

Wilderness is Everywhere: The Importance of Community to American Environmentalism

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Abstract

While environmentalism is an increasingly popular discussion topic among Americans, the exact goals and concerns of the field are often debated. It is a common belief that environmentalism is synonymous with lifestyles, such as veganism, which argue in favor of extreme cultural shifts to prevent humanity's ever-increasing encroachment on nature. In this article, I argue that intense forms of isolation from other organisms or from other people are unnecessary and require a degree of financial and social privilege to sustain. I use an ecocritical perspective on popular transcendentalist titles, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" and Henry David Thoreau's works "Walking" and *Walden*, to analyze the origins of this ideal of isolation and deconstruct the weaknesses and strengths of the two authors' beliefs. Furthermore, this paper discusses key environmentalist and ecocritical authors invested in the same question, such as William Cronon in his article "The Trouble with Wilderness; Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature." In considering each of these sources together, I will argue in favor of practices which reintroduce a social element to the American understanding of nature. I especially highlight the potential benefits of community gardens, which serve as an educational platform for sustainability, a place to unite neighbors and members of a community, and a form of nature applicable to urban environments, reducing the need for privilege or status to access therapeutic experiences in nature for those who live in areas with less access to activities such as hiking or camping.

Environmentalism has a prominent place in the sustainment of the world we live in, making it a primary concern for many writers and thinkers among conservationists. Nature, and the ways we engage with it, has long been a popular subject matter for writing both prose and poetry. As such, conflicting ideas regarding the best way to partake in nature will arise from the various authors who have spoken on the topic. In the current climate of America's culture, environmentalism is viewed as the desire to preserve the environment via separation from human presence and meddling. This view regarding the movement is due to the popularity of lifestyles such as veganism, which advocate for the complete disengagement of humanity from other forms of life.

This ideal of separation and isolation can be further traced to the Transcendental movement in early American literature, as seen primarily in Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Nature" and Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. Furthermore, these authors have been widely discussed and analyzed by contemporary critics and environmentalists, such as William Cronon in "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," who in turn have encouraged further discussion regarding our modern understanding of nature and the outdoors. In reading Cronon's piece on wilderness, many may find a dissonance that arises between their established beliefs regarding nature and conservation versus the ideas that Cronon asserts about the false dichotomy between wilderness and civilization. As such, it is worth analyzing why and where his opinions differ from those of these foundational authors to better understand the best course of action regarding environmentalism's place in the future.

Therefore, I will be discussing Emerson's "Nature," and Thoreau's "Walking" and *Walden* from an ecocritical perspective. This will rely on pieces of criticism such as Cronon's "The Trouble with Wilderness" as well as theory sources describing ecocritical thought, including Robin Attfield's *Environmental Thought: A Short History*, among others. These sources will help to build and apply a definition of the ecocritical perspective to the two works in question. Regardless of the piece, however, each develops the idea that social, political, and personal backgrounds heavily impact the ways we engage with nature. In some cases, we turn to it as escapism, distancing ourselves from the stresses of daily life. To do so, while attractive to many, denies the community and coexistence with nature that are important to human living and environmentalist causes. As seen in Thoreau's solo experiment at Walden Pond and Emerson's metaphor of the transparent eyeball, these authors emphasize isolation and undermine their romantic visions of nature.

While it is important to refer to these foundational authors for inspiration in environmental objectives, much of their rhetoric undermines modern environmentalism's ability to positively affect the world. Many of these ideas need iterated upon, redefined, or rejected entirely. While Emerson and Thoreau focus on the important ideal of respecting and coexisting with nature, their elements of isolation and the demonization of humanity are not productive for modern environmentalists.

Following the publication of Emerson's and Thoreau's pieces, environmentalists have discussed many new concerns. Beginning with the transcendentalists, American authors and scholars have widely debated the importance of various environmental goals, such as preservation and other humanitarian efforts. Many writers, including Attfield, trace the beginnings of American environmentalism to the transcendentalists (82). While the transcendentalists themselves share the same emphasis on nature seen in environmentalism today, Attfield argues that what sets them apart is their focus on the human mind and experience (83). This is primarily seen in the form of generic spirituality prevalent in both Emerson's and

Thoreau's major works, which do not adhere to any given religion, such as Christianity (83). Regardless, both authors emphasize personal connections with nature that may manifest differently depending on the person; this nondenominational practice is the experience to which generic spirituality refers.

With this understanding of the importance of transcendentalism to American environmentalism, it becomes clear that both Emerson and Thoreau emphasize the importance of nature to their daily lives and to that of their audience. As such, it would be logical to discuss them from a perspective which questions the same morals and themes. Ecocriticism can be used as such, but it contains further nuances worth defining. This concept, like many forms of literary criticism, is based on a series of questions that focus on a specific theme. As Cheryl Glotfelty and Harold Fromm write in their anthology, *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, "ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii). As such, they define a series of questions which can be used in analyzing literature. These questions include:

"How is nature represented in this sonnet? What role does the physical setting play in the plot of this novel? Are the values expressed in this play consistent with ecological wisdom? How do our metaphors of the land influence the way we treat it? How can we characterize nature writing as a genre?" (xix)

Glotfelty and Fromm include additional questions that further characterize ecocriticism, but they summarize the purpose of the critical perspective by stating that each of these questions focus on "the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it" (xix). In this way, ecocriticism is useful for the purposes of this paper. It focuses on many of the same beliefs and themes of the transcendentalists, while building upon them with modern understandings of nature and conservation.

However, looking towards the future often comes with the questioning of old ideas and introduction of new ones. This is especially important for new schools of literary criticism as they seek to distinguish themselves from existing disciplines. One piece to do so for ecocriticism is *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* by Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace. They note that, among ecocritical writings, few African American authors are acknowledged for their contributions (2). Furthermore, they believe that there is a need for environmentalists to prove the significance of ecocriticism for it to develop into a respected form of criticism rather than one that remains in a developmental state (3). These challenges offer an important perspective for the purpose of this paper, as they emphasize a sense of diversity and efficacy that may otherwise be neglected by more idealist environmental thinkers.

In considering this turn towards the future, readers may find that a major presence in criticism of Emerson and Thoreau, as previously mentioned, is seen in Cronon's work. "The Trouble with Wilderness" is very broadly studied by environmentalists for taking its own ecocritical perspective to discuss the implications regarding nature made by authors such as Emerson and Thoreau. Cronon uses unique definitions for terms such as wilderness and nature, which may cause confusion if left undefined. Within his essay, Cronon distinguishes between the popular understanding of "wilderness," which refers to the idealized, primitive, uncolonized or uncivilized corners of the world which have evaded human contact (21), and "nature," which more generally refers to the environment in which we all live (21-22). Cronon ultimately argues in favor of embracing nature as humanity's home, rather than considering it separate as we often do when discussing wilderness. This distinction is necessary for the purposes of this paper, as the

works of Emerson and Thoreau often use the concepts of wilderness and nature interchangeably, ignoring the subtle distinctions between the two.

Despite the insight it offers, “The Trouble with Wilderness” could easily be taken as a slight against recreational hikers and the many other ways we engage with the environment if it is not fully understood or analyzed. As Gene McQuillan states in “The Forest Track: Working with William Cronon’s *The Trouble with Wilderness*,” the point Cronon is making can be entirely missed in favor of using his work as a superficial means of devaluing environmentalist perspectives, claims, and worries (159). Circumstances such as this appear to happen all too often when works such as “The Trouble with Wilderness” challenge the accepted norms of a given school of thought. When considered alongside other sources, however, it becomes evident that Cronon argues in favor of sustainable use and other common environmental concerns, especially in the ways that they bolster community and cooperation.

In his work, Cronon asks us to stop considering the world in black-and-white terms of nature versus civilization. He believes that this false dichotomy is reductive, and that nature represents the world in which all things live rather than some untouched corner of the world (21). Next, McQuillan’s piece analyzes the importance and cultural presence of hiking trails, which often serve as numerous individuals’ “only” access to wilderness. He states that, even in these “wild” regions, trails themselves symbolize a sense of community and history brought on by the effort it takes to define, maintain, and continually use these opportunities (161-2). Furthermore, additional authors have discussed Cronon’s effects on environmentalist thought, such as Andrew Bishop. In his essay, “Chatting about ‘Nature’ with Henry David Thoreau and William Cronon,” he instructs students to compare Thoreau and Cronon’s definitions of nature, which he claims leads them to readdress their own understandings of the topic. This often results in an increased awareness of their own inclusion in the idea of “nature” and a consideration of how urban environments can better partake in sustainable living (147-8). As such, the three scholars collectively discuss how the definitions of wilderness and nature should be refocused towards a form of sustainable living that emphasizes the importance of community in our daily lives.

This refocus is especially important to consider when analyzing works like Emerson’s “Nature.” A common theme among transcendentalist literature is a romanticization of isolation, whether as a brief reprieve from humanity or as a full lifestyle. Through his work, readers can observe the prior version of isolation in action. Emerson’s most striking example of such is seen in his description of his experiences with observing and enjoying nature:

In the woods, we return to reason and faith. There I feel that nothing can befall me in life,—no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes,) which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground,—my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space,—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or particle of God. (505)

This description, though a short piece of a much larger manuscript, summarizes the transcendental ideals regarding nature. In some ways, it agrees with Cronon’s descriptions of nature, primarily seen in Cronon’s acknowledgement that the outdoors may enable spiritual experiences (21-22). The key difference between Cronon’s and Emerson’s beliefs regarding nature, however, is its location. In this quote, Emerson declares his love for wilderness, rather than for all of nature. This focus on the isolated, pristine version of nature allows Emerson to separate himself from stressors and find healing. Despite this, Cronon argues that these same feelings can be accessed in “the wilderness in our own backyards, of the nature that is all around

us if only we have eyes to see it" (22). As such, Cronon aims to extend this healing to all who need it, rather than limit it to those who have the opportunity and ability to isolate themselves for extended periods of time.

Even so, it is important to note that Emerson and Cronon are not inherently opposed. Continuing his piece, Cronon describes how wilderness is an example of the ability of the world to thrive, with or without human input (22). Emerson ultimately exhibits the same respect for natural autonomy in the way he "see[s] all" (505), as he emphasizes the didactic quality of nature: it offers lessons to be learned and beauty to be appreciated. This appreciation for the "other," however, must be applied to all aspects and areas of life (Cronon 25), the lack of which causes Emerson to fall short of Cronon's ideals.

Following in his mentor's footsteps, Thoreau created many essays detailing his reflections on nature and wilderness. The first of these essays that I will be discussing is "Walking," which exemplifies many of the problems Cronon finds with the modern definition of wilderness. This can be most clearly seen in the way Thoreau limits being "ready for a walk" ("Walking" 150) to the wealthy and able. As discussed, Cronon heavily emphasizes the necessity for nature to be accessible to all people, regardless of status or privilege. In contrast to this ideal, Thoreau's version of nature is limited to those who are wealthy enough to avoid debt, healthy—or otherwise prepared to die—or "free [men]" ("Walking" 150). Furthermore, Thoreau details the importance of his surroundings, which coincidentally offer him the ability to walk to new locations daily, leading him to undiscovered and unsettled pieces of American countryside ("Walking" 151). Each of these descriptions of Thoreau's wilderness highlights the extreme importance of privilege to the isolated version of nature. This is most explicitly shown by the requirement that one must be a freed man to responsibly engage in wilderness, highlighting a racial disparity between those who do and do not recreationally participate in nature.

Furthermore, Thoreau's comments on human infrastructure are in direct opposition to Cronon's analysis. Where Thoreau complains of the deformation of natural landscapes at the hands of farmers and misers ("Walking" 153), Cronon actively satirizes the same concept: "It's too small, too plain, or too crowded to be *authentically* wild" (22). In emphasizing the importance of "authentic" wilderness, Thoreau ultimately neglects humanity's ability to bolster and engage with nature. While he intends to criticize the destructive work of capitalistic misers, Thoreau treats his appreciation of nature with a sense of exclusivity, much in the same way as the targets of his criticism, who hoard land and wealth for their own benefit.

Despite the ongoing conversation between the two pieces, it is important to note that Cronon's article is not the only criticism of "Walking." Bishop's "Chatting about 'Nature'" discusses another lesson that can be derived from Thoreau's essay. As discussed, Bishop's article stems from his experiences in teaching. In having classes compare Cronon and Thoreau, he states, his students learn to define nature in such a way that can include their urban environment and what daily access to wilderness such a location can offer them (Bishop 148). A more interesting comment, however, is Bishop's mention of how Thoreau emphasizes critical thinking regarding our surroundings and the language we use for them (148). The concept that nature can be a tool for education is also discussed by Cronon, who claims that wilderness can either teach us to discriminate between pristine and impure parts of nature (22) or to have "profound feelings of humility and respect as we confront our fellow beings and the earth itself" (23). Though Thoreau seems to be convinced of the prior in "Walking," environmentalism is rooted in the latter idea. As such, it is important that the critical thinking learned from Thoreau and from

wilderness is used to develop one's awareness of nature in all corners of life, rather than to establish a distaste for human life and development.

The second of Thoreau's texts of note for this discussion is his novel, *Walden*. In analyzing this piece, I am given the opportunity to continue to deconstruct transcendental thought, as out of each of the object sources I have chosen for this essay, *Walden* is by far the most emblematic of isolation and separation from humanity. Despite this, it is more useful to analyze in what ways Thoreau manages to live sustainably, as emphasized by Cronon and other modern environmentalists. Of the behaviors exhibited in *Walden*, two notable aspects of his lifestyle stand out as sustainable engagement with nature. One example is the description of Thoreau's cabin: it is characterized as small and humble, intimately connected to wildlife and his surroundings. He notes how his home is filled with birdsong, "not by having imprisoned one, but having caged myself near them" (*Walden* 943). Furthermore, he refers to the lake near his home as a neighbor (*Walden* 944), further highlighting a sense of companionship with nature. Thoreau summarizes the relationship he has with life and nature during his time at Walden Pond as an attempt "to live deliberately ... I did not wish to live what was not life" (*Walden* 946). Each of these descriptions of life and of Thoreau's home, when taken as advice for daily life rather than for a hermit lifestyle, encourages readers to integrate nature into their lives in as many moments as possible. As demonstrated by Cronon and other scholars, this concept is not exclusive to isolated, wild lifestyles.

The second notable aspect in *Walden*, however, is Thoreau's efforts in farming: the engagement with the land exhibited in the novel is personal and on a small scale. He describes a humble crop of "beans, ... potatoes, corn, peas, and turnips" (*Walden* 927), notably lacking any form of animal products. While farming can be potentially harmful to the land and environment when conducted irresponsibly, Thoreau's personal-scale endeavors emphasize individual education and sustainable practices.

This lifestyle need not be limited to a hermit in the woods, however. In fact, gardening can offer a solution to the dissonance demonstrated between Emerson and Thoreau, Cronon, and other scholars engaging in environmental discourse. One might assume that individual gardens connect gardeners to their land and to the process of cultivating plants; however, the same principle can be applied to the scale of a full community as well. This is demonstrated by Linda Corkery's article, "Community Gardens as a Platform for Education for Sustainability," which discusses the ability of community gardens to act not only as fulfilling engagement with nature in urban environments but as a platform for informal education for personal sustainability (70). The article claims that engaging in community gardening helped gardeners, researchers, students, and other participants, with benefits ranging from personal growth and understanding of sustainability to the physical and social advantages of working in community gardens (Corkery 74). As such, while Corkery acknowledges the remaining hurdles with maintaining interest and success for the project (74), the article demonstrates a means of solving the dissonance between transcendentalists and modern environmentalists. By incorporating rural lifestyles into urban locations, fostering community and sustainable living in our daily lives, and increasing access to nature regardless of status, these gardens serve as a compelling solution to the problems discussed by Cronon and other environmental thinkers.

Ultimately, environmentalism and the goal of sustainability remain imperative discussions that need to continue in American politics and education. To continue to grow and solve the pressing issues facing the environment today, a social shift may be necessary. The idea that humanity is somehow separate from nature should be done away with, allowing for a greater

focus on the communal aspect of nature. This should be done in such a way that emphasizes the protection of endangered plants and animals, the reintroduction of native plants to urban environments and gardens, and sustainable human engagement with nature. These end goals coincide with both Cronon's ideas regarding wilderness and the existing values of environmentalism across America.

While recreational activities in more "wild" areas such as woods, mountains, and other largely unsettled locations, including state and national parks, should not be discredited, a new emphasis should be placed on finding and preserving the pieces of nature that can be experienced and appreciated daily without needing to separate oneself from social engagement. This might be accomplished via any number of projects that benefit the public good, such as community gardens in urban locations, local parks, or other communal spaces involving the presence and maintenance of nature. Regardless of the specific example chosen, the underlying goal should remain the emphasis on sustainability and community.

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