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Conservation and Patriotism: A Conversation with William Cronon

By William Poole

How can we build a widespread political consensus around caring for the natural order and our human connection to it? In a forthcoming book, *Saving Nature in Time: The Rebirth of Environmentalism*, historian William Cronon suggests that the answer may lie in land conservation—a cause that taps into deeply rooted values that all Americans hold dear.

Cronon—one of the nation's best-known historians of the environment—is the Frederick Jackson Turner and Vilas Research Professor of History, Geography, and Environmental Studies at University of Wisconsin-Madison and author of several books on the history of American relationships with the land. He is also a member of TPL's national board of directors and a passionate supporter of TPL's work.



Photo: Hilary Cronon

You have argued that the protection of nature is a cultural project, not a natural project. Why?

Because it involves changing people's values and ideas, and building a politics around those cultural conceptions. Whether what we protect is deep wilderness or an inner-city community garden, from a cultural point of view what we are protecting is a symbol of what nature means to us. This doesn't mean that places are only symbols or pure cultural

constructions. The world exists, and yet we experience it through our own ideas. Our politics in particular are built out of those words, ideas, symbols.

You've identified several distinct "cultural landscapes" that are linked with certain cherished American values. What are those landscapes and those values?

The landscapes are city, suburb, working land, wilderness. Each embodies values that are essential to what we believe ourselves to be or aspire to become as a nation. Together they form a cultural continuum that profoundly shapes the way we think about nature in this country. TPL's great insight is that if we fail to protect nature in all of these landscapes, we will fail to protect nature in any of them.



Central Park, New York, John Bachman, circa 1859.
www.discoveryeditions.com

Wilderness and city seemed opposed to one another, and yet you say they both link to culturally held values. Can you expand on that?

At the wilderness end of the spectrum, we are the nation that invented the national park and the legally designated wilderness area. This is because as a nation born of the Romantic era, coming to full national identity in the 19th century, we saw in our most wild and beautiful natural lands symbols of the sublime—places where the divine was most present in the world. Wilderness also embodies some of our most powerful myths of national origin, the long frontier struggle to carve out a civilization. So although today we protect wild places to preserve biological diversity and other natural values, we should never forget how deeply tied they are to American ideas of God and nationhood.

At the other end of the spectrum, the city at its best has stood for the civilized world we fashioned from wilderness. Early Americans like John Winthrop of the Massachusetts Bay Colony wanted America to become "as a city upon a hill," a beacon for all the world to see. The notion of America as a vision of hope, an inspiration for what a community in the service of God and the common good might accomplish—is deeply embedded in our collective sense of identity.

We protect natural areas in cities partly because we believe that urban dwellers need regular reminders of the natural world. Also, at least since the days of Frederick Law Olmsted, green open space in the city has expressed what we hold in common as a vision of civic life. These days it's rarer for Americans of different backgrounds and beliefs to gather in common places to affirm their shared values and learn from their differences,

but that is precisely what civic spaces should enable us to do and why the urban commons is such an important part of the land conservation project.

What about suburbs and working landscapes?

The suburb was meant to be the middle ground between city and country—a place where you could have the amenities of civilization with the health, safety, and beauty of the country. This idealized domestic landscape became a refuge for the middle class, but also it would become an engine of sprawl, a high-energy-consuming economy, and a symbol of racial exclusion as well. One could say that suburbanization is partly about Americans' refusal to learn how to live with limits, or to live in a common geographical space with people who have a different skin color or cultural identity. Historically, working landscapes are those we label "the pastoral," an icon of tamed nature that goes back to Roman antiquity. One of the most compelling visions of our republic was of small landholders earning their livings from the soil. Jefferson believed that building communities on the land is the best bulwark for defending democracy. That is the vision that underlay the Homestead Act of 1862 and other acts that shaped our patterns of settlement. Though we long ago ceased to be a predominantly rural nation, we can't forget that this ideal remains one of our most dearly held beliefs.

Working landscapes—farms, ranches, timberlands, mining lands—are the parts of nature that most sustain our material lives. Again, some regard such landscapes as intrinsically fallen, desecrated, unnatural. Wilderness does provide essential ecological services, but our material bodies are sustained more by the working landscapes. And we love the pastoral aspect of those places, too. One of the most urgent tasks of conservation is to reclaim an ethical and aesthetic vision of what I would call the "honorable harvest" as a symbol of human good.

So American values are deeply linked to the ideas and symbols associated with these cultural landscapes. Why then have conservation and protection of these landscapes come to be seen as a narrow issue of the left?

For most of the 20th century, Democrats and Republicans alike strongly supported environmental protection, albeit with different emphases and policy strategies. Most of our great conservation achievements, from the founding of the national parks to the 1964 Wilderness Act to the 1973 Endangered Species Act, passed with very large bipartisan majorities. And most of our key federal statutes on the environment were passed during the Nixon administration—with very large majorities because of fierce competition between a Republican White House and a Democratic Congress over which was more committed to environmental protection.

That competition essentially came to an end in the 1980s, and the consequences have not been good for the environment, for our national politics, or for our values. The history is complicated, but one key factor was the successful conservative reaction against the power of the state in defense of American ideas of liberty. Americans' suspicion of state power goes back to the Revolution. The conservative reaction against environmentalism arose not from a failure to love the land but rather from fear that environmental laws and regulations represented a potential new form of state tyranny. The collapse of bipartisan

support for environmentalism was primarily a reaction, not against nature or the American land, but rather against centralized government power and its feared abuse.

And what can we do now to restore that broad support?

Figuring out how to refashion our political rhetoric about land conservation and environmental protection seems to me a critical priority. It is little short of a national disaster for the environment to appear as a one-party issue, and it is also very far from an accurate reflection of core American values. I believe that all Americans love the land, love what the land stands for. But they have different ideas and different cultural landscapes in their minds when they say, "I love the land."

In reforging a bipartisan political consensus for environmental protection, I believe the most effective tool is land conservation itself—caring for the land we all hold dear. Remember that the work of land conservation is not just about protecting material nature—not just about saving plants, animals, and ecosystems—but about protecting human values and cultural landscapes. Put simply, we protect nature because we love the land. We protect natural areas and open space because they stand for some of our most dearly held values, as individuals, as communities, as a nation. These places hold the history of our common struggle to build a democratic republic that loves liberty and justice and freedom. History and the land are at the core of our patriotism. They sustain our vision of what the United States is and should be.

How do you see the role of land trusts and organizations like TPL in building this new consensus?

I believe that land trusts and organizations like The Trust for Public Land are absolutely essential to the work of environmental protection today. These groups, and all of us who work on land conservation, are in the business not just of protecting ecosystems and ecological services and biodiversity, but of conserving the human values these lands embody. In essence, what we do is to work at affirming core American values. Can you sum up your belief about how the work of land conservation helps sustain our nation's democratic traditions?

Because land conservation works at the interface between public and private land, it seems to me that it is a great place to affirm the value of both—not just private or public, but the entire landscape that spans those boundaries. This movement is not about assertion of state power. Rather, it's about communities expressing shared values and working to make sure that the lands they love will continue to embody those values for all time.

William Poole is the editor of Land&People.

William Cronon's books include Changes in the Land: Indians, Colonists and the Ecology of New England and Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West, which won the Bancroft Prize and the Chicago Tribune Heartland Prize and was one of three nominees for the 1991 Pulitzer Prize in History. Saving Nature in Time: The Rebirth of Environmentalism will be published by W. W. Norton & Company in fall of 2007.