter however, any argument that claims nature and culture can be meaningfully separated is essentially flawed. It is our cultural perceptions which define what we understand as nature and what we regard as worth preserving, and consequently without an understanding of how these perceptions arise and what social forces create them, preservationism, although clearly a valuable tool, cannot be seen as a solution in itself to ecological problems. It is dependent for its success on a cultural recognition that the nature it seeks to preserve is indeed of value. Yet we know that much of our perception of nature is mediated not by an understanding of, for example, biological diversity, but rather through science and technology and their attendant cultural limitations.

It is the application of science and technology, the application of knowledge and the ability to manipulate tools, the ability we have to interact with and to change nature, that is at the basis of much of our relationship with nature and wilderness. It is through such a conduit by which we have arrived at the current situation of environmental crisis and our disenfranchised relationship with nature and wilderness. Such applications and abilities are a result of what Bookchin terms a 'second nature' (Bookchin 1990, 27), i.e. a human relationship with the rest of the world which goes beyond the biological basis

for human life, beyond that which requires reproductive ability and family care. It is a human nature that we create that embodies a cultural tradition, that has complexity of language and elaborate conceptual powers, and that allows us the capacity to restructure our environment. This is the foundation of social factors, factors that condition the use of science, technology and knowledge of the environment.

Preservationism does not recognise the social issues that lead to our cultural interpretations of nature, it does not acknowledge the social factors that cause varied uses and abuses of ecosystems and environments. Yet it is these social forces which generate the need for preservationism in the first place. As such, preservationism takes its social and cultural context as given, a context that is particularly western, and simply works within its existing boundaries. In this sense, preservationism too is a single monolithic approach to an environment, or wilderness, that does not acknowledge the complexity of the cultural bias of the viewer.

When we consider, for example, how many contexts there are in which culture meets nature, it seems implausible that preservationism can provide a way to such a diversity of environments; urban, pasture, arable land, forest, gardens, desert and so on. Furthermore, preservationism assumes an element of stasis in an ecosystem, and does not on a fundamental level appear to acknowledge the non-linear system of change operating therein. To preserve a landscape to the extent that natural forest fires have been inhibited, for example, has been shown in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to be problematic in terms of ecology and the natural regeneration of ecosystems. The notion then that change is inherent in both cultural and natural systems, and in the relations between the two, appears to be missing from the preservationist approach.

The absence of the recognition of the cultural element in the decision making process lying behind preservationism has meant a tendency to treat ecosystems and areas of wilderness in a simplistic and emotive way, and which has leant towards the management of landscapes. In 1832 the painter George Caitlin called for buffalo to be

preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could now see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse... amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes... What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A nation's park, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty! (Coates 1993, 27)

In this respect preservationism is deeply romantic, and as such is incomplete in the absence of either a social context or the recognition of the cultural bias of the viewer. Preservationism, it must be acknowledged, has proved to be extremely practical in that it has led to the relatively benign management of lands that might otherwise have become exploited in terms of resources or development. However, the cultural bias and the social elitism of those historically involved in the preservationist movement have led to a restrictive, limited and ultimately flawed perception of nature and of wilderness. The focus on the right to hunt in wilderness spaces is derived directly from not only part of the myth of wilderness, specifically in the wilderness of the United States, but also from the social structure that has enabled certain people to exercise such rights. The needs of indigenous populations in such designated areas has been overlooked to the extent that certain Amerindian populations have been removed from

designated wilderness areas to perpetuate the myth of an uninhabited wilderness, and to allow certain social activities to be available to certain limited sections of society. Preservationism has been crucially important, along with the conservationist approach, in ensuring that we have as much wilderness as we do remaining in the west today. But these approaches are not inclusive or broad enough to perpetuate their use into the 21<sup>st</sup> century if we wish to acknowledge the complexities of our relationship with nature and wilderness, and the complexities of our responses towards the global ecological crisis.

### **Biocentrism and Ecocentrism**

Although the previous chapter examined the anthropocentric aspect to our historical relationship with nature and with wilderness, and the subsequent cultural complexities we have inherited from such a standpoint, recent responses to wilderness and to ecological problems in the west have increasingly incorporated an element of the ecocentric. As I discussed in the previous chapter in the section regarding anthropocentrism and the Judaeo-Christian tradition, a move away from an anthropocentric viewpoint would necessitate a move towards sentientism (according moral recognition to all creatures with feeling), biocentrism (recognising the moral standing of all living creatures, recognising all other life as valid, and assigning value accordingly and intrinsically), or ecocentrism (regarding ecosystems and the biosphere as having moral significance independent of that of their members, recognising the symbiotic whole of natural systems) (Attfield 1995). This symbiotic whole of natural systems recognised by ecocentrism acknowledges abiotic as well as biotic life, and the protection of a species is inextricably linked to its supporting ecosystem. Ecocentrism

therefore can incorporate biocentrism and some aspects of anthropocentrism, accepting human and biological values, as well as ecosystemic properties and values.

As has been shown, preservationists reject the conservationists' strictly economic view of natural resources, including such measures in value-determination as species diversity, rarity, and aesthetic considerations. Ecocentrism and biocentrism furthermore entirely contradict a conservationist approach, as the focus on the use-value of nature is contrary to the perspective afforded by an ecocentric approach. From an ecocentric or biocentric viewpoint however, the preservationist view also remains anthropocentric, as values are derived from a human perspective, appealing to human utility or a sense of aesthetics. In this sense then, any theory which is ecocentric will reject both conservationism and preservationism largely because they fail to take fully into account the intrinsic value of nature.

The appeal of an ecocentric perspective is that it does not rely upon the concept of human beings as being central to the purpose of nature, or that in terms of ecological development that human beings are more advanced or superior to other species. Ecocentrism allows for intrinsic value to exist within nature and within wilderness independent of humans' experience of nature and wilderness; this value it is argued exists within nature itself.

This recognition of the intrinsic value of nature can include the need to modify human behaviour when it harms or damages the ecological whole, as human needs and desires do not have automatic priority over the needs and rights of other biotic communities. There is clearly an attraction in moving from the instrumental, human-centeredness of



conservationism and preservationism, to more plural value-basis of ecocentrism, given the problems that human-centeredness appear to have created ecologically.

There are however problems inherent in an ecological perspective. The intrinsic values of biotic communities are always measured and judged to some extent from a human point of view, as we cannot assume any perspective other than the human. The idea that there is even such a concept as wilderness is in itself profoundly anthropocentric, as it is a fundamentally human concept mediated by culture.

Natural or evolutionary process led to human nature, and human nature to culture; but culture has paradoxically enabled behaviour that impairs the integrity of nature. Thus no return to nature seems possible without contravening human nature and the reality of the past ten thousand years of history. (Oelschlaeger 1991, 297)

The fundamental problem behind an ecocentric position seems to be the absence of an acknowledgement of the cultural diversity behind the human perspective, and there are multiple cultural perspectives and multiple human languages that codify and modify our experience with nature and wilderness.

As I argued in the previous chapter, humans cannot view wilderness from anything other than a human standpoint. However, if human action is modified and shaped by culture, then that culture allows behaviour and practices that are environmentally damaging. Thus culture would have to be overcome to allow a return to nature and the adoption of behaviours and practices that no longer damage the environment or threaten

wilderness. This however is impossible, as culture defines and shapes our actions and is the conduit by which we interact with nature. Thus an ecocentric position, while laudable and indeed greatly valuable as an approach to wilderness, does not adequately address the issues of culture that shape and inform human interaction with the rest of the biosphere. In short, we cannot overcome our culture, we cannot be anything other than cultural beings. The difficulties with anthropocentrism are not, as ecocentrics suggest, that it gives only a limited human perspective or that it promotes only human values, but rather that there are very particular human values which tend to be culturally absorbed in the west, values of science, instrumentalism, monetary value, exchange and so on. Problems in our relations with nature arise, in part, in the absence of an acknowledgement of the validity of plural views of nature, and not simply because we are humans.

Ironically, ecocentrism tends simply to replace one, albeit problematic, universal view of our relationship with nature, with another, albeit benign, one. The problem with wilderness specifically and its relationship with ecocentrism is in the absolutes that wilderness represents for an ecocentric position. To ascribe intrinsic beauty to a landscape or wilderness area is, paradoxically for an ecocentric approach, to ascribe human values to a non-human system. So when Leopold states that ‘a thing is right when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the biotic community. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.’ (Leopold 1966, 262), and although the definitions of beauty may be varied and wide-ranging, he is demonstrating Hume’s is/ought dichotomy. This confusion of fact and value, however paradoxical in strictly logical terms, does not detract from the fact that ecological standpoints have very valid arguments for the introduction of more holistic land-based ethics into the sphere of

scientific knowledge of the environment. In this sense, it is not possible to say that an ecocentric point of view will always be an inappropriate response to how, for example, humans interact with or define wilderness. Equally, however, it is not possible to say *a priori* that it will be the right way.

The ecocentric approach is one which relies upon intrinsic value and the intrinsic beauty of ecosystems and of wilderness, without necessarily acknowledging that there is a human dimension to all such determinants, and furthermore without acknowledging that there are culturally diverse responses to our environments which shape these determinants.

### ***Deep Ecology***

We can show the above arguments in more detail if we consider the paradigm example of ecocentrism that is deep ecology. Deep ecology is theoretically consistent with ecocentrism, yet goes beyond it by developing a critique of western culture and society. The term deep ecology was first used by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in an article originally published in 1973 entitled *The Shallow and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary* (Naess 1998). Naess offered an ontology based on humanity being an integral part of the ecosystem, inseparable from nature. Followed through to its logical conclusion, this ontology means that to harm nature is to harm ourselves, and its aim is to lead to a new ethic and new forms of practical action. It suggests that without a deep perspective on our relationship with nature there is a split

between nature and culture, and that there is a need to locate culture within nature, to relate human existence to nature in a more profound and implicit manner.

Deep ecology is founded on the beliefs that all life on earth has intrinsic value, that human relationships with the earth presently endanger biodiversity and the rights of other species, and that changes to the economic, cultural and social fabric of human existence are necessary to effect a real change that would reduce the danger to the biosphere posed by human activity. Naess argues that:

A global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature is now encroaching upon all the world's milieux, desecrating living conditions for future generations... An exponentially increasing, and partially or totally irreversible environmental deterioration or devastation perpetuated through firmly established ways of production and consumption and a lack of adequate policies regarding human population increase. (Naess 1989, 23)

This fundamentally scientific and technological relationship with nature is at the basis of the deep ecologist's understanding of the global ecological crisis. The only way to halt the progress of this crisis is to question mankind's *raison d'être*. Naess felt that there were fundamental structural reasons for a change in an ethical interpretation of life. Firstly he proposed a society which strives for value in equilibrium, rather than one that strives at all costs for growth, one where alternative measures of success are valid, not just technological and industrial measures of success.

A society or communities where political change and profound change in economic goals are necessary, and where the opinions of the grassroots of society are essential in formulating and implementing any changes in development. (Naess 1989, 24)

The principle of natural right is that which to a certain extent informs deep ecology and which is twofold: firstly since not all ways of life and practices are equally justifiable their moral status must be measured against a higher standard i.e. nature; and secondly, that nature is orderly, containing patterns or structures that, when rightly understood ought to be applicable to human affairs. Classical natural right as understood by Aristotle is a hierarchical tradition. It views nature as an ensemble of 'natures', where an individual's excellence can only be fulfilled when in the correct position in the ecological hierarchy. Politics, law and ethics are conceptualised as being in unity, and it is hardly surprising therefore that deep ecologists find this tradition to be generally unacceptable. If, according to classical natural right, hierarchical rationality rules, then dominance prevails, leading to an anthropocentric view which deep ecology rejects. Also deep ecologists deny that the political community is the only or the most desirable context for human development. An alternative tradition of natural right however views humans as intelligently managing biologically given instincts, impulses and desires which come from nature, i.e. the system of laws governing the physical world. What seems to be an insurmountable problem within the deep ecology movement is the question of man's place in a properly functioning ecosystem. Scientific ecology teaches that a mature ecosystem, in a climax stage of biological succession, has three salient characteristics: it is in a state of equilibrium or homeostasis where relationships between species exist though numbers may fluctuate as a result of environmental stress;

it is stable, that is for long periods, so not excluding further evolution; and it has diverse flora and fauna, a manifestation of balance and interdependence achieved through a long history of adaptation. The classical view of the human position in this system is a paternalistic viewpoint clearly unacceptable to deep ecologists, who although developing an agenda of practical tangible issues, also retain the philosophical sense of deep ecology. This philosophical sense as understood by Naess refers to the concept of Self-realisation (upper-case S), an attempt to amalgamate our human needs and desires with the sense that all life is one. It is different from self-realisation (lower case s) which leads to egoism:

...every one strives to keep his individuality as apart as possible, wishes to secure the greatest possible fullness of life for himself; but meantime all his efforts result not in attaining fullness of life but self-destruction, for instead of self-realisation he ends by arriving at complete solitude. (Naess 1989, 9)

The concept of a greater Self is the expansion of oneself to include other people, other species, nature itself in fact, and is a concept that is essential to the existence of deep ecology. Deep ecology becomes an intuitive assessment of environmental concerns or problems, rather than one mediated by culture or by society.

However laudable the principles of deep ecology, there are counter-arguments that expose the limitations of such a philosophy. The advocacy of preserving large tracts of wilderness, of indeed withdrawing human habitation from areas to allow regeneration of wilderness can be seen as in itself an ethnocentric concept. There is a social and economic naïveté inherent in deep ecology that does not appear to take into account the fact that

societies' views of nature are culturally constructed, that they are a product of the self-interpretation of a society and as such the assumption of absolute truth is problematic. There is an assumption within deep ecology that certain ethical intuitions will arise in those who practice it, and that certain common truths will emerge concerning how humans might make decisions which are sensitive to the intrinsic value of nature itself. Given the arguments of this chapter and the previous one, such an assumption would seem to be a claim in need of further support.

Other criticisms of deep ecology focus on its predominately western perspective, focusing as it does on industrial societies relationships with nature and wilderness, and mystifying the pre-industrial and pre-modern human societies, perpetuating the myth of the 'noble savage' (Bookchin 1994, 9-10). Bookchin identifies a tendency in the modern era to pit technology against nature, countryside against wilderness, and humanity against the biosphere (Bookchin 1990, 21). This he sees as the tendency of deep ecology to focus on the social symptoms of our relationship with nature, rather than on the social causes of the environmental problems arising therefrom. Here we return to a problem which has been previously discussed. Deep ecology can claim a cultural inheritance but it is selective in the inheritance it chooses and as such creates (as does the dominant western worldview) a series of irreconcilable opposites. This of course is what might be expected from, as ecofeminism argues, a perspective which does not take into account androcentrism. Rather, it focuses on anthropocentrism and does not address the issue of environmental degradation at the hands of, specifically, men, those who historically have created and controlled science and technology and its applications in the natural world. By this androcentric tendency deep ecology repeats the culturally specific mistakes of the views it intends to criticise.

These criticisms find resonance in the work of Guha, who criticises deep ecology from a non-western perspective. Guha (1989) also finds the defining characteristics of deep ecology to be a shift from the anthropocentric to a biocentric perspective, a focus on unspoilt wilderness to the neglect of other environmental issues, and furthermore a characteristic belief in the importance of Eastern spiritual traditions to the development of a new environmental ethic. In common with Bookchin he finds the move to a biocentric approach to have obscured the fundamental issue of social inequality. The issues surrounding over-consumption of the world's resources by western nations are largely issues of political structure and economics, and deep ecology is limited in its acknowledgement of the complexity of the cultural element in patterns of consumption. It does partially acknowledge the cultural, but to the detriment of social and economic issues. In its approach to wilderness, Guha finds deep ecology's perspective to be harmful if applied to less industrialised nations:

Because India is a long settled and densely populated country in which agrarian populations have a finely balanced relationship with nature, the setting aside of wilderness areas has resulted in direct transfer of resources from the poor to the rich. (Guha 1989, 75)

He argues that the setting up of wildlife preserves in India and in African countries is as a result of pressures brought to bear by international agencies such as the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and, in India, the declining feudal elite. This establishment of wilderness areas in such countries does indeed export a western approach and perception of wilderness to other nations, one that does not necessarily take into account the environmental issues concerning indigenous populations, which tend



towards food shortages, water pollution, crop failures due to climate imbalances and soil erosion, and deforestation and land appropriation. As such this international exportation of the concept of wilderness preservation, which is culturally rooted in the conservation history of the west, can be seen to be a form of environmental colonialism. By seeing ecological problems as based in the absence of an independent value in nature, deep ecology provides a solution to a problem without fully identifying the cause. If the cause has something to do with production and consumption patterns, with our cultural views of nature and with social inequalities, simply wishing we viewed nature differently is not a solution. Again, we see that by not addressing the issues surrounding the plural views of nature and culture, such an analysis does not allow for culturally appropriate solutions to ecological problems to be explored.

Deep ecology's tendency to see the spirituality of eastern religions as a way in which to bypass the cultural problems arising from a Judaeo-Christian inheritance appears to be a move which can only have limited scope for success. By appropriating ancient eastern religions and claiming their inherent biocentric approach towards nature, proponents of deep ecology not only claim legitimacy as a universalist philosophy, but also thus construct the illusion of an authentic lineage with its foundations in several of the world's major religions.

Complex and internally differentiated religious traditions – Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism – are lumped together as holding a view of nature believed to be quintessentially biocentric. ... This reading of Eastern traditions is selective and does not bother to differentiate between alternate (and changing) religious and cultural traditions. (Guha 1989, 77)

Apart from the inherent ethnocentrism of characterising different religions and spiritual traditions under the same approach, this also demonstrates a return to the colonisation of eastern nations by emphasising a focus on the spiritual, as if the rational and scientific are the preserve of the west. This perpetuation of the east as 'other', although in this respect in an essentially romantic and positive way, is nevertheless dangerous in its cultural assumptions. Deep ecology tends towards the mystification of the east, of assuming a biocentric approach in such cultures which it can draw upon in its search for a more instinctive relationship with nature (although there has been an active relationship between human societies and nature throughout the east, and 'modern western man has no monopoly on ecological disasters' (Guha 1989, 77)). This perspective applies to other indigenous populations; the Amerindian population of the now United States, indigenous at the time of European settlement, are also regarded as having a fundamentally biocentric and benign relationship with nature which, as will be explored in the case study on America, although essentially true is not a complete view; there is evidence of mass overkill of indigenous animals also to be found in the time before European settlement. Thus the avoidance of the responsibilities of the cultural inheritance of the west by the appropriation of eastern philosophies is an avoidance of the realisation that western cultural suppositions will have to be challenged in the search for a more sustainable and ecologically benign way of life.

Deep ecology is biased very much towards wilderness as a series of ecological realities, yet it nevertheless does not challenge the fact that humans cannot help but be anthropocentric. As such it is difficult to see how it can provide an effective process for personal or political change, or even an adequate theory of our relationship to nature and to wilderness. Wilderness as we understand it in the west has arisen from a uniquely social

and environmental inheritance, and environmental protection cannot be adequately addressed by wilderness protection alone. In this, deep ecology promises more than it can deliver. The foundation of a theory on such limited perspectives that cannot be globally applied means the global aspirations of deep ecology are essentially unachievable.

Deep ecology relies upon an intuitive understanding of the natural world. What is right and what is wrong in nature's terms cannot therefore be learned but requires an interpretative act. However, all interpretation is culturally distorted, and posits the theory of plural rationalities; sets of convictions about the world in which we live which are essentially contradictory and that generate different definitions both of environmental problems and their solutions. Society and its various forms of organisation furthermore inform such rationalities, and effective environmental decision making must take these rationalities into account. Just as we have a plurality of cultures, so we have a plurality of rationalities within those cultures. This obviously has great importance to the argument for cultural constructivism, recognising as it does the importance of multiple levels of experience in the forming of our approach to nature and wilderness, a complexity which deep ecology does not address.

We have seen that within the categories of conservationism and preservationism there are clearly problems in terms of seeing these perspectives as responses which could be seen as universally applicable. Similarly, despite its claims, deep ecology also has its limitations. This does not mean that these approaches to explaining or developing our relationship with nature and wilderness will in all instances be inappropriate. It does however mean that we cannot universally apply these approaches prior to our knowledge of the cultural specifics of any particular ecological and cultural situation.

## **Ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism is another response to the limitations of the western world view that is essentially material, rational and instrumental but one which introduces the concept of gender as that which is missing from much of the analysis of the relationships between humans and nature, and from much of the analysis of the relationships amongst humans.

Ecofeminism is a broad term which can incorporate views which range from simple liberal views of civil and political equality to mystical appreciations of the earth as goddess, as culture imbued with a masculine perspective of nature. Liberal ecofeminism is an approach where environmental problems are seen to be the result of rapid development and regulatory failures, and are best tackled from within existing structures of governance, using new laws and regulations if necessary. Women would be empowered to participate in the governance of the environment, and through education therefore would, as scientists, lawyers and legislators, be in a position to participate fully in environmental conservation. This is clearly an approach which does not fulfil the criteria required by this thesis of pluralism and a more widespread cultural approach. Cultural ecofeminism however can be interpreted as essentially anti-science and anti-technology. Cultural ecofeminism is the strand of the movement that celebrates spirituality and as such is the more visible accessible outspoken aspect of ecofeminism, and the one that is therefore most open to criticism.

The intuitive, anti-rationalist form of ecofeminism is the form with which Bookchin takes issue, and which he brands as ecomysticism along with deep ecology (Bookchin

1994). Bookchin's view of the 1970s as being essentially reactionary, as fostering a withdrawal of human commitment from social concerns to spiritual and mystical ones, is one that he shares with Merchant (1992). Merchant identifies women's culturally constructed experiences as leading to an ethic of care and nurturing, but is aware that this is open to an essentialist critique that women's nature is to care and nurture. She instead advocates the avoidance of gendering nature as mother or goddess, and the avoidance of the ecocentric egalitarianism that equates all life forms as being morally equivalent.

The use of the term ecofeminist is therefore prone to confusion and interpretative problems. What has been identified as liberal ecofeminism and cultural ecofeminism is brought together by Cuomo (1998) under the umbrella term of ecofeminism. That which Merchant identifies as social ecofeminism and socialist ecofeminist, Cuomo would probably recognise, at least in part, as being similar to that which she terms ecological feminism, a sub-set of ecofeminism. This ecological or social feminism, according to Cuomo, takes into account all oppressions, and looks at links and patterns among the treatment of the oppressed, the exploited, and the undervalued, be that human or non-human. She is critical of the characterisation of nature as feminine, and of making women responsible and the only ones capable of saving the earth, as the concepts 'women' and 'nature' are also socially and historically constructed. As socially created concepts these terms refer to highly varied categories of beings and objects, and generalisations can therefore be simplistic and consequently flawed.

If such concepts are historically constructed then the validity of inherited views and opinions must also be questioned. In common with Merchant (1992), Cuomo also

identifies an ecologically-minded feminism as having developed alongside the ecology movement of the 1970s (Cuomo 1998, 23), when links were made between patriarchal mistreatment of women and the mistreatment of nature. If the oppression of women includes oppression based on race, class, sexuality, physical ability, caste, religion, and so on, then all of the forms of oppression are feminist issues. The emphasis of ecological or social feminism is not necessarily on the connection between women and nature, but instead it can be a perspective that can illuminate forms of oppression, exploitation, mistreatment and degradation. Ecological feminism challenges our assumptions of other political perspectives, it has feminist political foundations, and recommends opinions that take into account the intersections between different forms of domination. Ecological feminism is therefore a useful analysis, but by her own admission, it is not the only analysis that Cuomo believes is needed (Cuomo 1998, 37).

Environmental degradation and exploitation are feminist issues because of the effects on women's lives. In this sense the test of ecofeminism is not in the universal applicability of theory, but rather in the particular lives of women themselves. The issue of deforestation in India, as mentioned in the critique of deep ecology, affects women's ability to maintain a subsistence household, and is a direct result of social inequity arising from commercial production. Ecofeminism can escape certain criticisms of deep ecology and the eco-colonialism it is prone to, by virtue of the validity and critical importance of global feminist movements. Hence the Chipko movement, a peasant anti-deforestation movement that started in the Himalayan foothills of India, is characterised by the involvement of the commonly disenfranchised; the peasant community, tribal communities, and women.

Each concept of ecofeminism introduces gender as an issue, but they diverge in consideration of the focus on the purely female in a discussion of environmental domination and ecological problems. The more mystical aspects of ecofeminism can be criticised in their reliance on the cultural to the exclusion of other viewpoints, and that their cultural focus is furthermore one that does not recognise plural rationalities. Ecofeminism does however have a role to play in the spectrum of environmental approaches and theories. Merchant identifies social ecofeminism as based on and building from the social ecology of Bookchin. It accepts the basic tenet of social ecology (that domination of nature is preceded by domination of human by human), and that women are oppressed by social and economic hierarchies. It does not recognise that biological differences should necessarily lead to gender-based hierarchies and hence domination, and accepts that men as well as women are capable of care and nurture. Furthermore, social ecofeminism does not reject deep ecology, rather it brings a social dimension to the political awareness that deep ecology encourages by its recognition of the intrinsic worth of the natural. As such it is heir to the criticisms of deep ecology, but modified in its focus on the social dimension necessary for ecological change.

Broadly speaking therefore, ecofeminism is similar to deep ecology in that it believes that despite the west's cultural belief in the intrinsic progressiveness of science, science in fact serves regressive social tendencies; that the social structure of science, its applications and technologies are essentially racist, sexist, classist and culturally coercive (Harding 1986, 9). This issue of science will be returned to in the consideration of the chosen theory of cultural constructivism in Chapter Three. Salleh identifies ecofeminism however as being essentially different from other theories in the

field of environmental ethics, in that it is concerned with the integration of a social analysis. In this sense ecofeminism is not linear in its approach, it addresses the needs demanded by feminism, including seeking a political voice for women, it seeks to question the patriarchal relationship of man to nature, and it ultimately addresses the 'need for a multilevered and reflexive epistemological stance' in relation to nature (Salleh 1992, 198). Ecofeminism therefore critiques deep ecology, and other forms of environmental ethics, by virtue of the fact that they do not contain a feminist element to their theory, and that by this absence they are limited in their approach to a truly radical politics that would address the inequities of the social agenda alongside the ecological crisis. To do this, all levels of oppression must be considered, sexism, classism, racism and speciesism, in order to deconstruct the conceptual roots of the dominant system and address the social and ecological problems which result from the current framework of social relations.

Unlike the other theories we have considered in this chapter, ecofeminism begins to introduce a more developed sense of the contribution that social conventions, structures and hierarchies may make to cultural views of nature and wilderness. The fact, for example, that nature tends to be viewed as feminine within western culture is testimony to this. It sits comfortably with some of the assertions made in the previous chapter that ecological problems cannot be viewed from outside of a human perspective but takes this further to argue that the problems of both ecology and women are rooted in social and economic hierarchies. A cautious approach is necessary however, as the presumption of both ecofeminism and, as we shall see in the following section, forms of social or socialist ecology, is that the removal of those hierarchies will remove the problems of the relationship between culture and nature through cultural change. This



may be the case, but we cannot assume it will always be the case in all situations. It is simple enough to see that hierarchy and oppression may create exploitation and degradation but less clear that all exploitation and degradation must be a function of hierarchy and oppression.

### **The Socialist Ecological Agenda**

So far it is clear that those theories which have been developed to explain or manage the relationship between humans and nature do not address the diversity of cultural perceptions of nature, and how important that diversity is in proposing any meaningful way of approaching the resultant ecological problems. In this section, the varieties of social or socialist ecology are considered.

Socialist-led ecological theories all recognise the social problems of hierarchy and domination, characterised by a state-dominated and patriarchal society, and have a shared belief that these social problems are at the root of environmental problems. As such, we might expect them to suffer less from the criticisms I levelled at deep ecology, and to a certain extent the spectrum of ecofeminist perspectives, regarding the absence of rationality and a spiritual tendency towards the mystical. However, this does not mean that they are without their own problems.

### *The Marxist background to the socialist ecological agenda*

Marx and Engels asserted that man did not exist apart from and outside of nature, or the non-human aspect of nature, indeed that he was in fact part of nature:

Man lives on nature – means that nature is his body, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is part of nature. (Marx, quoted in Merchant 1992, 137)

However, there is a complexity in the claim that man is part of nature, for by the very process of defining man separately from the non-human, an anthropocentric tendency in such a perspective is inevitable. In terms of Marxist writings, furthermore, there is a fundamental ambiguity in the relationship between man and nature, for to be part of nature, man has to have an interactive relationship with it. Man is not so much part of nature as a natural being, who through work has the capacity to transform himself and non-human nature, work that is a collective, rational and active process (Belsey 1996, 156).

Man can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life. (Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology*, quoted in Belsey 1996, 156)

One strength of this perspective is the realisation that modes of production differ through time and in different societies, and this acknowledgement of the differences of social and cultural conditions and experiences over time is an essential part of a cultural consideration of the western perspective. Just as modes of production differ over time, so industry and technology will affect the way in which our interactive relationship with nature develops, and so contribute to the formation and change of social structure. Hence Marxism's perspective on capitalism's economic and ecological relations leading to both human beings and nature being exploited.

A Marxist critique of capitalism is that it dominates, exploits and is destructive both of human beings and of the environment. This is not so much an ecologically benign perspective, as one which regards the internal failings of capitalism to have contributed to an inability to successfully master nature. Capitalism is a necessary stage in the move away from fetishising nature:

Hence the great civilizing influence of capital; its production of a stage of society in comparison to which all earlier ones appear as mere local developments of humanity as a nature-idolatry. For the first time, nature becomes purely an object for humankind ... it ceases to be recognized as a power for itself ... capital drives beyond national barriers and prejudices as much as beyond nature worship... (Marx, *Grundrisse*, quoted in Lee 1980, 5)

However, overcoming capitalism does not mean an abandonment of this attitude of mastery over nature, ecological problems are a result of ideologies of production, of

waste and exploitation, of the search for profit and fast returns on investments. Instead a Marxist perspective includes effective control and mastery of nature:

In short, the animal merely uses external nature, and brings about changes in it simply by his presence; man by his changes makes it serve his ends, masters it. This is the final, essential distinction between man and other animals, and once again it is labour that brings about this distinction. (Engels, *Dialectics of Nature*, quoted in Belsey 1996, 159)

A closer relationship with nature, an understanding of long-term effects of production, the knowledge that scientific and technological developments will have an impact on our environment, are all part of the Marxist perspective. Although human beings are regarded as being part of nature, the language is rather of human beings as natural creatures who are set aside from the rest of non-human nature by virtue of their consciousness, and who interact with nature through mastery and control. Thus culture is a means to develop production, and so interaction with nature is essentially determined by that means of production.

The central ontological claim of most socialist thinking is that decent egalitarian political and social structures will lead to a decent people and a cultural change to a society that is environmentally friendly and benevolent towards other humans and towards nature. From a cultural constructivist point of view this is far too simplistic; we are in fact the product, as individuals and as societies, of complex and contradictory cultural inputs, and a socialist ecological approach, while it recognises some inputs in

some places at some times, cannot be ontologically inclusive in a way that makes ecological sense.

It is clear from the accounts of the relationship between humans and nature above that Marxism suffers, as have the other theories we have considered, from having a singular perspective of these relationships which, in conjunction with Marx's admiration of capitalism as an efficient method of production, led him to view the 'natural' as the servant of the 'cultural'. For such a perspective to avoid the problems of western liberal capitalism, Marx's emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between humans and nature (one which is similar to the account given in the previous chapter concerning the recursive nature of that relationship) would need to be his central ontological claim, yet this is not the case.

More recent attempts within the Marxist tradition have fared little better. Merchant identifies socialist ecology as a distinct strand of social ecology, one which has been spearheaded by the economist James O'Connor, and which like social ecology is rooted in the Marxist tradition. Instead of the focus on hierarchy and domination it concentrates on 'an economic transition to ecological socialism, initiated by green social movements' (Merchant 1992, 146). It is not so different from the social ecology of Bookchin in that it incorporates the concept of the social construction of nature, but it also puts forward the theory of the autonomy of nature, as well as criticising state socialism and existing socialist systems for both contributing to and failing to address the ecological crisis.

Traditional Marxist thought teaches that the dialectic between the forces of production and the relations of production lead to economic breakdown and the breakdown of capitalism.

O'Connor expands this dialectic to that between production and the environmental conditions of production. The eco-economic crisis forced by this breakdown will initiate the transition to ecological socialism. Capitalism will create its own limits to growth by resource depletion and pollution, through destructive agriculture and fishing methods, through groundwater, soil and oceanic pollution, and through diminishing yields. Traditional Marxism holds that economic crisis will force social change by a change in the relations of production through social and labour movements. Ecological socialism however believes these movements will be new ecological social movements; green parties and local anti-pollution organisations for example. Ideally capitalism will respond by introducing a more socialist element to policy making, an approach that would focus on more environmental and resource planning and a more transparent decision making process.

Science and technology are not seen as problematic, it is the application of such knowledge and skills that are seen as the problem. Consequently, the difficulties of previous theories remain; although it does not seem unreasonable to argue that economic forces have a cultural effect, nor that these, in turn, are important in defining our relationship with nature, it is another thing altogether to argue that these are all we need to recognise and resolve current ecological problems. Such a perspective could not in itself do justice to the many and varied cultural interpretations of nature or of the various forms of interaction with it. Most importantly, from a cultural constructivist point of view, there is a strong prescriptive element that appears to suggest that the cultural should take priority over the ecological, prior to any consideration of what the particular conditions of that decision might be. The fact that O'Connor includes new social movements in his analysis is important and valuable, but the contradiction

inherent in any 'democratisation' of the relationship between humans and nature is precisely the point that we cannot prescribe the outcomes of such a process, we simply have to live with the process (Saward, 1993).

### ***Social Ecology***

Social ecology, in contrast to socialist ecology, places emphasis on eliminating social injustice through controlled development, collectively overcoming political and economic obstacles to an ecological society, one that could conceivably include capitalism. The anarchism of social ecology Pepper considers to cover a broad range of opinion, from liberal anti-state consumer led movements (which he identifies as 'green' or 'feminist') to anarchist-communism, which he identifies as being propounded by Murray Bookchin, advocating an ecological society based on decentralised socialism. Merchant furthermore makes a distinction between social ecology and socialist ecology, the latter's aim being ecological socialism (Merchant 1992). Each of these distinctions is rooted in the Marxist tradition, and their common ground is that all have identified the need for social as well as ecological solutions to the global environmental crisis, to addressing the apparent contradiction between production and ecology. Social ecology is the primary focus of this section, dealing as it does with the ecological in a central and inclusive sense, rather than as a subset of the transition to socialism.

Murray Bookchin is the leading exponent and intellectual founder of social ecology. He views our interpretations of nature as hierarchical and competitive, of such hierarchy being fundamental to our founding societies based upon the same principles, and that a

reinterpretation of our understanding of nature would make possible a more symbiotic relationship amongst ourselves and with the rest of the natural world. If nature is perceived to operate on the principles of domination and hierarchy then we are more inclined to believe biological determinism leads us to perpetuate these same principles, principles that in turn lead to ecological as well as social problems. Poverty, pollution, inequality, repression, ecosystem destruction all stem from the same premise; that our perception of nature as external, hierarchical and competitive is profoundly flawed. Social ecology, unlike the tendency in socialist ecologies, uses an ecological perspective rather than an environmental perspective. An environmental perspective is one which facilitates the domination of humans over non-human nature, and indeed over other humans. It is a perspective that sees nature as a resource for human existence. Ecology by comparison is based on the premise of interaction. Social ecology not only includes the ecosystem, it also includes the societal elements, the social as well as the organic factors that contribute to a community. Social ecology therefore not only is committed to reversing the trend of domination of humans over nature, but also to removing the trend of social domination.

Bookchin identifies simplistic divisions within our social framework that dominate the ecological argument: technology against nature; countryside against wilderness; humanity against the biosphere. By accepting such clearly delineated lines of argument, Bookchin argues that they 'prevent us examining the highly complex differences and divisions within society so necessary to define our problems and their solutions.' (Bookchin 1990, 22). Society and civilisation conceal vast differences in the constructions of humanity, and social ecology seeks to avoid such dualism and reductionism. Social ecology therefore acknowledges that we are culturally the result of social history, that we carry with us beliefs, habits, sentiment, attitudes, and that there is an evolutionary element to the



development of our culture. In this sense, Bookchin agrees with the critique of deep ecology that was given by ecofeminism earlier in the chapter and is far closer to the cultural constructivist approach proposed in this thesis than the other theories we have considered so far.

In asking the questions how did a combative relationship between humanity and nature emerge, and what institutions and ideologies made this possible, social ecology does believe in the construction of nature, in the cultural impact of the plurality of our social inheritance. It furthermore extends the question of inequality and oppression beyond economic oppression to include cultural forms of domination: generational, between the sexes, between different ethnic groups, in terms of political and social institutions, and in the way we experience nature and wilderness. In doing so it seeks to move towards radical social reconstruction. Social ecology however states that hierarchy is unavoidable in the natural world, and that it is necessary for the organisation and stability of social life (Bookchin 1990, 45). To extrapolate this to consider the place of humans within nature is to stray into the arena of rights in respect of human behaviour towards other species, and in this tends towards the hard anthropocentric perspective of Marxism (rather than the perspectival anthropocentrism I am proposing):

Until society can be reclaimed by an undivided humanity that will use its collective wisdom, cultural achievements, technological innovations, scientific knowledge, an innate creativity for its own benefit and for that of the natural world, all ecological problems will have their roots in social problems.

(Bookchin 1990, 39)

It seems to be naïve to suggest that in a socially equitable world the patterns of human destruction and environmental degradation would change to such an extent that ecological problems would cease to exist. Patterns of consumption and production undoubtedly have terrible environmentally destructive impacts on the biosphere, yet the social ecology perspective seems to rely upon a fundamental change in the political structure without a concurrent change in cultural attitudes. As I suggested in the previous chapter, to the extent that hierarchies prevent the articulation of competing cultural views and to the extent that this, in turn, promotes a narrow and uni-cultural view of our relationship with nature, then hierarchy is implicated in both the cause and the continuation of an asymmetric relationship between culture and nature. However, it is not clear that social equity of itself would resolve such asymmetries.

Socialist perspectives do recognise the cultural in the formation of social structures, and in this respect they are valuable in the spectrum of theories that this thesis is concerned with, however, they do not acknowledge the continuing and inevitable plurality of viewpoints as regards nature and wilderness, and instead focus on degradation of the environment as it relates to human patterns of consumption and in its resulting impact on human existence. Again, there is the assumption that should structural change be achieved, certain culturally (and hence ecologically) beneficial outcomes would follow. This relies on the further assumption of some form of cultural convergence on the basis of such structural change. There is here, as there was in deep ecology and the Marxist perspective, an assumption not only that we can find a singular cause for ecological problems, but also a single solution which will be acceptable to all once the 'truth' is seen. Of course, the argument here is that, in fact, there is no single truth to be found as such, but a series of truthful experiences mediated through cultural and ecological realities.

Social ecology furthermore regards wilderness specifically as a social issue, of a way in which we alienate ourselves from the natural world or accord it mystical and spiritual qualities which mask the essential social needs of inequity. The definitional problems of wilderness have been addressed in the previous chapter, and to some extent there is justification in expressing the perspective that wilderness has ceased to exist in its purest ecological non-human sense due to global levels of pollution. However, although Bookchin recognises the importance of protecting wilderness, he nevertheless tends to marginalise its importance in the global ecological agenda by negating its validity through the issue of human habitation. If a constructivist approach is taken however, there exists the possibility of the co-existence of human habitation within that which is understood to be wilderness. To suggest otherwise is simply to limit the prescriptions of what wilderness must be irrespective of another's understanding. In this respect social ecology shows a distinct naïveté as regards the complexity of the cultural constructions that influence our relationship with wilderness. I would argue that our culturally constructed perspectives of nature and wilderness lead to a more complex and symbiotic relationship with human beings than can be accounted for in social ecology. The need and desire to dominate, to control, and to destroy are not easily explained by the inequities of political structures or by the inefficient or exploitative modes of production those structures have developed. We are far more complex as cultural animals, and our conceptualising of nature and wilderness is a reflection of this complexity.

Social ecology insists on a transformation of worldviews to ensure environmental stability and an end to the global ecological crisis, but unlike deep ecology its emphasis is homocentric rather than ecocentric. The human element and the economic basis of transformation are seen as central to the ecological health of the planet. Social

processes that work towards the equalisation of the quality of life of peoples globally are seen as central to the transition to environmental sustainability, while the process of constant ecological change is fully recognised.

Bookchin is famously scathing about spiritual approaches to the environment:

To sidestep the social basis of our ecological problems, to obscure it with primitivistic cobwebs spun by self-indulgent mystics and anti-rationalists, is to literally turn back the clock of ecological thinking to an atavistic level of trite sentiment that can be used for utterly reactionary purposes. (Bookchin 1990, 42-3).

Yet this is, perhaps, a core difficulty with all the models we have considered so far. There is no doubt, as Bookchin suggests, that a spiritual approach to the environment is not one which is transferable between cultures, yet it is also true that we cannot exclude spiritual accounts of our relationship with nature either. As I have previously discussed, our western cultural inheritance includes a reverence for nature and a basis in animism, and so our relationship with nature is perfectly capable of embracing such viewpoints and finding them valid and meaningful.

For Eckersley (1989) Bookchin represents just another anthropocentric worldview, one which makes claim to knowledge of ecological systems and our relationship with them which cannot be sustained without a more inclusive, biocentric worldview:

... an ecological ethics must be commensurate with our ecological (and evolutionary) understanding. Our empathy toward other beings should therefore lead us to practice humility in the face of complexity and to acknowledge how little we know of our rapidly changing and crisis ridden world... Bookchin's enticing promise of the widest realm of freedom to all life forms is best delivered not by his own ecological ethics but by a biocentric philosophy. (Eckersley 1989, 116)

This is an important point and one on which to end this section. The work of the previous chapters has suggested Eckersley is correct to claim that our ecological understanding is not as strong as many claim; both resourcism and preservationism clearly display this tendency and both are essentially anthropocentric. She is wrong however to suggest that by virtue of anthropocentrism, ecological understanding is necessarily limited. What limits ecological understanding within social ecology is not its presumption that ecological problems are social problems, but rather its prescriptive sense of what ecological understanding amounts to and how we discover it.

From a cultural constructivist perspective there are many ecological understandings, some more compatible with sustaining ecological systems and their concomitant cultures than others. It is not anthropocentrism *per se* which limits our perception of nature, but rather the totality of the dialogues, discourse, myths and stories of our relationship with nature which are partial, self-interested and unrepresentative.

## **Conclusion**

The theories examined in this chapter are fundamentally ethical, and hence the descriptions of the ecological crisis and its solutions are prescriptive. They either do not acknowledge the full impact of culture on our behaviour and beliefs, as in deep ecology, or they do not accept the limiting effect of culture and believe it can be overcome through social change. A less prescriptive and more inclusive approach is necessary, leading me to use cultural constructivism as an interpretative tool.

The spectrum of theories examined in this chapter do not demonstrate an understanding of how language gives us a sense of how we understand wilderness. Although there are issues arising from definitional aspect of wilderness, for example with social ecology and the assertion that man is part of nature, there is no central fundamental acknowledgement of how different definitions not only come from different cultural inheritances, but also lead to different modes of behaviour. Differences in approaches to wilderness through language enable the justification of plural ethical and political stances towards nature and towards wilderness, and the spectrum of theories in this field do not address the inherent problems of linguistic interpretation.

The view of science and technology varies between the theories as regards ecological problems lying in the incorrect application of such science, as with the socialist agenda, or with the ethics of domination lying behind the development of such science, as with the more eco-centric approaches. Furthermore, the approaches examined do not consider the wide variety of cultures and the multiplicity of influences upon them. Myth and the creation of myth is not an area that is explored in these theories to any

useful extent, except in a mystical reverential way or as a dangerously anthropocentric interpretation of experience in approaches such as deep ecology, and only in the criticism of the mythic as sentimental and trite in terms of social ecology. The theories examined however do concur in their assessment of the mythic element in culture as being atavistic, and I would argue that myth creation and formation is in fact an ongoing and vital process in our cultural construction, and so is therefore of prime importance in the exploration of our response towards nature and wilderness. To relegate myth to the atavistic is to deny its validity in the formation of a modern environmental consciousness, and the understanding of myth is central to the understanding of how we respond to the natural world and its perceived threats.

This is not to say, however, that our cultural inheritance is ignored by the theories considered above, but rather that its consideration is partial. Most ecological theories will, of course, include a critique of the dualism and mechanistic materialism which came from the Enlightenment and most will explore, to a greater or lesser extent, our ethical inheritance. It has, however, been the argument of this thesis from the very beginning that these considerations are necessary but not sufficient in themselves. In addition to these cultural forms we may include symbolic and mythical representations of nature and wilderness which are crucial in our understanding and experience of ecological problems, and which in turn strongly suggest that great care be taken in ascribing views of nature to others or to believing that culturally embedded views of nature can be politically overridden.

The theories in general seldom show how we might decide between competing interests, they often focus on one issue to the exclusion or partial exclusion of others,

for example gender or hierarchy, and furthermore do not adequately describe the relationships between humans and nature in a way that includes the plurality of western culture. They do not describe the human/nature relationship in a distinct or inclusive way, they make assumptions about this relationship which do not acknowledge the validity of plural responses, and they tend towards the prescriptive without recognising the vast array of interpretations and responses that makes our relationship with nature infinitely more complex than the prescriptive can encompass.

Cultural interpretations help us understand nature, and a broad and inclusive approach to the construction of western culture is essential if we are to understand our part in both the creation of and our interpretations of the ecological crisis. Our relationship to wilderness is fundamental; wilderness is by turns primal, mythical, a source of natural and spiritual resources, a source of leisure activity, a variety of biological realities and ecosystems. It is in turn appreciated aesthetically, it is feared, sought after, fiercely protected, eradicated, and increasingly stripped of natural resources. Our attitudes towards wilderness are multiple, various, contradictory and highly complex, and reflect the contradictions and complexities of our cultural inheritance. The theories explored in this chapter each address a part of the issue, explore and examine a part of what constitutes nature and wilderness and our relationship with the non-human natural world, but examining the construction of culture in a broad and inclusive approach that acknowledges the complexity of our historical and linguistic self-definitions will ultimately, I believe, lead to a more thorough and complete view of our relationship with wilderness. This in turn will allow us to develop an approach within the context of western society that can begin to address the urgent and very real needs arising from the global ecological crisis. The chapter following this will examine the theory of cultural



constructivism, demonstrating that as a theory, for the purpose of this thesis, it is the most useful interpretative tool of all the contemporary theories examined here.

## **Chapter Three: Cultural Constructivism**

### **Introduction**

The previous chapter explored the contemporary spectrum of theories with specific reference to those which contained a cultural or social dimension, and as such considered them to be the contemporaries of cultural constructivism. They all contained an ethical perspective, and I concluded that each was too prescriptive because such prescription, while in many ways sensitive to ecological and social needs, tends towards a view of the relationship between culture and nature which will not be able to avoid seeing these relationships as essentially the same wherever they may occur. Yet I have argued that, in fact, such relationships may well be radically different depending upon how specific cultures interact, and have interacted historically with nature. The theories examined as a precursor to the exploration of the framework of cultural constructivism did not take into account the diverse range of cultural influences on our social behaviour, tending to focus on single issues such as hierarchy or gender inequalities. They furthermore all worked from the premise that social change could be affected by overcoming elements of culture, rather than exploring the embedded aspect of such elements. This is an important point to consider, as I have previously argued that assuming that cultural change will follow structural change in a particular, prescribed way, is a weakness of many contemporary theories of ecological politics. It seems sensible instead to accept that cultural orientations towards nature are significant in facilitating the plurality of dispositions towards nature. In this sense, working towards a sense of a greater cultural, social and political plurality is, I have argued, a

more defensible and practical approach, rather than seeking to overcome cultural views of nature.

Cultural constructivism can address the multiplicity of cultural influences; it does not focus on single issues but instead is concerned with a pluralistic approach which furthermore does not seek to overcome cultural elements, an approach that seeks to guide future knowledge with an awareness of the spectrum of cultural diversity. A constructivist element means theories are more likely to be attentive to the ideological foundations and theoretical frameworks that inform social explanations. Constructivism can also locate rationality within a historical and conceptual context, it does not presume that rationality is universal or utilitarian. Because it is being used interpretively, there can be few prescriptions as such. By this I mean that within this framework we cannot begin with a conclusion on how cultures should view nature and wilderness, we can only witness their views. Prescription, though, is difficult to avoid completely. I am aware that by arguing for plurality, that is for the validity of varying views of the culture/nature relationship, there is an element of prescription involved. Equally if, as I suggest later, that giving voice to varying cultural views of nature and wilderness is perhaps the best way to avoid a singular, destructive voice dominating ecological discourse, then there exists here, too, a prescription. My argument, however, is that current theories tend to prescribe 'ends' and it is here that problems primarily arise. Instead, to the extent that prescription exists, I propose that this prescription should tend to be in terms of an inclusive and open 'means' through which varying views of nature (as well as other factors) may be given voice.

Constructivism, broadly speaking, views all our knowledge as constructed; it is contingent on convention, human perception, and social experience (Dougiamas 1998, Golinski 1998, Marsh 2000). While there is a variety of schools of thought concerned with a constructivist approach, the common thread between all forms of constructivism is that they do not focus on an ontological reality, but instead on a constructed reality. In this sense, then, there can be no appeal within such an approach to any universal understanding of nature or any one sense of what the solutions to ecological problems might be.

The issue of myth was approached by the theories as an atavistic component of cultural inheritance; furthermore, for the more eco-centric range of the spectrum, the arena of the mythic is a profoundly anthropomorphic response to experience, and as such is an entirely inappropriate means of rendering knowledge. The symbolic construction of nature however is not confined to pre-modern societies (Eder 1996, 29), and I intend to approach myth as an ongoing and current perspective in the examination of cultural development, showing through the case studies that it is a present and powerful aspect to our cultural inheritance. The primacy of myth will be emphasised in the case studies following this chapter. I wish to make clear that by the mythic I do not refer to a simplistic fairy story, I instead interpret myth as a constructed reality, a form of codifying and interpreting experience. Bearing this in mind, cultural constructivism can encompass the variety of human experience that has shaped, and continues to shape in an ongoing and dynamic process, our pluralistic and complex cultural inheritance.

Our relationship with nature and wilderness from a western perspective has been and continues to be, in part at least, rapacious and destructive, as well as having the

potential to be both benign and symbiotic. There exists a plurality of outlooks and beliefs not only between different cultures but also within each culture. In the west there is evidence of perspectives which demonstrate both an aggressive dominion of and a more sympathetic sensibility towards nature. European and western cultural history therefore is in itself not a universal ethic, it is more an evolution of different ethics which are cultural responses to specific social conditions and developments (Eder 1996, 163). A framework that allows an examination of the diversity of cultural perspectives on nature is essential if a pluralistic viewpoint is to be approached, and a pluralistic approach is necessary to avoid prescriptive decision making that does not address the wider needs of humanity and of nature, however those needs are interpreted or perceived. By developing a more pluralistic cultural perspective, those needs can be more fully addressed in terms of social validity and ecological sustainability. Any theory with universalistic aspirations must embrace the plural and accommodate diverse and divergent points of view, agendas, and ethics. Cultural constructivism is the interpretative tool that I choose to use, because a partial valuation and understanding of our relationship with nature and wilderness can not be fully sustainable, or respond comprehensively or inclusively to the needs of the society in question or the issues surrounding the global ecological crisis.

Based on this understanding of the constructed nature of culture, I first look at wilderness as an example of how we have approached nature through cultural construction. I then, with an understanding that wilderness is a constructed concept, move to examine constructivism as a theory or approach. After looking at the historical development of constructivism I then specifically address the fields of cognitive, radical and social constructivism, and the work of Piaget, von Glaserfeld and Vygotsky.

Following the theory of social constructivism, I examine the cultural aspect, approaching nature as it has been encountered by human activity, and as such I look at the essentially scientific sphere of human encounters with nature in the experience of western society.

I have said at various points that the claims of contemporary theories of ecology that the role of science and technology in creating ecological problems will not be disputed and I examine the development of this tradition as both a conduit and a component part of western culture, with reference to the industrial revolution and the development of a modern scientific consciousness. In discussing the development of this modern western consciousness, I refer to the work of Thomas Kuhn and also that of Rachel Carson in opening the field of scientific endeavours to general awareness. This general awareness was specifically in relation to a growing urgency surrounding the issues of environmental degradation and human health.

However, I have also argued that to see cultural views of nature only through the influence of the western ethical tradition and its effects on science and technology is to tell only part of the story of how culture affects our perceptions of nature and wilderness. As a balance to the focus on the scientific approach of western society to nature and wilderness, I address the development of myth and its importance within the modern western canon of thought as regards perceptions of nature and wilderness. Myth and its structure will be more fully dealt with in the context of the case studies, and in the chapter following this will be applied directly to the issues surrounding the development of narratives that contribute to a sense of national identity to the first of the case studies, that of the United States of America. I here however assert that a

cultural constructivist perspective has to include the narrative, the historical, and the mythic alongside the empirical and flawed science of the western model in order more fully to address the complexities of our responses towards nature and wilderness.

I conclude by reasserting my position regarding constructivism, and propose that only by including the social perspective and perspectives regarding other global cultures, alongside the perspectives afforded by other theories such as feminism, can a culturally constructivist framework be reached. I then define my position as regards the central importance of the examination of western cultural construction, and outline the cultural signifiers I chose to examine in the case studies that will demonstrate the complex and contradictory nature of a western cultural response to nature and wilderness.

### **The Construction of Wilderness: Nature and Culture Linked**

The modern western conceptualisation of wilderness is complex; alongside the perception of ecological and biological realities, it incorporates several important symbolic themes which arise in part from a growing dissatisfaction with scientific rationalism. These symbolic themes emphasise the aesthetic view of nature and wilderness in both a visual and a dramatic sense, and this successfully integrates opposing ideas about nature as both a source of spiritual renewal and an arena for activity and challenge. We use wilderness as an arena for sporting endeavours, for exploration and eco-friendly activity holidays, for hunting for sport and for wildlife observation. We recharge our batteries on holiday by escaping from the urban to the wilderness, and hope to find a more elemental and braver version of ourselves through

our interaction with wilderness. These are themes that are displayed in the narrative structure of our stories of human interaction with wilderness, as will be examined in the case studies following this chapter.

Nature, and more specifically wilderness, is therefore not only a source of spiritual renewal, it is also the stage for the dramatic expression of a variety of cultural ideas and identities, representing freedom away from an increasingly dissociated and stressful urban environment. Wilderness is thus in part a mystification of the environment, where what was once hostile is integrated into an idealised version of national identity. This is particularly true of nations such as the United States of America and Australia; the sense of national identity being rooted in wilderness in America will be explored in depth in the case study. But in her work with pastoralists and aboriginal cultures in North Queensland in Australia, Veronica Strang (1997) found this sense of national identity to be inherent in those living in wild areas (from a European background as well as from an aboriginal background), as well as urbanites, making for a much more complex development of myth creation with a plurality of influences.<sup>1</sup>

The relationship between humans and nature is essentially dynamic; the symbolic universe of the human mind and the material world constantly interact to develop the cultural being:

It is thus a creative process of integration and adaptation. There is a readily definable set of human biological needs ... for water, food, shelter, safety and reproduction. There are also less easily defined needs and drives – which could be termed psychological needs – for such things as social identity and status,



intimacy with other human beings, self-expression, knowledge and control of the environment. ... the form through which all these needs are met – whether they are biological and/or psychological – is a cultural matter, and cultural forms are an essential part of the adaptive process. ... The human environmental relationship is therefore a complex response to both universal and cultural imperatives, and culture can be seen as both a particular response to an environment and, within that environment, a social construction to which people also respond. (Strang 1997, 171)

Hence the expression of culture is an interactive process with nature, and the formative parts of this process include the material or biological, and the psychological and social. As I said in Chapter One, culture is inextricably linked with nature; we have an understanding of our relationships with nature and wilderness that is mediated through the cultural. In order to explore the construction of western culture in relation to nature and wilderness, it is necessary to examine the approach of constructivism itself so that the approach of cultural constructivism can be defined, thus creating a framework to the case studies.

### **The Development of Constructivism**

Constructivism offers a way of answering fundamental questions regarding the origins of preferences, reasons and interests that inspire actions.

Actors have identities, worldviews and cognitive frames, informed by culture, that shape perception and interests. (Green 2002, 6)

In the view of the constructivist, learning is a constructive process in which the learner is building an internal illustration of knowledge, a personal interpretation of experience (Marsh 2000). This representation is continually open to modification, its structure and linkages forming the basis upon which other knowledge structures are formed. Learning is thus an active process in which knowledge is constructed on the basis of experience. This view of knowledge leaves space for the possible existence of a real world outside of human experience, but all we know of the world are human interpretations of our experience of the world, and this anthropocentric standpoint will shortly be addressed. Constructivism has been said to be post-epistemological, meaning that it is not another epistemology, or a way of knowing. It can not replace objectivism. Rather, constructivism is a way of thinking about knowing.

Meaning is not given to us in our encounters, but it is given by us, constructed by us, each in our own way, according to how our understanding is currently organised. (Duckworth 1987, 112)

"Constructivism" is a relatively new word. The verb "to construct" comes from the Latin *con struere*, which means to arrange or give structure, and ongoing structuring and organizing processes are the conceptual heart of constructivism. Among the earliest recorded proponents of some form of constructivism are Lao Tzu (6th century BC), Buddha (560-477 BC), and the philosopher Heraclitus (540-475 BC). In western cultures, constructivists often trace their intellectual genealogy to Giambattista Vico

(1668-1744), who emphasized the role of fantasy and myth in human adaptation, Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who emphasized the power of patterns in our thinking, Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860), and Hans Vaihinger (1852-1933) (Mahoney 2004).

In 1876 Hans Vaihinger elaborated some of Kant's ideas. In *The Philosophy of "As If"* Vaihinger argued that the primary purpose of mind and mental processes is not to portray or mirror reality, but to serve individuals in their navigations through life circumstances. Vaihinger said that we live our lives by means of "functional fictions." This implies that we all experience reality differently, a theme that was developed by Piaget in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century (Mahoney 2004).

While constructivism has been most commonly associated with the discipline of psychology, it has through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century gained currency in the field of education, as a perspective of learning and cognition that has its origins in the works of Piaget, Vygotsky, Dewey and Bruner. The work done in this field has been fundamental to the development of constructivism as a more widely used concept. Nevertheless, even in this one field it is still not a single clearly delineated concept. Constructivism is a meta-theory which takes different forms, and a broad examination of the differences within the constructivist approach is necessary in order to delineate the cultural constructivist approach more specifically.

Within the field of constructivism there are several distinct strands, and a brief examination of the major approaches can help to clarify the variety of viewpoints within the concept as a whole, and more specifically as they may be related to nature and wilderness.

The principle of cognitive constructivism (or trivial constructivism, according to von Glaserfeld (Dougiamas 1998)) was developed by Jean Piaget, who proposed that knowledge is constructed through three mechanisms; namely, assimilation (fitting in a new experience into an existing mental structure), accommodation (revising an existing representation of the world because of a new experience, when new experiences do not conform to internal expectations); and equilibrium (seeking cognitive stability through assimilation & accommodation). In Piagetian theory there is no objective ontological reality, thus in the modern era we have a break with the epistemological tradition of the western world that states that we must strive to attain a picture of the supposed real world. As the psychology of each individual differs so the knowledge and understanding of each individual differs. This clearly indicates that although we can speak of cultures as distinct entities, we also must be mindful of the diversity of opinion and perceptions within those cultures. This form of constructivism is therefore a tool by which we can recognise and validate individuals' perceptions within a given culture. As this approach suggests that all knowledge exists within the confines of mental structures, it leans towards a hard anthropocentrism which, as I have previously discussed, I have rejected in favour of a perspectival anthropocentrism. Were cognitive, or trivial constructivism to be strictly applied to ecological issues, then the learning process would imply a degree of acceptance of ecological problems arising from, in this example, human activity.

The greater percentage of land being farmed post World War II and through the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Britain, to increase food production, meant the ploughing of uplands with steeper gradients than had previously been so farmed, a change in activity also made possible by developments in farming technology and the increased use of

machinery. This however led to the loss of habitats within these species-rich grasslands, and an increase in soil erosion due to the subsequent rapidity of rainwater runoff and the concurrent leeching of nutrients from the soil. Cognitive constructivism would imply assimilation and accommodation of these changes in ecology and landscape in order to reach a state of equilibrium in the individual. This does not however take into account the cultural forces at work in society which refer to desires, myths and aesthetics, and which ultimately do not allow an equilibrium to be reached in the case of landscape degradation, loss of species and wildlife habitats, and a perceived loss of ecological wellbeing. Although the loss of nutrients from the soil could be counteracted in the short term by the addition of fertilizers, the response to loss of wildlife habitats is not merely an ecological response, but one which is culturally situated in the importance of such species to the national identity of a culture, and the place which these species have in the cultural representations of nature throughout our culture. The growing unacceptability of the loss of species-rich upland grassland is therefore not only an ecological response to loss of biological diversity, it is a response to the loss of butterflies, orchids, wild birds, and the entire food chain that depends upon these habitats, and the subsequent loss of experiences of such wildlife, experiences which were radically changed within a generation in Britain.

Radical constructivism, unlike cognitive or trivial constructivism, does not deny an objective reality, but instead states that we have no way of knowing what that reality might be. Radical constructivism attributes its origins to von Glaserfeld, who proposed that reality is within the individual and knowledge is constructed from individual experience (von Glaserfeld 2005). Mental constructs, constructed from past experience, help to impose order on one's flow of continuing experience. However, when they fail

to work, because of external or internal constraints, thus causing a problem, the constructs change to try and accommodate the new experience. In this respect radical constructivism is akin to cognitive constructivism, and the implications for views of ecology, nature and wilderness are clear; radical constructivism cannot include any significant element of intrinsic value of nature and wilderness. While I support an interpretation of the environment that is one of perspectival anthropocentrism, it is worth noting once more at this juncture that I do not mean by this to comprehensively deny any intrinsic value in nature. I believe that we cannot know intrinsic value, that we cannot determine or measure any such value, and that the perception of intrinsic value is in itself an anthropocentric act. As such, it seems reasonable to argue that while anthropocentrism (which is typically not associated with the intrinsic value of nature) is unavoidable, it would not be reasonable to exclude the possibility that we may culturally ascribe such a value to nature or, indeed, perceive it as existing.

Radical constructivism differs from cognitive constructivism in that it does not deny the existence of an objective reality, however, it does not allow for a relationship with that reality that can accept any other form of rationalisation or action other than a constantly changing set of individual behavioural norms and beliefs. If reality is constructed to such an extent by personal psychology that an objective reality cannot be known, then the theory is incomplete as an approach, for personal psychology is dependant on social and cultural factors. Limiting our understanding of reality to our own psychology does not take into account what binds communities together, that is, shared understandings that are received through social structures and that are culturally embedded.

None of this is to imply that either of these forms of constructivism are in themselves invalid or wrong, but it does mean that the need for a change to our perceptions and behaviour that is demanded by the growing global ecological crisis cannot be addressed by these approaches. The existence of ecosystems as we have studied and understood them shows a temporal aspect that lies outside the lifetime of a human being; it is essential that any relationship with nature and with wilderness is tempered by the knowledge that there are elements that are not knowable or understandable within the span of human life. In parts of India it is common behaviour to discard one's drinking vessel out of the windows of trains, so that the ground alongside train tracks has long been littered with fragments of unfired clay cups. In the modern era polystyrene cups are more commonly used, though behaviour has not modified to adapt to this as there is no fundamental difference in outcome for the human population at present, beyond an aesthetic response (and that arguably predominates in western visitors). The decay of these products however is of ecological concern in terms of pollutants leached over long periods of time into the soil and groundwater, though the rate of decay is one which is so prolonged as to have no immediate affect on the human population at present. An approach has to be considered therefore which not only accepts the possible existence of an objective reality, but which furthermore includes those influences suggested by the multiplicity of social and cultural experiences which contribute to the construction of our beliefs, myths, aesthetic responses, scientific knowledge, and behaviours; the human environment.

Neither cognitive nor radical constructivism addresses the full extent to which the human environment affects learning. Social constructivism however places the importance of the social existence of the individual in a central role in the cognitive

system. Social constructivism has its origins in the theories proposed by the psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who focused on the importance of cultural and social contexts in influencing learning; namely the role of the community, the people around, significant adults, culture and language (Dougiamas 1998). Social constructivism tempers radical constructivism by saying that we construct reality within our own minds *yet in the context of* our social learning environment. Each participant's own landscape of knowledge, beliefs and experience will receive the content differently. Crucial to Vygotsky's writings were his beliefs that higher mental functioning in the individual arises out of social processes, and that human social and psychological processes are fundamentally shaped by cultural tools, or mediational means (Wertsch 1993, introduction ix, to Vygotsky & Luria 1930). These tools are artificial, and can indicate the cultural environment that we use to assist us with our physical functions by technical tools such as means of communication or transportation. Cultural tools can also indicate psychological tools; in common with physical tools these mediate human actions, and they furthermore mediate our ways of thinking. Cultural tools, then, transform human actions from impulsive behaviour aimed directly at a desired object into an instrumental activity mediated by the tool. Tools serve to shift our abilities from a reliance on the elementary functions to the higher psychological functions, from a direct to an indirect, or mediated relationship to the environment. Instead of an immediate interaction with problems posed by the environment, the human mind becomes involved in the indirect relationships mediated by more and more sophisticated systems of symbolic tools. From this stems Vygotsky's view that our higher, mediated psychological abilities have their origins in the social relations between people (Wertsch 1993, introduction to Vygotsky & Luria 1930).



This concept of social constructivism informs the area of cultural constructivism which I believe to be the most useful and appropriate standpoint from which to approach both current theories and the problems of universalism. It is cultural constructivism which more fully explains the plurality of approaches we currently display towards wilderness and towards nature in general. The component parts of our culture, our history, tools and language, are factors that influence our perceptions of the natural world. The case studies will more specifically demonstrate that this cultural inheritance has not only influenced our outlook, but has had a direct and dramatic impact on our relationship with, and treatment of, wilderness and the natural world.

To explore the reasons for human activity it is essential to look at the interface between nature and such activity. Cultural constructivism gives a perspective on our human activity by its inclusive approach and the acknowledgement of the complexity of cultural development.

By adding a cultural perspective to an environmental issue, we can more readily see the divergent influences in action in any given area. To consider the issue of logging in wilder areas in the western nations for example, and the actions of bodies such as Earth First! in the America in particular, we can demonstrate the need to address a wider cultural perspective in order to arrive at a more inclusive understanding. The advocates of direct action against the logging companies, and against the individuals involved in such activity, is justified by those involved in Earth First! by the principles of deep ecology. These actions include spiking trees in order that chainsaws cannot be used, which can result in injury to those using such machinery. While the activists may defend this behaviour on the grounds of the intrinsic values of nature and measuring it against human values (in itself

an anthropocentric approach), those involved in the logging (and prone to such injuries) may be acting out of economic necessity that precludes such sensibilities to a perceived intrinsic value, or may indeed themselves hold a more complex set of responses to nature and to wilderness than might be assumed by the deep ecologists. The economic necessity of their actions would be addressed by the principles surrounding social ecology, which would address the economic need to be involved in rapacious and destructive behaviours towards wilderness, but the fact that individuals are allowed a far more complex set of responses than may be implied by either the deep ecologist or the social ecologist can only be addressed by a consideration of cultural construction.

The interface between human activity and nature is knowledge, belief, interpretations, understanding or, in other words, culture (Milton 1996, 40). Some of this knowledge is constructed and some comes from experience, and diverse experiences lead to diverse perspectives. Essentially culture is about survival, about planning future actions, and about communicating experiences to others. It consists of perceptions and interpretations through which people make sense of experience, and it is a mechanism through which people interact with their environment (Milton 1996, 66). Consequently:

Ideas of nature can never exist outside a cultural context, and the meanings we assign to nature cannot help reflecting that context. ... If we wish to understand the values and motivations that shape our own actions toward the natural world, if we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural. (Cronon 1996, 35-6)

Our relationship with nature has progressively involved the use of scientific and technological innovations, from the first agricultural tools to our current levels of technological interaction with nature, and it is this which has, quite rightly, drawn the attention of the theorists considered in the previous chapter precisely because of its cultural effects. Some of this experience has been generated through fear and the need for survival, and the issues of domination and conquest have, as it has been demonstrated, been an essential part of the canon of western thought and behaviour. Some parties attempt to try to find solutions to ecological problems on the basis of the application of appropriate technologies and a restraint in the use of energy, or a more equitable distribution of natural resources. Others however advocate a change to the consciousness of man, and look to societies and cultures where this consciousness was ingrained as a primary article of faith, where such consciousness led to an evolution of a mythical world which drew attention to ecosystems and inter-relationships (Kapila Vatsyayan, in Baidyanath Saraswati (ed) 1998, viii). This approach was offered by certain theories we considered in the previous chapter, yet their limits are clear when taken in the context of meaning being generated in the interaction of culture with nature. The human intellectual and social world is not constructed on this basis:

...we could not, with conviction, borrow or endorse (or imitate others who endorse) judgements of other cultures unless there were some basis in our existing patterns of moral thought. (Attfield 1983, 224)

In this sense morality is part of the cultural construction of a society, and if our knowledge, beliefs, interpretations and understandings of nature within our society are culturally embedded, then importing (and exporting) aspects of other cultures in the search

for a modification or adaptation of the consciousness is not sustainable, in that it is not rooted in the culture which is attempting to assimilate it. Equally, as we could not borrow from others, then neither can we successfully export a cultural view of nature onto the 'existing patterns of moral thought' of others. Moral thought, broadly speaking, only makes sense within the culture in which it is experienced or generated. This is not to say that cultures do not share moral thoughts, for they clearly do, but such sharing must be established, not assumed. It is only on such a basis that culture as an interpretive tool can be useful, yet without it, without the beliefs and understandings that are integral to culture, there can be no meaningful interpretation of, in our case, ecological events, and certainly no viable solutions.

### **The Essential Scientific Basis of a Culturally Constructed Western Relationship with Nature**

The scientific basis referred to in this study is a broad concept, it encompasses the full range of western science and technology and the material ways in which we interact with nature. Science is the key conduit of the application of our knowledge in western culture, and as such plays a key role in the debate on cultural constructivism. It was demonstrated in both of the previous chapters that the relationship between ecological problems and science and technology is seen by some to be causal. White argued this case very strongly, though he mediated the effects of science and technology through the western ethical tradition as he understood it to be. Marxists, eco-feminists, deep ecologists and social ecologists all have views on the reasons for, and the extent to

which, science and technology are implicated in ecological problems, for example, as was quoted in the previous chapter:

A global culture of a primarily techno-industrial nature is now encroaching upon all the world's milieux, desecrating living conditions for future generations. (Naess 1989, 23)

It would seem necessary, therefore, to give some consideration as to how science and technology may form part of our cultural view of nature.

Knowledge of nature has been an important component in the development of science, and the expression and manipulation of such knowledge can be exercised through the application of technology. Furthermore, technology and science, and the application and uses to which these are put, can have a direct relationship with the quality of life for humans and the rest of the biosphere. We cannot artificially separate science from the human social network that creates and sustains it (Mahoney 2004), consequently, a view of nature which excludes our scientific perspective is not going to be complete.

Science in itself, and separate from its cultural and social context, is an inappropriate filter through which exclusively to perceive and understand nature. By addressing our perceptions of nature separately in terms science we are in danger of neglecting the cultural input that helps us create our scientific 'truths' and in doing so do not allow for changes in perception other than those supported empirically. Such cultural inputs include the economic, those decisions driven by a shared morality (such as principles determining medical research), intellectual curiosity, political will, and so on. They

furthermore include the mythic element to our cultural identity that determines the sort of people we strive to be, and the ambitions and aspirations we exercise through our scientific endeavours. The reductionist principle in western science that has been referred to in previous chapters has a fundamental role to play in limiting the consideration of cultural inputs. The reductionist principle does not allow for an integrated approach to scientific or technological issues, and by following a scientific tradition that neglects the mythic, emotional, and spiritual influences upon cultural mediations, the western scientific model is limited in its avoidance of an holistic approach.

Science, whether by developing modes of transport, manufacturing industry, or technologies of publication, distribution, and communication, is the conduit by which we express the many other cultural signifiers of our complex relationship with nature and wilderness, and is in itself an integral part of such a body of cultural expression. Western science creates a virtue of the purely material and denies any intrinsic mythical element to our understanding of nature. The problem is not so much that science differentiates itself from myth, but rather that it has come to exclude other forms of knowing about nature. This is problematic not only because it leads to reductionist views of natural processes, but also because epistemologically it can lead to both a misplaced faith in scientific knowledge and a sense of science as culturally able to distinguish itself from broader social, political and moral influences; these are positions which are clearly incompatible with the broad thrust of this thesis. Moreover, if underlying such a position is the assertion that science provides a dominant, exclusive means of knowing, then a sense of plurality is lost. As was stated earlier in this chapter, a growing dissatisfaction with rationalism as a means of knowing indicates themes that

are present in our myths of wilderness, in the narrative structure of our stories of human interaction with nature. These themes emphasise alternative means of knowing, of an aesthetic response, or a spiritual response exercised through seeking spiritual renewal in wilderness. A pluralistic approach must therefore include these themes as well as those suggested by science in an exploration of cultural expression.

While it is commonly believed that the dominant western world view emerged from the scientific revolution of the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the industrial revolution of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Sterling, in Engel and Engel 1990, 78), White traces the scientific western tradition to a technological development that began several centuries before. However, although Byzantium and Islam may have produced aesthetically superior and sophisticated cultures by the Middle Ages, it was European industrial developments in terms of labour saving industries that led to a superior technological capacity, a superiority that meant by the 15<sup>th</sup> century global colonisation from a western standpoint was a reality (White 1968).

After Newton the world view became biased towards a mechanistic conception of the universe, a move away from an holistic and an organic interpretation of the world. The science of material things became the predominant science and formed the basis of the only legitimate knowledge of the objective world; this rationalism became the world view that determined the relationship between man and nature in the modern western world (Nasr 1968, 70).

Our understanding of modern science has been that it operates in a sphere that is largely free from political, moral and social values, but when this view is contested we can

demonstrate the basis of a constructivist view of science, and through the application of science then ultimately of our relationship with the natural world.

Not all critiques of science and the applications of science include an element of social critique, and I would suggest that this is their weakness. The Strong Programme of the Edinburgh school that arose in the 1970's hoped to make scientists more receptive to the concerns of social scientists and to sensitise them to the various social and cultural environments in which their work was embedded. However crucially, unlike the constructivists, the Strong Programme accepts the existence of an unproblematic reality that is successfully explored through science (Sardar 2000, 44). The Strong Programme does not acknowledge any social interest in science outside of science itself. There is no sense of larger forces operating on science beyond those that the scientists themselves witness.

However, Harding identifies two competing approaches in the modern era that seek to explain the rise of modern science, the internalist and the externalist. The internalist approach, characterized by logical positivism, assumes an independent history of intellectual structures, the development of knowledge as independent from cultural evolution. The externalist approach seeks reasons for the transformation of knowledge and science in the technical, economic and cultural conditions of society. They are constitutive of the development of logical structures, and developed primarily within the Marxist discourse which saw scientific progress as a response to shifts in the economic base of society (Harding 1986, 209-10).



Both these points of view are incomplete. Harding states quite clearly that the development of science is a social phenomenon (Harding 1986, 211). Human actions are not only governed by the laws concerning physical matter, but also by systems of beliefs, rules and conventions, and the perceptions and goals within cultural systems. But neither can the development of the scientific world view be explained only in terms of the economic, political and technological history of social relations, for these very things create the cultural context (for example, the epistemic context) within which they themselves operate. It is not realistic to assume that we can separate our social phenomena from one another or from the natural world.

Scientific knowledge is a product of socially organised activity, and the results of the use of this knowledge can be social and ecological catastrophe. Baidyanath Saraswati (1998) identifies the problems of modern global civilisation to be the result of scientific and technological developments from a western perspective; from urbanisation and an increasingly technocratic lifestyle, from industrialisation and the resulting environmental pollution, from commercialisation and its resulting consumerism, and lastly from an increasing tendency to globalisation.

Just as we perceive nature as essentially material, so we have also historically viewed nature aesthetically, sentimentally, and spiritually. I will demonstrate however that the western perspective has in the modern era sought to separate these views from one another, and through the development of an understanding of science outside its social and cultural context has arisen the application of such science in a way that has had a catastrophic impact on the global environment.

The freedom of science is based upon a concept of truth, an ideology of truth, that is independent from and superior to philosophy or religion (Ravetz 1979, 19). However, this perception of science was profoundly damaged during the 20th century with the advent of the two World Wars and the counter culture of the 1960s, in which central to the growth of public protest was the perception of an increasingly industrially and militaristically influenced political system. Until this point science was perceived as pure, separate from technology and industry, and in some way therefore above society, the province of the natural philosophers, a paradigm for genuine knowledge. The argument of course still remains that science is of and by itself neutral, but is put to good or bad uses. However, the link between scientific discovery and economic and political input from military sources was evident, and the neutrality of science can no longer be assumed. The concept of an independent scientific drive for the truth was destroyed with the atomic bomb (Ravetz 1979, 38).

It was in this period of political repression of 1950s America that Thomas Kuhn produced his seminal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). He showed that science was problem-solving only within accepted patterns of belief (Sardar 2000, 8). The Cold War atmosphere of 1950s America was a period of extreme political repression and any social aspect to science remained outside the remit of study for academia. Science may have been tainted with politics, particularly militaristic involvement, but was idealistically seen as the neutral objective in the universal pursuit of truth (Sardar 2000, 16). This perspective married with the avoidance of any social input for fear of academic and political repression led to a neglect of the social dimensions to science.

Scientific knowledge is a human creation, made with available material and cultural resources, rather than simply the revelation of a natural order that is pre-given and independent of human action. (Golinski 1998, 6)

This absence of a social dimension can lead to environmental damage and degradation through the belief in the enactment of absolute scientific truths, and it is essential to acknowledge the human role as social actor in the making of scientific knowledge, in order to understand the cultural and social forces at play in the decision making processes that affect our relationship with, and treatment of, nature and wilderness.

Kuhn was writing in an era dominated by the logical positivists, or Harding's internalist approach, developing knowledge independently of cultural evolution. Kuhn argued however that scientists solve puzzles within an established world view, or paradigm, where a paradigm is a way of looking at things, a set of shared beliefs, dogmas, conventions, assumptions and theories. He argued that there are two types of mature physical science, normal and revolutionary. Normal science aims to extend and articulate the paradigm, not test it. The paradigm defines the research tradition and the scientific life of a particular discipline and its practitioners (Nickles 2003, 1). Normal science suppresses anomalies that subvert the existing tradition of scientific practice until they become dominant, heralding a paradigm shift to a new paradigm and hence to revolutionary science. In revolutionary science the problems, standards, vocabularies, and goals of research of the competing paradigms do not match, they are therefore incommensurable, that is they cannot be measured against the same standard. Kuhn has since defined incommensurability as the meaning of scientific terms and concepts changing with the theory in which they are deployed (Kuhn 2000, 34).

Revolutionary science will settle to become the new normal science, and it is this shift from normal to revolutionary to normal science brought about by paradigm change that is at the core of Kuhn's understanding of the constructivist nature of science. Each paradigm may produce a particular work that defines it, Aristotle's *Physics* for example, but the traditional picture of science as a progressive gradual cumulative acquisition of knowledge based on rationally chosen experimental frameworks is no longer valid (Sardar 2000, 27). Just as in biological evolution, you can within the evolution of scientific knowledge trace historical lineages and note historical differences, for example the increasing accuracy of latter day science. But this does not indicate a linear progression towards the truth. Kuhn denied that the history of science tells one linear, continuous, cumulative, unified story, and recognised the importance of the social behaviour of those involved in shaping the scientific tradition. Traditional concepts of truth, rationality, and objectivity in science become untenable when one approaches knowledge from this perspective. Importantly, from our perspective, the truth of science or, more accurately, the assumptions based on singular truths, misrepresents much of our understanding of nature and natural processes. The constructivist approach has at its core the presumption not that there is a singular scientific view of nature which is true or is an accurate reflection of nature itself (though there could be such a thing), but rather that science is only one among many competing views of nature which will have its cultural uses in some contexts but not in others.

The paradigm suggests the kinds of experiments that scientists perform, the questions they ask, and the problems they consider important. A shift in the paradigm alters the fundamental concepts underlying research and inspires new standards of evidence, new

research techniques and new pathways of theory. Like other cultural institutions, the products of science are as much constructed as they are invented or discovered (Nickles 2003, 5). Changes in the social activity of science change the conception of science as the pursuit of truth, and the attention of the general educated public has shifted from the nature of science and its relationship to philosophy and religion, and towards the role of technology based on applied science. The role of industry in science for example has become increasingly apparent.

The consequence of the work of Kuhn and Carson (*Silent Spring* 1962) was a growing belief in the idea that science was a social activity that could lead to ethical problems. Ravetz, writing after Kuhn and Carson, suggested abandoning the truth or falsehood concept of science, and suggested that if science was indeed the product of social process, it should be measured by quality not truth (Sardar 2000, 38). Furthermore, quality in science needs to be based on an awareness of method and culture. Without this there is a tendency for the focus on qualitative measures to have a masculine and western tendency (Sardar 2000, 50). Perspectives outside of the traditional sphere of science need to be included, and this requires an inclusion of the environmental, of social science, and of non-western cultures. Essentially, Ravetz suggested that scientific facts are not 'discovered' but that every fact has a socio-technical history associated with it and is therefore constructed (Sardar 2000, 41). From the work of Kuhn it is clear that what passes for truth or fact at one point in time will not necessarily do so at another. Yet we mediate our understanding of and disposition towards nature very largely through our sense of science as a key to our survival and the means by which we control and dominate wilderness. It is clear, however, that despite the critique of

science here, there are objections to such a critique and it should not be assumed that science is without its defenders. It is to these, briefly, that I turn now.

### **Cultural Constructivism and Postmodernism**

A key text in the field of cultural constructivism is *Higher Superstition: The Academic Left and Its Quarrels with Science* (1994, 1998 2<sup>nd</sup> ed) by Paul Gross and Norman Levitt. This is of significance in the current intellectual and academic struggles between the viewpoint considering certain strands of postmodernism and the assertion that the world exists independently of our perspectives, prejudices, ideologies and languages, and the viewpoint that considers science to be the best way of finding out what the world consists of and understanding the natural world around us. In this book the authors air the grievances of science against the new postmodernist movement in academia, and the cultural constructivism of sociologists among others (Edis & Bix 2003).

A movement that started as a deconstructionist method of literary criticism, postmodernism is now seen as a way of thinking that is proposed by some as an explanatory method for everything, including science. Briefly, postmodernism as viewed by Gross and Levitt proposes that science is nothing more than a cultural construct, and has no more objective validity than any other form of knowledge. The authors maintain that while natural sciences have remained untouched by this movement, it is taking over the social sciences, spurred on by the latter's failures to establish its scientific basis as firmly as the former has done (Gross & Levitt 1998).

The academic left is defined as mainly social scientists who exhibit a 'deep concern with cultural issues, and, in particular, a commitment to the idea that fundamental political change is urgently needed and can be achieved only through revolutionary processes rooted in a wholesale revision of cultural categories' (Gross & Levitt 1998, 3). This means that, rather than using science to inform the political process, the reverse should happen: feminist postmodernism demands 'a complete overthrow of traditional gender categories' (*ibid*, 3), and environmental postmodernism 'envision[s] a transcendence of the values of Western industrial society and the restoration of an imagined prelapsarian harmony to humanity's relations with nature' (*ibid*, 4).

The most commonly used method to effect these views of the world is postmodernism, that is, the view that our ideological system (including science) is under the purview of cultural constructivism and is a product of the culture in which it exists. According to Gross and Levitt postmodernism was first a product of literary criticism and history, but is now widespread in all forms of learning and knowledge. Variants of this view propose that science is really a bourgeois construct, or the product of gender bias, or of a one-sided Western perspective, or of an impulse to objectify nature and alienate man from direct experience of nature.

This text is a good standpoint from where to discuss the various limitations of cultural constructivism in general, not just with specific reference to science. While it is an uncontroversial assertion, as the authors clearly argue, that science is certainly informed by culture in the sense that the projects and questions we ask are motivated by current events and interests, postmodernists are regarded as using the term to mean that 'science is a highly elaborated set of conventions brought forth by one particular

culture' and 'is but one discursive community among the many that now exist and that have existed historically'. This position entails that 'science deludes itself when it asserts a particular privileged position in respect to its ability to 'know' reality' (Gross & Levitt 1998, 45).

The authors are fundamentally opposed to cultural constructivism in so far as it represents a strong postmodernist perspective:

The central ambition of the cultural constructivist program - to explain the deepest and most enduring insights of science as a corollary of social assumptions and ideological agenda - is futile and perverse. The chances are excellent, however, that one can account for the intellectual phenomenon of cultural constructivism *itself* in precisely such terms. (Gross & Levitt 1998, 69)

However, while in common with Gross and Levitt, Kate Soper also identifies a postmodernist perspective as 'culturalist', having arisen alongside an ecological perspective as a result of the ecological crisis, she also acknowledges the boundaries are blurred, for example as regards the tendency of both perspectives to question western models of progress and a belief in a scientific rationality (Soper 1995, 5). The ecological (or 'realist') viewpoint she broadly defines as one which is critical of human use and abuse of the global ecosystem, the postmodernist (or 'culturalist') viewpoint relies on recent theory and cultural criticism to examine the non-human world and its relation to human identity. While acknowledging the impossibility of clear linear ideological positions, Soper nevertheless identifies the realist perspective as 'generally nature-endorsing' and the culturalist perspective as 'generally nature-sceptical' (Soper



1995, 34). The former she views, broadly speaking, as that which places biological limits on human endeavours, providing the measure of liberation or repression of human institutions; whereas the latter proscribe and culturally ordain that which is to 'limit and circumscribe the possibilities of human culture' (Soper 1995, 34).

I would disagree with this criticism of a postmodern or cultural perspective and would suggest it assumes a hard anthropocentric outlook; while it may be true that an anthropocentric viewpoint might be assumed to be used to examine the non-human world, I would also argue that in a milder form it can be used instead to examine our *perceptions* of the non-human, and far from being nature-sceptical can in fact identify the dangers posed to nature by human conceptions and interpretations. A perspectival anthropocentric outlook, as discussed in Chapter One of this thesis, does not deny the usefulness of alternative approaches to the human/nature relationship, as it does not claim a moral or biological superiority of humans over non-human nature, but instead requests a measure of acknowledgement of the cultural filters which human societies employ in their interpretations of and relationships with nature and with wilderness. A cultural constructivist viewpoint that supports perspectival anthropocentrism therefore is one that I believe approaches our relationship with nature and wilderness in a fundamentally responsible manner; it does allow for plural viewpoints to exist, it allows for the social and the cultural to be acknowledged as critical to the formation of our scientific and supposedly objective sense of reality, and it allows for the spiritual and nature-endorsing viewpoints of societies and individuals to be given validity and voice. It is absolutely appropriate to question gender-laden, capitalist assumptions of our society, and it is absolutely appropriate to question the destructive effects of western science and technology on society and the environment (Sardar 2000, 5), as science is

one type of knowledge, not the only knowledge of nature that we understand. But it is also entirely appropriate to examine the cultural basis upon which we have constructed the basis of our behavioural norms and our suppositions and beliefs regarding nature and wilderness. The claim here is not that science cannot do the things it claims it can do, but rather that it is one very useful form of knowledge which, however, is not without its difficulties. One of these difficulties is that it appears to have displaced other ways of knowing nature and has become the dominant form of the cultural mediation of nature. Again, we return to the point that a plurality of views of nature is necessary for a balanced sense of how culture and nature might co-exist. As a counterbalance to the mechanistic and scientific, I will now explore the mythic as a concept that reflects the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of our relationship with nature, the social explanations of our experience of the natural world.

### **Myth and its Importance to Social and Cultural Construction**

Our understanding of our relationship with nature and with wilderness is founded in what we might, from a modern western perspective, term myth and folklore, as is evidenced by our early European cultural inheritance demonstrated in previous chapters by reference to such texts as *Beowulf*. This we would tend to view as atavistic and pre-modern, and not relevant to us in our continuing relationship with wilderness and nature. I would suggest however that myth is a far more relevant term to a modern western society than might otherwise be assumed, that myth is relevant in our interactions with nature and wilderness just as science offers us the conduit by which to enact those relationships, and that myth is part of the construction of our response to

nature, of our perceptions of threat and danger, and of our relationship with wilderness in modern western society. Myth is therefore fundamental to our drive to develop the science and technology that we exercise in our relationship with nature, and an holistic approach that addresses the importance of the mythic element to our cultural interpretations is essential if a pluralistic outlook that accepts the interrelated nature of our social and cultural constructs is to be approached.

In the chapter following this, the case study on the United States of America, I examine the structure of myth in relation to Levi-Strauss' theory of binary opposition, and relate it directly to the issues surrounding the creation of a modern mythic narrative regarding the west, the frontier, and wilderness within the national cultural identity of the United States. Here however I intend to relate it to the theme of Judaeo-Christian culture, insofar as a working definition of myth and the limits proscribed by a broad definition will allow for a more culturally constructed understanding of western culture, and the emergence of a western epistemology that is generally scientific in character.

Myths are generally narratives passed down from a pre-modern era, traditionally intended to explain universal and local beginnings in creation myths and founding myths. Myths are also used in pre-modern societies to explain natural phenomena, inexplicable cultural conventions, and anything else for which no simple explanation presents itself. Myths furthermore are frequently sacred, and often involve a supernatural force or deity. In terms of western culture myth is most often used to specifically refer to ancient tales influencing our culture, such as Greek mythology or Roman mythology, where the fundamentals of the story are untrue but where the story in itself holds meaning for people.

Myth however is also used to refer to other conventions of story telling, such as fables, legends, folklore, and other forms of anecdotal or fictional narrative. The term myth is often used in modern societies in a pejorative sense towards the beliefs of another culture or the beliefs of a religion to imply that a story is fictional and therefore lacks any element of truth or consequent validity. Myths however figure prominently in most religions, and 'myth' does not always imply that a story is either false or true. It is important to bear in mind that while some view myths as merely stories, others may hold them as a central tenet of their religion, and consequently a certain sensibility in the use of the term myth must be exercised. However, others may not regard the tales surrounding the origin and development of religions as literal accounts of events, but instead regard them as figurative representations of their belief systems. Many modern-day more liberal Judaeo-Christian movements for example, may have no problem in viewing their religious texts as containing myth. It is possible to interpret a sacred text as indeed containing religious truths, divinely inspired but delivered by and in the words of men, and so one can refer to a Christian mythology without questioning the central tenets of the faith.

Our understanding of myth is therefore broad, and myth can in the modern era be used to refer to stories that, while they may or may not be strictly factual, reveal fundamental truths and insights about human nature, and which furthermore reflect the time and the culture which saw their development. Such stories can encompass allegory, parable, anecdotes, heroic sagas, the epic, narrative drama and historical accounts.

Myths authorise the cultural institutions of a tribe, a city, or a nation by connecting them with universal truths. Myths justify the current occupation of a territory by a

people for example, and as will be demonstrated in the following chapter the myth of an uninhabited wilderness is one that allowed early European settlers to populate the east coast of the North American continent without regard to the native inhabitants of the region at the time.

All cultures have developed their own myths over time, consisting of narratives of their history, their religions, and their heroes, and there is great power in the symbolic meanings of these stories for their host cultures. It is possible to develop a picture of the mythic narrative of Judaeo-Christian texts, therefore, that allowed for the instruction and regulation of the society that existed at the time(s) of writing through symbolic representations. If, as was discussed in previous chapters, the relationship between a basic agrarian society and nature was fundamentally tenuous, then the symbolic representation of wilderness as areas which needed either dominion or stewardship allowed such a society to regulate the behaviour of individuals. The despoiling of nature would have had dire agricultural impacts and consequent impacts on human society, and therefore mitigation against behaviour that would lead to such despoiling had to be incorporated into the dominant norms and codes of behaviour of the time (Kay 1988).

The development of the mythic in terms of modern representations of historically accurate or fictional events and individuals is further evidence of the importance of the symbolic, in terms of the representation of the cultural ideals of a society and the subsequent enactment of those ideals. The activities of Daniel Boone in 18<sup>th</sup> century America were symbolically manipulated in the publication of his alleged autobiography in 1784, which portrayed him as a frontiersman destined to conquer the wilderness yet

finding beauty in the glories of nature (Nash 1982, 63). Through the subsequent recreation of his character in the character of Natty Bumppo (also called in different books Hawkeye or Leatherstocking) in James Fenimore Cooper's (1789-1851) *The Leatherstocking Tales*, Boone became a figure who championed the existence of a disappearing wilderness. He became, through the works of Cooper, an heroic figure who despises civilisation and prefers the wilderness, though in reality it is suggested that it was to the advancement of civilisation that he was actually dedicated. The development of the mythic hero in order to satisfy the cultural needs of a changing society may be rooted in historical fact, but the creation of the myth is a potent force for the reinforcement of the perceived social and cultural needs prevalent at the time.

This cultural development of the mythic representation of the wilderness, as demonstrated in the case of Daniel Boone, is explored in detail in the subsequent chapter which explores the development of the concept of wilderness in the United States of America since European settlement. It is important to note however, that myth in its broadest definition, myth as is understood by the inclusion of the heroic figure, the enhanced historical narrative, the epic tale, the legend, and the parable, is fundamental to the creation of the cultural being. The culture of a society is reflected in myth and in science, and these two broad areas, encompassing a wide variety of knowledge and interpretation and understanding, furthermore inform one another. Our scientific endeavours are determined and shaped by what we culturally and socially deem to be of importance or relevance. Similarly knowledge from the scientific field of endeavours informs our understanding of the natural world, of our part within it, our ability to manipulate, destroy, or preserve it. Consequently the use of cultural constructivism is one which must encompass all these elements; it need not be strictly

nature-endorsing or nature-sceptical, it is an approach that need not be polarised; in its application it is an approach which must be as inclusive as possible in order to address the cultural plurality of society.

Cultural constructivism is not a cultural examination of nature *per se*, but instead is an examination of our constructed perspective on nature, and therefore must address the plurality of inputs into that construction in order to approach a more comprehensive understanding of our cultural responses to nature and wilderness. Science and myth are not the only inputs into our culture of course, but no account of how humans interact with nature and wilderness can be complete without them. Myth is an area of complexity as regards nature, wilderness and the ecological crisis. Myth can involve the atavistic of course, and as such it is perceived as fanciful and unrealistic in its interpretations of our relationship with nature. But it also indicates the creation of modes of expression that give a sense of moral structure and meaning to our experience, and in its broadest sense myth enables us to construct an understanding of our relationship with, our interaction with, and our behaviour towards nature. As such it is a vital element in a consideration of our behaviour towards nature, as through myth we codify and construct a set of beliefs and structure our knowledge and experience, to give form to our behaviour, and to channel our aims and ambitions as regards our place within the natural world.

## **Conclusion**

To place an understanding of cultural constructivism within the meta-theory of constructivism, I would first of all disagree with the viewpoint that a cultural perspective cannot permit the validity of any form of reality due to all forms of perception being constructed. This echoes back to radical constructivism and its origins in the work of von Glaserfeld, who proposed that all reality exists within the individual and as a result of individual experience. Similarly I would also take issue with the viewpoint that a cultural perspective limits the possibilities of human culture. This I would relate to the notion of cognitive constructivism suggested by Piaget, who suggested that knowledge is constructed through the mechanisms of assimilation, accommodation and equilibrium. This approach would seem to suggest the limitations suggested by Soper. Instead I would advance the notion of social constructivism as founded in the theories of Vygotsky, and would suggest furthermore that cultural constructivism is inherent in this approach; we construct reality in our own minds yet in the context of our social and cultural learning. The examination of the roots of our cultural suppositions regarding the environment is the beginning of a critical evaluation of our relationship to nature.

Cultural constructivism offers a more complete explanation and understanding of our approach to ecological issues and our environment in general, and postmodernism that chooses to inform us of the profound inaccuracies and invalidity of science, or of any sphere of knowledge, has relevancy within the framework of cultural constructivism. Cultural constructivism can offer a way of communicating that will take into account the cultural discourse at the root of all social, political and scientific endeavours, and so



can acknowledge the complexity of the issues and the multiplicity of the solutions necessary in any future attempts to ameliorate the global ecological crisis.

Such an approach takes into account the cultural dimension of a society, and which builds upon the constructivism of Kuhn's approach to science and the approaches of feminism and the increasing challenge to the dominant world view posed by others cultures and other civilizations.

One of the great challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be the protection of minority cultures against the powerful forces of standardisation and integration. These forces – economic, linguistic, technological – tend to dilute, homogenise and regulate cultures throughout the modern world. Yet the survival of small cultures is important ... because imbedded in their traditions and beliefs are social, environmental, political and even spiritual solutions to some of the crises facing contemporary societies. The preservation of cultural diversity – no less than biological diversity – is crucial for the future of mankind. (John V Kingston, prologue to Baidyanath Saraswati (ed)1998, xv)

Here, then, the relationship between culture and nature is seen in a stark way; that the survival of biological diversity is reliant in some at least on the survival of cultures as well. In turn, giving voice to those cultural views of nature is the only approach that can more fully explain our ecological crisis, and therefore more fully address our future relationship with wilderness and nature.

Transformation and restoration can only take place if ... (investigations) lead to a re-orientation of the policies, programmes and institutional structures which ... continue to adhere to an earlier mechanistic view of linear progressive development and the replication of single mono models. Uniformity is not endemic in nature... (Kapila Vatsyayan, foreword to Baidyanath Saraswati (ed)1998, xii)

In the case studies following this chapter I intend to use the cultural signifiers represented largely by artistic endeavours, particularly that of painting, literature and film, as an exploration of the complex, diverse and sometimes contradictory constructions of nature and wilderness that a western perspective understands within the boundaries of culture. Through an examination of the development of modern myths of wilderness arising from our complex constructed cultural inheritance, I will demonstrate that there is a plurality even within the same broadly delineated culture that reflects the complexity of our response to and relationship with nature and wilderness.

Passmore argues against the possibility of a new environmental ethic arising from western civilisation, arguing that 'the emergence of new moral attitudes to nature is bound up ... with the emergence of a more realistic philosophy of nature' (Passmore 1980, 218). I however agree with Hargrove's assessment of this stance and claim that western cultural traditions, including those regarding environmental protection and ecological concern, have in fact arisen from centuries of scientific exploration and aesthetic appreciation of nature and wilderness. The history of the development of a western tradition can be evidence of the need to found a search for an new environmental ethic in the scientific and

aesthetic inheritance of western culture, with all its inherent contradictions and in all its diversity.

The appreciation of nature and wilderness in a western tradition is a complex concept, one in which each word is loaded with supposition and assumption. But while a western tradition can indicate a variety of responses, I would suggest that there is a broad band of identifiable traits that most would concur are contained within the concepts of the west. These are not only inspired by but are also reflected in the various strands of expression our culture provides; in art, literature, urban planning, resource use, political activism, photography, theatre, poetry, garden design, botany, horticulture and landscape design.

It is not simply technology that determines the human impact on the environment, but a combination of technology with economic values, ethical standards, political ideologies, religious conventions, practical knowledge, the assumptions on which all these things are based and the activities that are generated by them. (Milton 1996, 5).

I intend, through the examination of aesthetic representations of nature and wilderness in a western tradition, to demonstrate that a pluralist viewpoint is essential if the debate over the relationship between humans and nature is to lead to a more ecologically healthy existence for the biosphere, and I propose that this pluralism can only be fully expressed through the framework suggested by cultural constructivism within a perspectival anthropocentric approach. Constructivism is part of the process of the development of a more pluralistic approach, and dialogues can only be developed and

be of worth if the emphasis is geared towards connection rather than separation, and an acknowledgement and embracing of the diversity of viewpoints between, and within, cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> 'We'd just go by our dirt tracks or cut through the bush to a creek or something, and we'd take the billy and some sandwiches, and pull up somewhere and have a cuppa and the kids enjoy that sort of thing you know. They really enjoy it. I'd be full on teaching them to look after little things, and not to destroy things. To be kind, not to be cruel' (Diane Denial 1992, quoted in Strang 1997, 131). Strang however identifies the fact that wilderness appreciation of the pastoralists is fundamentally different from that of the aboriginal inhabitants, as there is a pervasive element of separation between economic needs and recreational activities. 'In the end, the pastoralists' use of the land is a response to a range of factors ... they respond to their own historical and technological momentum, the exigencies of the physical environment, the demands of urban Australia and a host of political and social issues ... their economic activities and mode of involvement with the environment are ... an expression of cultural beliefs and values and a response to culturally specific meaning' (Strang 1997, 132).

## **Chapter Four: American Wilderness**

### **Introduction**

I have discussed the issues surrounding the global ecological crisis in relation to the western cultural conceptualisation of nature and wilderness, and claimed that this complex conceptualisation is at the root of our subsequent behaviour towards the environment. I furthermore have claimed that to understand this conceptualisation and to work towards a more pluralistic and comprehensive viewpoint the approach of cultural constructivism should be used, and that this must be tempered with the knowledge of the unavailability of perspectival anthropocentrism. To explore the validity of a cultural constructivist perspective in an examination of the global ecological crisis, I focus specifically on the western viewpoint as regards nature and more specifically wilderness.

As has been previously discussed, the conceptualisation of nature and wilderness that has resulted from the complex cultural inheritance of the west has been largely responsible for the development of a globally exported worldview. This worldview, being western in flavour, is represented by ideas and values that have underpinned behaviour towards nature, and this behaviour has resulted in decision making processes that have contributed to the global ecological crisis. I intend in this chapter to focus specifically on the case of American wilderness i.e. that of the United States of America, and the complex construction of a modern conception of wilderness arising from the experiences of that country, more specifically as a result of European settlement. In this respect, although I will make reference to the inhabitants of the American continent prior to European

settlement (peoples I refer to as Amerindians, after Arnold 1996), the time span suggested by this examination is predominantly concerned with the last 400 years.

America and the construction of a relationship with wilderness within America has been chosen as a focus of study for several reasons. Firstly the United States of America is a powerful global force politically, economically and also culturally. The concept of wilderness and the image of the frontier has been globally exported and has been a fundamental factor in influencing the construction of a modern western conception of wilderness. As will be shown, it is the modern response to locate wilderness within designated areas, such as national parks, that has led to the trait of locating wilderness globally within similarly defined areas. America has generally sought to define wilderness in terms of large-scale tracts of land with little or no human habitation. To this end, the creation of national parks and designated wilderness areas in the United States has resulted in the displacement of indigenous populations, building as it has upon the myth of an uninhabited wilderness at the time of First Contact. This tendency to identify and define wilderness as such is unworkable in a global sense, where indigenous populations cannot and similarly should not be displaced in order to satisfy the definitional needs of the global worldview, and it furthermore places the responsibility of wilderness survival on similarly scaled tracts of land with low density of human populations. The influence America has had in a global sense on wilderness definition and appreciation, and in fact on all aspects of the global economy, cannot be underestimated, and an examination of the American response to nature and to wilderness is essential if an understanding of the world-dominant western perspective is to be reached.

Furthermore, the relationship between humans and nature has been at the forefront of the

construction of the American sense of national identity and the creation of related myth and symbolism.

The cult of wilderness – its origins and history, its philosophies and programs, its impact on landscapes and its implications for mankind – should receive thorough scrutiny. The way Americans feel about wild nature is intimately bound up ... with this country's special history. (Lowenthal in Nash 1972, 55)

Although I have emphasised throughout this thesis that the human/nature relationship has been the basis of our social construction, the study of America is particularly significant given the rapidity of European settlement which led to a consistent and involved relationship with wilderness. This relationship was of crucial importance at the boundary of modern human habitation that was the frontier. As such the formation of the cultural identity of America has been articulated in such a way as to emphasise the central role of wilderness in that formation, and is therefore an extremely clear example of the central role that nature and wilderness have had in the construction of a western cultural perspective.

Just as with wilderness, so the concepts of 'The West' and 'The Frontier' are central to the human/nature relationship in America. The physical realities suggested by the challenges of settlement, and the myths arising from these realities, have informed a modern perspective through the complex construction of the developing culture of a modern America. This construction is reflected in the expressions that our western culture provides, and in this chapter I approach cultural expression from aesthetic representations, more specifically literature, painting, photography and film, particularly the western. I

intend to show, from an examination of the wealth of the cultural representations found in these expressions, that a diverse range of influences have given rise to a complex conception of nature and wilderness in the modern era. To this end I will first look at the complexities of myth formation with specific reference to the modern history of America. By demonstrating that there is a complexity to the construction of this myth I will show that there is a complexity to our relationship with nature that is informed by such myth. This leads me to conclude that there is a pluralistic content to our cultural construction which informs our response to nature and wilderness.

Myth makes everyday actions and concerns bearable through the reinforcing power of entertainment. (Wright 1975, 7)

As an examination of the construction of the mythic that has found expression in the aesthetic forms outlined above, I then address the issue of the formation of the wilderness myth in modern American, by examining the inputs in the early days of European settlement raised by issues of Puritanism, of a European cultural inheritance, and of the physical realities of the frontier experience. This experience finds expression in early American literature, and I look at the influence such texts as *The Leatherstocking Tales* have had in the construction of the myths of the hero, of wilderness and of frontier experience.

One of the most persistent generalizations concerning American life and character is the notion that our society has been shaped by the pull of a vacant continent drawing population westward through the passes of the Alleghenies,



across the Mississippi Valley, over the high plains and mountains of the Far West to the Pacific Coast. (Smith 1950, 3)

The experience of the frontier is of central importance in the cultural construction of a modern American perspective on national and individual identity, and this is further explored in the representations and mythic creation of a frontier relationship with wilderness through the sections concerning firstly the painting of the American West, through the impact of photography, and finally the role of the western in a cinematic tradition. These various representations see the development of a modern concept of the frontier and of wilderness, and this modern concept arose as the frontier closed in the early 1890s, and the relationship with wilderness found new expression as Americans sought a cultural identity that was unique and independent of European cultural references.

The plurality of our cultural construction, and the complexity that has arisen from the powerful use of myth and legend in our recent history, can be used to inform different responses to nature and to wilderness. As a conclusion to the chapter I examine the single issue of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, as an example of how the powerful cultural response to myth and the ensuing plurality of cultural construction can give rise to opposing views, and thus inform different actions and decision-making procedures with relation to one specific issue.

I conclude the chapter by asserting that only through a framework that takes into account a plural rationality, and one that allows for the relative validity of different viewpoints, can an understanding of the complexity of the relationship between humans and nature be

reached. A framework of cultural constructivism is essential if the debate regarding the global ecological crisis is to address the complexity of the relationship between humans and nature, and so lead to a more ecologically healthy existence for both the biosphere and human life. Cultural constructivism allows us to understand the plural inputs into myth and the constructed aspect of culture, and thence to an understanding of how each point of view has a measure of validity within its cultural milieu. Only by doing so can we address contrasting perspectives arising from the same culture inheritance and so moderate between them, in order to have a validity in our responses and decision-making as regards the ecosphere and an essential progression towards a sustainable future.

### **The West, the Frontier, and the Role of Myth**

Myth has defined the creation of the national identity of America; this myth is rooted in the concepts of the west and the frontier, and the place of untamed wilderness inherent in these concepts. These concepts are inter-related; the west was defined by the frontier, the meeting place between wilderness and civilisation, it represents space, freedom, individuality and conquest (Rudzitis 1996, 3), and can be variously defined by physical geography, climate and history. The geographical and historical realities of the west have helped the growth and development of the myth, and have led to a narrative tradition that has been expressed through a variety of cultural representations from the early days of European settlement.

To love nature is regarded as uniquely American. “The outdoors lies deep in American tradition” (Outdoor Recreation for America) “It has had immeasurable impact on the Nation’s character and on those who made its history. This is a civilization painfully and only recently carved in conflict with the forces of nature”. (Lowenthal in Nash 1972, 55)

Lowenthal regards this perspective as sentimental and disregarding historical facts, and regards the human place in the American wilderness, rather than wilderness *per se*, to have been a driving force in the construction of an American civilisation. The human relationship with nature and wilderness is however partly dictated by the ecological realities of that wilderness, so while the various European influences that settlers brought to America are crucial in the formation of national characteristics, so are the geographical realities that those settlers encountered. This is consistent with the theory expressed in the introductory chapter of this thesis of a recursive element to the relationship between nature and culture, that the boundaries between nature and culture continually shift, and so inform each other. Culture transforms nature by virtue of the fact that our behaviour physically transforms nature, but nature informs culture, insofar as it helps define our sensibilities and our values.

The physical reality of an ‘unambiguous west’ (Rudzitis 1996, 4) is a vast swath of land running from the northern to the southern boundaries of America, from New Mexico westwards towards California, with the Rocky Mountains at the heart, and the Cascade Range and the Sierra Nevada mountain range stretching from north to south in the east of the region. This is a vast region of mountain ranges, huge rivers, arid lands and wide open spaces, it is dependant on resource extraction for (modern) human habitation, and

it supports a low density of human population. The geographical reality of the west is a landscape of ecosystem, physical and climate extremes, and it is thus defined by its geography. In terms of cultural references, and with these essential aspects of landscape so clearly defining and shaping the concept of the west, other associated areas can also participate in the myth, so Texas for example with its arid expanses and sparse human population, though falling outside the physical boundaries of the 'unambiguous west' may also be physically defined as part of the mythic west. Hence the myth as it develops can include areas that, although they may not fulfil the geographical criteria, can nevertheless fill the physical criteria and find inclusion in the concept. The myth subsequently becomes more than the physical, more than its original specific, and in this case, geographic limitations, and instead develops into a complex structure that is more inclusive and more applicable and significant to a wider audience. So the development of myth can transcend physical boundaries and become representative of characteristics arising from those original experiences.

The European settling of the American West, of this geographically defined region, has become mythical and legendary in terms of the formation of specific American characteristics, defined by high moral character, the formation of a new democracy, and the escape from an old and decadent European civilisation. This period of settlement was in reality an extremely short period of time. The period of the settlement of the eastern frontier lasted 130 years, whereas that of the western region lasted at most 50 years. These 50 years encompassed hugely significant and culturally resonant moments in history; the first wagon trains to Oregon, the California gold rush, the Indian wars which began in 1861, the Homestead Act that was passed in 1862, and the last unoccupied region which was opened to homesteaders in the Okalahoma land rush of

1889. Subsequent to these events the frontier was declared closed as a result of the national census of 1890. The crucial period during which most westerns are set is even shorter, from about 1860 to 1890 (Wright 1975, 5), and this 30 year period has produced a tremendously rich narrative tradition of mythical figures and events. This rich narrative tradition will of course result in a highly complex culture, which in its constituent parts reflects the rapid physical expansion of settlement, and concurrent with this the need to adapt social mores and norms in order to create a cultural existence that would support a wide variety of non-homogenous human societies. It is no surprise, therefore, that alongside powerful economic imperatives and the physical realities of existence, there also rapidly developed a strong tradition of myth and legend in order to frame and codify new experiences and knowledge.

The west affords a source of myth and legend through the experiences engendered by the extreme social turmoil of the period. The westward movement of the frontier, and the wide variety of lifestyles and occupations open to people moving into the region expanding as a result of this movement, is a powerful indicator of the need for a narrative structure that displays clarity in terms of values and conflict resolution. Society became more fluid in terms of social definition, there were new opportunities opening and possibilities to reinvent oneself that did not exist in the rigid class structures of Europe or the eastern seaboard, and so the west and the frontier became a source of myth, where new concepts of social structure and morality could be located.

This interpretation as to the positioning of myth is supported by traditional approaches. Wright identifies the meaning of the western myth as having been dominated by two explanations: as satisfaction of social needs or as satisfaction of psychological needs

(Wright 1975, 8). The satisfaction of social needs is explained by interpreting myth as the resolution of conflict, in this instance this includes examples such as such conflict being between Puritan control of feelings and the legitimisation of violence, between law and morality, and between progress and individual freedom. Wright sees problems in this purely social explanation of a resolution of conflict as an attempt to explain a rich mythic form in terms of a single specific cultural or social dynamic. A psychological interpretation of myth would focus on the myth answering universal and unconscious needs, for example about fears of adulthood and responsibility. A psychological interpretation however does not recognise the fact that myth is also a social phenomenon, and changes in plot structures of the western, for example, cannot therefore be explained by the fact that the meaning of the myth is universal.

The problem with these two approaches is that myth is seen as no more than the resolution of a central underlying conflict, whether social or psychological. Where there are essential and crucial components of myth that are addressed by these two avenues of explanation, there is also another approach which would seem to offer a more complex and complete an explanation, and this would be to approach myth as the search for meaning in experience, and the communication of such meaning. Human beings are social creatures, and we communicate through social structures. To understand myth from this perspective is a more internalised procedure, it requires an understanding of the structure of myth, of its component elements, rather than identifying those component elements with an externally validated conflict. A cognitive approach is one that would seek to understand behaviour through how we organise and communicate our experience, it would incorporate an understanding of the structure of language and semiotic communications, and as such is a component part of the cultural

constructivist approach of this thesis. An examination of the structure of myth is essential if consideration is to be paid to the component parts of that myth and the subsequent cultural inheritance arising from that composition.

### ***Myth creation and binary opposition***

Myth requires structure and content, a structure by which the human mind imposes order, and symbolic content through which formal structure is applied to socially defined experience (Wright 1975, 11). Structurally, the elements of myth are ordered to give meaning to these elements, to the images and actions of the narrative. The content is always socially specific, and a myth therefore relates a story that the members of a society can understand. In this respect, a myth is a story that the individual can relate to as a social and historical being. Human experience is social and cultural, and hence the ordering concepts by which an individual's acts will be reflected in the myths of that person's society.

A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths. (Wright 1975, 16)

Myth is therefore a symbolic strategy that can communicate experience and codify behaviour. The emergence of such a powerful mythic inheritance as the concepts of the west and the frontier is inevitable considering the enormous social and cultural upheaval that this time and place engendered.

Claude Levi-Strauss approached myth as a formal conceptual structure that echoed the structure of the human mind, as the ‘conceptual response to the requirements of human action in a social situation’ (Wright 1975, 17). He did this by demonstrating that the structure of tribal myths is expressed thorough the structure of binary oppositions, and that this binary structure is as result of the human mind imposing such structure on myths.<sup>1</sup> Levi-Strauss derived the concept of binary opposition from linguistics, where the act of naming is to create two spheres of existence, where that which is not named is by virtue of definition the ‘other’. Symbolism therefore creates two worlds, where every symbol creates that which is named and that which is not.

This concept of binary opposition informs the structure of myth, as it creates a simple and powerful way of divining meaning from myth, of creating a symbolically simple means of communicating the underlying message of a narrative. In terms of the mythic west and the mythic frontier, this is demonstrable in the use of the binary opposition of such concepts as good and evil, society and the individual, wilderness and civilisation, and law and morality.

Wright however argues that Levi-Strauss’ explanation that the structure of myth reflects the structure of the mind that creates it does not take into account the fact that myth is about communicating ideas between and within societies (Wright 1975, 20). This approach would take into account the narrative structure of myth, as well as the basis of binary opposition that Levi-Strauss proposes. To consider the narrative structure of a myth is to take into account the diverse social and cultural influences that cause variations within myth, and would also help to explain the change in narrative content and moral messages developing over time as the needs and mores of societies change.



Hence the cinematic tradition of the Western changes in narrative structure as social institutions and attitudes change over time, and therefore the narrative structure and the diversity inherent within any given myth is not constant. An examination of the complexities integral to the narrative structures of myths will be addressed in the sections of this thesis specifically designated to aesthetic representations through painting and film. However, this complexity is not restricted to these forms alone.

These complexities are also approached through historical accounts of actions. Lewis and Clark undertook an exploration of the Missouri River and over the Rocky Mountains to the mouth of the Columbia at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Louisiana Purchase in 1803 sparked interest in expansion to the west coast of the continent. President Jefferson sent Lewis and Clark on what was ostensibly a scientific enterprise, to study the tribes, botany, and geology of the region, but also to search for a Northwest Passage to the Pacific, a commercial route across the continent, an enterprise that was built upon exploration as well as economic and political expansion and control. The Lewis and Clark expedition (1804 to 1806) and the search for a continuous river passage without portage, which would open up the American continent and provide a route to the Pacific, proved to be a failure in an immediate commercial sense. The expedition however made a major contribution to the mapping of the North American continent, observed and described new flora and fauna, and strengthened the U.S. claim to the Oregon Territory. It was of enormous importance in the creation of a national myth, in the conquering of the notion of a continent forever physically divided, and so it was ‘the enactment of a myth that embodied the future’ (Smith 1950, 17). This future included the opening up of America’s west to settlement, the relentless push of the frontier westwards towards the Pacific, and the overcoming of physical hardship

and treacherous climate and land to achieve passage, domination, and control. These have been recurrent themes and debates over environmental issues to date, for example (as will be explored in greater detail towards the end of this chapter) the search for oil in the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge has been consistent with the quest for political strength and has been justified in terms of national security and self-sufficiency

This future, and the myths feeding into the hopes and ambitions of the future, was dominated by the concept of wilderness. Lewis and Clark overcame the physical hardships of wilderness to achieve passage across the continent to the Pacific Ocean, and it is this concept that is fundamental to the concepts of the frontier and of the Wild West. Physical endurance and moral fortitude have therefore become part of the wilderness myth of America, and hence there is a moral dimension to our relationship with wilderness that can be seen to arise in the formation of the wilderness myth from these early days of settlement and exploration. It is therefore appropriate to address this central issue in more depth, in order to more fully understand the driving force behind the conceptualisation of the myths and legends that have been so instrumental in the formation of the American consciousness. After addressing the beginnings of the American myth of the wilderness, through the experiences of the early days of European settlement and a Puritan inheritance, I will then examine the concepts of the west and the frontier that progressed from these beginnings.

## **The Beginnings of the American Wilderness Myth**

The wilderness fallacy based on the perception that the ‘new world’ was pristine when ‘discovered’ by Europeans at First Contact denies the occupation of native peoples, and is integral to the construction of the belief that human intervention, any human intervention, degrades wilderness. Wilderness preservation and the movements that promote it therefore have the dangerous tendency of denying native populations the right to occupy land, more specifically in situations where wilderness is interpreted as requiring a complete absence of human activity. This concept of wilderness is evident in the formation of the National Parks, discussed more fully later in this chapter, and it perhaps is based in part on the popular concept of a discovered pristine wilderness, a concept which is mythical, as the landscape of North America had, at the time of European settlement, been modified and worked by Amerindians for thousands of years.

In reality there have been human inhabitants of the North American continent since descendents of Asian populations crossed the Bering Straits 15000 years ago. Early settlers, the Paleo-Indian, existed from 14000 to 11000 years ago, and were mobile, adaptable and efficient hunters with a preference for open environments with high animal populations. Around 12000 years ago there was a shift towards hunting smaller game and towards plant gathering, and cultivation of crops began around 6000 years ago. This long association with the ecosystems of North America played a sometimes undervalued and a crucial part in the early European settlement of America. The success of frontiersmen, i.e. the early European settlers, depended in part on interaction

with the native inhabitants of the continent, and the use of their customs and expertise in clearing techniques and food preservation.

The other side of the argument to that of pristine American wilderness can be demonstrated by the use of evidence of a Pleistocene overkill, the evidence that Amerindians changed the biotic composition of the continent by hunting to extinction entire species of large mammals. Between 12000 and 10000 years ago, two thirds of the large mammal population of North America disappeared from the fossil record, which would suggest both human intervention and climate/habitat stress as animals moved south, away from the spread of human settlement originating at the Bering Straits (Simmons 1993b, 4). Just as it is dangerous to assume a pristine wilderness and deny the validity of the existence of native cultures, so one must also guard against the improper use of the theory of Pleistocene overkill. If this deterministic argument is used to justify recent and current environmentally destructive attitudes, by maintaining that each ethnic group has broadly similar characteristics and attitudes towards nature, as supposedly evidenced by the overkill concept, then this has the effect of responsibility avoidance. In this sense, there is nothing in the approach taken in this thesis which suggests that culture will have inevitable results upon nature, this would, indeed, be deterministic. Rather the suggestion is that while culture will clearly make some dispositions more likely than others, nevertheless, where choice exists, so does responsibility.

The overkill theory furthermore can be used to assert a linear superiority, which is ethnocentric and genetically suspect. This is not to deny the evidence of Pleistocene overkill, though climate and other factors may have contributed to the extinction of

large mammals 12000 years ago, it is not however a reason to insist on an environmentally destructive cultural trait amongst Amerindians, and to therefore extrapolate this to an equally viable and unavoidable cultural impetus in western society. Pleistocene overkill cannot be equated with the current ecological crisis or the cultural background that has led to the crisis. The contribution of the Amerindian population to a modern relationship with nature and wilderness will be explored later in this chapter, when the emergence of a modern concept of environmentalism is examined. However, although the continent when first encountered by European settlers may have shown signs of human habitation and the use and manipulation of nature and other species, these effects were benign in comparison with the rapid development of a rapacious relationship with nature and wilderness that subsequently developed.

### *Early European settlement and Puritan influence*

The arrival of the Puritans in the New World in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century has become a mythical event in the early days of European colonisation. Thanks in some part to the Puritans, American civilisation is obsessed with radical newness, newness as a sign of integrity, a mark of America's special relationship to history, and an assumption of American exceptionalism (Hughes 1997, 21). The European settlers brought with them a general antipathy towards untamed nature. William Bradford reportedly stepped off the Mayflower into what he reported to be a 'hideous and desolate wilderness' (Nash 1982, 23), into the heavily forested east coast. This perspective, alongside the myth of superabundance (the perception of abundance to the point of unlimited resources in the

new world), shaped attitudes towards wilderness and encouraged exploitative attitudes towards nature and wilderness.

The wilderness encountered by the settlers was home to potentially dangerous unknowns; unknown peoples, animals and plants. The scale of the continent was daunting, a vast unknown unmapped continent that was being settled by peoples whose lives had been strictly physically delineated in countries where very often little if any land was left undiscovered. But while these tangible fears may well have been logical responses to wilderness, wilderness also had resonance with the settlers' deep psychological fears. As well as being a threat to survival, wilderness is also a potential moral vacuum. Just as wilderness is feared for the absence of moral structure and lack of civilised society of its native inhabitants, so it also has the potential for undermining the moral fibre of those who have come to live in the wilderness. There was therefore a real and valid fear of wilderness testing the morality of those who settled it, and those who failed the test were feared to revert to animalistic behaviour. There is a perception that the moral structure of individuals and of emergent societies and groups of individuals can be undermined by removal from the society that founded such structures. This lawlessness is not only documented in the early records of settlers, but it has been a dominant theme in American culture ever since. American cinema is full of examples of wilderness driving individuals and societies to lawless, violent and immoral behaviour, yet it has been an emergent theme that there are those individuals who are strong enough to be tested by wilderness and not to be found wanting, and in fact their morality remains intact. The hero in this respect can be created by the interface between European morality and the unique landscape of America.

This positive role of wilderness in the creation of the hero is relatively recent of course. The Puritan concept of wilderness persisted well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century as is evidenced by Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), where the forest represents a moral wilderness. The subjugation of wilderness was a source of pioneer pride, bringing the sensibilities and culture of civilisation into the wilderness; 'the conversion of a wilderness into a desirable residence for man, at least may compensate the want of ancient castles, ruined abbeys and fine pictures.' Timothy Dwight was reported as saying in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (Nash 1982, 42). Yet the move away from Europe, the search for a uniquely American experience of landscape, was a source of national pride from very early settlement days.

Westward movement across the continent may have been instigated by the needs of European colonial expansion, but it could not have been sustained by those needs for long. Colonies had to be near the sea to ensure that the resources of the colony by way of its raw materials were sent back to Europe for consumption and the generation of wealth and power. Similarly the colonials had to consume the products of the Empire, and proximity to lines of communication and shipping were therefore essential if the colony were to be efficient in both production and consumption. To venture too far into the continent would mean that commerce would be removed from the trade routes that ensured the continued usefulness of the colony to the empire. However, the draw of unexplored and resource rich areas of land meant that, initially, exploration and the settlement of the interior of the continent was an inevitability: 'Westward the course of empire takes its way' (Bishop Berkeley in the 1720s in Smith 1970, 8).

With Independence the growth of American nationalism found its basis in the unique physical opportunities afforded by the interior of the North American continent. Settlers organise land and find their place within that land by the use of their culture's organising principles, in European terms this meant the organising of the knowledge of nature through science. The scientific endeavours of natural history shaped the settlers understanding of nature and wilderness, knowledge was organised into a comprehensive European system; scientific expeditions mean the mapping and naming of the continent, climates and geologies were measured, and this in turn affected the search for beauty in landscape (Dunlap 1999, 21).

This search for beauty and fertility in the interior of the continent is a Utopian fantasy (Smith 1950, 11), a search for a cultural worth independent of Europe, based in the uniqueness of the new world, and that uniqueness lay in the physical grandeur and scale of the continent. The frontier therefore became the movement of settlers westwards across the continent, it was expansion in search of wealth and empire, but it also became the foundation for that which was uniquely American.

### ***The Frontier and the West***

The frontier was the physical zone in which European settlers interacted with wilderness, yet it is a term that encompasses more than a physical or geological reality. The cultural inheritance of the concept of the frontier can be seen in the duality of perception that was present throughout the existence of the political and physical frontier. Broadly speaking there are two perceptions of the frontier, one of the frontier



as brutalising, the other as that which fosters courage and self reliance. The former is a particularly city-centric point of view, the frontier slowing economic development in urban centres by drawing away populations and vital human resources from newly established cities; the latter is a view of the frontier as a symbol of movement away from an effete Europe (Short 1991), the subjugation of wilderness a source of pride, the development of self-reliance, and the foundations of democracy emerging from conflict with nature.

The heroic destiny of America was in westward expansion, the movement westwards of the frontier. Gilpin wrote in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century:

The untransacted destiny of the American people is to subdue the continent – to rush over this vast field to the Pacific Ocean ... - to teach old nations a new civilisation – to confirm the destiny of the human race – the carry the career of mankind to its culminating point – to cause a stagnant people to be reborn – to perfect science – to emblazon history with the conquest of peace – to shed a new and resplendent glory upon mankind... (Gilpin, in Smith 1950, 37)

This concept of destiny, which has since been termed Manifest Destiny, is pervasive throughout American culture, and is fundamentally colonial and supremacist in its beliefs (Merchant 2002, 82). Manifest Destiny implies an approval of the subjugation of the continent and its native peoples; this implicit approval is fundamental to the creation of the modern American consciousness as regards the human relationship with and behaviour towards nature and wilderness.

Consistent in the identity of what it means to be an American is the concept of vacant land pulling people westward across the emergent nation. The significance of the frontier to this concept has universal acceptance in the identity of the American nation. The west is an amalgamation of myths and realities, classically the west was America's frontier, the meeting place of wilderness and civilisation, a west located in resource extraction and conquest. The myth of the west and of wilderness has defined the whole of America, not just the geographical west, and not just the geographical frontier. The west has throughout post-settlement history represented freedom, individuality and conquest. The west is therefore located climatically, historically, culturally, and it is also a state of mind (Rudzitis 1996, 3).

In 1893 Frederick Jackson Turner presented a paper<sup>2</sup> to the American Historical Association, noting a bulletin issued by the Superintendent of the Census for 1890.

Up to and including 1890 the country had a frontier of settlement, but at present the unsettled area has been so broken into by isolated bodies of settlement that there can hardly be said to be a frontier line. In the discussion of its extent, its westward movement etc., it can not, therefore, any longer have a place in the census reports.

(Turner 1893, in Durham 1969, 9)

According to Turner, the closure of the frontier represented 'the closing of a great historic moment... the existence of an area of free land, its continuous recession, and the advance of American settlement westward, explain American development' (Arnold 1996, 100). The development of America came from the meeting point

between civilisation and savagery at the frontier, the constant shedding of old ideas and institutions to adapt to the challenge of the wilderness. The frontier is therefore both place and process. It is more than a geographical reality, it signifies a cultural and physical set of forces that enabled frontiersman to transform the wilderness. As the frontier moved westward, so it became 'more and more American... a steady movement away from the influence of Europe, a steady growth of independence on American lines' (Arnold 1996, 102). This American character was not limited to the frontier. Such experiences were retained by places when the frontier had moved on, and their character and those who were raised in them reflected something of this frontier spirit. From the frontier territories came the idea of egalitarianism, of new political institutions; the growth of American nationalism depended on the advancing frontier. The frontier was the stage for many of America's formative episodes and is a historical repository of many of its highest ideals.

The frontier is the line of most rapid and effective Americanization. The wilderness masters the colonist. It finds him a European in dress, industries, tools, modes of travel, and thought. It takes him from the railroad car and puts him in the birch bark canoe. It strips off the garments of civilization and arrays him in the hunting shirt and the moccasin ... In short, at the frontier the environment is at first too strong for the man. He must accept the conditions it furnishes, or perish. (Turner 1893, in Arnold 1996, 101)

Turner is not glorifying the wilderness, he is not celebrating primitivism, he is establishing an American identity based on the concept of a fresh start; by stripping a man of European dress, manners and culture the wilderness becomes a testing ground,

and the subsequent transformation of the wilderness comes from integral qualities of strength and fortitude, not from knowledge or tools that the man has carried from a European culture. Thus the passing of the frontier became a source of regret and concern that that which had formulated American institutions and character might no longer exist, and therefore the search for that which was uniquely American led to the settlers' primary opponent at the frontier; the wilderness.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century the advance of the frontier was as a result of the quest for a passage to India, and hence the source of wealth and empire (Smith 1950, 22). From the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the settlement of the west coast and the subsequent closure of the frontier, there developed a more inward looking concept of empire which found its expression in the development of the interior of America. The change in American attitudes towards wilderness and nature since the closing of the frontier has led in a relatively short space of time to a concept of wilderness appreciation that has located the American character not only in the frontier experience, the conflict between man and wilderness, but also in the wilderness itself. The emergence of an emotional and ideological identification with the landscapes of one's own country was not new of course, but in America there developed a greater sense of landscape as something invented or imagined, imbued with symbolism, something greater and grander than Europe, a source of national pride; vast and primitive and democratic.

The development of a sense of identity based in the American wilderness had emerged before the closing of the frontier in the 1890s. It was artists, writers and scientists who developed an enthusiasm for the aesthetics and sensed the ethical values of wilderness,

while the more prosaic realities of the frontier continued until the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

... wilderness was the basic ingredient of American civilization. From the raw materials of the physical wilderness Americans built a civilization; with the idea or symbol of wilderness they sought to give that civilization identity and meaning. (Nash 1982, xi)

The landscape painters of the Hudson River School (19<sup>th</sup> century painters depicting the Hudson River Valley and surrounding areas), and those working after these artists found the physical wilderness of America to contain a source of national pride and identity, national identity reflected in the work of Thomas Cole (1801-1848), Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), and Frederick Edwin Church (1826-1900). Other art forms at this time also helped shape an identification with nature that helped to fulfil a desire for national identity; novelist James Fenimore Cooper (*Last of the Mohicans*), poet William Cullen Bryant, and of course the works of H.D. Thoreau and Ralph Waldo Emerson. Artists of all types helped define and promote American identity with American wilderness.

### **Early American Literature: the Hero and Wilderness**

Daniel Boone's alleged autobiography in 1784 (mostly written by fellow Kentuckian John Filson) shows a frontiersman who is destined to tame the wilderness, but who yet finds 'astonishing delight' in wild scenery (Nash 1982, 63). This neatly sums up the

dual aspect of the frontiersman that Boone was seen to embody, and furthermore the dual perception of the American wilderness. Boone was a founder of the commonwealth of Kentucky, he was instrumental in denying Amerindian claims to land in Kentucky, and represented the struggle between civilisation and wilderness in his role as empire builder. He also however in the popular mind came to represent a hero who was a fugitive from civilisation (Smith 1970, 54). Thus there still existed a fear and hostility towards wilderness that civilisation was meant to conquer, but there was also the rise of a new type of hero, who may in reality have sought the advance of civilisation but who in popular myth came to represent the frontiersman who fled from civilisation and preferred the woods to the city.

Boone is used as a historically accurate figure by Cooper at several points in *The Leatherstocking Tales*, both using details of his exploits as the basis for fictitious events (the rescue of his daughter and others from the Cherokees providing inspiration for the rescue of Cora Munroe in *The Last of the Mohicans*), and making specific reference to Boone's emigration across the Mississippi in *The Prairie*. Boone became a symbol of freedom, of the frontiersman who lived in wilderness and fled from civilisation. As a popular legend, if not in reality, Daniel Boone thus became an heroic figure of the American wilderness.

James Fenimore Cooper (1789-1851) is considered to be the first major American novelist. He was a prolific writer, publishing dozens of novels, works of non-fiction, a play and numerous pamphlets and articles. His most lasting contributions to American literature were his five books about Natty Bumppo, which were later anthologised as *The Leatherstocking Tales: The Pioneers* (1823), *The Last of the Mohicans* (1826), *The*

*Prairie* (1827), *The Pathfinder* (1840), and *The Deerslayer* (1841). *The Leatherstocking Tales* had an enormous impact in influencing the views of Americans of both the American Indians and the frontier period of American history. Cooper was a major influence in the creation of the romanticised image of the strong, fearless, and resourceful frontiersman (i.e. Natty Bumppo), who lives free and close to nature, as well as the stoic, wise, and noble "red man" (i.e. Chingachgook).

*The Leatherstocking Tales* were not written in chronological order, they were a series of novels about frontier adventures and pioneer life, featuring the frontiersman Natty Bumppo, also called Leatherstocking or Hawkeye, and his Indian companion Chingachgook. In Cooper's novels the wilderness is not a physical or moral wasteland, but is instead imbued with beauty and adventure. The novels mark a distinct association of American identity with nature and wilderness. This identity was drawn from Cooper's own experiences in the American west, and contemporary accounts of expeditions and explorations. The drawing of the Natty Bumppo/Leatherstocking figure from Daniel Boone has already been mentioned, but Cooper had the idea of transporting Leatherstocking to the Far West while he was writing *The Last of the Mohicans*. He had read Major Stephen H. Long's account of his expedition up the Platte River; during the spring of 1826 or earlier he met a young Pawnee chief who became the model for Hard-Heart in *The Prairie*; and from the narrative of the Lewis and Clark expedition he took such names as Mahtoree and Weucha for Sioux chiefs.

The Leatherstocking stories and the other early 'backwoods' novels of Robert Montgomery Byrd, Timothy Flint, and William Gilmore Simms were pre-

eminently American fiction because they bore the stamp of the unique in the American environment. (Nash 1972, 76)

Through the experience of Cooper's Leatherstocking, the wilderness is a source of adventure, of beauty and of moral fortitude. However, while the beauty of the woods is seen as God's work and the wilderness is celebrated, the coming of civilisation is seen as an inevitability. The passing of wilderness is a source of sadness, and yet the coming of civilisation after the passing of the frontier is the destiny of civilised man. Here is the complexity associated with the cultural construction of wilderness; it is a truly unique American experience, it defines the American character through the experience of the frontier, and yet at the same time it is the conquering of wilderness and the advance of civilisation that is also a founding characteristic of American identity. This plural viewpoint that accepts the aesthetic and moral superiority of wilderness, at the same time that American identity is inextricably defined by the subjugation of wilderness, is inherent in the concept of Manifest Destiny, previously outlined, and it is this concept that will be further explored through the work of landscape painters working in America in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Wilderness and the American West in Landscape Art**

The opening up of the American West led to new opportunities in landscape art. The Santa Fe Trail opened in 1821, and the Oregon trail in 1839, opening up new lands for settlers from the east. Artists who travelled the west at this time helped define and promote nature and wilderness. They travelled with surveying expeditions, or as part of



logging and mining communities, and their role was as much to propagate the myth of American wilderness as God's chosen country as it was to document the landscape in a pre-photographic era. The west was documented in this way through painting and sketches, which gave the only graphical representation of the west that was available to the vast majority of the American population. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a time of cultural exploration between man and nature in Europe as well as America, but it became America's national myth, and the act of painting wilderness became an assertion of national identity.

The artists and writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century involved in these movements were not working in isolation, and art forms often informed each other through personal friendships and professional admiration; the painting *Kindred Spirits* (1849) (fig. 1) by Asher Durand, shows the painter Thomas Cole with the poet William Cullen Bryant on a rocky ledge in Kaaterskill Clove. It was painted after Cole's death as a memorial, Bryant having orated at Cole's funeral and having shared his vision of the artist acting as the appointed voice of nature; 'we might dream that the conscious valleys miss his accustomed visits, and that the autumnal glories of the woods are paler because of his departure' (Hughes 1997, 157). Hence there was a unifying aspect of cultural representations of wilderness in this period, a strong sense of collaboration and a single and therefore uncomplicated story to be told. 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism in Europe and America was intertwined with nationalism; national character traits became intertwined with the landscape. America had as its primary landscape an abundance of wilderness, and wilderness was interpreted as the prototype of nature, God's original design.

**Figure 1: *Kindred Spirits* (1849) by Asher Durand**



Thomas Cole (1801-1848) painted the Catskill Mountains and the Hudson River, which actually at the time of his painting was upstate New York and thus was not unexplored wilderness. He is however acknowledged as the spiritual father of wilderness painters, or the Hudson River School; he introduced the debate over natural resources, over the dominion and exploitation of nature and wilderness, and introduced into art the theory of the destruction of nature being related to the destruction of God's creation (Hughes 1997, 146). Hudson River school paintings reflect three themes of America in the 19th

century: discovery, exploration, and settlement. The paintings also depict the American landscape as a pastoral setting, where human beings and nature coexist peacefully.

Hudson River School landscapes are characterized by their realistic and detailed portrayal of nature. Cole's most ambitious work was *The Course of Empire*, a five-painting series charting the rise and fall of a fictitious city along classical lines (fig. 2). It was informed by a growing unease regarding rapid expansionist policies, increasing industrialisation, and the unrestrained growth of cities. The paintings are of one particular landscape, first depicting a state of nature showing early signs of human habitation, then a pastoral state, progressing to dictatorship and extravagant spectacle, then destruction, and finally desolation. The fear present in this series of paintings is of an emergent nation state being destroyed by a moral catastrophe, a warning about dictatorship rising from a newly founded democracy, a reflection on the rise and fall of civilisations. Wilderness ultimately reclaims the landscape, a fitting reflection on the power of nature and the need to respect the wilderness spaces of America.

**Figure 2: *The Course of Empire* (1836) by Thomas Cole (1801-1848)**



*The Savage State*





*The Arcadian or Pastoral State*



*The Consummation*



*Destruction*



*Desolation*

The Hudson River School were therefore part of a shift from 18<sup>th</sup> century rationalism to 19<sup>th</sup> century romanticism. They painted wild nature, sublime in its untamed grandeur, beauty and power.

Cole's successors included Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902), who explored westwards with the frontier to the Rocky Mountains and Sierra Nevada Mountains, and Frederick Edwin Church (1826-1900), perhaps the most notable of the wilderness painters. Church became America's national artist in as much as he was America's favourite artist of any school, not only landscape art, and concerned with the essence of America and his role as an interpreter of the same (Hughes 1997, 162). His painting *Niagara* (1857) (fig. 3) is the definitive oil painting of this subject, and shows heavy editing of any evidence of human population, confronting the viewer instead with the full majesty of God's creation, and bringing to mind Biblical associations of the Flood and God's subsequent covenant with Man (evidenced by a rainbow in the falls). It can be no mistake that Church intended to associate this covenant with America's position as a



new country untainted by the decadence and weight of history borne by European art (Hughes 1997).

**Figure 3: *Niagara* (1857) by Frederick Edwin Church (1826-1900)**



This concept of America being God's chosen country and the absolute right of the European settler found its expression in the concept of Manifest Destiny, previously referred to in this chapter. Manifest Destiny was a declaration of justification for subjugation of the land and its native inhabitants by Anglo-Saxon Americans. It claims an absolute right to possess and conquer the continent, and its myth of redemptive violence was clearly promoted by the landscape art of the time. There was a movement in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century landscape art from classical to Biblical references. Albert Bierstadt (1830-1902) promoted Manifest Destiny perhaps more than any other painter of his age, propagating a dream of conquest, portraying a providential mission into the wilderness. His *Emigrants Crossing the Plains* (1867) depicts a train of covered wagons, leaving behind the bones of dead cattle and moving towards a golden sunset with healthy well-fed stock, and passing as they do so a small settlement of tepees.

Hughes called this ‘one of his most extravagant paeans to Manifest Destiny’ (Hughes 1997, 196). The settlers are obviously the righteous inheritors of the new land, they are welcomed into God’s new nation, their cattle are healthy, implying that nature is conquered with God’s blessing, and death, lean times, and the prior human inhabitants of the land are left behind both physically, and also in terms of a linear timeframe. The future of America belongs to the white settlers, those who are brave enough and morally strong enough to venture beyond the frontier. Bierstadt also painted the Rocky and Sierra Mountain ranges; *View from the Wind River Mountains, Wyoming* (1860) and *The Rocky Mountains, Lander’s Park* (1863) are both sweeping landscapes, idealised and on a grand scale, with the sun streaming through the clouds representing a spiritual element to the grandeur of the landscape.

Painting at the same time was George Catlin (1796-1872), whose *Mouth of the Platte River, 900 miles above St Louis* (1832) for example was painted as a result of an 1832 trip up the Missouri River to the mouth of Yellowstone as a guest of the American Fur Company. His work was more generalized, he worked in the field, painting quickly, and is also notable for his portraits of Amerindians and scenes of their cultural practices. In fact it was Catlin who in the 1830s called for ‘a nation’s park containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature’s beauty’ (Short 1991, 96), prefiguring the development of the National Parks in America. These valuable historical records are evidence of the market for visual documentation of the expansion of the frontier, and this market helped fund the interrelationship between scientists and artists that existed in this period. The Lewis and Clark expedition (1804-1806) was instructed to search for commercial river passage to the Pacific Ocean, and to study the botany, geology, terrain, indigenous tribes, and note the activities and potential for

interference from British and French-Canadian trappers in the region. They noted beauty and ecological interest in their reports and diaries, and produced in their diaries a large body of literature about the West. The combination of fact and value in the work of such scientists and artists was echoed in other art forms that were consumed by the general public, for example in photography post-1860.

### **Photography and the West**

William Henry Jackson's photographs of Yellowstone in 1871 were accepted by Congress as persuasive evidence in favour of preserving the site as a national park in 1872, and Jackson was amongst early photographers who prefigure the work of Ansel Adams in the photography of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Adams (1902-1984) is one of the most important photographers of American wilderness, and is popularly known for his photography of the Sierra Nevada in California (including Yosemite Valley). They are strong black and white images in which the human figure is barely acknowledged, and have been greatly influential to the wilderness movement in America. His work can be seen as a continuation of the line of work of the artists of the Hudson River School, and their influence can even be seen in the composition of his work, as can be seen by a comparison between Cole's *The Oxbow* (fig. 4) and Adams' *The Tetons - Snake River* (fig. 5). In both works the dominance of the landscape is asserted by the grandeur and scale implied by the expansive sweep of the river in the valley below. There is no sense of enclosure in the valley, the vast swath of land that the river cuts through in each work is a reflection of



**Figure 4:** *The Oxbow: the Connecticut River near Northampton* (1836)  
by Thomas Cole (1801-1848)



**Figure 5:** *The Tetons - Snake River: Grand Teton National Park, Wyoming* (1942)  
by Ansel Adams (1902-1984)



the vastness of the American continent. The majesty and scale of the landscape is reflected in the use of scale in the clouds, in each work they are depicted as looming, glowering, with an implication of an impending storm, and furthermore assert the wild and uncontrollable aspect of wilderness as a whole. In both works furthermore, the mountains in the background (though more forbidding, untouched and snow-capped in Adam's work) lend further weight to the assertion of a vast and wild continent.

Other photographers have used wilderness in a different, but perhaps no less reverential way, reflecting the changing attitude towards wilderness throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Henry Wessels Jr's *Untitled* (1971) is of an endless landscape of dry scrub with low hills in the background, the only sign of human habitation is a wooden sign with the word 'ICE' painted on it. Edward Weston's *Quaker State Oil, Arizona* (1941) is once again of desert scrub with evidence of human habitation without the human figure. In this case there is a highway with no cars, but with two road markers evident and an oil advertisement sign in the foreground. The sky in this photograph is glowering and full of heavy clouds, possibly approaching, certainly dominating. In these photographs signs of human habitation are fragile, and are dominated by the landscape. They are decaying, and the threat of wilderness reclaiming the landscape is ever present (Szarkowski 1981). Of course using visual materials as primary source evidence is never simple, consideration of external influencing factors has to be taken into consideration. The interests of the artist, the needs of the subject, the purpose of the publishers, and the desires and responses of the contemporary audience have to be considered.

Laura Gilpin (1916-1979) was a photographer and a contemporary of Ansel Adams', but while Adams photographed a seemingly pristine natural world (even arranging his subject to avoid human references), Gilpin photographed a landscape that was influenced and constantly modified by human settlement. She photographed a vernacular landscape rather than an heroic landscape, and perhaps the gender of the photographer might be evident in this portrayal of the reality of western settlement rather than the perpetuation of an heroic mythology. It is interesting that Gilpin was born and raised in the west, that she perhaps had less desire to romanticise the wilderness than photographers from the east, photographers who might be seen to emulate the work of landscape artists influenced in the previous century by the European aesthetic in their portrayals of the American wilderness.

The heroic mythology expressed in photography, particularly in the work of Adams, helped create the sense of national identity with wilderness. He recorded the power and splendour of wilderness, without any evidence of human action or habitation, thus perpetuating the myth underpinning the concept of Manifest Destiny. Adams began photographing Yosemite National Park in 1916, at the age of 14. He worked as a guide for the Sierra Club's treks through the park, and driven by his desire to protect the landscape he petitioned Congress in 1936 for the creation of a national park in King's River Canyon in California. His photography of snow-capped peaks and vast forests were instrumental in the creation of the Kings River Canyon National Park in 1940, echoing the influence of Jackson in the creation of Yellowstone National Park in 1872.

The importance of the wilderness in this work is fundamental to the cultural construction of a concept of wilderness, and by association to the creation of myth. The

binary opposition of wilderness to civilisation is one which is thus reflected in the cultural constructions of society, as can further be evidenced in the role that film, particularly the western, has played.

### **Wilderness and the Frontier in the Western**

Through the influence and wide reaching impact of the film industry, the western has become part of the cultural language by which America understands itself. The myth is portrayed through the use of cinematic imagery; the wide open skies of landscape painting and Adams' photography. There is the added impact of the use of music, which adds significance and makes images clearer to understand through the clarity made possible with aural indicators. The change in style of the western over the years reflects the change in the conceptual needs of society, and as such is evidence of the cultural construction of our conceptions of wilderness:

... if we are fully to understand and explain specific human actions, we must be able to relate those actions to the social narratives or myths of the society to which the actor belongs. It is at least partly through these myths that he makes sense of his world, and thus the meaning of his actions – both to himself and his society – can only be grasped through a knowledge of the structure and meaning of myth. (Wright 1975, 194)

The western affords us a rich narrative tradition. It is a genre that combines myth and ideology, concerned with the conflict between good and evil at the frontier between

wilderness and civilisation, and is a representation of the making of America. Wright disagrees with Levi-Strauss in arguing that the binary structure of myth does not reflect the structure of the mind, but instead argues that this binary structure creates the symbolic difference necessary for understanding (Wright 1975), allowing the images of myth to signify both general and complex structures and to make them socially available. Myth he identifies as being present in images that are recognisable, as being easily understood, with social relevance, and which reflect basic concerns of their society (Wright 1975, 194). There are several basic oppositions such as good and bad, internal and external to society, but civilisation is not necessarily reflected by society. Society means having roots and responsibilities, whereas civilisation is represented by the tools and products of American culture. Thus the Amerindian is within society, i.e. his own, but outside of civilisation.

In the western the hero is associated with wilderness. All the other characters, good and bad, are associated with civilisation (Wright 1975, 57). Thus in *Shane* (1953) the hero is associated with a pure and noble wilderness, and the east is represented by its contaminated civilisation. The character of Shane, the hero, is dressed in buckskins, identifying him with the wilderness unlike every other character in the film. He has a knowledge of the land and of wildlife not matched by any other character. And the visual identification of Shane with the wilderness is carried through visual imagery in the cinematography: Shane is the only character filmed alone against the mountains; the town and the bad characters are never filmed with the mountains in shot until Shane arrives to kill them, and then the mountains are seen towering over the town. The cinematography is even manipulated to the extent that the same journey taken by Shane, and later by the bad men he must fight, is filmed from different directions so

that only Shane is seen in shot with the mountains. Wilderness is thus associated, through the character of Shane, with strength and goodness.

The polarities of the western are not as simple as good versus evil however, although nature versus culture, the individual versus community, and west versus east might at first seem to indicate a clear division. Community for example also implies social responsibility and democracy, as similarly desirable as the freedom, honour and integrity implied by the concept of the individual. This confusion over the polarities may well represent the social difficulties that were present in an era when the formation of socially cohesive groups from a nation of individuals was presenting conflict and problems.

The western represents the relationship between law and morality, it represents the conflict over the legitimisation of violence versus Puritan control over feelings, and places progress and success in direct competition with heroism, honour and freedom. As such, the western satisfies the social as well as the psychological needs of a society. The cinematic industry that arose in Los Angeles in the 1920s created mythic narratives, and the silent film industry was an ideal medium for a population that was comprised of so many recent immigrants, many of whom did not speak English. Early cinema, and the morality plays that were the early westerns, helped in the socialisation of immigrants. The plots were simple, symbols were simple such as the use of black and white hats to distinguish between the heroes and the villains, and the films promoted the values of small town America, such as good citizenship. These early westerns celebrated the coming of civilisation and the taming of the wilderness, and as such the wilderness and the Amerindians were successfully subdued. One of the first,

*The Covered Wagon* (1923), a celebration of pioneer virtues, was made with advanced production values, authentic locations and settings, and entered the western into folk history. John Ford emerged as a director of note in this era, with *The Iron Horse* (1924), the story of the building of the transcontinental railway, an historical epic from the building of America and not from European history, full of hope and national pride.

The western as a genre did not flourish with the coming of sound in movies. Studios churned out 'B movie' westerns to a formula, which meant an absence of subtlety and no moral ambiguity, whereas in reality the polarities of experience, for example community and individual as discussed earlier, were far from being morally divisible. This ambiguity is evident in the film that revived the genre of the western, John Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939). The narrative of *Stagecoach* is simple; a stagecoach travels through the west to the town of Lordsburg with a number of characters on board, including a drunken doctor, Dallas (a woman of dubious morality), a good pregnant woman, and a gambler. John Wayne as the Ringo Kid joins the stagecoach on his way to seek revenge on a man in Lordsburg and they travel through Indian Territory with Geronimo on the warpath. The Indians are unequivocally the enemy, but the rest of the movie displays the moral ambiguities of the transformation of the wild west to civilisation. In the course of the journey the redemptive qualities of the west are such that the doctor sobers up and delivers a baby, the gambler shows he is a gentleman, and Dallas has a heart of gold. These may appear to be simple moral statements, however none of these reformations are necessarily permanent. And Ringo, having exacted revenge and killed his enemy is not jailed and is not punished by the laws of the emergent society; Ringo and Dallas leave the town for the wilderness. The coming of civilisation has its

problems, and the movie suggests that in the coming of civilisation and the loss of wilderness America experiences a moral tension and confusion.

This moral confusion is evident in other subject areas of the western. In *High Noon* (1952) the town marshal is deserted by the townsfolk when he stands up to four gunmen. This incidentally is a morality tale for an America gripped by McCarthyism, and repeatedly the western genre has been used to provide contemporary social commentary in a mythic setting. In *Broken Arrow* (1950) the Indians are not portrayed as a savage enemy, and the hero, played by James Stewart, marries an Indian woman. They are individuals with a recognisable culture, rather than an amorphous mass of savagery. *The Searchers* (1955) has the wilderness/civilisation theme as a recurring motif, and the moral ambiguities of life in the wilderness are evident in the portrayal of Indians as aggressors and as victims to the cavalry. Once again the end of the film sees the hero returning to the wilderness once the social balance of the emergent white society has been restored.

In the latter years of the genre, wilderness is something to be revered and the coming of civilisation is clearly criticised. The western was furthermore used as a vehicle for social criticism, and was used for criticism over the war in Vietnam, American foreign policy, the treatment of the wilderness, and the legitimised and corruptible power of the establishment. In *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969), the heroes have to leave an America of corrupt law and order, in *High Plains Drifter* (1973) the whole town is corrupt; Clint Eastwood rides in from the wilderness, exposes corruption, then leaves for the wilderness again; the wilderness is a place of truth and freedom. *Silverado* (1985) deals with racial conflicts, *The Shootist* (1976) mourns the passing of the



frontier and the coming of civilisation with the anachronism of an aging John Wayne as a dying gunman, no longer needed in the emergent society of turn-of-the-century America.

It is not just the western in its traditional genre that has portrayed the moral ambiguities of the wilderness experience. In the modern era of cinema the themes traditionally explored in the genre of the western have been revisited in contemporary tales of human interaction with the wilderness. John Boorman's *Deliverance* (1972) has as its central theme the corrupting yet testing influence of wilderness on man. Four men, each representing a different male character type (Burt Reynolds as the urban hunter, Jon Voight as the civilised moral centre to the group, and so on) decide to ride the rapids of an Appalachian river before it is flooded to provide a new water source (thus also commenting on the effects of development on the environmental). The mythic journey they undertake not only tests them as individuals, it also pits them up against the locals, who are wild, lawless, dangerous and inbred. Wilderness is morally ambiguous as it can not only corrupt and create murderers and rapists out of those excluded from modern civilised society, it can also test the moral fibre of the hero figures and reveal the complexity that allows them to band together and reveal their bravery, but also guiltily hide the death of the hillbilly they killed from the authorities on their return. Wilderness finds the moral fibre of the city-dwellers to be lacking, however heroic they may be they are flawed, and the ambiguity of the myth of wilderness is exposed.

A less ambiguous version of the myth of wilderness is seen in *The River Wild* (1994), which again refers to the unspoilt wilderness and the desire to experience this uniquely American inheritance. In this modern morality tale of family and nature the mother Gail

is the primary hero (Meryl Streep), as she takes her family back to the river she rafted as a young woman and they encounter a group of criminals led by Wade (Kevin Bacon). The film follows several days of a journey down the river, as Wade escapes the law and kills those who get in his way, and as the family overcome not only the criminals, but also the emotional divide between them that is shown at the outset of the film.

In this film there are direct and specific references to the untamed wilderness, and Gail's desire to show her young son the wilderness before it is spoilt by pollution and development. The wilderness is thus associated with the hero(ine), a connection that is reinforced by the use of Native American themes in which once more only the family can participate. The young son is likened to a young brave who might undertake a 'vision quest' which would entail several days and nights spent in the wilderness, and would culminate in the signalling to his family by smoke signals, and the leaving of signs in the form of pictographs on the rock walls of the canyon. These indicators are used in the film for the family to communicate with one another in ways which Wade and his cohorts cannot hope to understand, and which they openly mock in the early stages of the film when telling the story of the vision quest around a camp fire, thus disassociating themselves from Amerindian knowledge of the wild. (The family are deeply fortunate in their ability to communicate in a private way, as they all use sign language due to the existence of a deaf grandfather who we see at the beginning of the film, a convenient plot device, though the connection with the Amerindian population of the region through the use of signs rather than technological communication is fundamental to the validity of the family as inhabitants of the wilderness). Thus there is

an attempt to connect the hero with the native inhabitants, and furthermore a connection between the hero and the unspoilt wilderness.

The father in this film is emotionally reconnected with his family through the bravery he displays when encountering the wilderness; he can interact with the wilderness, he can path-find and swim, where Wade by comparison can do neither. Even the use of a family animal, the dog, is used as further evidence of a connection with wilderness being fundamental to the formation of the character of the hero; the dog does not obey the father until he has struggled to save his family and displayed courage and bravery in the wilderness.

In the tradition of the western genre, and those films which are similarly located in the wilderness and reflect many of the themes of the western, the wilderness is the source of the hero's physical and moral strength, he is independent because he is part of the land, he is necessary and desirable because he is the human manifestation of the wilderness. Furthermore the weakness of the villains and of society is as a result of alienation from wilderness and identification with civilisation. The land that gives rise to the strength, goodness, moral fibre, individuality and respect of the hero is therefore an embodiment of all these values, and the western has therefore played a crucial role in constructing the role of wilderness in America.

The myth of wilderness has thus been created, developed and used, but it is not a process that remains in stasis; human societies change and adapt to different forces and needs, whether those be ecological, economic, material or spiritual. However, the initial creation of the modern concept of a myth of wilderness can be firmly located in

relatively short space of time following European settlement of North America, as shown above, and it is from this basis that subsequent adaptations of the myth can be traced. The creation of the myth of wilderness was a rapid manifestation of the needs of the societies emerging from the frontier and from early settlement, and the foundations of this myth are visible in the subsequent developments that have seen wilderness emerge as such a fundamental aspect of the national identity of America.

This role of wilderness, this cultural construction of the concept of wilderness, has been instrumental in legislative processes that have protected vast tracts of America in national parks, and the mythic creation of American identity is bound in a complex relationship with the forces that led to the creation of such spaces.

### **Conservation and Preservation in the National Parks movement**

Historically the European settlement of America was founded on a myth of superabundance, which in itself encouraged practices of resource exploitation. There was initially at least a general fear of and aggression towards untamed nature, but with the passing of the age of the frontier there was a noticeable change in popular attitudes towards wilderness, heightened by the need for a cultural identity looking for the uniquely American in the land that formed the new culture. Broadly speaking two areas of concern arose, the utilitarian conservation movement that focused on the rational use of natural resources, and the preservation movement, a more aesthetic conservation movement. Attitudes began to change in America following the closing of the frontier

and a new concern for nature arose in the form of the conservation movement and the formation of national parks.

Seminal works of the 19<sup>th</sup> century include H D Thoreau's *Walden* (1854) and Ralph Waldo Emerson's *Nature* (1836), but of the two it is Thoreau who has been hailed as the forerunner of the modern environmental movement; less transcendental, more practical, with his critique of capitalism and his deep-seated concern for the natural world. Other texts published in this era which were hugely influential include George Perkins Marsh's *Man and Nature* (1864), which not only identified the destructive behaviour of humans, in particular the forestry industry, but also focused on the interrelatedness of nature, calling for the setting aside of land in its primitive condition for education and recreation of course, but also as 'an asylum where indigenous trees... plants... beasts may dwell and perpetuate their kind' (Coates 1993, 16). In this he echoes Thoreau, and he like Thoreau also found inspiration in the Amerindians and their pre-European way of life that was more in harmony with the natural world than that of the settlers.

One of the main forerunners of modern environmentalism is Gifford Pinchot, who claims to have coined the term 'conservation', and was head of the Division of Forestry in 1898 (which then became the U.S. Forest Service in 1905, and is now the Bureau of Forestry). Pinchot was powerful and successful in no small part due to his relationship with Theodore Roosevelt, a president who was committed to the newly emergent theme of conservation both locally and globally:

Roosevelt was a nature lover, writer, and a vigorous advocate of conservation; but he was also a champion of the manly virtues gained through encountering nature. His *Wilderness Writings* extolled the ruggedness of outdoor life, including colorful descriptions of hunters in the American West... His writing underscored the need to preserve both manly engagement with wild nature and to conserve dwindling natural resources. (Merchant 2003, 139-140)

Although as chief of the forestry service Pinchot had as his body of concern not only trees, but also soils, water and minerals, he nevertheless held that conservation was primarily about the effective use of resources. The position that Pinchot held and the relationship he had with Roosevelt ensured that conservation was a federally-led top-down approach to wilderness management, whereas preservationism was a grassroots movement that came from public support and also included the active support and participation of women in a pre-emancipatory era. San Francisco's Sierra Club, which still exists though perhaps in a rather more conservative form today, dates from 1892 and is notable for the early membership and activity of women. The Audubon society was famously formed to prevent the slaughter of birds to use their feathers as hat plumes, but while this may seem more concerned with a middle-class lifestyle than with nature preservation, women were deeply concerned in this era with nature from a spiritual as well as an aesthetic basis, and were active in saving Californian Redwoods, birds, and the formation of national parks and national forests (Merchant 2003, 140).

Preservationism stemmed from a deeply patriotic base, and the love of American wilderness has always been a source of national pride. It has also been a concern of the huntsman, and hunting and a love of nature have always been seen as compatible. Aldo

Leopold, writing in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, who was a pioneering ecologist and seminal figure in the development of modern environmentalism, was himself a lifelong ardent hunter. Hunters did not lobby merely for game reserves and game preservation, they have historically been concerned with the preservation of habitats and species not associated with their sport; it is possible therefore to interpret the love of hunting as an assertion of nationalism and a patriotic return to the era of the frontier.

John Muir was a contemporary of Pinchot's, and the conflict between the two men that finally and famously destroyed their relationship was the Hetch Hetchy controversy, a conflict that made a clear distinction between utilitarian conservation and preservation. Muir's Christianity was the foundation of his belief in the rights of nature and wild things to exist even without reference to human existence. After his birth and first few lean years in Scotland, he was brought up in a strict puritan household on a pioneer farm in Wisconsin and spent his early adult life wandering America's wilderness areas, particularly Yosemite Valley. His love of the outdoor life and his assertion of the rights of all creatures, even those regarded as dangerous and hateful such as the alligator or the snake, has led to him being hailed as the forerunner of deep ecology. His perception of humans as merely a part of God's creation, not the most important or the most worthy, shows a comprehension of environment as it is more commonly understood today. His defence of Yosemite in the Hetch Hetchy controversy was founded in his theocentric approach, and was contrary to the conservationists' appeal for wise resource use.

Yosemite gained National Park status in 1890 due in no small part to the campaigning of Muir, and it was in this National Park that the Hetch Hetchy controversy arose,

dividing preservationists and conservationists and creating another step along the road to a modern conception of environmentalism. The National Parks of America are a source of immense national pride and patriotic fervour. The first National Park was Yellowstone, created in 1872, but in fact Yosemite was its forerunner in all but name, having been granted state park status in California in 1864. It became a National Park in 1890 along with Sequoia National Park and General Grant National Park. The damming of the valley of Hetch Hetchy in Yosemite National Park was seen as the solution for power and water for the city of San Francisco. Authorisation for its damming was passed in the Raker Act of 1913. The damming of the valley was desirable from an economic and material perspective in terms of water supplies for urban and agricultural regions, but in terms of the cultural identity of America, which increasingly located a source for its nationalism in wilderness and specifically in the national parks, the damming was to many culturally unacceptable. This is in an era when ecocentrism was not yet defined or quoted, and intrinsic value of wilderness was not something that was used as an argument against such development. But in a nation that had increasingly located its identity in the unique aspect of the grandeur of its wilderness, the cultural construction of American society meant that the project was immensely controversial and publicly opposed. A cultural constructivist perspective is essential if the full implications of such controversy are to be appreciated, for the aesthetic and nationalistic response to the damming indicate a complex set of cultural responses that go beyond the mechanistic or economic, and are instead located in the mythic.

George Catlin the painter is often accredited with the idea of the creation of national parks, a desire that arose from his call to protect wildlife, in this case buffalo, from the



profligate habits of fur trappers. Writing in 1832 while travelling on the Upper Missouri he called for these animals to be:

preserved in their pristine beauty and wildness, in a magnificent park, where the world could now see for ages to come, the native Indian in his classic attire, galloping his wild horse... amid the fleeting herds of elks and buffaloes... What a beautiful and thrilling specimen for America to preserve and hold up to the view of her refined citizens and the world, in future ages! A *nation's park*, containing man and beast, in all the wild and freshness of their nature's beauty! (Spence 1999, 10 & Coates 1993, 27)

Yellowstone was established in 1872 with 3300 square miles of Wyoming Rockies based largely around the geysers and natural water attractions of the area. The agricultural worthlessness of land enclosed by the first national parks helped their formal recognition, but the main reasons for Yosemite National Park were botanical (to preserve the giant sequoias) and aesthetic, while the reasons for Yellowstone National Park were geological, as a wild animal preserve, and the aesthetic. Thus wilderness itself may well have been protected through the formation of national parks, but the primary reason for their existence was to protect natural phenomena such as the giant sequoias and the geysers from private exploitation. The motivation for the formation of the national parks stemmed largely therefore from the conservationists camp of utilitarianism. The search for symbols of national identity provided the impetus to protect monuments of national importance, and the Antiquities Act of 1906 provided authorisation to the president to designate national monuments that were of scientific, prehistoric or historic value (Coates 1993, 28). The Grand Canyon is one of the national

parks that came into being via this route. The 1916 National Park Service Act further establishes the anthropocentric nature of wilderness legislation that defined the first legal protection of American wilderness areas:

...to conserve the scenery and the natural and historic objects and the wild life therein and to provide for the enjoyment of the same in such a manner and by such means as will leave them unimpaired for the enjoyment of future generations. (Soule & Lease 1995, 123)

If the agricultural worthlessness of land assisted its transition to National Park status, it did not however protect these areas when resources were discovered for economic development. The Hetch Hetchy dam project is the most prominent of such developments. Conservationists saw the greater good as being the use of water to fulfil people's needs, preservationists saw the preservation of the valley and its ecosystems to be the greater good. Although the dam was constructed and the valley flooded, the preservationist values were now part of the public domain and played a crucial role in the development of environmentalism. This example displays, I suggest, the essence of the cultural disparity that can exist, for it indicates not simply two opposing ideological views, or two competing economic dispositions towards a single issue, but rather a broader sense of value, belonging and appropriateness which is, in part at least, cultural.

### **A Modern Concept of Environmentalism**

Settlement meant that new ways of managing the land became essential and possible on the vast tracts of land previously unknown to the European immigrants. Survival was a priority, not the creation of landscapes, and with the abundance of land came the agricultural and forestry practices of clear cutting, clear burning, and also land abandonment due to the continuing availability of good fertile agricultural land. Mobility therefore became a key to success; physically, economically, and even socially. The American character has developed with a need for and love of travel, and a willingness to abandon and discard. The motor car has become a potent symbol of American freedom, and wilderness reserves in modern times have needed to consider this form of access. Furthermore, unlike European countryside which is open to the public, often even when privately owned, the American landscape of farmsteads is predominantly private and not open to public access. In modern times therefore, the creation of wilderness reserves, forests, and parks open to the public, has been an initiative that has leant heavily on the need to create trail and recreational opportunities. The first Ford motor car entered Yellowstone in 1915, the Sierra Club's purpose included the undertaking 'to explore, enjoy and render accessible' the Sierra Nevada (Coates 1993, 29), and visits to national parks included hotels and entertainments as well as roads. It wasn't until 1951 that the Sierra Club dropped the 'render accessible' part from its mission statement, as increasingly the national parks had been suffering from visitation overload. Edward Abbey, novelist and sometime park ranger, called for 'no more cars in national parks' (Abbey 1968, 65).

Industrial Tourism is a threat to the national parks. But the chief victims of the system are the motorized tourists. They are being robbed and robbing themselves. So long as they are unwilling to crawl out of their cars they will not discover the treasures of the national parks and will never escape the stress and turmoil of the urban-suburban complexes which they had hoped, presumably, to leave behind for a while. (Abbey 1968, 64)

The first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw the development of a widespread and legislatively recognised form of biocentrism. The creation of the Everglades National Park in Florida in 1934 marked a victory for biocentrists with the creation of a park in a marshy swampland simply for species protection and preservation. Aldo Leopold, although originally trained as a forester at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and dedicated to the utilitarian concept of conservationism, gradually emerged as an ecologist throughout the 1920s and 1930s whose influence would be one of the most crucial in the development of a modern environmental consciousness. His posthumously published *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) was a collection of essays that showed his conviction that the emergent science of ecology would enable a relationship and an existence with nature that would avoid such calamities as the Dust Bowl of the 1930s, and he argued for that which he termed a 'land ethic', an understanding of the biosphere and a development of a collective environmental conscience (Simmons 1993b, 126). He advocated a 'state of harmony between man and land' (Leopold 1949, 207), and the maintenance of biological diversity and ecological health.

If the National Parks of America are the repositories of American wilderness, it is notable that park management today has become greatly concerned with the protection of native ecosystems. The Outdoor Recreational Resources Review Commission in

1962 defined wilderness as an area over 100,000 acres 'containing no roads usable by the public' and 'no significant ecological disturbance from on-site human activity' (Nash, 1982), and the standard definition of wilderness from the Wilderness Act 1964 is:

A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognised as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man is a visitor who does not remain. (quoted in Callicott & Nelson 1998, 3-4)

This definition of course ignores the existence of the indigenes. What exists in our concept of human habitation and wilderness is in actual fact two landscapes, both with human inhabitants, but one with overwhelming evidence of human influence, and one with very little. The two landscapes are two ways of living within an ecosystem, two human ways of existing. Wilderness therefore is a term that while widely recognised as being an integral part of one of these landscapes, does not, or should not necessarily preclude human habitation.

The complexity surrounding the definitional aspect of wilderness is of course a reflection of the cultural complexity of American society and national identity. There is a pluralistic content to cultural construction that informs responses towards nature and wilderness. The complexity and ambiguity of myth as well as physical and scientific experience are fundamental to the divergent views held within the same culture, and acknowledging this pluralism is a key element in cultural constructivism. Cultural responses to myth contribute to the construction of the culture, and this in turn

influences actions and decision making processes. So we see that as changes to the physical environment and the loss of wilderness develop new forms of understanding, so the culture responds by adapting myth in order to create different ways of valuing wilderness, as can be evidenced in the creations of the Everglades National Park in 1934. Myth, as has been stated before, is not in stasis, it adapts to changing knowledge and understanding in order to codify and explain new experience, and as such can incorporate ambiguities such as those that exist within the myth of American wilderness.

### ***The Amerindian approach to nature and its relevance today***

Amerindian populations have historically had different approaches to nature within themselves as separate cultures, though broadly speaking they are all evidently in greater harmony with nature than European cultures. There is no single Amerindian belief system, Amerindian culture is in fact a geographically related collection of diverse cultures, with a unifying element however that is reflected in the relationship with the natural environment. The environmentalism of Amerindian religions is not a new concept, having been reported by early white settlers. Amerindian environmental relations and religions are deeply integrated; ethno historian Harold Hickerson has called Amerindian religious expressions “the religion of nature” (Vecsey & Venables 1980, 2), and nature is perhaps the most important dimension of such religions. Vecsey identifies three types of integration between environment and religion among Amerindians (Vecsey 1980, 10/11). Primary integration he identified as that which was involved with subsistence; the hunting rituals that involved apologising to spirits of

animals about to be killed, fertilization rituals, and salt gathering rituals. Secondary integration he associated with societal relations; the structure of a society and the use of shamans. The third form of integration identified by Vecsey is symbolic integration, where the natural environment informs the use of symbols, words, designs and art. Throughout Amerindian cultures there is a popular concept of the Amerindian as a 'natural' being, living in harmony with nature; a perception held by Amerindians as well as whites. This natural identity has dual connotations however. On the one hand is the image of the Amerindian as a 'noble savage' living in harmony with nature, on the other is the brutish and harsh existence that echoes the savagery of the natural world. Both these views rely upon the Amerindian being perceived as an extension of if not an integral part of the natural world, but the attitude adhered to is likely to reflect the white attitude towards nature itself.

Language has the power to evoke images and complex ideas, although 'images have imprecise meanings and culturally determined meanings' (Cronon 1996, 202). Chalwa (1991) identifies two dimensions of reality that language can represent. The first is the purely objective and includes the natural environment, the air, mountains, water and climate. The second is the cognitive, that which covers human perception and creation. This creative dimension modifies objective reality; as cognitive reality and language are closely related, so language facilitates the modification of an objective reality. If Amerindian languages are compared to English therefore, we can clearly see how realities are linguistically and culturally constructed to influence the approach to nature and wilderness that different populations have developed. Time for example in Amerindian languages is continuous. In English, time is a fragmented concept. 'English

language patterns encourage the tendency to perceive resources in isolation rather than holistically' (Chalwa 1991, 254).

Recent ecological searches for a new ethic have created a symbolic eco-saviour out of the Amerindian and the perceived inherited culture or group of cultures. While this emergent consciousness in new popular culture goes some way towards a partial redressing of centuries of ethnocentric persecution, the wholesale appropriation of perceived cultural and religious traits is to some extent a possible absolution of responsibility towards and within the dominant culture. As has been previously discussed, it is the locating of understanding within the experience of the dominant culture that has the greatest possibility for mass resonance, and without such resonance then the actions and decisions of a society would have little validity. It is essential to construct a new ethic or group of ethics that has resonance within the dominant, and in this case, and to date, environmentally destructive culture and society if the process of policy formation is ever to reflect a more sustainable approach to environmental relationships. Thus the consideration of Amerindian cultures in this thesis is necessarily brief, and exists more as a means to demonstrate the more rapacious attitudes of the European-in-origin dominant culture.

### **The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge: Ecology, Politics and Cultural**

#### **Delivery Routes**

The complex cultural inheritance of America is fundamental to the decision making process, and the policy arising from this process has direct and immediate impacts on



areas of wilderness globally, and within the United States today. As an example of the complexity of the cultural construction of wilderness demonstrated in this chapter, I here identify the case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in Alaska, and the very recent conflict that has existed over the extraction of oil and minerals in this protected area.

When the Wilderness Act was passed in 1964 there were 9 million acres of wilderness lands protected by it in the United States. Today there are 100 million, but this still represents less than 3% of the geographical territory of the United States. Most of this land does not contain much in the way of economically viable extractable resources, and 60% is in Alaska (Rudzitis 1996, 21). Wilderness, as has been discussed, has become a repository for the mythology of modern western values. Wilderness is largely managed, and as such it is therefore a social construct. It has often largely been managed in terms of native species. The introduction of alien species, such as the European rabbit to Hawaii or Australia, has led to the loss of native biota, and management techniques have developed to combat and retain wilderness, where wilderness is seen as worth protection in its own right, as well as a repository of species and ecosystems or a landscape.

The Wilderness Act of 1964 provided the machinery to create a national wilderness system, and led to further legislation such as the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act of 1968, and the National Environmental Policy Act of 1970. National parks are established for cultural reasons as well as natural features, for example the preservation of battlefield sites or evidence of early European settlements. They are constructions to a greater or lesser extent, and although preservation of biological diversity is possible, distance from wilderness becomes more pronounced with the introduction of cultural concerns.

Wild nature and national parks may well be imperfect and dependent on the ecological care taken by human populations, but they are crucial in retaining the link between humans and nature's ecology. Wilderness as it is understood in the national American consciousness can offer a healthy ecosystem, a spiritual sanctuary and recreation of a sustainable low-impact variety. This is not to say that nature and wilderness should not be defended outside of the national parks scheme, in fact it is essential if marginalized species and ecosystems are to survive. But the national parks scheme has been a legislative introduction that has formalised the American need for and love of wilderness spaces, and has become in itself part of the national identity of America.

However flawed the ecological and cultural conception of wilderness may have become, however managed wilderness may have become, the cultural construction of wilderness is not only fundamental to the national parks scheme, it has also been responsible for the defence of wilderness when such wilderness is threatened. The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is an area where the national cultural inheritance has been mobilised against resource use and government legislation. Furthermore, this construction has also led to the use of cultural references by those advocating resource use in this area. The construction of the wilderness myth and the national identity bound up with this myth is complex and contradictory, but is part of the cultural construction of America and reflects a variety of standpoints on this issue.

In the 1950s a group of scientists and conservationists recognised northeast Alaska as one of the United States' last truly wild, natural areas. One of the Refuge's founders, Supreme Court Justice William O. Douglas declared 'This last American living wilderness must remain sacrosanct... This is - and must forever remain - a roadless, primitive area where all food chains are unbroken, where the ancient ecological balance

provided by nature is maintained.’ (Defenders of Wildlife 2005) Biologist Olaus Murie stated that the Arctic Refuge should be preserved ‘as a help to us for our understanding of the natural processes in the universe... We have only begun to understand the basic energies which through the ages have made this planet habitable. If we are wise, we will cherish what we have left of such places in our land.’ (*ibid* 2005). And in the late 1970s, Secretary of the Interior Cecil Andrus stated:

In some places, such as the Arctic Range, the wildlife and natural values are so magnificent and so enduring that they transcend the value of any mineral that may lie beneath the surface. Such minerals are finite. Production inevitably means changes whose impacts will be measured in geologic time in order to gain marginal benefits that may last a few years

(*ibid* 2005)

The Arctic National Wildlife Refuge is a prime example of the way a culturally constructed concept, based on an ecological reality, has influenced the legislative process, not only in the establishment and subsequent preservation of the refuge, but in the mobilisation of the grassroots of society to ensure the continuation of that protection. The establishment and subsequent protection of this area appealed to the American love of wilderness, and literature that refers to the herds of caribou as being akin to the herds of buffalo that must once have been on the Great Plains creates resonance with a mythic America. Hence when threatened, it is perhaps not surprising that the mobilisation of the American public calls on this immensely powerful inherited myth for support.

The wildlife and wilderness values of the Refuge are irreplaceable resources that we have an opportunity to pass on to future generations ... Just as the Administration does not consider building a dam in the Grand Canyon during times of drought, we will not consider opening one of the last pristine ecosystems of North America during an oil price spike.

(David Hayes, the Deputy Secretary of the Department of Interior, Clinton Administration: Defenders of Wildlife 2005)

Congress has recently attempted to open the Arctic Refuge to drilling. Most, but not all, of the 19-million-acre Arctic Refuge has been given official Wilderness designation by Congress, and is thus protected from oil development and other destructive activities. But the coastal plain of the Refuge, totalling 1.5 million acres, is outside the Wilderness boundaries and is therefore vulnerable to oil drilling.

However, the defence of America's wild spaces has also been portrayed as fundamentally un-American, as if the subjugation of the wilderness is still a defining characteristic of the American people. Gale Norton, and her predecessor at the Department of the Interior James Watt, have been consistently singled out for criticism as regards the proposed oil drilling in the Arctic Refuge<sup>3</sup>. This criticism has come not only from established wildlife protection agencies such as the Wilderness Society and the Sierra Club, but also from the mainstream press:

Gale Norton, newly nominated as secretary of Interior, is unfit to be entrusted with our national parks, monuments and other public treasures ... Adoption of Norton's agenda would mean one of two things: Either the government would

have to pay polluters not to pollute, ... or it would have to repeal most of our health, safety and environmental laws. The second alternative is the one Norton clearly prefers. She notes: 'If the government must pay compensation when its actions interfere with property rights, then its regulatory actions must be limited.' She views this 'chilling effect on regulation' to be 'something positive.'

(Los Angeles Times 9 January 2001)

The call to subjugate the wilderness refers to the uniquely American experience of the west and the frontier as much as does the call to defend the wilderness. When Norton claims that 'It is not beautiful. There are no mountains like they show in the television commercials. It is a plain.' (The Guardian 7 March 2002), then we can refer directly to the concept of Manifest Destiny, to the desire to advance the frontier across the wide expanse of the American continent, and the perception of the enormity and the lack of any worth other than the economic inherent in the continent and its ecology.

While the theories rejected earlier in this thesis would have a coherent strategy for dealing with this conflict, the full complexity can only be addressed through a more inclusive approach that accepts the pluralistic element of the prevailing culture. A Marxist approach would explain this issue in terms of the economic, in terms of the benefits arising from the drilling for oil, while a deep ecology perspective would tend to apportion intrinsic value to the flora and fauna of the region. None of the approaches however would provide a complete explanation for what is politically occurring in this particular issue. The use of emotive language by both parties, whether referring to the destruction of the Grand Canyon or the 'lifeless' plain that is the tundra, can only be

understood when taken in context of the culture in question and how the language, myths and symbols upon which it draws might resonate and be politically effective. It is only through such an understanding that a useful interpretation of motives and beliefs can be arrived at. If this is therefore so restrained within cultural parameters, then to approach the issues of other societies with imported cultural assumptions cannot lead to an inclusive or informed understanding of the motivations and beliefs underlying the actions of those societies.

### **Conclusion**

In the modern era wilderness in the American consciousness has become a cipher, a symbol of the untouched and the ecologically pure. Of course there are those who hold that there is no land on earth left untouched by human influence. Bill McKibben (2003) claims that the human-produced toxins and greenhouse gases have changed the biotic composition of all life on earth, and all existence is henceforth determined by human activity (hence the title of his book *The End of Nature*). Wilson (2002) however states that our perception of wilderness is in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a matter of scale. That life we are only now beginning to understand offers a new wilderness frontier in the form of bacteria and protozoa. However, wilderness to many now means species diversity, ecosystem diversity, and biodiversity. It means landscapes in which we find spiritual resonance and places to fear as well as revere. We are cultural animals and we will have socially mediated responses to our surroundings no matter how much we try to modify our anthropocentrism;

... grounding our wildlife institutions, beliefs and practices in such (anthropocentric) aesthetic experience seems to be the best approach – one that takes into account not only those institutions, beliefs and practices as they are now understood by most people, but also the history of ideas that produced them. (Hargrove 1989, 132)

The received wilderness concept is of course deeply flawed. It perpetuates a pre-Darwinian metaphysical dichotomy between man and nature (Brennan 1995, 240), it is ethnocentric in that it largely ignores the existence of indigenes, and it ignores time; ecological status-quo is in fact unnatural. But wilderness is transformative. It transforms biodiversity into a value-bearing property, it is rare due to global population pressures, it is a blanket term for a full range of wild landscapes. Furthermore wilderness is valid to whatever degree we experience it, whether that be primitive wilderness discovery, or whether that be outdoor sports and recreation. ‘Wilderness isn’t anything but that which people think it is’ (Nash 1982, 5).

We need nature, and particularly its wilderness strongholds. It is the alien world that gave rise to our species, and the home to which we can safely return. It offer choices our spirit was designed to enjoy. (Wilson 2002, 148)

Wilderness, our perception of it, our understanding of it, our treatment of it, cannot be explained by ecology or economics or theology alone. Cultural constructivism can recognise the complex social and cultural interpretations of nature and wilderness that societies create, and the mythic element of our cultural definitions can be acknowledged and validated by such an approach. Wilderness is culturally constructed from a multiplicity of sources, and our relationship to wilderness, wherever and

whatever that is, is crucial to our development of a sustainable way of living in the natural world.

....the qualities that as a nation we profess to admire most: courage, self-reliance, wisdom, strength, compassion, and spiritual depth. In my experience, the American Wilderness is the cradle of these virtues, the repository of our epic stories, and the great stage upon which we are privileged ... to re-enact our national experiences ... Wilderness enriches us spiritually, culturally, physically, and aesthetically. It is an enduring resource that gives meaning and definition to our lives, nurtures our character, and sustains our beliefs. (Gorman 1999, 12).

Wilderness, cultural representation or ecological reality, real or mythical, has been an essential part of the construction of and continued driving force behind American national identity. Wilderness is perceived as representing a truly American landscape, due in no small part to the modern era's cultural romanticisation of the age of the pioneer and the frontier, particularly in an age when the geographical frontier no longer exists, even as a living memory. The influence of representations of wilderness through such cultural representation and expressions as landscape painting, photography, and film are significant in the perpetration of the concepts of the frontier and the west. They furthermore have played a crucial role in the formation of wilderness myths and legends. If there is a set of identifiable national character traits that wilderness and contact with wilderness helped form, and if these traits are perceived as positive, then wilderness acquires heritage values. Furthermore, if these heritage values are



legitimate, then wilderness survival is perceived as essential to keeping these traits alive.

Wilderness has been used in this case study as an example of how we specifically construct our perceptions and understandings of nature generally. This construction is culturally specific. With similar economic imperatives affecting diverse cultures, those cultures respond in different ways. The nation of Bhutan for example values its wilderness and natural beauty highly, so that economic imperatives have to be met in ways other than by the extraction of natural resources, and instead through the raising of money through eco-tourism and severely restricting the numbers of people allowed visas to visit the country each year. In this way the effects of globalisation and tourism are being held at bay by a culture that measures its values and beliefs through a markedly different cultural and social response.

Some difference between societies is therefore going to be explained by culture and the relationship that has developed between humans and nature within that culture, through the myths, language and social significance surrounding nature and wilderness. This complexity is reflected between cultures, but also within cultures, as has been evidenced in this case study of America. Approaching the diversity of conceptions and understandings of nature and wilderness from a constructivist viewpoint, and furthermore by adopting a constructivist viewpoint that is predominantly cultural in its approach, leads to a greater understanding of the divergent forces upon such conceptualisation. With a greater understanding of the variety of influences that have created such a pluralistic relationship with wilderness in western society, a more inclusive and pluralistic outlook that refutes a single set of rules or norms can be considered.

Ultimately a more pluralistic approach to the ecological crisis is necessary, one that although may potentially involve some measure of compromise in decision making processes, can more readily address the plural needs of society and the diversity of responses demanded by the ecological crisis.

The perspective afforded by the examination of the concept of American wilderness is now examined in the following chapter, that concerning the place of wilderness in Britain. The conceptualisation of wilderness in Britain differs from that of America in terms of definitions and ecologies, and the similarities and differences of these two western nations will be explored as a means of further demonstrating the plurality of outlooks that exist both between and within similar cultures. Although the cultural inheritance of these two countries has been largely similar from ancient myth, early European folklore and experience, and the influence of a predominantly Judaeo-Christian culture, in the modern era the perceptions of wilderness from these two nations have allowed for differing responses. There can be no strictly delineated separation of responses, as a global culture means there is a recursive element to such responses. The divergence of understandings and definitions of wilderness as it applies to each nation is partly as a result of the growing sense of American national identity, but also as a result of the maximising of wilderness experience in the increasingly densely populated British Isles. The following case study will explore the diversity of this experience.

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<sup>1</sup> The process of conceptualising images of things, moving away from a primary or analytical process, and towards a secondary conceptual process of creating myth, is available only to primitive societies, as Levi-Strauss argues that a scientific society will create scientific theories and explanations in order to move from a primary to a secondary, and therefore organising, conceptual process. The work of Levi-Strauss is concerned with tribal myth, however I would suggest that modern society also incorporates myth alongside the rational use of science. It is inappropriate therefore to confine the discussion of myth to tribal or primitive societies alone.

<sup>2</sup> 'The significance of the frontier in American history' Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893.

<sup>3</sup> The Interior Department's primary mission is to manage nearly 500 million acres of the public domain, including national parks, monuments and wildlife refuges. The Interior also administers the Endangered Species Act and thus is entrusted to protect wildlife and plants.

## **Chapter Five: Britain and Wild Nature**

### **Introduction**

This thesis has explored the concept of the human relationship with nature and wilderness, specifically in western culture, and I have concluded that an anthropocentric outlook is unavoidable, although I would suggest that to allow for a full range of expression a perspectival anthropocentric approach is encouraged. I have asserted that the western worldview is increasingly global in its influence, and that an approach that relies on the western paradigm to manipulate the natural environment is increasingly at fault for the global ecological crisis. I have furthermore explored the complexity of culture, with specific reference to western culture, and have stated that only with a constructivist perspective can the plurality and complexity of said culture be appreciated, for while science and technology are fundamental to a western understanding of nature, so the complexity of that construction can only be fully appreciated if the mythic element of culture is also acknowledged. In short, while it is correct to say there is such a thing as a western world view, this view is more complex than has previously been suggested, and it is this complexity which accounts, in part at least, for differing dispositions within the west towards nature.

While western culture's relationship with nature and wilderness has so far been explored through an American perspective on wilderness and the fundamental role that wilderness plays in forming a sense of national identity, I here intend to broaden the examination of western culture with reference to Britain and to the complex cultural understanding and cultural resonance of wilderness that exists in the British Isles. I

acknowledge that the North American countries, the countries of Europe, Australasia, and others, can all be identified broadly speaking as western. Furthermore these nations have a recursive element to their cultures; they inform and influence one another through the communicating of ideas, understandings and concepts. However, I have chosen to concentrate on Britain and wild nature as a balance to the grandeur of the American concept of wilderness, and as an exploration of two nations that speak (largely) the same language and have a similar linguistic and cultural inheritance. By an examination of the conceptualisation of wilderness from a British perspective, through a cultural constructivist approach measured by perspectival anthropocentrism, I intend to further demonstrate the diversity of wilderness experience in our relationship with nature. In doing so I intend to explore the concept of scale, and define an understanding of wilderness that encompasses the ecological realities of a densely populated and long inhabited Britain. Furthermore, the concept of wilderness in Britain has not only been constructed from the ecological realities of the country itself, but has also been influenced by the expansion of the British Empire, through colonialist expansion, and the subsequent location of wilderness in other parts of the world.

Through this exploration of the concept of wilderness in Britain, I will suggest that alongside the concepts of wilderness as the unknowable and wilderness as untrammelled nature, it is essential that we also adopt an understanding of the immediacy of our relationship with nature and wilderness to our daily lives in all matters of scale. We need to acknowledge the validity of the different component parts of our cultural construction of nature and wilderness in order to develop a more inclusive and pluralistic outlook. This pluralistic outlook is essential if our relationship with nature and wilderness is to exist beyond the ecological crisis, and to do this our

pluralism needs to encompass a range of responsibilities; social, ecological, political and cultural.

In this chapter I begin by identifying the issues surrounding wilderness in Britain with the concept of territory, and fundamental to this is the process of enclosure of the commons. It is the enclosure and cultivation of Britain that has led to the rise of the pastoral idyll, and it is from this idyll that I suggest a more modern response to wilderness has come.

The rise of Romanticism following the Enlightenment can be interpreted as a critique of increasing industrialisation and the drive for mastery over nature. With the increase in popularity of the natural sciences and the negative impact of the urban experience came the development of the rural myth. In locating the desire for a nostalgic past in the countryside of Britain, the influences of the Enlightenment and Romanticism contributed to a modern cultural construction of the relationship with wilderness in Britain.

I explore the issues raised by the cultural complexity of Romanticism through the poetry of artists such as Wordsworth and Coleridge, who gave voice to the yearning for a more essential and democratic relationship with wilderness in Britain. I refer also to the concept of wilderness as the 'other' to be increasingly located overseas with the influence of colonialism and the expansion of empire. I claim Romanticism played a crucial role in the adoption of a sense of wilderness and the sublime within the natural in Britain, and anchored a sense of responsibility towards the wilder parts of Britain in the diverse and culturally complex perception of wilderness that was developing.

With an exploration of wilderness as it has been portrayed in examples from the novel, I further expand the complex construction of wilderness to include not only a response to wilderness as the 'other' in the colonial experience, but importantly the recognition of the atavistic and wild within human nature. The role of human society in the relationship with wilderness and nature is also explored, and thus the complexity of a relationship that involves the atavistic, the social and the economic is identified and asserted.

The chapter uses the concept of a designed wilderness in terms of landscape and garden design to further demonstrate the introduction of the wild into a modern conception of nature in Britain. With an examination of the issues surrounding ownership of wild land, I then explore the conflicting arguments concerning the issues of seclusion and access, and equate this to the study in the previous chapter of the Arctic Wildlife Refuge. Just as in this previous examination of a single issue of modern ecological concern, the divergent views regarding the issue were embedded in the same cultural inheritance.

The issue of compromise in the decision making process from a cultural constructivist perspective is revisited and explored in this case study with the examination of the need to integrate the economic and ecological needs of humans and nature in environmentally degraded areas. The Lea Valley Regeneration Project is the example used in this chapter to demonstrate the social and economic needs that are being integrated with the ecological needs of an area, and how a pluralistic cultural viewpoint is essential if an ecologically and socially healthy environment is to be sustained.

### **Wilderness and the Countryside: a British Understanding**

Short identified the end of wilderness in Britain as occurring in 1746 with the defeat of the Highland Clans at Culloden (Short 1991, 57). This wasn't a defeat of the Scottish by the English, or British, but was far more complicated with Scots fighting on both sides. It was rather an outcome that represented victory for the Hanoverian state and the monopolisation of land; it was a victory that brought the land of mainland Britain under territorial control. This is not wilderness as an ecological fact, but as a territorial concept. This concept of wilderness as territory is by no means unique to Britain but, by identifying the end of wilderness as occurring at Culloden, Short links British wilderness with land enclosures that had been applied since mediaeval times, and which through the Enclosures Acts had effectively abolished traditional land rights and led to an ongoing tragedy of the common land (Jagtenberg & McKie 1997, 14). The enclosure of common land helped transform the relationship between people and nature, and resonates through to the present day with the issue of the right to roam in Britain's wilder areas.

About 10,000 years ago the ice sheets that had covered most of the northern hemisphere retreated as the ice age came to an end. With rapid climate change came a dramatic change in vegetation as dense impenetrable forest covered Britain in birch, oak and hazel. The Mesolithic, or Stone Age, shows us evidence of man already beginning to modify his environment with burning, evidence of axes and land clearance, and the beginnings of farming. Farming started in the Middle East around 10,000 years ago, arriving in Britain 4,500 years ago. The immigrants to Britain who brought farming with them also brought new crops and animals including wheat and barley, cattle and



sheep. Most importantly, in this the Neolithic Age, the farmers no longer lived in temporary camps like the hunter-gatherers, but settled down and cleared land for exactly this purpose. This clearance of the forest is the beginnings of ultimately large-scale human intervention in the landscape of Britain.

While Britain was sparsely populated many wilder areas remained relatively untouched, however, by the 12<sup>th</sup> century land was beginning to be enclosed for agricultural reasons. The enclosure of common land increased through the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries, dividing and privatising the common fens, marshes, moors and other uninhabited places. This particularly affected areas where grazing had previously been plentiful on otherwise marginal lands, such as the East Anglian fens and the Yorkshire moors, and where access to common land had been an essential part of economic life. Enclosure by Parliamentary Act began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the process of enclosure was largely complete. The reduction in the numbers of small landholders and the rise of the landed elite is a fundamental element in the issue of land ownership and management that exists in Britain today, and the issues arising from ownership of what had once been common land is fundamental to the concept of landowners acting as stewards of British wildlife and of the British landscape. This issue will be returned to later in this chapter in a consideration of access and the debate surrounding the issue of the right to roam. But first I will examine the changes in the use of the land that had a profound impact on the concept of land as countryside, and of the rise of the rural or pastoral idyll. It is this pastoral idyll which played a large part in the ruralisation of Britain and a change in the conceptualisation of wilderness.

### *The Pastoral Idyll*

The pastoral idyll comes from Greek literature, which was popular in the Middle Ages and influenced the work of poets such as Spencer, Milton and Tennyson. The pastoral myth claims that an agricultural life is lived closely with the rhythm of the seasons and of nature, and is therefore spiritually good and healthy and less compromised by social convention (Short 1991, 30). The pastoral or the countryside therefore becomes representative of the nostalgic past, and inherent in the pastoral myth is the preference of countryside over urban life. This criticism of the urban finds its roots in the rapid expansion of the population of Britain, the increase in mechanisation and industry, and the rise of the city. This is in contrast with the preceding Renaissance period, where the art, literature and scientific endeavours of the 14<sup>th</sup> to the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries had equated the city with civility, manners, taste and sophistication. The rise of the city in this period had engendered a love of urbanisation and modernisation. (Thomas 1984, 243). After this period however, the popularity of the myth of the countryside reflected the rapid social changes being effected; as cities rapidly expanded they became associated with overcrowding, moral degeneracy, industry and its attendant pollution, disease and poverty.

In common with America therefore, it was a rejection of the urban that fostered an appreciation of wilderness. As was explored in the previous chapter, it was from the east coast of America and from the cities that an appreciation of nature and wilderness began. And it was with aesthetic representations, through poetry and painting, that an American myth of wilderness was developed and made accessible to the population. In Britain also the rural myth was engendered in the arts, specifically poetry. However, the

fundamental difference between the two nations is that while America's wilderness myth was part of the quest for a new identity, a break from the cultural inheritance of Europe, Britain's rural myth came to be located in the desire for a return to the pastoral idyll, a retrogressive desire.

The appeal of the countryside was in part negative, in that it was a reaction to the urban and an escape from the cities. The countryside as a myth was a place of plenty, of recreation, of a legitimised society and an organic community, whereas in reality there was overwhelming poverty and its associated social implications. The myth of the countryside was further reinforced not only by the separation of the urban from the rural, but also the de-ruralisation of towns and cities themselves (Thomas 1984, 250). The loss of orchards, green spaces, gardens, trees and grazing rights due to population pressures in towns and cities played a part in the growth of an authentic longing for wilder nature. In the myth of the countryside we can identify the beginnings of the creation of the myth of the wild; from the concept of the countryside representing a nostalgic past, and as a result of the Enlightenment and Romanticism, there develops the modern constructed concept of wilderness in Britain which is considered in the following section.

### ***Beyond the pastoral idyll: Romanticism and the Sublime***

The mythology of the original state of nature is 'ambivalent' (Macnaghten & Urry 1998, 11), in that it incorporates the concept of nature as innocent and the concept of nature as savage, wild and untouched. In this ambivalence it is reflected by both the

Enlightenment and Romanticism. The Enlightenment views nature as existing outside of Eden; the concept of nature is constructed within the principle of dualism, as has previously been discussed in this thesis, and from the agricultural and the industrial revolutions and the subsequent concept of an achievable mastery over nature comes a sense of separation between the human and the natural. Romanticism on the other hand views nature as Eden itself, and the myth of the countryside and the rise in popularity of the natural sciences meant a tradition of celebrating wild areas in Britain became more widespread.

Romanticism was a critique of mastery over nature and the negative impacts of industrialisation. Through the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries agricultural improvement and exploitation was not only economically viable, it was also a moral imperative where wilderness was viewed as wasteland and productive land reflected the ancient classical ideal of beauty being related to fertility (Thomas 1984, 255). The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw the celebration of wilderness, where agriculture increasingly came to be seen as an assault on wilderness (Short 1991, 38), and thus reflected a development beyond the myth of the countryside. I do not mean by this to suggest that this rural countryside myth no longer had relevance. The rural myth is still evident today, and its validity can be traced through its influence in literature, as will be explored later in this chapter. But the Romantic movement of the 18<sup>th</sup> century allowed there to be a celebration of the wild, where before there had been fear:

Early modern travellers usually found mountainous country unpleasant and dangerous ... in 1697 Ralph Thoresby found both the Border country and the Lake District full of horrors: dreadful fells, hideous wastes, horrid waterfalls,

terrible rocks and ghastly precipices. In the same spirit Dr Johnson wrote of the Scottish Highlands that ‘an eye accustomed to flowery pastures and waving harvests is astonished and repelled by this wide extent of hopeless sterility’.  
(Thomas 1984, 258)

Wordsworth was one of the most significant writers influencing the Romantic movement. Through his poetry and travel writings the sublime, which was an emotional reaction to landscape, the aesthetic appreciation of the more terrifying aspects of nature, was incorporated into Romanticism. Nature was understood as scenery, views and perceptual sensation, and the Lake District was the most famous focus of his attention, where previously the Lake District had been referred to by Defoe as ‘most barren and frightful’ (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 114).

Here we begin to observe the concept of a managed wilderness. Wordsworth campaigned for the wilderness of the Lake District to be conserved (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 14), and the use of mountains and wild areas as recreation was a celebration of the sublime in a society that saw advances in transportation and an increase in available leisure time. This trait was reflected for example in the rising popularity of climbing, and the formation of the Alpine Club in 1857 saw the celebration of British and European mountain regions reflected in the recreational and aesthetic appreciation of wilderness (Thomas 1984, 261).

Through the influence of Romanticism, the celebration of the sublime, the increasing aesthetic and recreational use of wild areas of Europe, and more specifically Britain, we can see the multiplicity of cultural influences at play in the construction of the concept

of wilderness. The social and economic were essential; increased leisure time, transportation and education were all fundamental to a wider section of the population having access to the wilder areas of Britain. But the association of mountains with spiritual renewal and the aesthetic dimension of wilderness that came to be celebrated also contributed to a more complex construction of wilderness. These aesthetic and spiritual dimensions occur in addition to, rather than instead of, considerations of hierarchy, economics and gender. A multiplicity of reasons for the desire for wilderness experience means that no one single view of wilderness can include the range of definitions and impulses that form the complexity of our social and cultural response to nature and the wild. As was explored in the previous case study of America, the desire for wilderness experience was fostered by a multitude of reasons, some recreational, some spiritual, some connected with the search for a new cultural identity (or in the case of Britain the search for a connection with a rural idyllic past). And in common with America, the rise of recreational time and higher incomes in the modern era has led to a wider range of people being able to access a wilderness experience.

As well as the social and economic impulses at home which fostered the desire for a new relationship with wilderness, the issue of wilderness as 'other' and the issue of our responsibilities towards wilderness were also influenced by the social and cultural complexities of colonialism. The expansion of the British Empire from the 17<sup>th</sup> century influenced the cultural conceptualisation of wilderness, both overseas and at home, and therefore contributed to the development of the conception of British wilderness.

The wilderness is not, in fact, a type of landscape at all, but a congruence of feelings about man and nature of varying import to different epochs, cultures

and individuals. For Elizabethans, the wilderness was barren, chaotic, frightful, 'howling'; for contemporary Europeans it is often associated with primitive and romantic tribes in distant lands; for many Americans, it is an entity distinct from the workaday world, an oasis where the laws of nature still apply. (Lowenthal 1972, 55)

### *Colonialism and the wilderness as 'other'*

The expansion of the empire was the overseas expansion of British commercial and political interests from the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Wilderness was found in a variety of ecologies overseas, and the concept of wilderness and the attendant trait of domination sustained and legitimised the colonial adventure (Short 1991, 58). Wilderness in its various forms as it was explored overseas was on a scale and incorporated unknowns to such a degree that the wilderness of Britain ceased to have the impact of the 'other', of the terrifying or the dangerous. Wilderness therefore increasingly came to be identified as that which existed overseas, in inhospitable lands, with savage native inhabitants and unknown and terrifying animals. By identifying wilderness as being overseas, colonialism helped formulate the concept of a justifiable domination of a separate entity, that which needed subjugation in order to serve the needs of the Empire. This was also of course profoundly racist in its ideology; by the identification of native populations with the newly 'discovered' lands, people could be claimed alongside the flora and fauna for manipulation and exploitation, as was previously discussed in terms of the early European settlement of America.

There is no singular nature as such, only natures. And such natures are historically, geographically and socially constituted. Hence there are no simple natural limits as such. They are not fixed and eternal but depend on particular historical and geographical determinations, as well as on the very processes by which nature and the natural is culturally constructed and sustained, particularly by reference by what is taken to be the 'other'. (Macnaghten and Urry 1998, 15)

Overseas exploration therefore embedded the concept of wilderness as 'other' in a way that firstly allowed for the domination and exploitation of such wilderness, and that also, in the locating of this concept as existing overseas in its most wild manifestations, allowed for the abdication of responsibilities of attending to wilderness in Britain. I believe this is still a definable trait, and that by focusing on the wilderness of the Amazonian rainforest, for example, there has been a recognisable tendency to avoid the responsibility one has to as yet unexploited nature within western nations themselves. It is essential to recognise wilderness existing within each nation, in whatever scale and however defined, in order to accept responsibility for the range of ecological issues confronting the human/nature relationship today. The movement identified as Romanticism is, I believe, fundamental to a growing acknowledgement and appreciation of wilderness in Britain. Wilderness is of course simultaneously important at home, no matter how much the identification of wilderness as the 'other' is located overseas. And wilderness in all its various forms, as will be explored later in this chapter, is vital to an ecologically sustainable relationship with nature in general. Without the concept of wilderness in Britain, located in Britain, there would be no construction of a cultural identity that included the desire to locate wilderness overseas. Therefore, no matter how important the role of the colonial experience of wilderness, it



is the contribution that this experience made to the tendency to avoid responsibility to wilderness at home that has been an important element in the construction of a cultural response to wilderness.

### **Romanticism: the Poetic and the Wild**

In terms of a British sensibility therefore, wilderness as both a territorial concept and an environmental ideology has from the 18<sup>th</sup> century been increasingly situated overseas. This period thus heralded a shift in emphasis in terms of exactly where wilderness as the 'other' was to be found, largely separating the concept of wilderness from Britain and supplanting it with the pastoral. The rise of Romanticism developed the concept of the British countryside and the concept of the pastoral idyll. It is however possible to identify the traits of nature reverence within this pastoral idyll that celebrated the wild within Britain; Romanticism and colonialism did not entirely banish the concept of wilderness from Britain, wilder areas were celebrated alongside the rural, and Romanticism allowed for an appreciation of the wild that did not require the pastoral to be the only form of aesthetic or spiritual nature appreciation. Romanticism is therefore of great importance in retaining the concept of wilderness in Britain in an era when the pastoral idyll could well have predominated. The complexity of reverence for nature as both pastoral and wilderness is therefore a complex cultural response to nature, and reflects an ongoing relationship with the wild that incorporates a variety of responses and conceptions. It demonstrates the need to acknowledge the importance of the role of spirituality, of aesthetic responses, and of the complexity of a cultural inheritance as much it is important to recognise the social, economic and the mechanistic in an

exploration of the concept of wilderness. The landowner's response towards nature and wilderness may be one based on a utilitarian appreciation, tied in with an understanding of a custodial responsibility towards the landscape of Britain, for example in the maintenance of hunting areas such as forest chases or grouse moors. Romanticism also allowed for areas of wilderness that had utilitarian value to be valued in terms of the aesthetic, an aesthetic furthermore that was outside of the normal remit of pastoral appreciation.

William Wordsworth (1770-1850) 'exuded a reverence for nature' (Simmons 1993a, 102). With Samuel Taylor Coleridge he produced the joint publication *Lyrical Ballads* (1798), which was an important work in the Romantic movement. One of Wordsworth's most famous poems, *Tintern Abbey*, was published in the work, along with Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*.

Therefore am I still  
A lover of the meadows and the woods,  
And mountains; and of all that we behold  
From this green earth; of all the mighty world  
Of eye and ear, both what they half-create,  
And what perceive; well pleased to recognize  
In nature and the language of the sense,  
The anchor of my purest thoughts, the nurse,  
The guide, the guardian of my heart, and soul  
Of all my moral being.

*Lines Written a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey*

*On Revisiting the Banks of the Wye During a Tour, July 13, 1798*

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

Here Wordsworth finds no contradiction in celebrating the wild alongside the pastoral, with his love of the meadows and the mountains, this in an era when the mountainous regions of Britain were still largely inaccessible to most, thus allowing for a continuing complex relationship with nature that incorporates differing ecological realities and measures of human intervention. This poem also contributes to the previously discussed approach suggested by perspectival anthropocentrism, in that it is the personal response of the poet that guides his response towards nature, it is his cultural existence that predisposes him towards certain human responses and measurements of value of scenery and landscape. It is also true to say that his response can be seen as spiritual and atavistic, that in the locating of morality within nature we see an ecocentric position being demonstrated. I would suggest however that this ecocentrism is filtered through a perspectival anthropocentric approach, as it is through the response of the human eye and ear that the poet is allowed to respond spiritually, and however valid his spiritual response it is always measured through the complex constructed language of poetry.

The relationship with nature that allows for different ecological realities is important when considering the modern concept of wilderness in Britain, which allows for the wild to be defined and protected even within such small spatial entities as the hedgerow. This modern complex construction of wilderness will be returned to later in the chapter, here I wish to continue to explore the notion of wilderness in the Romantic era, particularly with reference to the concept of the sublime and the development of a national identity that encompasses a relationship with wilderness.

As a Romantic poet, Wordsworth explored the notion of the sublime, of finding the essence of spiritual renewal in wilderness. After climbing Kirkstone Pass in a storm, Coleridge wrote 'the farther I ascend from animated nature, from men and cattle and the common birds of woods and fields, the greater becomes in me the feeling of life ... 'God is everywhere' ... I exclaimed' (cited in Thomas 1984, 261). This reverence for the wild is evident in the work of the 'outstanding nature poet' John Clare (1793-1864) (Simmons 1993a, 101), from rural Northamptonshire, whose work reflected environmental and social change and thus included the social and cultural aspect of wilderness appreciation. John Clare, as Wordsworth, saw the destruction of a familiar landscape by owners who were seeking greater agricultural efficiency in order to increase profits. They protested in poetry, and furthermore linked nature and the wild with patriotism and Englishness, a crucially important development in the relationship with wilderness and the cultural importance of wild areas to the national character.

There is a Yew-tree, pride of Lorton Vale,  
Which to this day stands single, in the midst  
Of its own darkness, as it stood of yore:  
Not loth to furnish weapons for the bands  
Of Umfraville or Percy ere they marched  
To Scotland's heaths; or those that crossed the sea  
And drew their sounding bows at Azincour,  
Perhaps at earlier Crecy, or Poictiers.  
Of vast circumference and gloom profound  
This solitary Tree! a living thing  
Produced too slowly ever to decay;

Of form and aspect too magnificent  
To be destroyed.

*Yew Trees*

William Wordsworth (1770-1850)

These traits of nationalism were linked to the treatment of the land, and the ongoing processes of enclosure, mechanisation and gentrification of country estates. Clare, in common with Wordsworth and Cowper (1731-1800), demonstrates a close and complex relationship with nature, which is both valid and powerful in identifying the poet as a rightful possessor of the land due to local knowledge and spiritual experience. Thus by excluding the commercial and exploitative relationship with the land of the traditional landed gentry, the poets place freedom, both political and spiritual, within the land and the uncultivated wilderness (Fulford 1995).

I long for scenes where man has never trod;  
A place where woman never smil'd or wept;  
There to abide with my creator, God, 15  
And sleep as I in childhood sweetly slept:  
Untroubling and untroubled where I lie;  
The grass below--above the vaulted sky.

*I am!*

John Clare (1793-1864)

The colonial period had the effect of increasing the concept of wilderness to include other societies, other cultures, and other ecologies. This significance of the recognition of the global is important in that it does not preclude the concept of wilderness still existing in Britain, and furthermore it allows for a realisation of global responsibility; just as colonialism had allowed for domination of other lands in the name of the Empire, so colonial responsibility for those lands precluded an ecological awareness and the notion of an ecological responsibility on a global scale.

*Inversnaid*  
Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889)  
(published 1918)

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nature may well be neglected. What becomes clear, then, is that views of nature and wilderness have, as was stated earlier, both a conceptual and a geographical aspect and without taking these into account we cannot fully understand either our own myths or those of others. Equally, if this is so, then we risk the inappropriate imposition of one (in this case British) myth on other cultures, which has been in large part the critique of the dominant western world view from developing countries. These myths, of course, are not ethically neutral, they contain a sense of how we *should* behave towards nature given the values attributed culturally to the landscapes that are incorporated into the myths themselves. In this sense the representation of wilderness has both ethical and political implications which reach much further than the myths themselves might suggest. As Simmons argues:

From such a set of roots has grown the basis of the modern western attitude to wilderness ... not the replacement of wilderness with 'useful' and 'productive' land, but its preservation in order to retain the cultural values inherent within it and to contribute to some perceived ecological equilibrium on a global scale.  
(Simmons 1993b, 167)

A cultural constructivist perspective is therefore a more inclusive approach, as it can acknowledge the complexity of inputs, the political, the cultural, and the social, in the construction of the concepts of nature and wilderness. This approach will more fully address the need to understand this constructed conceptualisation as, briefly, unlike social ecology it can recognise and validate the spiritual and aesthetic dimension, and unlike deep ecology it can similarly do the same with the economic and social pressures and forces that change and modify the cultural expression of a relationship with

wilderness. To further examine the use of cultural references to wilderness, I will now address the issues arising from the colonial and the rural regarding a relationship with nature and wilderness in the novel, in order to more fully explore the complexity of our relationship with nature and wilderness and thus indicate the plurality of influences, political, cultural, and social, that demand a similarly pluralistic non-prescriptive approach.

### ***Wilderness and the Novel***

One of the earliest examples of the novel is *Robinson Crusoe* (Daniel Defoe 1660-1731). Its entire narrative is a metaphor for civilising the wilderness. It celebrates and equates the spiritual with material progress, and uses the language of colonialism. (Short 1991, 161). *Robinson Crusoe*'s central theme is that of retreat and withdrawal from civilisation, renewal in the wilderness, and ultimately reunion with society. The island that Crusoe inhabits is a physical wilderness that is also symbolic of a spiritual wilderness. Crusoe then recaptures his spiritual wholeness through material progress on the island and the creation of a replica civilisation (complete with a class system in the slave figure of Man Friday).

The theme of wilderness in relation to the spiritual as represented by a tropical island recurs in *Coral Island* (R.M. Ballantyne 1825-1894), and again in *Lord of the Flies* (William Golding 1911-1993). *Coral Island* concerns the three boys who are shipwrecked on the island. The island becomes a place of spiritual purity for the boys, and wilderness brings out the best in human nature. They arrange themselves quite naturally into a socially functioning group with distinct strata. In this respect the



novel's treatment of wilderness is similar to *Robinson Crusoe*. The wilderness is approached from the perspective of the Enlightenment, and is firmly identified as the 'other'. The subjugation and manipulation of the wilderness are seen as being social and moral necessities, and the duty of the civilised man to command the wilderness, and the native inhabitants of that wilderness, is validated and justified.

The wilderness in *Lord of the Flies* by comparison is a novel where the relationship with the wilderness produces barbarism in the boys who are stranded on the island. It is not so much a comment on wilderness, but an indictment of civilisation. The social structure that the boys bring to the island is not sustainable in a wilderness situation. Away from the social structure of civilisation, they cannot cope with the pressures of their social positioning and the roles they are expected to play. Civilisation is therefore perceived as fragile and is a flawed social construct. Wilderness is not a place of spiritual renewal for these characters, but neither is it in itself a corrupter of morality. It is a moral vacuum and a place where the fragility of social convention has no place (Short 1991, 164). *Lord of the Flies* does not embody wilderness with the anthropomorphic values of society, and in this respect the novel reflects those characteristics of a relationship with wilderness that can be traced back to Romanticism. Romanticism identifies wilderness as existing within an Edenic state, and so equates wilderness with the essential basis of human nature. Similarly *Lord of the Flies* identifies the essential state of man with wilderness, and argues that without social convention a more natural state is arrived at. The difference of this novel from Romanticism is that it identifies the natural human state to be barbaric rather than morally pure, but this is not a criticism of wilderness per se, and in terms of this thesis what is important to identify is that it shows an acceptance of wilderness within the human. By such an identification, an acceptance of the responsibility to address

wilderness as a concept that cannot be separated and delineated away from human society is demonstrated.

The role of society in the human relationship with wilderness and nature is explored throughout the work of Thomas Hardy (1840-1928), who wrote of change and conflict within a rural setting. *Far from the Madding Crowd*, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, *The Woodlanders* and others are all set in their local physical environment and show evidence of a deeply felt sense of place. Egdon Heath in *Return of the Native* is so prevalent, so powerful a presence, that it is a character in its own right. The novels are furthermore a social commentary in that they picture the countryside in a state of transition, from an authentic rural society to the homogenisation and standardisation of an urban metropolitan society. Hardy recognises that with this move towards increasing urbanisation comes a recognition of wilderness appreciation.

Haggard Egdon appealed to a subtler and scarcer instinct, to a more recently learnt emotion, than that which responds to the sort of beauty called charming and fair.... The time seems near, if it has not actually arrived, when the chastened sublimity of a moor, a sea, or a mountain will be all of nature that is absolutely in keeping with the moods of the more thinking among mankind. And ultimately, to the commonest tourist, spots like Iceland may become what the vineyards and myrtle gardens of South Europe are to him now; and Heidelberg and Baden be passed unheeded as he hastens from the Alps to the sand dunes of Scheveningen. (Hardy 1878, 5)

Hardy however here demonstrates the fear of the loss of the sublime, the implication being that what is now wild may in the future be easily visited, easily consumed, and therefore may be absorbed into a more social and less natural experience. By referencing tourism, and by acknowledging technological change in terms of transport, speed, and ease of access, Hardy is anticipating the recreational use and appreciation of nature to spread beyond the cultivated to include the wild. He also anticipates the 'more thinking among mankind' to be at the vanguard of wilderness appreciation, spreading to 'the commonest tourist'. In this he acknowledges the traits identified in this chapter and the previous chapter, insofar as it was the educated, urban and wealthy who first fostered an aesthetic appreciation of wilderness. This elitism reflects the social and economic realities which dictate that leisure time and disposable income that allow for travel and for wilderness experience, particularly the wilderness experiences abroad that Hardy refers to, will first of all be experienced by the social elite before such experiences are made available to the rest of the population. Furthermore, that Egdon Heath appeals to a 'more recently learnt emotion' implies that the development of an appreciation of wilderness is culturally driven, that it is not a return to an atavistic relationship with wilder nature. In this respect, Hardy's identification of wilderness appreciation being a modern development, dependant on an aesthetic response and with attendant social restraints, can be located within a culturally constructed framework.

This socialisation of the wild and the natural is also a trait that can be identified in the rise in popularity of garden and landscape design. It is a socialisation that has the potential to deny the wild within nature, for while the rigid identification of wilderness as the 'other' can sanction the tendency to absolve human responsibility towards interaction with and treatment of nature, and so contribute to a pattern of domination,

the socialisation of nature also encourages domination and validates the manipulation of nature and wilderness. It is only through an approach that can recognise the plurality of influences and the potential for plural cultural responses towards nature and wilderness that any considered sustainable mediation of human activity can be reached.

### **Landscape Design and the Wild**

The manipulation of the wild that we see in landscape and garden design is not unique in terms of human relationships with wilderness and nature. From a western perspective we commonly regard areas of the world as wilderness without regard to human inhabitants, though such areas may have been, or still be, home to traditional pre-modern societies. This myth of the uninhabited wilderness that has actually been home to humans and has seen human intervention and manipulation in nature has been referenced in the previous chapter, with regard to the notion of the Pleistocene overkill hypothesis in North America. In fact there is evidence to suggest that humans have been permanently influencing the ecology around them throughout human history. The aboriginal inhabitants of Australia developed land management techniques thousands of years ago that meant the lighting of bush fires to assist hunting, favour certain flora, and influence the fauna of an area (Simmons 1993b, 5).

Considering that the transformation of nature is not a recent development in human history leads us to the notion of a designed landscape, particularly the garden, which has a long history in human society. With the spread of Islamic culture westwards after the fall of the Roman empire, gardening was encouraged as well as philosophy,

learning, and the arts. This referred back to Greek and Roman traditions of learning, and the horticultural traditions of the early Christian world, where the gardens of Persia were thought to be representations of an earthly paradise. Such horticultural influences found their way into western Europe through the Arabic conquests of Spain and the Mediterranean, and Christianity also played a role in the subsequent establishment of the formal mediaeval garden, with religious orders who not only were important landowners but also created gardens for culinary, contemplative and healing purposes.

The formal style predominated in western landscape and garden design through the Tudor era, the influence of Renaissance Italy, and French royal gardens of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. The 18<sup>th</sup> century however saw a fundamental change in landscape design and gardening, both in terms of aesthetic emphasis, but also reflecting issues of social and economic power and a reaction to advances in agricultural practices. Increasing cultivation of the land and progress in agriculture engendered a self-conscious reaction, and the developments in landscape gardening at this time are indicative of a growing reaction against an increasingly mechanised and intensively farmed country. Agriculture in Britain, particularly England, was much more intensive than in many other countries in Europe. It is hardly surprising therefore that the major changes in landscape gardening that are synonymous with English gardening design styles today arose in Britain in the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

The 18<sup>th</sup> century, the era of the Enlightenment, was a period of changing attitudes towards nature and countryside, and influences included classical ruins, big landscapes, and European travel, which meant the adoption of influences from the ruins of ancient Greece and Rome. Charles Bridgeman (1690-1738) began to adapt the formal gardens

of large houses and learnt to borrow the surrounding landscape. He was the first to use the ha-ha, basically a trench at the end of the formal area of the garden, hidden from view, that allowed for an uninterrupted vista stretching into the surrounding fields and woods but which prevented livestock from straying onto the lawns of the house.

William Kent (1685-1748) dressed up gardens with design features like classical temples. At Rousham House he built a ruin of a classical temple on a hillside far from but visible from the house, thus borrowing the landscape, intimating that the countryside from the garden to the ruin on the hill was owned (which it was not) by Rousham House.

One of the most renowned designers of the period was Lancelot Brown (1716-1783), known as Capability Brown due to his habit of extolling the capabilities or the potential of landscapes. His design formula was to bring the landscape right up to the walls of the house, and to create vistas by planting swathes of trees that neither he nor his patrons would live to see mature. The designs that Brown and others created were for the landed aristocracy, and the elitism inherent in the commissioning of the designs meant that seclusion, but also exclusion, were at the core of their creation. On occasions this meant Capability Brown moved entire villages that were in the way of his grand vistas, and as such the scope of such landscape design exercised not only aesthetic but also social and economic power (Short 1991, 70). As such, landscape design was the preserve of the wealthy; elevated social and economic positions meant the ability to participate in wilderness appreciation (Thomas 1984, 264), and in this it mirrors the experience of America, where those who lived in the east developed the notion of

wilderness appreciation, rather than the settlers or others involved in subsistence living at the frontier.

This informal landscape garden (which might have as adjunct a walled garden for produce) seems to allow the resurgence of nature (albeit under control) at a time when it must have seemed that the triumph, actual or potential, of mankind over nature was about to be realized. (Simmons 1993b, 27)

The reasons for the move towards a greater appreciation of wild nature in landscape design are more than aesthetic. There were aesthetic reactions against the uniformity of agriculture and artificial garden designs, but there was also a reflection of Romanticism, a growing feeling that wilderness could give meaning to human existence, that open spaces meant human freedom and that the pull of wild nature was no longer an anti-social emotion.

A designed landscape or a garden is a transformation of nature; it will almost invariably involve non-native species in the planting, which with elements of hard landscaping will impose cultural preconceptions on an area of land. Gardens convert nature into 'something at once more agreeable and intelligible than a wilderness' (Passmore 1974, 37), though this perspective can be criticised in its aesthetic bias:

The informal garden praised by Passmore is restful to the eye and the spirit, a nice place to go to relieve city stress, but it is still a human-made distraction; it is calculated to please, and thus it is not so capable as wilderness of posing a

challenge or providing an alternative to civilisation or to our self-conception.  
(Thompson 1995, 304)

The aesthetic is not the only response, or the only reason indeed to preserve wilderness. Wilderness is still an environment not of our own making, and as such is a refuge from the human environment. The human environment is not only the urban, the material, and the mechanical, but also the moral and spiritual dimension inherent in this relationship. Thus the argument for challenging our notion of self conception made by Thompson gains validity; it is through the challenge to our constructed selves that wilderness exercises its spiritual and emotional resonance. The introduction of a wild element into landscape design and gardening may be an artificial recreation, and it may well favour economic and social power, but in its reaction to formality and structure it indicates the change in the relationship with nature and wilderness that was heralded by the Enlightenment and by Romanticism.

The debate between Passmore and Thompson shows, again, that there is a plurality of views and that none of these can be said to be entirely wrong or entirely right. Such a debate acts as a microcosm of a broader perspective, which suggests that one outcome of creating plural and differing landscapes is that we have plural views of what nature and wilderness are, and what human purposes may be served by them. Furthermore, in such a densely populated and recreationally consumed nation as Britain, the introduction of the wild into the garden is arguably an important consideration in the perpetuation of wilderness in Britain. When considering definitions and matters of scale, the grandeur of American wilderness is not necessarily the benchmark by which wilderness in Britain should be recognised and acknowledged. It is the wilderness that



exists in species rich hedgerows that is more akin to the notion of the wild in Britain today. This aspect of wilderness of course refers back to the previously discussed concept of the rural idyll, for just as ecological realities such as hedgerows are species-rich repositories of ecological diversity, so they are emblematic of the rural myth; the flora and fauna, as well as the visual impact of such ecologies, are culturally embedded in our society and represent a nostalgic past as much as they do a sustainable ecological future.

### **Conservation, Access and the Right to Roam**

The rural myth as it exists today is more than the search for a return to a nostalgic past, as was represented in the poetry of Wordsworth and Coleridge, it represents the right to participate in the British countryside in terms of access, and in this reflects the concerns of Wordsworth in terms of accessing the healing and spiritual properties of nature and wilderness. This is a continuing theme of a democratic and nationalistic right to participate in the wild and the rural, not only as a spiritual or aesthetic response, but also in terms of preservation, conservation, and the social arena explored through the issue of access and the right to roam debate.

The right to roam debate has been present in some form or another since the enclosures of public and wild land in Britain, and instead of being prescriptive in its intentions, it is instead an arena in which individuals can participate in a very plural sense in the wilderness and rural myths. The development of a modern understanding of the wilderness and rural myths in Britain incorporates changes in ideologies as regards

land-use in Britain, and the modern era has seen a more inclusive attitude being adopted in terms of the scope of land included in the land-use planning system.

The 1947 Town and Country Planning Act introduced the modern land-use planning system, with the intent to retain 'nature as a refuge from modern life', with the focus on the recreational and aesthetic. Crucially agriculture and forestry were not included in this act, in fact they were not brought under such planning legislative controls until the 1981 Wildlife and Countryside Act. Their omission was as a result of post-war policy which was geared towards food production, in order to ensure the self-sufficiency which had been absent during World War II, and this omission of agriculture and forestry reflects a dualism in the legislative treatment of the countryside and wild nature in Britain.

National Parks were designated under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act 1949 for the twin purposes of preserving and enhancing their natural beauty and of promoting their enjoyment by the public. The definition of a National Park is:

an extensive area of beautiful and relatively wild country in which, for the nation's benefit and by appropriate national decision and action:

- The characteristic landscape beauty is strictly preserved
- Access and facilities for open-air enjoyment are amply provided
- Wildlife and buildings and places of architectural and historic interest are suitably protected
- Established farming use is effectively maintained

*(<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk>)*

(The reference to the effective maintenance of established farming use is for agricultural use of land within the National Parks, not for agriculture in general in Britain).

The National Parks Authorities are charged with conserving and enhancing the natural beauty, wildlife and cultural heritage of the National Parks, and taking into account the economic and social needs of local communities. This acceptance of the long standing human habitation of the British Isles does not preclude a sensibility to wilderness and nature:

The Parks are made up of countryside that has been shaped over 5000 years by people at work. With well-managed sustainable development strategies in place we can make sure that these landscapes are here for future generations.

*(<http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk>)*

Although the concept of wilderness as it exists in similar legislation in America is not comparable to Britain, it is this acceptance of the plural range of needs of society, of the economic and social needs of the community as well as a responsibility towards the sensitive management of ecologies, that would indicate an acceptance of the complexity of a relationship with wilderness, however managed that wilderness may be, within Britain. The complex cultural construction of such a relationship can be seen in the changing attitudes towards farming within Britain, as the post-war drive for increased food production has had to give way to a more ecologically sensitive appreciation of the rural and the wild.

In the issues surrounding the Right to Roam debate, the rights of the British public to gain access to land, both the rural and the wild, has been asserted in the face of the rights assumed by landowners as stewards of British countryside and of British nature. In this the concept of wilderness in Britain is defined in such a way as to include the human element, and to validate the participation and enjoyment of wild areas of Britain by all, not just the landed elite, albeit in a monitored and responsible manner.

It is not only recreation but a tradition of social action that has been instrumental in creating the legislation in Britain that is concerned with nature, and wild nature. The Clarion Clubs of the 1890s combined socialism and environmentalism, and encouraged participation in the British countryside for health and recreation, for fresh air and exercise for those that lived in the towns. By the 1930s more than 3 million people were registered unemployed in Britain, northern cities were highly industrialised and experienced high levels of poverty and pollution, fascism was on the rise across Europe, and yet large tracts of land across Britain were reserved for the recreation of the elite, for hunting, shooting and fishing. A group of young politicised walkers from Manchester and Sheffield organised the now legendary mass trespass of Kinder Scout in Derbyshire in 1932 by around 500 people. Benny Rothman, a young Jewish Communist mechanic from Manchester, addressed the gathered mass of walkers:

I gave them an outline of the history of the Enclosures, the injustice of it all ... the common people were turfed off the land. This sacred 'private property' is stolen property, stolen from the common people. I told the meeting that we could only get access to mountains by mass action, and the mass trespass was our first blow.

(quoted in The Independent Magazine 20 April 2002, 20)

As a result of the mass trespass, six people, including Benny Rothman, were sent to jail, causing a national outcry and raising the awareness of the campaign for the freedom to roam. The 1939 Access to Mountains Act restricted walkers' rights and made trespass a criminal offence in certain circumstances. It was opposed by the Ramblers Association and was later repealed. The 1949 National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act defined open country as mountain, moor, heath, down, cliff and foreshore, and local authorities were required to survey open countryside, assess the level of access provided and to secure further access by means of agreements, orders or by purchasing the land. Finally, in 1997 the new Labour government was elected on a manifesto that included a commitment to introduce legislation allowing the public the freedom to roam on mountain, moor, heath and down. The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 eventually allowed for this right of access, and was applied across the whole of England by the end of 2005 (<http://www.ramblers.org.uk/freedom/history.html>).

In common with the case of the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge in America and the myth of the frontier and undiscovered wilderness, the debate surrounding the issue of public access is intrinsically related to the common myth of the British countryside. Landowners and farmers were seen, and still are to a certain extent, as the guardians of Britain's rural landscape, including the managed land of moors and heaths. This was as a result of the ongoing process of the enclosure of public land, which meant that open public wilderness that is not under the jurisdiction of a landowner has not existed in Britain for a long time. Furthermore, as Britain is a largely rural landscape, it has been through agricultural practices and intervention that cultural definitions of countryside

and the wild have been formulated. In viewing the landowners as guardians of the countryside and of wild Britain, the echoes are of Hardy's Wessex, of a rural and pastoral idyll, where the national identity and cultural conceptualisation of wild Britain are located.

Using the same ideology are those who have campaigned for greater public access. The right to personally experience wilderness and nature in Britain recalls the Romanticism of Wordsworth and Coleridge, though in this case opposition to access is less about the desire to retain wilderness as largely free from human intervention, but is about the rights of seclusion of farmers and landowners. In common with the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge however, we can see differing points of view that stem from the same cultural suppositions regarding nature and wilderness. That the construction of each culture is complex is the reason behind the plural approaches arising from such complexity. And, as with the Arctic Refuge, it is the weight of cultural pressure that seems to have swayed the balance in the decision making processes.

An increased awareness of an issue, and an increased ability to participate in the debates surrounding that issue seem, in the cases of the Arctic Refuge and the right to roam debate, to have allowed a greater plurality of opinion to exist, and for the decision making process to have been forced to include a variety of standpoints. An acknowledgement of the cultural complexity of a society, and an awareness of the constructed essence of that culture, can mean that validity is given to the variety of cultural references and suppositions so arising. These cultural inputs include the economic and the social, but also give resonance to the emotional and spiritual aspects of cultural identity, and therefore lead to a more inclusive decision making process.

This does not mean that the weight of public opinion is always brought to bear, or indeed that the results of this decision making process do not vary widely over time.

### ***The Lea Valley regeneration project***

An example of the way in which the ecological is taking its place alongside the economic and the social is in the regeneration of the Lower Lea Valley in East London as a result of the successful bid for the 2012 Olympics. Part of the success of the bid was attributed to the environmental concerns demonstrated by the project, and a key aspect of the regeneration of this area concerns the environment alongside the economic:

Firstly, the Games will bring great environmental benefits by reclaiming contaminated land. The Lower Lea Valley has great potential as an environmental zone, with its unique network of waterways and marshland. At the moment, the area is described as a 'brownfield site'. This expression is used to define areas which are underdeveloped, derelict, contaminated or vacant. As well as becoming home to the proposed Olympic Village, this area will be the biggest new park London has seen since Victorian times.

Secondly, the Olympic and Paralympic Games will also provide the chance to implement environmentally friendly policies. All construction projects before and after the Games, and the Games themselves, will minimise waste, pollution and the impact on London's wildlife habitats. The Games organisers will adopt

and promote sustainable procurement and design practices, and use every opportunity to educate Londoners, and especially young people, about the importance of sustainable development ...

... Finally, nothing will be built permanently on London's green spaces like Hackney Marshes and London Fields (known as 'greenfield sites').

(<http://www.london.gov.uk/mayor/olympics/benefits-environment.jsp>)

Alongside the creation of a new urban park and the creation of new housing and local amenities, the project promises the creation of three hectares of new wetland habitat, 'and the park will be planted with native species, including oak, ash, birch, hazel, holly, blackthorn and hawthorn, providing a home for wildlife in the middle of the city' (<http://www.london2012.org/en/bid/greengames/a+valley+reborn.htm>). This plural approach to ecological need and the needs of Britain's wildlife indicates a more holistic approach to a regeneration project that acknowledges the cultural importance of wildlife and wilderness within an urban setting. The area in question has traditionally been home to heavy and light industry, has been contaminated by them, remains highly polluted, and consists of large areas of industrial dereliction. This is not to say that the creation of wetland habitats will not destroy areas of wilderness that have managed to exist in this area:

Emma Harrington, head of operations at the Lea Rivers Trust, which manages parts of the valley as a nature reserve, is cautious. 'We're very keen on regeneration but the proposals coming from the bid are quite destructive to what



already exists,' she says. According to the bid planners, recovering the area is impossible without an overall plan to clean up contaminated land and waterways. 'The ultimate prize is restoring the riverine ecology of the Lea, and while there will be some short-term losses, that goal is worth going for,' says Jason Prior, who is coordinating the planning team.

(The Guardian 16 February 2005)

Cultural constructivism approaches issues with the understanding of plural inputs and an acceptance of some measure of compromise in the outcomes. So to take the single issue of wetland habitats within the Lea Valley project is to understand, as quoted above, that some measure of loss will be involved in order to answer the plurality of demands made upon the project, which in this case will ultimately create a larger and ecologically more healthy area of habitat, with lower levels of pollution and industrial waste within the system. In an attempt to ensure that a more inclusive approach was considered, plural inputs into the decision making process were sought and the Olympic bid body, London 2012, consulted expert opinion from environmental groups such as the World Wildlife Fund and the BioRegional Development Group in the formulation of plans for the site. The issue of the ecology of the area is just one aspect of the issues surrounding regeneration, and integration into a social and political whole is part of the process that development processes need to take into consideration in Britain. Indeed, the Lea Valley Regional Park Authority has within its remit the statement that the park, including its wetland habitats, is 'to be an area of enhanced and protected natural biodiversity for the enjoyment of all.' (<http://www.leevalleypark.org.uk>). This acceptance of the social needs of the community alongside the ecological needs of the flora and fauna is, I suggest, a more practical way of approaching the issue of

wilderness survival within such a densely populated nation as Britain. The issues of social inclusion and economic revival are important to consider in any approach that accepts a perspectival anthropocentrism, and to integrate wildlife conservation within such projects is to include a measure of wilderness in the everyday experience of local people.

To incorporate the lofty ambitions of political, social, economic and ecological improvements must realistically involve some element of compromise. But in the awareness that long-term improvements to the local economy and local quality of human life are linked with the ecological good health of an area is a major realisation not only of the risks to health attendant with pollution, for example, but the social and cultural needs of a community that can respond to and participate in wildlife and wilderness appreciation.

## **Conclusion**

In modern Britain, it appears that a human dilemma has arisen as regards finding a balance between the physical requirements of human habitation of a densely populated country, and the existence of wilderness and wild nature in Britain. An increasing belief in the balance of nature, and the ecological dependency of different species in an interconnected series of ecosystems, was engendered in the modern era by the Enlightenment, and the rise in popularity of natural sciences. With the spiritual dimension that Romanticism encouraged and the development of the pastoral and rural

myth of British countryside, we can identify a culturally complex set of responses to nature and wilderness that have arisen as a result of this plurality of outlooks.

It is only through a cultural constructivist approach that the full extent of these influences can be realised. The mythic element of our relationship with nature and wilderness is culturally and socially located; it is in part atavistic, but it is also a response to the mechanistic and material in terms of increasing urbanisation, and has resonance with a nostalgic past. A cultural constructivist perspective can address the social and economic, and through a perspectival anthropocentric approach, as was explored previously in this thesis, a more benign and less rapacious attitude towards wilderness and nature can be developed. But in the recognition of the importance of myth to the social and cultural relationship between humans and nature, as has been explored in this chapter in relation to such representations and uses of nature, the cultural constructivist perspective can address the essentially anthropocentric nature of myth itself. The role of myth in the construction of a social and cultural national identity is fundamental, and in a society that is continually reinventing its relationship with wilderness and nature, a pluralistic approach is essential if any moderation to human behaviour is to be considered.

Since World War II, modern agriculture has meant not only increasing mechanisation but also increasing use of chemicals in the form of pesticides and herbicides. Wild Britain has increasingly been confined to smaller and smaller areas, but it has also found new homes. Railway cuttings, derelict inner city sites, canal banks and paths, and churchyards have become home to wild nature that could not survive in an intensively farmed modern agricultural setting. Wilderness in Britain is on a different scale to that

of the previous case study of America. I claim that although a different relationship with wilderness has developed in Britain, it is no less valid for the matters of scale and habitation arising from the issues surrounding such a densely populated nation. Communication, transport, technology, and the subsequent loss of fear in the wilderness of Britain can imply that an increasing trend to ruralisation has taken the wild out of nature. Furthermore, the exploration of the rest of the world that has continued in the modern era since colonialism has allowed societies to share experience and knowledge of one another and of different ecologies and environments across the globe. Experiencing or communicating knowledge about the rest of the world's environments has engendered new fear and awe of wilderness that is separate from the wilderness of Britain. Wilderness definition however is desperately complex, and I believe that British countryside and the changing relationship between humans and wilderness within the British countryside has always had an element of wild nature within it.

The deeply cultural response to wild nature that is evident in a relationship between humans and nature in western society is indicative of the complex network of social, economic and mythic needs of such a society. In Britain, the ability to address those needs, by recognising the wilderness in matters of smaller scale of geography and ecology, has meant that there is a more holistic approach to our relationship with nature that seems to be gaining ground. The recent changes to agricultural practice which draw on a history of stewardship are addressing an ecological crisis in our countryside in terms of loss of species and habitats, and therefore loss of elements of wilderness, but it is also addressing the deeply located cultural needs of a society that identifies itself in part by its relationship with wilderness, both overseas and at home.

It is only by addressing the ecological crisis in an holistic way, in terms of the local and the global, that any amelioration of the ecological crisis can be achieved. With an increasing awareness of global ecological concerns in the public arena, and the democratisation of participation in those concerns through the work of such movements as Greenpeace, the global and the local are being integrated in an holistic and comprehensive manner.

This is not to suggest that there is no consideration of the economic in such a future. The example of the Lea Valley Regeneration Project support, among other things, the integrations of political, social, economic and ecological needs. A measure of compromise will be inevitable but, though a perspectival anthropocentric approach, this compromise should be more measured and less rapacious. This paves the way for a modern interpretation of nature which acknowledges the needs of economics and science, the aesthetic response, and the issue of amenity recreational enjoyment, but which also considers the wider issue of life support, and life support of the ecosphere in its entirety.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter I assert that an anthropocentric stance towards nature has been pervasive in western society, and although, as I have identified in this thesis, an anthropocentric outlook is unavoidable, I suggest that this does not necessarily preclude a more benign relationship with nature. To this end I propose that perspectival anthropocentrism is considered, which allows for the acceptance of approaches such as ecocentrism and biocentrism, but moderates these by claiming the existence of cultural filters through which human societies interpret their relationship with nature and wilderness.

Through an understanding of the cultural complexity of our relationship with nature and wilderness we can arrive at a more informed and measured approach to our interpretations of and behaviour towards nature. Only through a cultural constructivist approach, with an acknowledgement of a perspectival anthropocentric outlook, can we more fully comprehend and validate the varied component parts of our cultural inheritance and therefore the basis for our beliefs and understandings that underpin our behaviour. To this end I have established that other approaches do not fully address the cultural complexity of human societies in their relationship with nature, and that furthermore they are prescriptive and hence limited in their efficacy when addressing the issue of human behaviour in relation to the global ecological crisis. I propose that a pluralistic approach is one that will more readily address the needs of human society while simultaneously acknowledging the complexity of the ecosphere and the responsibility we have to address the outcomes of our behaviour.

This thesis is concerned with examining the role that culture, specifically western English-speaking culture, has played in constructing attitudes towards nature and wilderness. I am not in this thesis concerned directly with the search for a new environmental ethic. I am however fully mindful of the fact that any environmental discussion will inevitably involve an ethical dimension. Our response to nature and wilderness is subjective and often emotional, and our decisions are similarly influenced:

The new strategy to save the world's fauna and flora begins, as in all human affairs, with ethics. Moral reasoning... is and always has been the vital glue of society, the means by which transactions are made and honoured to ensure survival. (Wilson 2002, 151).

In any search for a new environmental ethic, that is, the basis of modification and mitigation of our understanding and behaviour, it is essential that we first understand the ways in which we conceptualise our environment. One problem with the search for any new ethic is the value-laden aspects of viewpoints that are culturally constructed, and an acknowledgement of the complexity of these constructions is essential if a more holistic, less reflexive, and ultimately sustainable outcome is to be reached.

Callicott writes that an environmental ethic must acknowledge the intellectual and moral atmosphere that we operate within as individuals and societies, must retain continuity with the ideals and ideas of the past, and will constitute an ideal of human behaviour (Callicott 1994, 2). Seen in this light, an environmental ethic has direct relevance to how humans relate to the natural world; cultures throughout human history have existed with culturally evolved and integrated ethics that have enable them to live

with nature. This has direct relevance to the issues surrounding the creation of myth, as it is through myth that we formulate our understandings and interpretations of our experience, and through myth that we communicate this experience and the moral and ethical strictures that lie behind our subsequent behaviour.

Seeing ourselves as part of a story in which we play a role guides our actions; the storyline often tells the actor what to do or conversely allows an individual to rebel and follow a different story ... there are a multiplicity of perspectives imbedded in (the stories) through which people define themselves, their place, and their active roles ... (the stories) have a diversity of cultural representations that reveal the many ways in which people have been socially and culturally formed. (Merchant 2003, 202)

Myth is symbolic, and the content can be applied to socially defined experience (Wright 1975, 11). In myth, the content is always socially specific, and a myth therefore relates a story that the members of a society can understand. In this respect, a myth is a story that the individual can relate to as a social and historical being. Human experience is social and cultural, and hence the ordering concepts by which an individual acts will be reflected in the myths of that person's society.

A myth is a communication from a society to its members: the social concepts and attitudes determined by the history and institutions of a society are communicated to its members through its myths. (Wright 1975, 16)



Myth is therefore a symbolic strategy that can communicate experience and codify behaviour. White asserted that every culture, whether it is overtly religious or not, is shaped primarily by its religion (White 1968). Although we have in the modern era developed a separation between religious belief and secular life, human history has undoubtedly been sustained in complex patterns of societal relationships through the structure of religious belief systems, and the influence of the Judaeo-Christian belief system(s) was explored in this thesis as the foundation for a western response to nature and wilderness. White related the pursuit of science and technology (to the detriment of the environment), to the value structures of Christian tradition:

The consistency with which scientists during the long formative centuries of Western science said that the task and the reward of the scientist were “to think God’s thoughts after him” leads one to believe that this was their real motivation. If so, then modern Western science was cast in a matrix of Christian theology. The dynamism of religious devotion, shaped by the Judeo-Christian dogma of creation, gave it impetus. (White 1968, 89)

In more recent times there has been a desire to site an emerging environmental ethic within Eastern philosophy. Deep ecology has an eco-centrism at heart that is not conventionally western in its approach. However, Eastern philosophies are not at the heart of the canon of western philosophy and art that has formed the backbone of the cultural inheritance of our society. As I have discussed in this thesis, I do not disregard the importance that the influence of other philosophical traditions and cultures may have for western society, in what is increasingly a more culturally integrated world. Soper feels that to do so would be to ‘limit ... the possibilities of human culture’ (Soper

1995, 34). I do however acknowledge that a western cultural inheritance, our interpretations of nature and our understanding of that relationship, have influenced our belief structures and therefore our behaviour towards and relationship with wilderness and nature.

Bearing this in mind I have explored the foundations of western cultural conceptions of the environment, with the intention of identifying traits of thought and behaviour that, while accepted as true and immutable, are in fact products of ascribing norms to the non-human world. If Wilson and Merchant (above) are right, then when we speak of a global ecological crisis we speak of a moral and social crisis as much as we speak of an ecological one; this has been a central part of the argument of this thesis. Furthermore, this spatial dimension is crucial because, even if it were ever possible to speak of a homogeneous cultural view of nature within western societies (and this is by no means clear) it is certainly not the case in a global sense. As such, an appreciation of the diversity of the moral and ethical guidelines that might bind together us is an essential first step to understanding how ethics of human relationships with nature might develop. My argument here has been that one important, and understated, aspect of the way in which we can relate to one another in terms of moral and ethical guidelines, is the myths by which we make sense of our relationship with nature.

Through the historical references to the development of the relationship between humans and nature, and through its examination of cultural responses to nature, this thesis has sought to show the basis of the modern western attitude to wilderness. The general approach to wilderness has moved away from desiring its conversion to useful and productive land, to the more prevalent western attitude desiring, to some extent or

another, the preservation of wilderness. Broadly speaking, the preservation of wilderness reflects not only the desire to contribute to the ecological well being of the ecosphere, but also the desire to retain the cultural values inherent within and evident in the relationship with wilderness.

We have a broad range of utilitarian and non-utilitarian reasons for wilderness preservation. Scientifically it is in the human interest to preserve wilderness if for no other reason than as a pool of biodiversity and potentially useful organisms. Economically the preservation of wilderness is connected to the scientific, and also includes the benefits to communities and the wider economy from recreational use and eco-tourism. This leads us to a consideration of the cultural and social aspects of wilderness preservation, to those that include the preservation of aesthetic values and the conservation of a cultural heritage. This in turn is connected with the more spiritual or ethical aspects, which ensure that in the western approach we value wilderness for what might be termed a neo-religious experience, wilderness as a cultural repository of all that is removed from the stress and artificiality of the developed and the urban. My approach has been to suggest that, rather than see these things as separate and unrelated and, furthermore, to rely strongly on any one aspect in particular for our interpretation of nature, it is important instead to value and give voice to the full scope of cultural possibilities. Thus we can ensure that, however nature and wilderness might be viewed culturally, we take a non-prescriptive approach which does not allocate the ends to discourse before the dialogue has begun. This, I suggest, is the problem of most contemporary western approaches to environmental ethics.

The western worldview has incorporated the religious inheritance of Puritan settlement of America, the belief in wilderness as a source of purification, and the myths arising from the emergence of a new nation, but it has also incorporated the advances of science and technology which have made wilderness less fearful and less dangerous, making way for a more benevolent attitude towards it. As wilderness has become more scarce it has become more valuable as a resource; economic, cultural, scientific and spiritual. But as we have preserved wilderness we have also confined it within designated areas, and this is the fundamental difference in the western attitude to wilderness from that of other cultures. The western attitude has been exported as the predominant worldview, and it is essentially about control; wilderness areas are demarcated, wilderness exists where we have allowed it to exist. Our relationship with wilderness is essentially paternalistic, the Biblical concepts of dominion and stewardship have been prevalent, sometimes opposing one another and sometimes integrated, throughout the western relationship with nature and with wilderness. We may have fear of natural disasters on a local level, and we may increasingly be concerned about the health of the biosphere and the influence our actions have on that health, but in essence we have created a cultural existence for ourselves that allows us to behave in a generally rapacious way towards nature. As Passmore argues: 'from wilderness ... we are always in some measure alienated' (Passmore 1974, 37).

And yet we inhabit the natural world, and in order for us to realistically mitigate against our behaviour and actions that have led us to a global ecological crisis, we have to critically appraise our relationship with nature and wilderness. In this respect I find that the attitudes towards wilderness in Britain have a great deal to offer to the debate. If we restrict our understanding of wilderness to that which involves human activity as little

as possible, then wilderness is separate from us, and there exists an implication that interaction with wilderness is to be restricted and monitored, limited to an elite few (whether this elite is determined by economic, educational or ecocentric means). This is inherent in a classification of wilderness that only includes areas of a certain magnitude of certain scale, or of a remoteness from human civilisation. Such restriction in our understanding of wilderness can absolve us from the responsibility to attend to the wilderness complexities that exist around us, and to nature that exists in the rural and the urban, as well as the wild. In Britain wilderness is often about relatively tiny areas of land, we have television programmes about wildlife in the garden, farming subsidies encourage set-aside areas and species diversity, and hedgerows, waterways and coppices are recognised as repositories not only of the myth of the countryside but also as ecological good health. In a consideration of a western worldview, I would suggest that a broad scope of definitions that include the acknowledgment of wilderness in such forms is a good basis, both for considering the complexities of wilderness and mitigating against our more destructive behaviour, and also for retaining an element of that which is mythic and culturally essential to our sense of self within the natural world. In this sense, the more plural the definitions of wilderness, the more diverse the cultural views of nature, the plausible it becomes that culturally appropriate and sensitive understandings will prevail in the diverse spatial settings in which responses to ecological problems might arise. It is, then, no less prescriptive to export definitions of wilderness, than it is to export the values which might regulate our treatment of it.

The concept of myth in terms of an understanding that is broader than that of folklore or an atavistic response, and instead includes the concept of a constructed reality and the structuring of cultural identity, is a fundamental theme of this thesis. The

approaches suggested by theories in the field tend to downplay the centrality of myth in western culture while at the same time emphasising instead the cultural influence of science and technology. Myth is not considered to take a central role, as it is either an unacceptably anthropocentric understanding of nature and wilderness, or it is an atavistic trait that is to be respected only in terms of the cultural needs of pre-modern societies. I suggest that myth is in fact a prevalent part of our cultural experience. It is a key part of how we name and understand the world, and underpins our sense of morality and consequently our decision making processes. The myth of wilderness differs between countries, and the cultural life of each nation has led to a complex set of myths and understandings of nature and wilderness that have cultural resonance within each society, and it is this sense of mass resonance that it is important to address when considering the theoretical approach to be taken.

In a consideration of contemporary theories of ecology I found much that was insightful and which would form the basis of any comprehensive view of how we meaningfully understand our relationship with nature and wilderness. Considerations of the value of nature to culture will always be indispensable; acknowledging the potential in spiritual responses to nature and the deleterious effects of social hierarchy and patriarchy are critiques of contemporary western views which cannot be ignored.

The central claim, however, that was made in my consideration of these theories was that they were incomplete, particularly in terms of their treatment of culture. It was argued that denying the dualism of human/nature relations was futile but that this need not lead to an aggressive, harsh anthropocentrism witnessed in resourcism and so maligned by deep ecologists. Rather, if part of this perspectival anthropocentrism was

an acknowledgement of the authenticity and validity of plural views of nature and wilderness, then a more benign social and ecological disposition could result from such an approach.

Equally, however, to focus strongly on social hierarchy, gender or capitalism to the exclusion of culture was to miss, as was said above, one of the crucial means by which we learn and understand our emotional and ethical responses to nature and wilderness. In this sense, the tendency of contemporary theories to focus their cultural attention on the effects of science in the western ethical tradition only told part of the cultural story. I suggested that another part must include the myths through which we make sense of our relationship with nature. As I said in the Introduction I do not claim that the inclusion of myth exhausts the possible cultural influences which affect our experience and perception, my claim is simply that an account of experience and perception which does not include myth is incomplete. Similarly, accounts of how ecological problems might be resolved which do not give voice to cultural dispositions rest their arguments very strongly on the suggestion that other, structural changes (to social hierarchies, economic organisation and so on) will lead to cultural change and hence, cultural disposition can in some sense be over-ridden. It was argued that a more plausible and ethically defensible position would be to take these pluralities as a starting point from which to balance cultural voices and avoid the predominance of one voice over all others.

In this sense then, a consideration of culture is essential to the development of an understanding of our interpretations and behaviour towards nature and wilderness:

If we wish to understand the values and motivations that shape our own actions toward the natural world, if we hope for an environmentalism capable of explaining why people use and abuse the earth as they do, then the nature we study must become less natural and more cultural. (Cronon 1996, 35-6)

A framework that allows an examination of the diversity of cultural perspectives of nature is essential if a pluralistic viewpoint is to be approached, and a pluralistic approach is necessary to avoid prescriptive decision making processes that do not address the wider needs of humanity and of nature, however those needs are interpreted or perceived. By developing a more pluralistic cultural perspective, those needs can be more fully addressed in terms of social validity and ecological sustainability. Any theory with universalistic aspirations must embrace the plural and accommodate diverse and diverging points of view, agendas, and ethics.

The case studies in Chapters Four and Five were designed to illustrate the importance of culture in our perception and experience of nature. The effect is, of course, notoriously difficult to measure, but it became clear that American views of the frontier and what this frontier says about the American disposition towards the nation and towards nature are indispensable insights into how, for example, the United States comes to decide on what parts of nature it protects, how such protection comes about, and what this means for Americans as such. The example of the exploration for oil in Alaska was a timely reminder of how complex, yet how important, cultural considerations are in explaining and interpreting political events. The same may be said of the British disposition towards countryside and wild places. We can explain easily enough the imperative to farm and produce wealth from the land, but it is very



difficult to explain the need to preserve, enjoy and experience nature without some account of cultural inheritance. Wilderness was chosen as the paradigm example of nature because it is through our relationship with wilderness that we have developed our responses towards nature:

We need nature, and particularly its wilderness strongholds. It is the alien world that gave rise to our species, and the home to which we can safely return. It offers choices our spirit was designed to enjoy. (Wilson 2002, 148)

In an understanding of wilderness, it seems essential that our interpretation includes all matters of scale, from British hedgerows to the grandeur of American national parks, for we cannot prescribe what wilderness is any more than we can prescribe what nature is. As I said earlier, it is important that wilderness is viewed from within its cultural context and the differences between the British and American experience of wilderness illustrate this point very well

The implications of a call for plurality in our perceptions of nature are wide-ranging. We need to look harder at the world, as environmental scientists would have us do, we need to empathise more determinedly with it, as deep ecologists would have us do, and we must also investigate the presuppositions of human values and knowledge, as social theorists would have us do (Hayward 1995, 86). Thus we need to apply a framework that is inclusive and pluralistic, rather than limited in its issue-base, and prescriptive in its proposed solutions.

By using the approach of cultural constructivism, based in an understanding of a perspectival anthropocentrism, the resulting search for a new ethic, or framework for understanding our interpretations and behaviour, would ultimately be more inclusive and pluralistic. Such an outcome can be demonstrated by the formulation of certain ethics which, I would suggest, indicate themselves a greater sense of pluralism. For example, Carolyn Merchant proposes a partnership ethic (Merchant 2003), one that understands the mutual dependence of human and non-human communities:

A partnership ethic ... goes beyond egocentric and homocentric ethics ... to a new ethic which entails the good of both the human and the more-than-human communities. In some cases the needs of the more-than-human community will take precedence, as in preservation of wild areas, while in others, the needs of the human community will be paramount, as in sustainable agriculture and sustainable cities. (Merchant 2003, 229)

While, as I have previously stated, it is not within the remit of this thesis to propose a new environmental ethic, it is important to realise that such ethics as are being proposed are moving towards an understanding of the cultural complexity that creates the wide variety of responses towards nature and wilderness in western societies.

There is, for example, a debate within green political theory around the issue of deliberative or discursive democracy (Dobson 1996; Dryzek 1995). The central argument here is that dialogue without preconceptions concerning political outcomes is essential if the ethical basis of the dialogue is to be maintained (that is, if outcomes are not to be prescribed in advance). The argument continues in a way similar to that

which has been implicit in much of the argument of this thesis; we cannot say in advance that one (cultural) view of nature is better or worse than another, we may only say that a balance of voices will ameliorate the tendency for one voice to dominate, a voice which appears to have produced destructive ecological tendencies. In this sense, a deliberative forum is one in which the prescription is confined largely to the requirement that views are expressed within that particular institutional process and according to the rules agreed by the participants. The ends of the process come about through the deliberation (discursion, dialogue) of those involved. In such a model there are no guarantees that the process will, for example, preserve wilderness, but such empirical evidence as does exist suggests that the outcomes of such deliberation tends to be more sensitive to 'other' points of view for precisely the reasons this thesis has suggested (Fishkin and Luskin 2000); that a plurality of views, cultural or otherwise, are able to be expressed and hence it is more difficult for one voice to predominate.

Ethical considerations, then, emerge from within the deliberation and are not prescribed in advance. The accusation of ethical or cultural imperialism is therefore more difficult to sustain in an open and negotiated framework. Of course, prescribing a process does not allow us to avoid the accusation of prescription completely, but prescription that is provisional and not absolute can hopefully produce a framework which will accommodate the complexity of views on culture and nature.

This complexity, as indeed Merchant recognises, will also entail a measure of compromise, and the mechanistic and the economic will also have a role to play in decision making processes concerning nature and wilderness, but it is through the understanding of the mythic within our interpretations of wilderness that we will more

readily arrive at an understanding and hence a modifying rein on our behaviour towards nature.

Ultimately we need to be broad-based in our approach towards nature and the ecological damage of which we are capable. The daily impact of human existence on nature can be small scale, and can also reach to designated wilderness areas. In some cases we will need to modify our behaviour and our anthropocentrism, and accept that some areas should remain inaccessible, we should be able to accept that it is not our intrinsic right to use wild open spaces as recreation, or lakes and rivers for recreation if ecosystems are fragile. Wilderness needs to be understood within all levels of human interaction with nature, and for this to be achieved we have to recognise the cultural impact that the experience and understanding of wilderness has had on the formation of western society. We need to recognise our constructed nature, including the influence of myth, as only by doing this can we develop a way of being that will have resonance with and relevance to our society and our culture. Only by acknowledging the complexity of our culturally constructed behaviour will we be able to formulate any socially sustainable modification of this behaviour, address our collective futures in the natural world, and so, it is hoped, approach solutions to the global ecological crisis.

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