

Lecture #25: That Which We Tame

Suggested Readings:

Bill McKibben, *Hope, Human and Wild*, 1995; *Deep Economy*, 2007.

Michael Pollan, *Second Nature*, 1992. (extraordinary book about environmental history & ethics)

Thomas R. Dunlap, *Faith in Nature: Environmentalism as Religious Quest*, 2004.

Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization*, 1992. (difficult but rich on idea of nature)

Outline

I. Searching for Lessons

Can we extract any lessons from environmental history? Possible answers are endless, but try these: a landscape is among most profound and complicated of historical documents, reflecting extraordinarily diverse ecological and cultural processes: history is everywhere around us waiting to be read when people migrate from one ecosystem to another, other organisms do too, with far-reaching effects when people exchange things in a market, they link together ecosystems and encourage change, often without fully understanding the effects they are setting in motion: markets connect & disconnect people mismanage fish and other common property resources when economics and ecology conflict tools and technology powerfully reshape natural environments, but their effects are always mediated by the complex cultural systems in which they are embedded if you want to understand people's environmental values, watch what they eat and throw away early conservationists were concerned mainly with questions of economically efficient production, while later environmentalists have often been equally concerned with ecologically responsible consumption we can never encounter nature at first hand, but experience it always through the lens of our own cultural preconceptions--which always contain an extraordinary amount of human history nature often expresses not just our idea of the non-human world, but of humanity and God as well

II. On Wonder and Responsibility: A Few Articles of Faith

time to stop and reflect on relation of environmental past, present, and future: is there room for hope? complicated moral problem of historicizing nature: may demystify relations we prefer to keep sacred--and yet it may be equally dangerous to believe in myths that ultimately distort actual relationships subtle effects of human power: technology as Faustian bargain, power to destroy selves and modify any ecosystem, so no wilderness left: from A-bomb to DDT-shattered shell power over nature doesn't mean control: never know full consequences of actions in advance fundamental lesson of history: every action yields proliferating effects and unexpected consequences: energy-saving pollution produces indoor air pollution; salvation of Echo Park destroys Glen Canyon; solution to ammonia refrigeration hazards yields freon and ozone hole; and so on unexpected problems could provoke us to despair or cynicism; or bring self-critical humility in face of mystery of nature and history both, antidote to intellectual arrogance or moral complacency note that prophecies of doom usually intended to generate their own failure: goal is to paint picture of future disaster in order to avert it by changing people's intentions & actions, as in *Silent Spring* our perceptions of facts are as important as facts themselves in producing historical change: ideas matter *seeming* environmental disaster can thus contain seeds of its own reversal: small victories may not seem like much, but may be all we can ever hope to have: no one big problem called "the environment," just an infinitude of problems, large and small, of living responsibly on the planet lines and shapes we draw on the land reflect the lines and shapes we imagine in our heads key theme of environmental history: to live on earth is to change it; people cannot live outside nature, only think themselves outside it; neither can nature now be separate from us material history of environmental change thus also a spiritual history of human consciousness and a political economic history of human society: inextricably entangled in fascinatingly complex whole even the most abstract patterns we trace on landscape reflect economic and ecological relationships that also represent competing visions of community: meaning of common good an open question no matter how abstract the pattern or distant the landscape, important to see the faces in the crowd: individual people, individual plants and animals, for themselves & as embodiments of larger processes values we teach our children as distilled expressions of our cultural beliefs about nature, often at their most ideal: the brick in the toilet gains power when seen through a child's wondering eyes patterns in one place tied into network of connections elsewhere: city/country, market relations, etc. global implications of population explosion, questions of environmental harm also tied to social justice problem not *whether* we'll leave marks on earth, but what *kind* of marks we'll leave: a key moral dilemma which is inescapably human, since we care far more about our legacy than nature does metaphor of the garden as a symbol of the tamed earth that we now serve as stewards Wendell Berry: "A culture that does not measure itself by nature...becomes destructive of nature and thus of itself. A culture that does not measure itself by its own best work and the best work of other cultures...becomes destructive of itself and thus of nature." (Berry, *Home Economics*) taming the wonderful for love: St. Exupery: "You become responsible, forever, for what you have tamed."